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Mobility Ideologies: Precarity and Meaning-Making in the College-for-All Generation

by

Sarah S. Payne

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Committee in charge:

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Abstract

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College access among underserved youth in the United States has expanded dramatically in recent decades, due in part to "achievement ideology," or institutional and cultural messages that equate hard work plus educational attainment with upward mobility. But, college completion rates for this group have remained low, and student loan volumes and defaults have soared, most of all for low-income, first-generation Black youth. What happens after these young adults exit college, with or without a degree? What sense do they make of their situations, why, and how does this matter to inequality?

This dissertation engages these questions with a qualitative study of the transition to adulthood among low-income young adults who attended high school in greater New Orleans, LA, and enrolled in college. The case of New Orleans, a majority-Black city, is useful because it exemplifies common U.S. dynamics regarding college access and offers a high density of my population of interest. In 2019, New Orleans became the first all-charter public school district in the nation. From 2006 until recently, most charter operators in the city explicitly emphasized college enrollment for all students, from early grades onward. Consequently, whole cohorts of young adults became the first in their families to go to college. And, like most American undergraduates, area public high school graduates who enroll in college mainly attend regional postsecondary institutions with low graduation rates. Through in-depth interviews with 40 Black young adults who grew up in New Orleans (as well as 17 additional young adults with other racial and ethnic identities, for comparison) and 9+ months of ethnographic fieldwork, I examine what happens in the after-college lives of Pell-eligible college persisters, leavers, and completers.

Most of my participants experience precarity. Some are on upwardly mobile trajectories, while others are not – regardless of educational attainment. But, despite similar backgrounds and irrespective of their apparent mobility trajectories, they make sense of their experiences in three distinct ways. *Gardeners* believe their selves are wounded or flawed and must heal or grow in order to achieve mobility. They perceive open opportunity for advancement, and value other people as aides toward internal development. *Climbers* believe the self is capable and whole, a vehicle made to navigate opportunity's possibilities and barriers. They focus on engaging their social networks to help them take the right external risks. And *seekers* believe the self is whole, but trapped in a relatively closed opportunity structure. They orient action and relationships around personal liberation.

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I theorize these beliefs about the self, social action, and social context as transformational, agentic, and emancipatory *mobility ideologies*, and observe them across race and gender groups. I further show that these mobility ideologies are not separable from mobility means (strategies, capitals, tools) and ends (targets, goals, aspirations). Instead, they shape, constitute, and interact with each other in ongoing processes, or *mobility projects*, that influence mobility pathways or trajectories.

The dissertation makes three main contributions. First, it qualitatively traces and compares what happens to demographically similar college leavers and completers as they transition into adulthood. Second, it builds on existing literature concerning culture and inequality to demonstrate how ideologies about the self, social action, and social context vary among the members of an often-homogenized group, and shape their varying mobility pathways. At a broader level, a third contribution of this research is to complicate understandings of what ideologies undergird contemporary American striving in the face of widely recognized inequality. I show that what enables my participants' simultaneous pursuit and rejection of the American Dream is not an ideology of merit but rather ideologies of the self. I argue that this finding is consequential to Bourdieusian and Gramscian theories of social domination because it constitutes a contradictory case in which power is both recognized at a social level and misrecognized at the level of the self.

For my students

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PREFACE

From 2012 to 2015, I worked as a college counselor at a public, open-enrollment charter high school in New Orleans. I had been a public school teacher in Baton Rouge prior to that, had worked and volunteered with a college access non-profit there, and also worked on high school graduation and college enrollment for the Louisiana State Department of Education (LDOE). I was recruited to the explicitly college-preparatory high school with a specific goal in mind: the school aimed to have 100% of its students apply to and attend college. Its first cohort would graduate in 2014; my task would be to design schoolwide programs and provide direct student support to help reach this goal. As a middle school teacher, I had worried about my students' high school prospects. Working to boost the statewide high school graduation rate at the LDOE, I worried about students' post-secondary prospects. The opportunity to help whole cohorts of public school students access higher education at rates (and institutions) usually reserved for the most affluent was exciting. I took the job.

Like most public schools in New Orleans, the vast majority of our students identified as Black or African American, were eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch, and would become the first members of their families to attend college (or, in some cases, to graduate high school). And, again like most public schools in New Orleans, the school was a charter school, meaning that it had more flexibility in how it allocated its resources. I was hired as the full-time college person: unlike most college counselors, I had only limited guidance counseling duties, and my case load averaged about 70 students.

I set about getting to know our students: their interests, hopes, fears, and dreams. We talked about the paths they wanted to take in their lives, why, and how various kinds of college training could help them work toward these aspirations. Did the schools they liked offer the major they wanted? How did their grades and test scores relate to where they might be admitted, and, crucially, to financial aid? Did they think an historically black college or university (HBCU) or a predominantly white institution (PWI) was a better option for them? We talked about college fit, the admissions process, financial aid, and what to expect in college. With these young people, I, like virtually every other adult in the school, was a voice for our school's mission: college access and attainment.

Ultimately, and as is commonplace in the world of charter schools, 100% of the two senior classes I worked with applied to college (about 80% 4-year, 20% 2-year), and 100% were accepted. Thanks to the brilliant work of our alumni support counselor, more than 90% overcame the notorious challenges of "summer melt" and started college the following fall (see Castleman and Page 2014). But, my colleagues and I celebrated our students' successes with some trepidation.

I knew as soon as I started the college counseling job that a majority of our students would be unlikely to attend the highly selective institutions that also offered the highest graduation rates (in some cases because of the academic requirements of these institutions, but more often for reasons unrelated to students' academic performance, like financial aid). I also knew that graduation rates are highly predictive: if you send a student to a college with a 25% graduation rate for their demographic group, they have about a 25% chance of graduating. If you send the same student to a college with an 85% graduation rate for their demographic group, they have about an 85% chance of graduating. At the time, many Louisiana 4-year public universities had Black and Pell-eligible student graduation rates well below 25% (these rates are slowly improving, but leave a lot to be desired).

Our students applied to the conventional mix of colleges according to their individual situations: "safety" schools where they were a shoe-in for admission, "match" schools that were more selective but where they still had a good shot based on their transcripts and test scores, and "reach" schools where the odds of admission were long. They applied (and were admitted) everywhere, from Ivy League universities and elite liberal arts colleges to in-state universities, commuter campuses, and community colleges. And, more often than not, they were admitted to their match and sometimes their reach schools, which usually had higher graduation rates.

The trouble with these schools was that, except in the relatively limited cases where schools pledged to "meet full financial need," our students could not afford them without taking on more debt than they could reasonably expect to repay given their planned career paths. Sometimes, it was not even possible for them to *access* the necessary loans because the totals were greater than federal lending limits for individual students, and their family credit scores disqualified them from federal Parent Plus or private loans. More often than not, our students wound up at schools that were more affordable, but less supportive. We anticipated this, and, like other charter schools in the city, we started building out a college success program before our students graduated. But we knew the odds were still against our students. We worried that some would take out even the more modest loans required to attend in-state institutions but would struggle in college for myriad structural reasons unrelated to their capacities for hard work. What if they took out loans, but never earned a degree? And even if they did earn a degree, would it be enough to put them on the trajectories they (and we) wished for?

To this day, I believe that every person working in that school wanted the best for our students. Most of us, by dint of the qualifications required to become teachers or administrators, had received bachelor's degrees ourselves – and we were invested in the work of helping others to do the same. Regardless, we bought into the ideas, popularized by decades of social policy as well as scholarship, that education is a "great equalizer" and "makes life better" (Mann 1848, 59; Hout 2012, 394). Specifically, we believed "a college degree can do it" (Hout 1988, 1391). To use sociologist Jay MacLeod's language, we held a very American attachment to *achievement ideology*: the belief that through hard work and educational attainment, anyone can advance. Were we right, or merely righteous?

The College Moonshot

It is tempting to know with certainty how you feel about issues that are both important and complex, and to feel one thing about them, particularly in the current polarized political and cultural moment in the United States. Certainty – tinged with righteousness – is woven into contemporary rhetoric and politics on both the right and left. And certainty, particularly about singular truth, often seems appealingly more straightforward: it is perhaps easier to live with or communicate than are ambiguity and complexity. It also often takes the form of a binary imaginary: do I feel good about the work I did (and continue to do) in New Orleans, or bad? Was it the right course of action, or the wrong one? The truth is, I do not know precisely what I think about my work with young people in New Orleans, and I have complicated feelings about it.

On the one hand, college access seemed profoundly important, not least because it has been so restricted for so long. I do not disbelieve the countless studies demonstrating that earning a college degree is associated with higher earnings, better heath, and greater civic participation. And a college degree remains essential for accessing our society's most respected, lucrative, and powerful professions and social networks. In many respects, the powerful drive toward a college degree that our students, their families, and our school staff felt was well-founded.

On the other hand, college access seemed like the best of bad options. Not going on to some form of postsecondary training would mean trying to find work in New Orleans's hospitality-heavy economy, in a state that defaults to the federally-mandated minimum wage (the lowest legal pay). Outside of community college, affordable training in trades seemed limited (though I am sure was less limited than my college-educated colleagues and I assumed, even if it seemed hard for us to identify). But, despite being admitted to a wide range of schools, for a majority of my students the higher education that was *actually* accessible to them offered about $25,000 in debt for a less than 25% chance (statistically) of graduating. If a young person enrolled in college but left without a degree and with substantial debt, wasn't it possible they could be left considerably *worse* off?

Moreover, even with a degree, what was to guarantee our students could "make it" into the wan security of even a middle class lifestyle? A troupe of mostly (older) millennials ourselves, my colleagues and I had lived through the Great Recession and watched job prospects dry up just as student loan payments came due for ourselves or our peers. And, as people generally upset with socioeconomic inequality and versed in popular social critique, we recognized that our students would, in varying ways, likely face labor market discrimination on the basis of race, class, and gender. College-as-moonshot is not a compelling vision for socioeconomic justice – but, given our backgrounds, knowledge, and limitations, it seemed the best option at the time.

Of course, these quandaries are not unique to New Orleans but rather commonly confront high school graduates (and the people and institutions advising them) across the United States. They became the basis of questions that I would ask in graduate school: my master's thesis examined the quantitative financial consequences of leaving college without a degree (including the role of educational debt), and this project, my doctoral thesis, qualitatively examines what happens in the lives of people like my students after college access and during the transition to adulthood.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the ambivalence that I felt on sending my students to college was only amplified in the course of doing the research that forms the basis of this dissertation. Between 2020 and 2023, I spent over nine months living in New Orleans (in several phases) and conducted in-depth interviews with 57 college-going young adults from public high schools across the Greater New Orleans region, most of which also emphasized college access. These thoughtful young adults generously shared their time with me, and were often quite keen to transmit what had surprised, disappointed, supported, challenged, infuriated, encouraged, and uplifted them in their transitions to college and adulthood. Like my students, they met federal definitions for being low-income college students, and were eligible for Pell grants. Also like my students, they were majority people of color (and majority Black), were often in the first generation of their families to go to college, and mainly (but not exclusively) attended four-year, public universities. And what my participants made clear is that New Orleans's college-for-all generation is not alright.

Some of them are doing okay, deeply or on the surface, and many are struggling – but the challenges of their early adulthoods have already been manifold and immense, and, they reckon, more await them. In sociological terms, they are encountering considerable and persistent precarity in their daily existence. And, they go to great lengths to make sense of their realities in ways that allow them to engage life as it presents itself. So, what began as a project aimed at understanding *what happened* in the aftermath of college access quickly became a project about *meaning-making*: how did my participants understand their realities? Why? What consequences

did this have for their lives? And what does all this reveal about social life? The result is an analysis that moves from the practicalities of everyday struggle to the ideological forms that shape it.

Positionality, Framing, and Analytical Choices

Readers may reasonably question whether a white woman (which I am) should conduct research centering on Black young adults, and some may reasonably conclude that one should not. There is a long and painful history of white scholars studying people of color – and very often, Black people – and drawing conclusions that reinscribe inequity and domination and cause active harm under the legitimating banners of science, objectivity, or scholarship. In studies of socioeconomic, and particularly racial, inequality, authors also sometimes deploy pity or sympathy tropes and write for an implicitly elite and white audience. Some studies go to great effort to "demonstrate" participants' humanity (because, the implication goes, it wasn't already self-evident). In some cases, this can amount to a trauma fetishism of the disadvantaged, objectifying suffering to relate to it emotionally from a politically neutral position. As a class-privileged white woman interviewing class-disadvantaged Black respondents (as well as respondents of other racial and ethnic identities), I risk inflicting the same or similar harms. In a more benign sense, readers might also question whether my racial presentation skewed my data collection by influencing what my participants shared (creating "interviewer effects").

Further, if I should not conduct this research on account of race and class privilege, perhaps I also should not conduct this research on account of my history working in college access in New Orleans. In addition to my work as a college counselor, I have also been involved for a number of years as a co-founder and subsequent advisor to a college persistence non-profit organization there. As I have said, at the high school in particular I was directly responsible for designing and implementing the school's college access programs, and for ensuring that 100% of our students applied and were admitted to college. From certain perspectives, this could imply that I am "too close to" (too invested in or biased toward) the empirical issues at hand, or, worse, that in returning to New Orleans for this research I am continuing to extract personal gain from, and/or to harm, Black communities, with little accountability.

These are important concerns and ones I have weighed throughout this project. Fundamentally, I believe (and have witnessed) that thoughtful people of various positionalities can disagree sincerely on these questions. I also believe that dichotomous thinking – yes, it is right for a white person to do this research; no, it is wrong – is reductive here.

While holding these concerns as open and unresolved questions, I have proceeded with this project for several reasons. First, I believe that categorically removing white researchers from research with Black participants or other people of color (a position for which I think few would actually advocate) can impede collective insight and unhelpfully excuse white scholars from studying race and racial inequality and injustice. The contexts of both researcher and research are important dimensions of a project's ethical content. In this case, for instance, I am trying to understand the sense my participants make for themselves, from within their own systems of meaning, as opposed to imposing preconceived frameworks on their meaning-making.

Second, an alternative interpretation of my background is that I am already involved, already implicated, in the communities and issues I am studying. (Of course, this implication is also shaped by race: my whiteness, as well as my gender and class, facilitated my employment and shaped my actions in the high school.) In the context of this case, I believe there is value in

leveraging my knowledge of and involvement in the New Orleans education system to ask frank questions about the consequences of college-for-all, good or bad. In some respects, and given my work history, this is more accountable, not less.

This relates to a third reason I proceeded with this research: my participants, who graduated from a wide range of high schools across the city, welcomed the opportunity to speak at length about their experiences in the transition to adulthood after high school. They lived through key transformations in New Orleans education, recognized how different the new schools were, had reflected about their experiences, and wanted to be heard. They were vocal in their critiques of educational institutions specifically and social structures more broadly, including their experiences of racial discrimination, especially from white people. A number of times, participants also expressed a sense of benefit at the end of the interview: some remarked that it "felt good," "like therapy," to get a variety of things off their chests. Some also explicitly acknowledged ways in which I, the researcher, could personally benefit from our interviews: a young man I call Jayden, for instance, commented that if this research became a book it would probably help my academic career. Without minimizing the power dynamics that exist between me and my participants, and without pretending that I am not benefitting intellectually or materially from this research, it is also important to recognize that my participants are not naïve. They often made plain that various public, personal, and political stakes of this research were apparent to them, and elected to participate in the project.

These are the primary reasons I have pursued this research despite the valid considerations described above. But in stating these reasons, I do not intend to reduce the complexity of the ethical questions the project raises or to suggest that I have arrived at some definitive answer to them. Instead, this is my best evaluation of the issues over time and at this moment.

Black Pain and Black Joy

A related concern regards academic portrayals of Black pain versus Black joy, of suffering versus thriving. Black subjects in social science research are routinely (historically and contemporarily) identified as *subjects in pain*. This has served an important purpose, making the myriad and profound sufferings of Black people part of critical analysis and understanding and working against anti-Blackness. It has also at times served to objectify Black pain, intellectualizing racial agony and rendering it approachable or even palatable to non-Black audiences. Implicitly and perversely, it can appear to define Black subjects negatively, by the harms perpetrated against them by racism and white supremacy, reinscribing a definition of Blackness that exists only in relation to whiteness or racial others (Dumas 2018). Such work can also itself become harmful to Black audiences, recapitulating the violence it seeks to redress (Brown 2021).

In contrast, research and writing on Black joy and Black thriving emphasizes the creative, life-oriented, and liberatory ways of being that Black people enact while being so often embedded in oppressive racial orders (see, for instance, the strategies of the Black women presented in Celeste Watkins-Hayes's book, *Remaking a Life* [2019]). More than simply telling stories of resilience (which again frames Black life in relation to or against racial oppression), this work upholds Black joy as a distinct and compelling method and social force that rejects the predicates or conditions of Black suffering (McKittrick 2021).

By centering Black young adults, this dissertation necessarily engages these tensions in multiple ways. At an empirical level, for instance, are my participants thriving, or are they

suffering? The answer is: yes. Their material and emotional struggles are profound, urgent, and very real. The sense of joy and connection they share with their families, friends, communities, and selves; their relentless dreaming; and their commitments to their own thriving are also undeniable. As an analyst, I aim to represent both realities and their complex interrelationships—but finding a balance has been challenging.

To be frank about the tremendous inequities and challenges my participants face, I need to address them in as holistic a way as space and time allow, which means an extended discussion of these topics. Because I am interested in how these young adults understand and navigate life after high school, my questions emphasize those topics, which, depending on the participant, can lead the interview relatively closer to or farther from discussions of thriving or suffering.[1] Readers will note that Chapter 2 explicitly centers precarity and struggle. However, I have also tried to share, particularly in the longer narratives that form Chapters 3, 4, and 5, the fuller scope of the senses of joy, connection, determination, and aliveness that my participants convey. *How* I relate their experiences also matters. For instance, in describing the meaning-making patterns among my participants, or what I will call *mobility ideologies*, I have chosen language that emphasizes the affirmative elements of these views: they are transformative, agentic, and emancipatory.

At the same time, the deeper I got into conversation with my participants, the more convinced I became that this project needed to address the concept of ideology. In its sociological use, the term *ideology* signifies a belief system that is rooted in, or in some sense reflects, material reality, but also justifies or legitimates the existing social order (more on this in Chapter 2). Ideology also obscures elements of that order, hiding them from conscious perception. So, at a methodological and theoretical level, this project asks that I, the analyst, do two seemingly contradictory things. First, I need to get as close as possible to a faithful presentation of the subjectivity of my participants, treating them as the experts on their own unique social positions (Collins 1990). (As I discussed above, this attempt is also limited by my own positionality in several ways.) Second, I need to put my participants' accounts "in conversation," analyzing them both with and against each other to query what might be obscured from my participants' (and my own) understanding. I need to both deeply believe and deeply problematize my participants' individual accounts so than a larger social account can emerge. As we will see, the results of this process complicate my participants' representations of both their social suffering and the ways in which they thrive.

Because of its thematic content, readers are likely to have differing experiences of this dissertation. For readers whose positionalities are relatively close to those of my various participants, reading it may be an uncomfortable, infuriating, discouraging, sorrowful, or painful encounter. For readers whose positionalities are relatively farther from those of my participants, reading these pages may also elicit feelings of discomfort, shame, anger, empathy, or pity. I hope it is possible for all readers to treat these responses as information, and perhaps specifically as information related to the need for care (for themselves; for others). For white readers in particular, it is an opportunity to question how whiteness, and the power embedded within in,

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[1] However, I attempted to draw out the discussion of joy and thriving in several respects. For instance, early in our life-story interviews, I asked about participants' happiest memories from childhood. I also asked about their important relationships throughout their lives so far, including friends, family, and mentors. I asked about their interests and passions, as well as about who or what they feel is most supportive to them in their current endeavors, including interpersonal relationships, artistic or spiritual practices, and other habits, practices, or internal resources.

might be shaping these responses, and what other responses – whether emotional or material – might be possible.

The Project at Hand

       This dissertation ranges widely in the scale and scope of its questions, exploring the stakes of the contemporary pursuit of mobility from the perspective of individuals, of institutions and policy, and of social theory. First and foremost, I am trying both to ask and to demonstrate what is at stake for the beautiful young adults who unstintingly shared their time and experiences with me. Through their generosity and insight, I criticize the secondary and post-secondary institutions that have so strongly shaped their experiences, and offer some recommendations about what might be changed. I also argue that my participants' experiences and understandings pose provocative interventions in some of the most enduring conversations in social theory: debates about the relationship between culture and inequality, about constructions of selfhood, about national myths like the American Dream, and about the nature and functioning of social domination itself.

INTRODUCTION

Janae, Britnee, and Mona have a lot in common.[2] They are all young, Black women in their mid-twenties who grew up in New Orleans, Louisiana. Their families struggled financially, and all three qualified for federal lunch programs at their elementary and secondary schools, as well as for other forms of public assistance. They are all the first in their families to attend college. And, in the mid 2010's, they all graduated with honors from the same public, open-enrollment high school in the Seventh Ward, which was at the time one of New Orleans's most violent neighborhoods.

The high school sat on two blocks just off one of the city's grand oak-lined boulevards. Once the thriving pride and joy of a vibrant Black neighborhood, the school had become notorious for violence and low academic performance by the early 2000s. After Hurricane Katrina, like all New Orleans public schools would eventually be, it was "converted" from a traditional, district-run school to a charter school run by a charter management organization. Well past its physical and academic heyday by the time Janae, Britnee, and Mona enrolled, it gave the impression of a fortress, with few points of ingress or egress and a remarkably tall chain-link fence surrounding the parking lot and football field.

Inside, though, the windowless halls were covered with brightly-colored pennants from colleges and universities across the state and country, motivational quotes, and students' academic accolades – because, like many others throughout the city at that time, the charter management organization that operated the school was aimed single-mindedly at helping a generation of New Orleans students – including Janae, Britnee, Mona, and the many other participants in this research – become the first in their families to earn a college degree. But, this project is not about these students' high school years. Instead, it is about their aftermath.

Similar Pasts, Similarly Precarious Presents

Janae, Britnee, and Mona left high school in similar situations. They had all done well academically: Janae was salutatorian of her class, Britnee was an honor roll student, and Mona, a three-sport athlete, was also an honor graduate. They had all applied to a range of public and private colleges and universities, and were accepted to multiple institutions; their federal financial aid applications determined they were all eligible for Pell grants for low-income students. Because of affordability, they all elected to attend regional, four-year, public institutions. They also held similar aspirations for white-collar professions: Janae wanted to be an oncologist, Britnee planned to become a physical therapist (this would later change), and Mona wanted to become a pediatrician.

Britnee graduated from college in five years, while Janae and Mona did not. Mona left college after one semester, later enrolling in community college in New Orleans, and Janae persisted for two years before being placed on academic leave (and also ultimately enrolling in community college). Despite their different post-secondary pathways, though, they are struggling in similar ways as young adults. All three live with family members. Janae and Britnee work multiple jobs; Mona works and coaches (which isn't paid but has material perks, like free gear). They all make less than $20 an hour, are skeptical of romance, and shoulder significant family responsibilities: Janae helps her mother, who is on disability, with bills and expenses; Britnee cares for her ailing grandmother as her live-in caretaker; and Mona is housing her mother and

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[2] All individual and institutional names are pseudonyms. Locations and other identifying information have been changed.

helping to raise her toddler nephew while also guiding two younger siblings into adulthood. All three also still have firm attachments to similar aspirations: they all are working toward financial stability, want to one day "give back," are trying to "get their credit together," and hope, eventually, to have a nuclear family and to own a home. They are all committed to hard work and independence – and even, still, to the idea that through education and hard work they can get ahead in life.

So, in many respects, Janae, Britnee, and Mona are strikingly similar. They share similar socioeconomic and institutional backgrounds, and they are struggling to navigate similarly precarious realities on the way to realizing similar, cherished dreams. But, for all this similarity, a closer look reveals that they understand their situations – the aftermaths of their attempts at educational attainment – in three distinct ways.

Underlying Differences

Janae, who struggled for several semesters to pass key pre-med classes and fell into a deep depression while in college, believes that she can transform her situation if she transforms her *self*. She focuses on *internal* growth as her ticket to advancement and to opportunity she believes exists. She cultivates relationships with friends and colleagues that support this. When she reflects on difficult periods in her life since high school, she says, "I feel like I had to go through that dark stage to, you know, help me grow into the strong person I am now."

Britnee, in contrast, narrates her after-college experience like she is the main character in a movie navigating a series of obstacles. She believes that her inner self is capable and that she can agentically work her way into a different situation if she is *externally* strategic enough, making the right moves, taking the right risks, and acquiring the right skills and knowledge. She puts considerable energy into building relationships with professional mentors and friendships with people who are trying to learn how to navigate the opportunity structure like she is: people, for instance, who can help her learn about credit, home ownership, and financial management.

Mona, like Britnee (and unlike Janae), also believes her inner self is whole and capable. But, unlike Britnee, Mona feels that she cannot take the action she wants to take. She is confined: by family responsibility, by prejudice (Mona is gay, and much of her family is not accepting of this fact), and by a lack of resources. So, instead of trying to cultivate and transform her inner self or leveraging relationships so she can take different risks, Mona seeks a way to emancipate her trapped self. She believes that reaching her aspirations requires liberation – a realized freedom that seems all too distant given limited opportunity.

Janae approaches her efforts at mobility like a *gardener*. She is trying to cultivate her inner self, nurturing its development and looking to others to help her do so as well. Her emphasis is on inward growth. Britnee, on the other hand, acts more like a *climber* on a mountain: she trusts her internal capacities, and is focused on taking the right external risks and making the right moves. And Mona, feeling capable but trapped, acts like a *seeker* longing and searching for a way out – a way to transcend her circumstances.

Mobility and Ideology

Although their variation may be easy to overlook amid otherwise pronounced similarity, these perspectives are strikingly different. Janae, Britnee, and Mona each hold a distinct belief about the meaning and nature of their self, of the actions they can and should take in their attempts at upward mobility, and of the social context in which they operate. Moreover, these perspectives are not unique to Janae, Britnee, and Mona. In fact, each of the participants in this

research demonstrates a perspective on how to achieve their own mobility that turns out to closely resemble one of these three: they tend to act like *gardeners*, *climbers*, or *seekers.*

This dissertation undertakes three major tasks. First, it aims to reveal a pattern: despite strikingly similar backgrounds and precarious presents, my participants hold one of three beliefs regarding how mobility should be attempted, or what I call *mobility ideologies*. Each mobility ideology is comprised of specific views about the self, social action, and social context. I demonstrate how similar mobility ideologies manifest in different lives. Next, the project aims to explore the consequences of mobility ideologies. Why does this pattern matter? What do mobility ideologies do in people's lives? Specifically, how, if at all, do mobility ideologies matter to the mobility pathways individuals construct? And what does this mean for our understanding of culture and inequality? I explore this through a fine-grained analysis of how beliefs shape action and mobility pathways in nine representative cases. Finally, the project assesses where mobility ideologies come from, how broadly they might be shared in American society, and what other forms of meaning-making might be available to individuals like Janae, Britnee, and Mona. In particular, I explore and how their mobility ideologies relate to their conception of the American Dream, and to social theories of domination.

At the same time, mobility ideologies exist in a broader sociological context. As I described above, my participants attended high school at a time when achievement ideology – which, as Jay MacLeod (1987) describes it, states that education plus hard work equals socioeconomic advancement – was both public and curricular policy. Most Orleans Parish public high schools at that time more or less billed themselves as "college preparatory": they were geared to help first-generation, historically marginalized, and predominantly Black youth access higher education. This was a school system and a set of charter management organizations that were invested in educational attainment as students' best path toward upward mobility. Though this college preparatory approach has been written about widely, I also know about it first-hand: prior to graduate school (and as I described in the Preface), I worked for three years as a college counselor in a public, charter high school in New Orleans, an experience that would eventually form the foundation of this research. And in this regard the schools were in lockstep with several decades' worth of education policy, reform, and philanthropic funding across the country.

College access is often framed as a civil rights issue, and for good reason. For decades, college access for people of color in America (and particularly those who were low-income) was severely restricted in both direct and indirect ways.[3] Explicitly segregationist admissions policies formally barred entry to many postsecondary institutions; cost often prohibited attendance where admission was possible; and inequities of resources, expectations, and curricular tracking in elementary and secondary schools failed to prepare generations of students for higher education (Gelber 2007). At the same time, college degrees were required for many if not most professions and positions that rewarded individuals with money, power, and status. If higher education was the bottleneck for upward mobility and social power, then expanding college access was a crucial intervention for equity. College access for low income youth of color was an obvious priority for individuals, families, institutions, and social justice movements concerned with advancement or equity.

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[3] And the rules of exclusion changed over time: well into the 20th century, for instance, Jewish applicants to Ivy League institutions were subject to strict admissions quotas (Karabel 2005). Many U.S. postsecondary institutions were also closed to women: Ivy League schools started admitting women in a co-educational context in the 1960s and 1970s.

For better and for worse, this trend in educational thinking – what has been termed a "college-for-all" agenda – shaped a generation of youth, in New Orleans and across the country (Lamboy and Lu 2017). My participants, and hundreds of thousands of young people like them, grew up in institutions and systems forged in achievement ideology. Many more remain in them.

According the logic of achievement ideology, the answer to intergenerational disadvantage was to help more disadvantaged young people access institutions that produced upwardly mobile young adults: colleges and universities. And this logic was not unfounded: while the question of whether post-secondary education has equalizing or reproductive effects is still debated among scholars, in the early years of the 21st century evidence that a college education could break patterns of intergenerational status transmission was growing (see Hout 2012). But, regardless of whether policymakers were acting out of their own ideological commitments or were being guided "by the data," as many New Orleans schools affirmed they were, the lesson for young people like my participants matched longstanding American achievement ideology. They were schooled to believe – and whether or not they all did is another question we will examine – that hard work and a college degree could materially change their lives and the lives of their families. At the same time, this belief was meritocratic: it implied that advancement was achieved through hard work, good character, talent, or similar forms of merit.

In other words: this research is not only an examination of the sense young people make in the wake of college access and precarious adulthood. It is also a study of colliding ideologies: this is a case of what happens when ideology that is implicit at the level of the self – like mobility ideology – meets ideology that is explicit at the level of institutions, such as achievement ideology or meritocracy. Of course, as we will also consider, perhaps these were never so separate to begin with.

In what follows, I present the design of my study, who my participants are, and the social worlds they inhabit. I outline they meanings they make, and the social theory to which their experiences and beliefs speak. But I also place these findings in the broader social, economic, and institutional context of the college-for-all agenda that shaped my participants' elementary and secondary schooling – and that of millions of young people like them across the country.

Ideology, Aspiration, and Mobility

The narratives I present in this dissertation are the stories of people who grew up with considerable (and sometimes extreme) socioeconomic disadvantage, who have been invested in educational attainment in various respects but sometimes subsequently disavow it, and who deeply recognize persistent race and class inequality at both personal and social levels. They are stories of remarkable striving, persistence against long odds, and relentless optimism. And they are stories of durable socioeconomic precarity.

To inequality scholars, the coexistence of these realities is unsurprising. Much inequality research, for example, has focused on the material and structural dimensions of social life, to important effect, showing how resources come to be unequally and durably distributed across socioeconomic groups through mechanisms of exploitation, opportunity hoarding, emulation, and adaptation (Tilly 1998), as exemplified, for instance, in economic and occupational transformations, neighborhood and housing segregation and discrimination, and policing and incarceration (Wilson 1987; Massey and Denton 1993; Western 2006; Wacquant 2009). And scholars have recognized that liberal and neoliberal subjects tend to accommodate the distance between their aspirations and realities by taking responsibility for their situations and

maintaining a relentless, "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011; see also Sennett and Cobb 1973; Sharone 2014).

More unexpectedly, however, my participants understand their positions on the receiving end of this unequal distribution in ways that differ strikingly from each other. This study, therefore, begins from a common material reality – precarious existence in early adulthood – that results from longstanding socioeconomic inequities, and seeks to understand how and why individuals differ in the ways they understand this shared experience. It asks about the systematic and sometimes implicit meaning people make, why they do so, and how this in turn shapes their efforts and pathways toward mobility. Based on patterns in this meaning-making, it approaches precarity and inequality – and mobility specifically – from the perspective of ideology.

Among my participants, ideology exists in multiple, intersecting registers. There is, for example, *achievement ideology*, which emphasizes educational attainment as the specific route by which mobility may be achieved (MacLeod 1987). This is promulgated by institutions (schools, media) and individuals (family), and drives the "college-for-all" ethos (Lamboy and Lu 2017). It is exemplified in former first lady Michelle Obama's "Reach Higher" campaign, the annual, nationwide celebration on May 1 of College Signing Day, the rise of college access organizations and the flow of philanthropic spending in that direction, and the heavy emphasis on college access among charter schools. Among my participants, it structures investments in higher education attainment.

There is also what I am calling *mobility ideology*, which links ideas about the meaning of the self to ideas about how mobility ought to be pursued tactically (what concrete action individuals should take) and to ideas about the meaning of individuals' social contexts (particularly their relationships with others). In other words, mobility ideologies convey meaning about who individuals are, how they should act, and how they should relate to other people. As I outlined above and will demonstrate at length in the chapters that follow, three types of mobility ideology predominate among my participants: ideologies that emphasize individual transformation, agency, or emancipation.

A third relevant ideological register is the up-by-the-bootstraps ideology of merit. In academic terms, this is called "meritocracy,"[4] but its core ideas ground what is popularly called the "American Dream." (And I often use this language in subsequent chapters.) Rooted in Calvinist Protestantism, meritocracy is individualistic, based on talent or character, and moralistic (Weber 2002[1905]; DeVitis and Rich 1996). Deracinated from its religious origins in the idea of salvation, but retaining an emphasis on the moral value of hard work, meritocratic ideology states that opportunity is there for the taking, and that anyone who wishes to advance can do so through a combination of effort and individual merit or deservingness (such as exhibiting perseverance). My participants have an ambivalent relationship to this ideology. They deeply recognize historical and contemporary inequity, and strongly disagree with the idea that opportunity is equally or fairly distributed in society. At the same time, they remain fiercely motivated by the pursuit of a middle class lifestyle, and believe that it is attainable for them individually. They also have ambivalent relationships to achievement ideology (which builds on meritocracy to specify educational attainment as the pathway to opportunity): college was often

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[4] "Meritocracy" is a more familiar term than "meritocratic ideology," which is why I opt to use the shorter form. In my use of "meritocracy," I imply its ideological dimensions. However, it is sometimes used to describe the social order it prescribes: readers may have encountered work on "the condition of the meritocracy," for instance, or work that assesses "how well meritocracy is working." These usages tend to preference the practical or structural elements of the term over its ideological underpinnings.

hard on them personally, frequently yielded ambiguous benefits on the labor market, and often put them in debt.

In other words, mobility, as a social aspiration and as a social pathway, is infused with ideological meaning among my participants and in the United States more broadly. In the chapters that follow, we will see how these three ideological forms (achievement ideology, mobility ideology, and meritocracy) exist and interact in the context of individual lives.

Additionally, given the obvious links between culture and mobility formed by these various ideologies, we might expect that there would be a considerable scholarly literature theorizing the relationship between culture and mobility. It is perhaps surprising, then, that this literature is relatively limited: a growing body of research examines the relationship between culture and *inequality*, but does so with a focus on how inequality is produced and maintained, rather than examining upward or downward *mobility* (Streib 2016, 2020).

Culture and Inequality

In recent years, sociologists have repeatedly called for renewed and deepened engagement with culture in stratification literature (Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014; Lareau 2015; Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010; Valentino and Vaisey 2022). At the same time, extant research on culture and inequality has often depended on social categories (like race, class, and gender) as comparative bases for measuring inequality and understanding its cultural mechanisms. For instance, sociology classics like Jay MacLeod's *Ain't No Makin' It* (1987) or Annette Lareau's *Unequal Childhoods* (2003) take this approach. And this is obviously both sensible and important, because unequal treatment, opportunity, or access on the basis of these categories yields large and unjust disparities between categorical groups. Yet, research that proceeds via cross-category comparison may also reinscribe analytically and theoretically the social forces that produce or maintain such categories: when class is the unit of analysis, for instance, analysts tend to observe mechanisms that operate via class difference (i.e., that vary strongly by class, such as cultural capital). Notably, categorical formulations of culture and inequality are less useful for engaging puzzles like the one presented by Janae, Britnee, and Mona, because such puzzles require an explanation of variation and inequality *within* groups that appear homogeneous (on the basis of ascribed category, but also of similar cultural capital).

While much scholarship usefully pursues knowledge about culture and inequality by examining categorical variation, such work is complemented by research on variation within ascribed category (e.g., Harding 2010; Jack 2019; Streib 2020). The study of mobility also implies, in some respects, the study of within-category variation. Indeed, analyzing social forces within social categories is an important approach for studying mobility specifically: it permits researchers to examine, among similar people, who moves up, down, and why. Common ideologies (achievement ideology, meritocracy) are topically concerned with precisely this – with mobility – but the sociological links between mobility and culture (and ideology more specifically) are underexamined (Streib 2016). This project seeks to contribute new empirical evidence and new theory in this area.

Culture's Conscious and Subconscious Modes

Ideology as a concept – a theory that there are beliefs that shape human action while also being obscured from the actor in some measure, hiding in plain sight – implies a tension between what is conscious and what is subconscious. This is a core concern of much cultural theorizing: how to account for the way individuals embody or reproduce cultural forms without doing so

self-consciously or recognizing that they do so, *and* how to account for the way individuals also express conscious thought and take individual action. This is usually presented as a duality: in social life there exists the reflexive and the pre-reflexive, the conscious and the subconscious, the declarative and nondeclarative, the recognized and the misrecognized, the theoretical and the practical. (Classically, this emerges particularly in the work of Marx, Weber, and Freud, but more recently is a through-line in work by Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Stephen Vaisey, and Omar Lizardo.) Existing theory has focused on arguing about the *fact* of this duality, and on delineating *what* is conscious versus subconscious. This is important, because it creates a range of theoretical explanations for the phenomenon described above: the reproduction of cultural patterns and social structures that individuals (re)enact seemingly without explicit choice. But, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Bourdieu), it leaves underexplored vital questions about the sociopolitical (or power-related) dimensions of the duality: when something is conscious or subconscious, why is it so? Whose interests are served, and with what consequence?

Further, when it comes to theorizing ideology in the U.S. context, individualism is often treated as the end of the analytical line: the individual, the self, is constructed by society (see Callero 2003) and imbued with responsibilities and requirements. It is the smallest unit of analysis within groups. Selfhood ideologies, though they have various flavors, are usually understood as consistent within or even across social categories, particularly class categories. What this project examines is how ideology extends still farther: into varying meanings of the individual or the self.[5] It considers how such ideology might shape individual attempts toward mobility, and, by extension, the mobility pathways individuals pursue. Beyond helping to reproduce inequality, it asks how ideology might also help or hinder upward mobility.

In other words, this dissertation contributes empirically and theoretically to scholarly understandings of the relationship between ideology and mobility, and of how and why mobility pathways develop. It argues that varying *mobility ideologies* about the self, social action, and social context guide the varying mobility strategies individuals pursue, and that these ideologies – which link internal beliefs about the self to external action toward mobility – necessarily interact with the means (like social and cultural capital) and ends (like aspiration) of mobility to shape the mobility pathways individuals construct. The dissertation also argues that these ideologies about the self enable my participants to pursue socioeconomic advancement despite their vocal skepticism about meritocracy.

More broadly, the dissertation further aims to illustrate how hidden ideologies about what seems most personal to us – the nature and meaning of the self – shape how we respond to socially and economically unsettled, or precarious, times. For indeed we live in unsettled times, and could remain in them for a considerable period. To my mind, understanding how our inner lives are tied to collective currents – materially, ideologically, or otherwise – seems essential to shaping our ongoing responses to the challenges and opportunities before us as a society. I hope that this research makes a small contribution in that direction as well.

The Self and the American Dream

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[5] Sociological accounts of what the self is and means vary. Callero (2003) provides a helpful review of these. Much disagreement centers on whether the self is a universal feature of human existence, as Mead argues, or whether the self is an effect of power, as Foucault claims. Here, I do not seek to adjudicate between these accounts or advance a new theory of the self. For purposes of this study, what is most relevant is the evidence that my participants have implicit conceptions of an existing, meaningful or meaning-laden interiority, which they describe in the language of selfhood. Where the idea or reality of a self comes from is an important and enduring question, but one that is outside the scope of this inquiry.

Finally, the dissertation reconceptualizes what the American Dream means and how it works in contemporary context. Today, an array of discourses include accumulated, vocal skepticism about achievement ideology and about the meritocratic ideology of the American Dream. This has emerged, for example, in scholarly discourse including in works like Chinoy's *Automobile Workers and the American Dream* (1957), Sennett and Cobb's *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1973), MacLeod's *Ain't No Makin' It* (1987)*,* and Tilly's *Durable Inequality* (1999). These scholars and others have shown how the meritocratic cultural myth of the American Dream naturalizes inequality, obscuring its structural origins by attributing lack of advancement to individual failings.

But skepticism about the American Dream is also readily observed among my participants, who, as we will see, often laugh at loud at the classic conception of the American Dream. Their skepticism is widely shared: in 2014, the Pew Research Center published a report that noted the fracturing of U.S. political ideology. The report drew on a national survey of over 10,000 adults to show that large majorities of significant population blocs ("Solid Liberals" and "Hard-Pressed Skeptics," whose "difficult financial circumstances have left them resentful of both government and business" but who diverge from Solid Liberals on social issues) feel that "hard work is no guarantee of future success" (Pew Research Center 2014, 2, 46). To the extent that there ever was public consensus regarding the American Dream, it now appears particularly tenuous.

Inequality is also the subject of much contemporary debate. This is true in the sense that there has been renewed, high-profile scholarship on the topic, in bestselling books like Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* (2010)*,* Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the 21ˢᵗ Century* (2014), and Matthew Desmond's *Evicted* (2016) and *Poverty, By America* (2023). It is also true in the sense that progressive social movements have recently highlighted, to national audiences, issues like runaway income inequality (such as through the Occupy movement or in the presidential campaigns of Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren), pernicious racial injustice (underscored by the Black Lives Matter movement and the Uprisings of 2020), and gender- and sexuality-based discrimination, harassment, and violence (in movements like #MeToo, or for marriage equality and transgender visibility and protection). Inequalities of many kinds are at the public fore.

Through public discourses and personal experience, in other words, large swaths of the U.S. population appear to recognize entrenched inequality in the face of the American Dream. Simultaneously, relentless and hopeful striving for mobility seems as ubiquitous as ever, epitomized in contemporary American "hustle" or "grind" culture. Widespread (if also sometimes implicit) criticism of an ideology paired with behavioral adherence to its key tenets should complicate how we understand what this ideology is and does.

As I have alluded to above, this forms another central topic of the dissertation: my participants recognize structural inequality and reject meritocracy, but nonetheless strive for individual advancement because they have replaced the ideology of merit with ideologies of the self, part of what I am describing as "mobility ideologies." In other words, I argue that mobility ideologies demonstrate how consent to participation in an unequal society *by members who recognize the structural origins of its inequalities* can be produced, or at the very least buttressed, through subconscious cultural meanings of the self. In this case, U.S. society prizes individualism, and the relevant ideologies iterate on the idea of the individual: most of the ideologies I identify are oriented around individualistic selfhood. Among my participants, these ideologies are paired powerfully with socioeconomic precarity and the experience of real, urgent material needs and constraints, both past and present. *That* they are eager to change their

circumstances is perhaps unsurprising from a material perspective. More unexpected is *how* they work do to so, and what beliefs guide them.

Data and Methods

This analysis draws on in-depth interviews with 40 Black (African American), gender diverse (60% women, 40% men, 0% non-binary) participants from greater New Orleans, LA. Participants attended high school in the New Orleans region, attended college and met federal low-income criteria (were eligible for Pell grants), and were between the ages of 18 and 29 as of 2022. The vast majority were first-generation college students. Some participants left college without a degree; some completed; some were still enrolled in college as of our interviews (see Table 1 for participant demographics). This group constitutes the focal point of the present study. However, for secondary comparison, I also interviewed 17 similar participants of differing racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Asian, Haitian, Latinx, and white participants.

I recruited participants through networks established during my prior professional work in college access in the region. I also contacted staff of local community-based college access and persistence organizations, and requested their help in recruiting participants from among their students and alumni. After interviews began, I used snowball techniques to recruit additional participants. This aggregate approach was useful to my purposes because it created access to a group of participants (low-income, first-generation, predominantly Black college-going young adults) who otherwise would likely be substantially more difficult to contact. The fact that I had lived in New Orleans, participated in the city's socio-educational landscape, or was connected to people they knew, also created a foundation of familiarity and sometimes trust.

Table 1. Sample description

	Main Sample	Supplemental Sample
N	40	17
% African American/Black	100	-
% Asian	-	29
% Haitian/Black	-	35
% Latinx	-	12
% white	-	24
% female	60	70
% male	40	30
% non-binary	-	-
% Pell-eligible	100	100
% completers	30	30
% leavers	50	12
% persisters	20	50
% earning >$15/hr	35	18
% earning >$20.73/hr	15	12
% multiple income sources	58	18(64)*
% in-state college or university	78	82
% with student loans	85	88
% living with family	58	47

% with caregiving responsibilities	35	24

*Note: Percent in parentheses includes participants who are full-time students and hold steady jobs, often working 15+ hrs/wk.

With the approval of my institutional research board, I interviewed each participant 1-3 times, typically for 90-120 minutes total (depending on the participant; a few interviews lasted 3+ hours), emphasizing that their participation was voluntary and that they were welcome to refuse a question or end the interview at any time, without explanation. As a thank-you for generously sharing their time, participants were offered $40 gift cards (which, if accepted, they received at the beginning of the interview).

Because of my analytical interest in individually contextualized experience and meaning-making, I conducted semi-structured life story interviews. (See Methodological Appendix for interview guide.) Life story interviews encourage participants to express the narrative frames from which they understand life and take action, as opposed to imposing a framework for this purpose (Atkinson 2007; e.g., Sweet 2019). In order to conduct in-person interviews (when Covid-safe and desired by my participants), gain understanding of the real-time material contexts of my participants' lives, and coordinate with professionals whose work includes extensive contact with college-going, low-income young adults in New Orleans, I also relocated to New Orleans for 9+ months (in two phases, given Covid-19 pandemic-related constraints: Jan-Jun 2020 and Sept-Dec 2022).

With participants' informed consent, I conducted interviews in person at locations of their choosing, and remotely by video and phone calls. With their permission, I made audio recordings of the interviews; otherwise, I took notes during our conversations. After interviews, I wrote a summary from memory, and transcribed each interview (if audio recorded). I took a grounded theory approach to data analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Corbin and Strauss 1990). I constructed pairs based on variation in educational attainment (a comparison of interest to the broader project), and closely "read" the summaries and interviews for each pair against one another, writing a comparison memo that described emergent themes. I then used themes across these memos to code transcript data. This process was iterative and inductive, building from interview data toward theory, which I then reexamined against the interviews. By listening for and to my participants' "deep stories" (Hochschild 2016), I attend to both declarative and non-declarative aspects of their individual meaning-making (Lizardo 2017; Pugh 2013).

Sample Selection

To make the arguments about ideology, mobility, the self, and precarity outlined above, I am drawing on a narrow subgroup – low-income, Black, college-going young adults from New Orleans – and generating theory that could, in the future, be tested against other subgroups or against the larger, population-level, whole. (Again, for proximal comparison, I also interview 17 additional participants, who similarly grew up low-income in the Greater New Orleans region and attended college, but who do not identify as Black.) But I also note, in Chapter 6, the ways in which the contents of mobility ideologies echo ideological forms used to describe very different subgroups (the white middle class, for instance) in academic work spanning several disciplines (from sociology to anthropology and philosophy) as well as in popular culture (from self-help books to pop songs).

I am focused on a group – low-income, first-generation, Black youth – that is often treated monolithically in social science research, characterized more often by internal similarity

than internal difference. My choices in this project intentionally resist a homogenizing logic: I want to know what we can understand by studying variation within this group, without discounting its internal similarities. In doing so, the study yields new insight on racial inequality as it relates to ideology and mobility. But, it also demonstrates how studying low-income Black youth from a perspective that is curious about their differences additionally responds to other questions of broad sociological concern, such as the relationship of cultural forms to mobility processes and the relationship between ideology and domination. At the same time, in no way does this project attempt to "transcend race" or minimize it. As we will see, race matters profoundly in my participants' experiences, in their meaning-making, and in their efforts toward upward mobility.

The case of New Orleans, a majority-Black city, is useful because, as mentioned, it exemplifies common U.S. dynamics regarding college access and offers a high density of my population of interest. In 2019, New Orleans became the first all-charter public school district in the nation. From 2006 until recently, most charter operators in the city explicitly emphasized college enrollment for all students, from early grades onward. Consequently, whole cohorts of young adults became the first in their families to go to college. And, like most American undergraduates, area public high school graduates who enroll in college mainly attend regional postsecondary institutions with low graduation rates. For these reasons, I hope that insights drawn from this research have broad relevance outside New Orleans.

Studying Practical Consciousness

As I have described above, this project developed inductively into a study of ideology and its conscious and subconscious moments. Its early premise was to understand the aftermath of college access for New Orleans youth, and the meaning that they made of their experiences in the transition to adulthood after high school. In other words, the concept of mobility ideologies, which contain and link reflexive and pre-reflexive elements, emerged from patterns I observed in interviews with participants. While I did not set out to study practical consciousness per se (though was open to encountering it as a form of meaning-making), I needed language to describe what I was seeing: that individuals seemed to share patterned but varying understandings about the existence and nature of a self, and that these understandings were implicit or subconscious. More concretely: as we will see, my participants do *not* say, "I understand my self in X ways and therefore I have Y strategies in life." They *do* say, "I have X goals and I need to do Y to pursue them." In other words, they articulate social action, but imply selfhood. In interviews, I never asked directly about selfhood, avoiding questions like "How do you see your self?" or "What does selfhood mean to you?" Instead, like other interview-based studies of selfhood, I am thematizing views about the meaning of the self or individual that are implicit and emergent in interview content (Bellah et al. 1985; Pugh 2015; Sharone 2014; Silva 2013).

The "self" in this context is not clearly defined, either by my participants' practical schemas or by my analytical ones. This is because the intent of the analysis is not to locate a (probably fictive) truth about some "objective" self, but is instead to examine the variable meanings attached to the "self" precisely as a result of its poor discursive definition. If the "self" is loosely defined, it can be many things or hold many meanings, and I am more interested here in understanding the consequences of this multiplicity than evaluating the real-ness of its core concept (the self).

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At a broader level, scholars have also debated whether interviews are methodologically appropriate for studying practical consciousness. Critics argue that interview-based data collection relies on linguistic reports from respondents, and therefore almost definitionally cannot reveal what is subconscious (Martin 2010; Vaisey 2009). As Stephen Vaisey puts it, "The unstructured or semistructured interview puts us in direct contact with discursive consciousness but gives us little leverage on unconscious cognitive processes" (Vaisey 2009, 1688). Jerolmack and Kahn (2014) argue further that interviews are poor representations of behavior, mistaking attitudes for action, and suggest that analysts should verify attitudinal reports against ethnographic data on action. Indeed, Pierre Bourdieu, in *Masculine Domination* – one of his most direct studies of subconsciousness – confines himself methodologically to ethnographic accounts of traditional Kabyle culture and to literary analysis of Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* in order to reveal "knowledge…that is both possessed and lost from the beginning," or the cultural contents of the subconscious (Bourdieu 2001[1998], 55).[6]

Proponents, on the other hand, point out that interview data, while limited in certain ways (as any method is), contains important forms of information beyond the discursive (Lamont and Swidler 2014; Pugh 2013). Allison Pugh, for instance, outlines four forms of data – the honorable, the schematic, the visceral, and meta-feelings – which together mean that "interpretive in-depth interviewing allows us to think about the cultural context of [cultural] meanings, to situate the feelings people feel in an emotional landscape they themselves sometimes ascertain, and always convey" (Pugh 2013, 47). She affirms: "[W]hen we analyze people's talk for the feelings that embed their narratives, and the management of their feelings that their schematic commitments require – a form of data only available from in-depth, interpretive, conversational interviewing – we can access the emotional schemas that impinge upon them, and that potentially shape what action seems possible" (Pugh 2013, 65). Because I am concerned with both action and meaning-making, this approach – that of "in-depth, interpretive, conversational interviewing" – is what I employ in my interviews.

Confidentiality

In order to describe the data patterns salient to my arguments, I need to present close studies of individual cases. I need to detail the material conditions and social contexts individuals experience, their aspirations and strategies over time, and the conscious and subconscious sense they make of all of these. I need to provide enough detail to develop clues about their interiority, incomplete as this necessarily is. And I need to show how the patterns of mobility ideologies manifest in individual lives that otherwise could seem quite different. All this raises potential concerns about confidentiality above and beyond those of many interview projects: by presenting life histories, I could inadvertently reveal my participants' identities.

I address this is several ways. First, as is usual, I assign pseudonyms to my participants (and to all other individuals they may mention). Especially because names can be interpreted in racially coded ways in institutions (like higher education) and on the labor market (Pager et al. 2009), I take care to select pseudonyms that emulate (while also disguising) the unique character of individual names. I also change the names and locations of institutions, businesses, and

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[6] It almost seems as if Bourdieu, in *Masculine Domination*, cannot imagine interacting with contemporary subjects in a way that could reveal anything useful about the subconscious effects of masculine domination and, in his account, its mechanism of symbolic violence. Yet this is puzzling, because Bourdieu's understanding of the subconscious draws on Freud, whose psychoanalytic method centered, at least in part, on the belief that it was possible for the discursive process of psychoanalysis to uncover important elements of the analysand's subconscious.

geographies. Importantly, and following Arlie Hochschild's example in *The Second Shift* (2012[1989]), the nine in-depth narratives presented in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 use composite characteristics of multiple participants to mask identifiable content while preserving substantive meaning.

Outline of the Dissertation

The dissertation proceeds in six chapters. Chapter 1 presents the theoretical foundations of the project. It first draws on the existing literature on American individualisms, therapeutic selfhood, self-blame, flexible selfhood, and cruel optimism to preview and characterize some of the commonalities presented in Chapter 2. Yet beneath these broadly shared understandings of the self lie patterned schema that are rooted in three specific understandings of what the self is or means. I argue that each understanding constitutes a distinct ideological system, linking ideas of the self to beliefs about social action and social change. I call these systems *mobility ideologies*, and briefly introduce three ideal-types – gardeners, climbers, and seekers – that are elaborated in subsequent chapters. I draw on the literature on culture and inequality (e.g., Young 2004; Smith 2007; Harding 2010; Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010) to clarify how mobility ideologies are analytically useful, as well as how they may be misinterpreted. Building on Merton's (1938) work on social means and ends, as well as DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin's (2016) concept of identity projects, I develop an analytical framework of *mobility projects* to conceptualize the interaction of ideology with the means (such as social and cultural capital) and ends (such as goals and aspirations) of mobility. I preview the arguments, developed empirically in subsequent chapters, that mobility ideologies are sociologically consequential because 1) they shape actions people take in their mobility projects and, as a result, shape mobility pathways, and 2) they simultaneously reveal, justify, and obscure the contemporary socioeconomic order.

Chapter 2 addresses experiences of precarity shared among my participants. It asks how first-generation youth experience the transition to adulthood after they exit college, and how these experiences vary among those who exit higher education with a degree versus "some college." Although the financial consequences of "some college" are being examined in a growing body of quantitative research on income returns and student debt, very little qualitative research describes the after-effects, financial and otherwise, of early college exit. Chapter 2 presents the after-high school experiences of college-bound graduates of New Orleans public high schools: their trajectories in college and in the transition to life after college. It presents the institutional landscapes these graduates encountered as college freshmen, and the labor markets they entered after leaving college. It directly compares college completers and college leavers (people with "some college"), drawing out distinctions between their post-secondary and post-college experiences, and contrasts fine-grained interview data with existing quantitative research on the returns to "some college." On the whole, however, the chapter emphasizes the many points of commonality in these young adults' post-college trajectories – precarity, side-hustles, optimism, and self-blame – despite variation in college outcomes.

Chapter 3 gives an in-depth, case-by-case presentation of the experiences and meaning-making narratives of three "gardeners," highlighting their differences in order to reveal the common undercurrents of mobility ideology that they deeply share. After presenting each narrative independently, I analyze them together, synthetically drawing out the contours of a common, "transformational" mobility ideology. This belief system is based on an understanding that the inner self is fundamentally flawed, wounded, or insufficient, and therefore must be developed, changed, healed, or otherwise altered in some way. The self is a *project*. Because of

this orienting belief about the self, the strategies that gardeners use toward their mobility projects center around inner change and transformation. While demonstrating the features of transformational mobility ideology, I also show how this ideology is useful to individuals in their efforts to make sense of their contexts and experiences (including childhood experiences), and trace the pathways that gardeners develop as they pursue strategic action shaped by their transformational mobility ideology.

The "climbers" of Chapter 4 differ from the "gardeners" of Chapter 3 in how they understand the meaning of the self. Like gardeners, climbers also seek growth – but not because they believe their inner selves are flawed or ought to change. Instead, climbers believe their selves are whole and capable; their selves are *vehicles*. Rather than seeking inner change, climbers aim to advance their mobility projects by making the right moves, taking the right risks, and learning the right skills and knowledge. In other words, their strategies revolve around outer agency. As in the case of the gardeners, I explore the features, but also the context and consequences, of climbers' agentic mobility ideology.

In contrast to the gardeners and the climbers, the "seekers" of Chapter 5 believe that their selves are whole, but trapped. The self does not need to be fundamentally transformed (as the gardeners believe), but neither is it free to act (as the climbers believe). Instead, the self is a *hostage*. As a result, seekers tend to focus their actions on tactics for self-liberation. For instance, they are comparatively less invested in economic advancement, and tend to eschew side-hustles. They want to gain habits, knowledge, skills, and relationships that will help them achieve the emancipation of their selves. Once again I describe the nature of emancipatory mobility ideology, as well as why it makes sense for seekers to adopt it, and what happens as they are guided by it.

Why do mobility ideologies matter, and what are their origins? Stepping back from the detail of individual lives, Chapter 6 makes a two-pronged theoretical argument. First, mobility ideologies are consequential because they shape the strategic action of social agents. That is, they shape how mobility projects are attempted. I contrast the meanings my participants make with the capitals and credentials they hold and the progress they make in individual mobility projects. I build on the literature regarding mobility and culture to hypothesize that mobility ideologies shape relationships between educational attainment, social and cultural capital, and mobility strategies and pathways, and do so across race, class, and gender groups.

Next, the chapter takes up the questions of why people hold particular mobility ideologies, and where mobility ideologies come from. Based on data presented in preceding chapters, I argue that use of or alignment with specific mobility ideologies is shaped by gender, trauma histories, and the nature of the events and circumstances individuals experience and of which they must make sense. At the same time, I review how mobility ideologies are not fixed, and may sometimes conflict within an individual's experience. I further show that cultural schema similar to mobility ideologies are evident in a wide range of interdisciplinary work on individualism, from sociologists like Émile Durkheim, David Riesman, Robert Bellah, and Ann Swidler to philosophers like Charles Taylor and anthropologists like Richard Shweder. I warn against the risks of making social prescriptions on the basis of mobility ideology, and reflect more broadly on the power of ideology to shape social outcomes. I consider what other ideologies of the self – such as an "interdependent mobility ideology" – may exist and be dispatched to foster alternate belief systems and work toward a more equitable society.

I conclude by complicating our understanding of what ideologies undergird contemporary American striving in the face of widely recognized inequality. For decades, social scientists have

shown how widespread belief in a meritocratic American Dream both naturalizes inequality and is remarkably enduring. However, most of my participants exhibit different beliefs: they reject the meritocratic basis of the American Dream, citing their knowledge and direct experiences of persistent socioeconomic inequities. Yet they remain attached to the American Dream's objects: financial security, homeownership, the nuclear family, a bit of leisure time, and the ability to "give back."

        I argue that mobility ideologies and mobility projects are consequential because they reveal the contours of what is conscious and subconscious to my participants regarding mobility. In so doing, they help differentiate between the elements of the social order that my participants perceive as unequal or unfair (socioeconomic inequality), and those they perceive as legitimate or correct (conceptions of the self). The relationship between the two helps explain why my participants simultaneously criticize the idea of the American Dream, and report acting in accordance with its mandates. To make theoretical sense of this apparent empirical contradiction, I relate it to two theories which similarly give two differing accounts of social domination: Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence and subconscious misrecognition, and Gramsci's theory of consent to hegemony. What enables these young adults' pursuit of advancement – and secures their participation in a system they believe to be unfair – is not so much a ideology of merit as an ideology of the self.

CHAPTER 1
MOBILITY IDEOLOGIES: DIVERGENT MEANING-MAKING

Precarity is an overwhelming presence in most of my participants' lives.[7] As the Introduction previewed (and as Chapter 2 demonstrates at much greater depth), many are regularly short on money (about two thirds make $15 or less per hour at their regular jobs), and cultivate multiple income streams as a result. In addition to their main employment, most have one or more side hustles. Some stay in jobs long-term (for a period of years), but many do not. Some also seek additional training and education in order to improve their earning potential.

Complicating many participants' working lives are a set of considerable responsibilities: paying off student debt and car loans, paying rent in an increasingly expensive housing market, and helping family members with bills. Many live with family: with parents and siblings, cousins, or grandparents. Many women participants are responsible for caregiving as well: for children (their own or family members'), or for disabled or elderly family members. Only a handful of participants are involved in serious romantic relationships; most express skepticism about spending time and money on relationships that feel unstable and unlikely to last. Many also raise concerns about physical safety: with car-jackings, car burglary, and gun violence rates rising, many participants report feeling less safe and wanting to leave New Orleans.

In other words, many participants confront considerable, even profound, adversity in their everyday lives. Yet in virtually every interview, they express both a dogged sense of optimism (they believe their various goals of upward mobility, home ownership, fulfillment, and "giving back" are achievable) and a sense of responsibility about their situations. As we saw, they do not necessarily blame themselves for *causing* the predicaments they are in, but they do believe that they should be capable of responding to and overcoming these obstacles. They share a common *belief* that they ought to be able to achieve their version of meritocratic individualism, or "the American Dream" (which they nominally reject in acknowledgement of Black people's historical and present marginalization in the United States, but more or less endorse in practice).[8] If they fail to transcend adversity, they regularly shoulder the blame and take responsibility for their predicaments. But, despite similar backgrounds, my participants make sense of similar experiences of precarity in differing ways.

Mikaela and Janae

These differences were, at first, hard to discern among the many pronounced similarities my participants share. However, once I began "listening" for the implicit and explicit meaning my participants made of their shared experiences and for what kinds of action they reported

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[7] Most of my participants' lives are precarious in the sense that they frequently experience considerable material strain, depend to some degree on part-time or otherwise flexible employment to make ends meet, and suffer frequent setbacks in pursuit of their goals. As the conditions of their experience change, they engage in a relentless process of strategizing and adjustment. However, some participants feel themselves to be on upwardly-mobile career paths.

[8] One might expect that Black participants' experiences of racism could point them toward blaming social structures (like white supremacy) or racialized others (like individual racists) for their struggles. These experiences were obviously distressing and impactful, and were recognized and critiqued by my participants – but they also rarely led participants away from self-responsibility.

taking in response, patterns began to emerge. One particular moment stands out as central to the development of these insights.

I had been reviewing my notes about an interview with a young woman named Mikaela, which had been conducted via video chat. Mikaela was at home during the interview, caring for her infant daughter. A smoke alarm had pinged intermittently, signaling it needed a new battery. A TV was on in the background, her daughter was having some fussy moments, and I was on her phone screen. Mikaela had been completely unbothered by all this. She would turn her attention to her daughter when her daughter needed it; she was neither flustered by sporadic wailing nor apologetic about it. She spoke in a straightforward way about her life. It struck me that Mikaela was relating to herself in a completely different way than some of my other participants did – specifically, my participant Janae. Where Janae was nervous, apologetic, and more easily flustered, full of self-deprecation and self-criticism, Mikaela was steady, self-assured, pragmatic. Where Janae focused the common inclination toward self-blame and personal responsibility on changing her self *internally*, Mikaela took responsibility for her circumstances by changing her skills, knowledge, or outward action. Where Janae leaned on others to help her grow, Mikaela leaned on others to help her make moves.

Was this just a personality difference? I went back to other interviews to see if there was a pattern. I found that, despite plenty of other differences, many of my participants *did* orient to their selves and to action toward their goals like either Mikaela *or* Janae (but generally not both) – and also that there was a third group, comprised of people who oriented to these things differently from both Mikaela and Janae, but in ways that were nonetheless similar to each other. Trying to clarify and understand these orientations – Where did they come from? How did they work? To what effect? – became a guiding direction for subsequent interviews, and indeed for this research as a whole. Rather than focusing analytically on the many commonalities among my participants in the aftermath of college access, I found myself asking: Why do common after-college experiences of precarity and personal responsibility correspond with differing strategies of action, beliefs, and mobility pathways among demographically similar individuals? And how do these differences matter?

Mobility Ideologies

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, I present empirical evidence demonstrating the existence and consequences of patterned ideologies regarding the nature of the self, social action, and social context. I call these *mobility ideologies*, because they constitute shared belief systems that, I argue, play an integral role in shaping how my participants strive toward upward mobility. I describe mobility ideologies via three ideal-types, or prototypical categories that delineate the most salient features of each belief system and highlight how they are both similar and different. They are similar in their *constitutive elements* or domains: each entails specific beliefs about the self, social action, and social context. However, they differ in terms of the *meanings* attached to each of these three domains.

One ideal-type (transformational mobility ideology) views the self as a project aimed at inner growth. It focuses strategic action and interpersonal relationships on achieving this growth, and tends to believe that society's opportunity structure is relatively open. A second ideal-type (agentic mobility ideology) views the self as a capable vehicle, which must make the right moves by securing the right knowledge, skills, or other resources. It views mobility as possible, though dependent on taking the right risks. The third ideal-type (emancipatory mobility ideology) views the self as capable, but trapped, and looks for ways to free the confined self. It views the

opportunity structure as relatively closed. These mobility ideologies are examined at much greater depth in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

When describing what mobility ideologies are and how they work, it is also important to describe what they are *not*. In identifying these ideal-types, I want to emphasize that they are just that: idealized categories. They describe overarching patterns in my data, but they are not intended to imply that each participant in a given category thinks exactly the same way about their selves or the actions they take. Nor do mobility ideologies imply fixed identities: I regard it as entirely possible that individuals could move among categories over time, or even, as I have evidence of in some rare cases, straddle categories at a given moment in time. These ideal-types are also not intended as statements of truth about the existence of some objective "self," or as an articulation of the only possible mobility ideologies. In fact, I think it likely that other forms of mobility ideology exist (which I discuss further in Chapter 6), though I would hypothesize that the three I discuss here likely predominate in American society.

Culture, Inequality, Ideology, and the Self

How and why do people who share similar socioeconomic backgrounds and similar experiences of present precarity make different, yet patterned, meaning of these experiences and use different, yet patterned, strategies in striving toward shared goals? This puzzle poses fundamental questions. How are individual meaning-making and action socially constructed? And, what consequences do these actions have, for individuals and for society?

In the case of my participants, these overarching questions revolve around a specific set of topics: culture, inequality, ideology, and the self. In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss primary theories that the existing sociological literature offers about these questions and their interrelationships in the context of culture, inequality, ideology, and the self. I argue that the relevant literature makes three main theoretical propositions: 1) cultural forms produce and reproduce categorical inequality, 2) shared selfhoods reify social structure, and 3) culture is linked to mobility by shaping its means and ends. I review the evidence in support of these theories, critique their shortcomings, and preview the contributions of this research.

Culture and Inequality: Cultural Forms Produce and Reproduce Categorical Inequality

A familiar sociological starting point for questions about how culture relates to inequality is the "culture of poverty" argument developed by American anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1959), who studied impoverished families in Mexico City. Lewis argued that values, habits, and behaviors were more to blame for these families' socioeconomic status than were the structural and economic conditions they struggled within, and described these attributes, in pathologizing terms, as a self-perpetuating "culture of poverty." His ideas were soon given a national platform in *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), authored by sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan and widely known as the Moynihan Report. The influential report was commissioned as an internal memo through the U.S. Department of Labor, where Moynihan was Assistant Secretary, to examine poverty among Black Americans, and in it Moynihan argued that persistent Black poverty could be attributed to single-parent family structures and deficient values. The Moynihan Report was roundly criticized for victim-blaming, among other weaknesses, but its central arguments left a deep mark on American public policy as well as on academic debate (Massey and Sampson 2009).

Over subsequent decades, a vocal scholarly backlash demonstrated that persistent poverty results not from a failure of values but from a host of structural forces, such as those stemming

from economic and occupational transformations, neighborhood and housing segregation and discrimination, and policing and incarceration (e.g., Wilson 1987; Massey and Denton 1993; Western 2006; Wacquant 2009). But, scholars have increasingly argued that what we broadly describe as "culture" does have a place in sociological understandings of inequality – albeit a very different one. This approach rejects the idea that persistent poverty is explained by pathological values, and asks instead what a wide array of culture concepts – such as capitals, perceptions, narratives, symbolic boundaries, repertoires, and frames (Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010, 14) – might help us understand about inequality and how people make sense of it. As Mario Small, David Harding, and Michèle Lamont memorably put it, "Culture is back on the poverty agenda" (2010, 6; see also Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014; Lareau 2015; Valentino and Vaisey 2022).

Culture, Capitals, and Inequality

Among scholars of inequality, for instance, theories of cultural (as well as social) capital have been particularly important in explaining how social structures reproduce inequality. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1970), which argues that French schooling uses social and cultural capital and symbolic violence to sort students into socially reproductive academic and occupational tracks, scholars have identified myriad cultural capital processes and mechanisms that impede efforts at upward mobility. Annette Lareau, for instance, shows in *Unequal Childhoods* (2003) how class-based cultural logics of parenting contribute to social reproduction. The "natural growth" parenting style of working class families teaches their children to accept authority as an immutable if unfair part of life; the "concerted cultivation" style of middle class families teaches their children to ask for what they need and want, giving them a sense of entitlement in relation to authority. This means that different advantages accrue to middle class children than to working class children over time, particularly as they enter and navigate educational institutions where self-advocacy can be crucial.

Arguing that within-class differences in cultural capital also matter in the reproduction of inequality, Anthony Jack demonstrates in *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students* (2019) that low-income college students at an elite university vary in their knowledge and capacity to navigate academic and social life in college. In his study, the "privileged poor" are low-income graduates of elite high schools who have already gained the social and cultural capital necessary to navigate elite post-secondary spaces, while the "doubly disadvantaged" are low-income graduates of over-crowded, segregated, and under-funded public high schools, who lack the social and cultural capital they need to way-find in an elite college. Cultural capital again serves to reproduce existing (and relative) advantage and disadvantage. But, cultural frames held by people other than the would-be upwardly mobile also influence how inequality is maintained: in *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs* (2015), Lauren Rivera shows how cultural gatekeeping shapes unequal transitions from college to the workplace. She traces how hiring managers at elite firms use ideas about what talent *is* and *means* (what it looks and sounds like; in whom it manifests) to guide decisions that offer some of the economy's most lucrative entry-level jobs to new college grads who are already among the most advantaged in their cohorts.

These studies convincingly argue that cultural capital plays a critical role in perpetuating inequality – and that it does so in ways that are independent of individuals' values or a so-called "culture of poverty." Further work emphasizes the role of additional aspects of culture – such as frames, symbolic boundaries, and institutions – in the production and reproduction of inequality.

Harding (2007, 2010), for example, shows that differing heterogeneity in cultural frames is associated with variation in romantic distrust and educational pathways among adolescent Black and Latino boys from low-income Boston neighborhoods with differing levels of concentrated disadvantage. More broadly, boundary-making processes, such as racialization and stigmatization, define social groups and shape inequality in the material and non-material resources they access (Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014; Omi and Winant 1994). Once produced, symbolic capital legitimates such distinctions between people and classes (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2013). Institutions, defined by their rules, norms, and frames (Scott 1995), also produce inequalities, such as in social networks (Small 2009), through policies and behavioral structures, and through normative expectations (such as ideas about deservingness) that can shape individual or group access to resources or services (Steensland 2006).

Ideology and Inequality

But is there no place for culture in guiding the actions of individuals as they attempt (or do not attempt) upward mobility? Surely what people believe informs what they do in some measure. And indeed, a robust literature on beliefs and inequality affirms that it does. Seminal works like Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour* (1977) and Jay MacLeod's *Ain't No Makin' It* (1987) detail the role ideological beliefs can play in social reproduction.

In Willis's classic ethnography of working class British schoolboys, the lads' investments in rebellion against authority, traditional masculinity, and working class culture lead them to reject school (unlike their 'ear'ole classmates) but also to valorize working-class forms of labor (such as on the "shop floor") as more legitimate or authentic. As a result, the solidaristic potential of their rebelliousness is undercut by patriarchal ideology, and they participate in the reproduction of their own class status, albeit unintentionally. Across the Atlantic, in low-income housing projects outside Boston, MacLeod's Hallway Hangers (a group of male youths who are mostly white) and Brothers (a group of Black male youths) reveal how other forms of ideology can have reproductive effects. In MacLeod's study, the Hallway Hangers have a distinct subculture that includes rejecting the dominant culture's meritocratic achievement ideology, or the idea that hard work and educational attainment breed success. The Brothers, by contrast, are invested in achievement ideology; unlike the Hallway Hangers, they aspire to academic achievement and professional occupations. Like Willis's lads, the Hallway Hangers' rejection of achievement ideology helps reproduce their class status, whereas the Brothers' embracing of achievement ideology hides how institutions, such as their high schools, direct them into socially-reproductive tracks: because achievement ideology teaches that failure to advance is the result of individual failings, the Brothers blame themselves, not their schools, for their academic shortcomings. For MacLeod, ideology helps reproduce social status, and obscures ways in which institutions do the same.

Further, sociologists Alford A. Young and Sandra Susan Smith show that worldviews interact with social and cultural capitals in key, but different, ways that are also consequential to inequality. In *The Minds of Marginalized Black Men* (2004), his ethnography of unemployed Black men on the West Side of Chicago, Young finds that social isolation (as a proxy for social and cultural capitals) shapes the worldviews of his participants: individuals who experience less social isolation – who hold more dominant capitals – tend also to believe that society's opportunity structure is more unequal and closed than people who experience *more* social isolation. For Young, social and cultural capitals play a role in shaping the minds – the worldviews – of his participants. Conversely, Smith, in *Lone Pursuit: Distrust and Defensive*

Individualism Among the Black Poor (2007), argues that defensive individualism and distrust prevent both job seekers and job holders in a Black, low-income community in Michigan from requesting and receiving or offering, respectively, employment assistance from their nearer and farther social ties. It is not necessarily the absence of social capital, but rather a beliefs-driven unwillingness to ask for or extend its benefits, that contributes to unemployment in her account.

Mobility and Within-Group Inequality

Taken together, this research on inequality productively emphasizes using various cultural forms to help explain inequality between categorical groups, or the reproduction of inter-group difference. However, the examples reviewed above illustrate two shortcomings of existing research on culture and inequality.

First, while much scholarship has examined the role of cultural forms in class reproduction, there is comparatively little research on their role in socioeconomic mobility, an important component of inequality research (Streib 2016). As Jessi Streib points out, existing theory on culture and mobility emphasizes "how cultural similarities between the classes facilitate upward mobility, but not how cultural differences between the classes do the same. They also explain how culture facilitates upward mobility, but say much less about how culture facilitates downward mobility" (Streib 2016, 128). The relative dearth of research on culture and mobility is both a feature of the historical predominance of theoretical frameworks emphasizing the relationship between culture and class reproduction (including culture of poverty, Marxist, and Bourdieusian approaches [Streib 2016, 128]) and likely an artifact of study design: research constructed around cross-group comparison is perhaps ill-suited to explain within-group variation.

Second, comparatively little is known about the role cultural forms play in creating or sustaining inequalities *within* ascribed categories, particularly class categories, because this implies attending to mobility rather than reproduction. At the same time, research shows that, although measures of inequality like overall income mobility have stagnated in the U.S. (Chetty et al. 2014), both upward and downward mobility take place at the individual level (Brand and Xie 2010; Hout 2012; Streib 2020; Torche 2011), suggesting that studying within-group variation may help advance new understanding of how inequality is produced, reproduced, and moderated.

What is the relationship between culture and *mobility*? How does culture relate to inequality *within* – as opposed to *across* – cultural groups (that is, among people with presumably similar habitus and cultural capital)? These are underexamined questions which this study approaches through an analysis of ideology, mobility paths, and the self.

Self and Inequality: Shared Selfhoods Reify Social Structure

The present analysis examines varying social conceptions of the self as key cultural frames that shape mobility and inequality in early adulthood. Selves are socially constructed and performed (see Callero 2003 for a review); as such they are social objects of cultural action. In *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters* (2001), Ann Swidler writes that "[p]eople use culture to learn how to be, or become, particular kinds of persons. Such self-forming… utilizes symbolic resources provided by the wider culture. Through experiences with symbols, people learn desires, moods, habits of thought and feelings that no one person could invent on her own" (Swidler 2001, 71). Swidler builds on this notion of self-formation to "propose…an 'identity' model of how culture works. The fundamental notion is that people develop lines of action based on who they already think they are. This is true in two senses. First…actors' capacities shape the

lines of action that they find possible and promising. The second sense in which [hers] is an identity-based model is that a great deal of culture operates by *attaching meanings to the self*" (Swidler 2001, 87, italics mine). As we will see below, considerable empirical evidence supports the proposition that selves are culturally-shaped: a robust body of research has described the existence and effects of widely-circulating cultural beliefs, frames, and scripts about the self. In the context of the United States, these revolve around individual responsibility, self-blame, and flexibility.

Meritocratic Individualism

Now-classic works of sociology have argued for decades that American individualism and the up-by-the-bootstraps, meritocratic ideology of the American Dream obscure the structural origins of inequality while convincing individuals that failure to reach their goals reveals a lack of character, merit, or hard work – not a lack of opportunity. The pattern holds, these studies demonstrate, across diverse ages, ethnicities, races, genders, and occupations. Ely Chinoy's white male midwestern autoworkers in *Automobile Workers and the American Dream* (1959), for instance, blame their own shortcomings when they cannot realize their dreams of upward mobility at the car factory where they labor (or in business outside of the factory). The first- and second-generation Italian immigrant, working-class men and women that Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb interview in *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1972) similarly introject the wounds of class status when they cannot realize their desire for social respect, blaming themselves for the rejection they experience in a class society. And the Black youth from Boston-area housing projects in Jay MacLeod's *Ain't No Makin' It* (1987) blame themselves when they perceive they cannot reach their aspirations despite changing national-level racial politics that they believe should have facilitated their success. The disjuncture between this ideology of meritocratic individualism and the realities of persistent inequality and stagnant mobility creates both cultural and political quandaries in the United States, as Katherine Newman demonstrates in *Declining Fortunes: The Withering of the American Dream* (1993) and as Jennifer Hochschild explores in *Facing Up to the American Dream* (1995). Newman describes how receding opportunity divides baby boomers and their parents in "Pleasanton," a New Jersey suburb, along lines of aspirations, values, and morality; Hochschild shows how political cleavages about the perceived racial and class allocation of limited economic opportunity divided American public life.

Neoliberal Selfhood

In the neoliberal era, self-blame finds renewed expression in the context of responsibilization, a therapeutic cultural ethos, and rising precarity (Foucault 1979; Bellah et al. 1985; Illouz 2007; Kalleberg 2010). Jennifer Silva (2013) shows how working-class, Black and white millennials use a logic of therapeutic selfhood to navigate feeling betrayed by institutions and disoriented by economic instability, deriving dignity and legitimacy from taking responsibility for managing their selves through hard-won transformation. María Rendón (2019) also observes self-blame among young, second-generation Latino men in Los Angeles who are deeply invested in meritocratic ideology, but struggle to make sense of the socioeconomic stagnation they experience despite their considerable efforts toward upward mobility. Further, self-blame in the context of precarity afflicts Americans of diverse class backgrounds in similar ways, as Ofer Sharone (2014) demonstrates in his study of long-term unemployment among white-collar workers. By comparing workers' experiences of rising white-collar unemployment

in the United States and Israel, Sharone shows that American logics of job "chemistry" lead jobless professionals to internalize blame for their unemployment, while their Israeli peers, following logics of job qualification ("specs"), blame the biases of "the system."

A close cousin of seemingly widespread self-blame is the contemporary imperative toward flexibility, which Allison Pugh explores in *The Tumbleweed Society* (2015) and *Beyond the Cubicle: Job Insecurity, Intimacy, and the Flexible Self* (2017). In the former, Pugh demonstrates that, in the context of precarious labor markets and a withdrawing welfare state, individuals (particularly low-income women) sense employment imperatives to be flexible and adaptable – yielding a "transient" self – even as they seek to uphold firm commitments in other areas of life (such as caregiving) and feel a discrepancy between their emotions and these cultural mandates. Social forces and conditions (like neoliberal socioeconomic insecurity) must still be accommodated within the self, even if such accommodation is not straightforward. (Indeed, in her introduction to *Beyond the Cubicle*, Pugh further argues that the emotional contradictions produced by flexibility imperatives "suggest potential stores of cultural resistance or change" [Pugh 2017, 5].)

Ubiquitous Selfhoods

Taken as a whole, this scholarship tends to narrate convergence: orienting logics of the self are shared within or sometimes across groups (class groups, for instance), major shifts in these logics co-occur with major shifts in population or political economy, certain cultural moods (like self-blame or a therapeutic ethos) are ubiquitous, and the overwhelming force of these logics and moods reify domination and obviate resistance (especially among most-dominated groups). Certain culturally-constructed selfhoods either predominate within ascribed groups, or are socially pervasive and transcend social categories: there is "working class selfhood," for instance, or "neoliberal selfhood." Research subjects within a given social category tend to experience similar feelings and make similar meanings of them, which reifies social structure.

These findings are both useful and compelling, because they convincingly link subjective experience to objective social structures, and especially to political economy, demonstrating how pervasive and powerful are liberal and neoliberal logics of the self. Like much of the literature on culture and inequality, these studies also give compelling accounts of how the self is mobilized toward social reproduction, either of intergenerational status or of broader structures like labor markets or class. However, and again like the literature on culture and inequality, little is understood about how the self may be mobilized toward *mobility*, either upward or downward (but see Streib 2020)[9]; about how constructions of selfhood may vary *within* categorical groups (as Harding's [2010] cultural heterogeneity theory might infer); and about how such variation could matter to inequality.

Further, existing scholarship can imply a certain fixity: in these accounts, individuals frequently (though not always) appear trapped inside constructions of the self beyond which they are barely able to imagine alternative selves or politics. Sennett and Cobb's working class subjects in the 1960s, for example, internalize blame for their social position to anti-solidary effect; Silva's individualistic millennials evince deep skepticism about both political and romantic connections with their peers. But what happens when similar beliefs (about individual

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[9] Streib (2020) focuses on personal *identities*, including "professionals," "stay-at-home mothers," "family men," "rebels," "artists and athletes," and "explorers." These are both relatively durable and distinct from cultural frames about the meaning of the self. For instance, a number of my participants hold artist identities, yet their predominant mobility ideologies vary across gardener, climber, and seeker ideal-types.

responsibility) and similar affects (like self-blame) correspond with differing strategies for social action, as the cases of Janae, Britnee, and Mona illustrated in the Introduction?

That is to say: from one perspective, my participants' experiences and beliefs closely mirror and support research findings regarding meritocratic individualism, self-blame, and flexible selfhood. Chapter 2 will illustrate the degree to which they are deeply invested in an ethos of hard work and personal responsibility, and believe that their dreams, which often hinge on financial stability and a middle-class lifestyle (a nuclear family, homeownership, travel, some disposable income, and the ability to financially help others) are attainable. When they stumble in this pursuit, they often (though not always, as we will see in specific and important cases) blame their own failings, ignorance, or limitations. They are committed to adapting to unfavorable circumstances and to flexibly making themselves amenable to institutional and employer demands, as evidenced strongly in their commitment to multiple and sometimes elaborate side-hustles, often in the gig economy. They keenly feel the emotional twist between how they "have to" approach their working lives and the aspirations for care and commitment that they dearly hold. In these respects, and as in the literature on meritocratic individualism, self-blame, and flexibility, there is great convergence in my data: these manifold aspects of commonality among my participants are both loud and essential to understanding their broader social situations. However, beneath these strong similarities lie key patterns of diverging ideologies – ones which complicate the sociological story about contemporary selfhood and its consequences.

Why Mobility "Ideology"? Part One

The term "mobility ideology" has been used in several scholarly ways. It has, for instance, been used, as "ideologies of mobility," to describe the contemporary scholarly paradigm which centers various forms of mobility: of people, of objects, and of symbols (Endres, Manderscheid, and Mincke 2016; see also Henretta 1977 for an earlier rendering of related ideas). In his 1964 book *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City*, a study of socioeconomic opportunity in mid-19th century Newburyport, MA, the historian Stephan Thernstrom also used the term "mobility ideology" to denote an earlier form of what we would today call the "American Dream."[10] I use "mobility ideologies" in a different sense, referring to a collection of varying but related ideologies about how meaningful or possible socioeconomic mobility is, how it may be pursued, and the nature of the selves that might pursue it.

"Ideology" itself is a term that has borne multiple meanings in social theory: for example, its use in classical Marxist writings pertains to the beliefs of a specific class, the bourgeoisie, that function to obscure (i.e., legitimate) the domination of subordinate classes (Marx and Engels 1978[1935]).[11] Other theorists have used the term more broadly. Karl Mannheim holds that any

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[10] Thernstrom writes, "The function of the ideology of mobility was to supply the citizens of nineteenth century America with a scheme for comprehending and accommodating themselves to a new social and economic order. According to this doctrine, a distinctively open social system had appeared in the United States. The defining characteristic of this open society was its perfect competitiveness, which guaranteed a complete correspondence between social status and merit. The wealthy and privileged could occupy their superior position only so long as their performance warranted it; the talented but low-born were certain to rise quickly to stations befitting their true worth" (Thernstrom 1964, 58).

[11] In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels write, "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of the society [ie., the bourgeoisie, in their analysis], is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those

social group may possess an ideology that both arises from and describes elements of their social realities – their social positions – and legitimates or justifies them (Mannheim 1954[1929]). For Louis Althusser, ideology not only describes in ideas individual relationships to a social reality, but it also has a "material existence," an active social force (Althusser 2014[1970]). Each of these definitions differs from contemporary popular use of the term, which is something akin to "worldview" or "belief system,"[12] because they specify that ideologies both originate in social location and serve to reinforce (by justifying or legitimating) the social order that produced them. It is in this more sociological sense that I use the term.

Mobility Culture?

But, why "mobility *ideologies*," as opposed to "mobility *culture*," or mobility *frames*, *scripts*, or other forms common to cultural repertoires? To begin: what I observe appears more durable and (at times) subconscious than "frames," which can be picked up and put down as useful tools and at an agent's conscious whim. A good, contrasting example is the heterogeneous frames about education and relationships that the young men in David Harding's *Living the Drama* (2010) deploy as they navigate adolescence: in Harding's case, a range of frames on these topics are culturally available, but are both relatively explicit and relatively changeable. Relatedly, "scripts" seem too superficial to describe what I observe here: scripts are usually taken to represent rote patterns of interaction or thought. This is not to say that mobility ideologies are divorced from scripts: in Chapter 6, for instance, I explore how the language of popular song lyrics mirror the logics of mobility ideologies. The language of the lyrics is familiar, patterned, and reads as if scripted. Similarly, individuals who hold the same mobility ideology do tend to use similar language as one another—which could make mobility ideologies appear more like scripts. But, in cultural analysis, the term "script" is typically used to describe the practices or performances expected or routinized in response to a series of events. Again, mobility ideologies go deeper: they relate more to deeply-held *beliefs* (about the self, social action, and social context) that durably guide action than to expected speech or specific, in-context movement or behavior. As we will see, they additionally serve a justifying or legitimating role – which is again proper to ideology and distinct from the concept of a cultural script.

Mobility Habitus?

But if not mobility frames or scripts, why not treat what I observe as "habitus"? The Bourdieusian notion of *habitus*, or sedimented dispositions that yield seemingly automatic patterns of perception, thought, and feeling, is far more deeply embedded than cultural tools like frames or scripts, a feature that I have argued also characterizes mobility ideology (Bourdieu 1977[1972]). And, though habitus is durable, Bourdieu argues that it can develop or change – albeit slowly or as the result of a very strong impetus – over time (hence his discussion of a primary and secondary habitus, cleft habitus, etc.) (Bourdieu 2000[1997]). This again bears similarity to how I conceive of mobility ideologies: they are durable, but can change over time. A strictly Bourdieusian approach to my data would likely argue that what I develop is a typology of

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who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships are grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance" (Marx and Engels 1978[1935], 172-173).

[12] The Oxford English Dictionary defines contemporary use of *ideology* as: "A systematic scheme of ideas, usually relating to politics, economics, or society and forming the basis of action or policy; a set of beliefs governing conduct. Also: the forming or holding of such a scheme of ideas" (OED 2023).

shared dispositions, common forms of habitus. Still, I have selected a different term – ideology – for three reasons.

First, there is the issue of habitus's debated ontological and epistemological status. Habitus in Bourdieu's theorization is significantly subconscious (or "practical," in his terms); it is also broad, encompassing traits as various as physical comportment, taste and other evaluative preferences, and taken-for-granted patterns of perception and action. This has led some scholars to critique habitus as constituting a "black box": how may an analyst know when she is observing it or not (see critiques by Connell 1983 and MacLeod 1987; see also Wacquant 2014 for a summary and rebuttal of related criticism)? Wacquant (2004; 2011; 2014) argues that this problem is soluble ethnographically; other researchers have operationalized habitus in quantitative research as a relation between "lifestyle" and the meaning-making function of "identity" (Abramsat et al. 2016); and among the many methods he deployed to assay habitus over his career, Bourdieu and his research team explored aspects of it using interviews in *The Weight of the World* (1999[1993]). The present study was not designed to query the complexity of habitus specifically (though I observe many elements that could be said to be linked to it), and whether and how habitus may be examined via in-depth interviews (or other methods) is contestable. I do not aim to address those questions here.

Second, to the extent that habitus may in fact be observable in the context of my interviews, individuals who share *similar* class backgrounds (which would shape primary habitus) but *differ* markedly in their comportments, identities, lifestyles, tastes, and perceptions in adulthood (or what might be called secondary habitus) nonetheless share *similar (yet also varying)* systematic beliefs about the self, social action, and social context. As an analyst, I need language to describe these similarities and differences which appear to contradict what the theory of habitus might expect (i.e., because habitus in theory corresponds with social position, albeit in a non-deterministic or associative sense, it could be construed as surprising to find the same understandings of the self, social action, and social context among people with widely varying secondary habitus, or, conversely, to find such varying understandings of the self, social action, and social context among people with very similar primary habitus). In other words, I do not necessarily reject the idea that my participants have habitus, or that elements of it are observable in my data, but rather place my analytical emphasis on different conceptual tools that seem better suited to my case. "Ideology" addresses the depth, durability, and sometimes-subconscious aspects of these belief systems, while remaining distinct from both habitus and cultural tools like frames, scripts, and narratives.

Third, the language of ideology additionally lends theoretical leverage to explore what is obscured and legitimated by these systematic beliefs about the self, social action, and social context. We have seen that, for theorists from Marx to Mannheim, ideology is said to arise from social position, reflect social reality in some (but not all) regards, and simultaneously serve to justify (legitimate) it. The concept is particularly useful given that my participants demonstrate complex relationships to a different, pervasive ideological form (the meritocratic ideology encapsulated in the American Dream), and because they recognize they are on the receiving end (and therefore must make meaning) of inequalities that the American Dream naturalizes.

Ideology's Political Character

To summarize, then: one of the fundamental questions of this research is, for lack of a better term, behavioral. I ask both what sense people make of their circumstances, and how they take action given these understandings. I am interested in both meaning-making and its link to

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decision-making, strategy, and action. Bourdieu avoids using the language of culture to describe what deeply shapes behavior, preferring terms like habitus and ideology (of course, he coins "cultural capital" to encompass symbolic resources, tastes, scripts, knowledge of cultural norms and codes, etc.).

In contrast, much contemporary sociological work on inequality that engages questions of behavior, decision-making, or action does so using the language of culture, including tool-related terms like symbols, boundaries, narratives, myths, values, frames, and scripts (Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010; Swidler 1986; Valentino and Vaisey 2022) and process-related terms like racialization, stigmatization, standardization, and evaluation (Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014). Work that examines cultural capital's relationship to inequality is also usually described as an important part of the literature on culture and inequality (Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010; Lareau 2015; Valentino and Vaisey 2022). Ideology is *cultural*, in that it concerns widely held beliefs and strategies of action, but differs from what is often referred to as *culture* in the contemporary sociology of culture. That is, ideology differs from symbols, frames, narratives, scripts and the like in the sense that it is both more durably operative and more concealed in individual lives than are the tools that comprise a cultural repertoire. It arises from material existence, and bears some resemblance to reality, but also obscures elements of reality and creates a justification for the conditions that create it. That is, it is explicitly related to power.

One contribution of this research, in other words, is to add to developing evidence that brings the analysis of cultural forces (including but not limited to ideology) to the terrain of mobility (as in Streib 2020). Second, and more specifically, it extends work on ideology and social reproduction (as in Willis 1977, MacLeod 1987, and Hochschild 2012[1989]) to instead examine ideology's role in the development of mobility pathways within an ascribed group, arguing that ideology permeates the work of mobility and shapes mobility pathways. A third contribution is to demonstrate new ways in which ideologies of the self – as opposed to ideologies related to class, gender, or education, for example – legitimate and shape an unequal social order.

This is not to suggest that the elements of an individual's cultural repertoire (frames, narratives, scripts) are irrelevant to their mobility – far from it. Indeed, the literature reviewed above indicates that analysts studying mobility processes ought to consider both the resources individuals can deploy toward their efforts at mobility – in the form of various capitals, for instance – and the goals and aspirations toward which individuals are oriented. That is, both the means and ends of mobility are relevant to shaping mobility processes and outcomes. At the same time, these means and ends seem to interact with ideologies about *what* the goals should be and *how* these resources should be deployed.

So, rather than arguing that ideology somehow supplants cultural forms and their relationship to mobility, I aim to show that ideology interacts with the means (social and cultural capitals, cultural repertoires) and ends (aspirations, goals) of mobility to shape mobility pathways and form what I call *mobility projects*. This is a framework I use to describe what is emergent in my data: I need a language to conceptualize and differentiate between ends, means, and ideological beliefs associated with the concept of mobility or socioeconomic advancement. To develop such a framework, I draw on two sources separated more in time than in content: Robert Merton's classic article, "Social Structure and Anomie" (1938) and DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin's book, *Coming of Age in the Other America* (2016). In both, the authors generate tools to describe individual belief and action in a society (American) oriented around "advancement," or what I am calling here "mobility."

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Mobility Projects: The Means and Ends of Mobility

For this means-ends formulation of cultural forms related to mobility, I first draw on Merton. His aim in 1938 was to turn debates about social deviance away from biological causal stories and toward sociological ones. To do so, he examined the relationship between culturally legitimate ends (goals or aspirations) and culturally legitimate means for obtaining them (guided by norms and moral imperatives), theorizing that tension or disassociation between means and ends resulted in one of five types of social behavior, ranging from compliance to rebellion. People who invested in culturally legitimated goals and had access to legitimate and effective means of pursuing them complied with social and institutional norms; people for whom these goals were illegitimate, and/or who lacked efficacious means of pursuing them, divested from goals, norms, or both. Thus, Merton linked individual behavior to cultural aspirations and cultural norms, rejecting biological determinism.

This classic model provides a useful framework for the present study, because my case similarly concerns ends, means, and action. Like Merton, I take "ends" to be goals or aspirations. However, where Merton described "means" of action as both normative (or guided by beliefs about what *ought* to be) and practical (or guided by access to efficacious tools), I separate these concepts in pursuit of analytical clarity pertinent to my case. When I refer to the "means" of mobility, I refer specifically to social and cultural capital and to the elements of an individual's cultural "toolkit" in the Swidlerian sense – the practical dimension of Merton's means (Swidler 1986 and 2001). What I describe as "mobility ideology" bears the normative dimension of Merton's means.

Next, I draw on DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin's idea of *identity projects*. In their book, *Coming of Age in the Other America* (2016), they interview 150 young adults in Baltimore whose parents signed up for the federal Moving to Opportunity program in the mid 1990s, which means that their participants shared similar origins: they lived in public housing during childhood, most of their parents had a high school education or less, about half had a parent who had been incarcerated, and most of their parents worked in low-wage jobs or struggled to work steadily. Interested in the social reproduction of inequality, DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin trace the trajectories of these youth, finding that "[m]ost were, in fact, doing exactly what young people their age are supposed to be doing – discovering what they were 'about,' cultivating dreams, and engaging in a quest to 'become somebody.' Most – more than eight out of ten – had not become caught up in delinquent behavior or crime. Instead, the large majority had bought into the dream of college, a career, home ownership, marriage, and family" (2016, 5). Despite large intergenerational gains, DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin also find significant heterogeneity concerning the paths through which the youths approached adulthood: some went to college and/or tried finding stability through labor market, while others felt disconnected. So, they ask, what separated these groups? They find that "[a]dolescents who found a consuming, defining passion – what [they] call an 'identity project' – were much more likely to remain on track than those who did not. In telling their stories, young people often explicitly credited their passion as the source of the fortitude they needed to beat the streets and work toward a brighter future" (2016, 8-9). Such identity projects can arise from activities, school, work, or unique interests, but can also stem from identity as a parent, for instance.

The vast majority of my participants also possess something that could be described as an "identity project": they are deeply invested in passions, goals, or aspirations that crucially help them forge a sense of identity in the difficult transition to adulthood. Very often, their planned

trajectories have clearly-articulated targets. But, I also observe that these ends or "identity projects" (what I instead call "mobility goals") vary consequentially over time and in their specificity. They also necessarily interact with means of social action (such as social and cultural capital) and with beliefs, such as mobility ideologies. Together, these ends, means, and ideologies shape mobility processes and pathways for my participants.

I therefore build on Merton's *means-ends* formulation and DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin's theorization of *identity projects* by elaborating a framework of *mobility projects.* Mobility projects are comprised of ideologies (including but not limited to mobility ideologies), concrete means (strategies, capitals, tools), and either specific or general ends (targets, goals, aspirations). The mobility project is the total description of what a person wants to realize and of the cognitive, cultural, relational, and material resources that both shape aspiration and direct action. Several varieties of cognitive resources are relevant here. One is achievement ideology (MacLeod 1987); another, which I more extensively describe and examine, is mobility ideology. This framework also implies that mobility ideologies are not separable from mobility means and ends, or vice versa: they shape, constitute, and interact with each other in an ongoing process. The process itself constitutes the mobility project and is dynamic, changing over time. *Mobility pathways* and eventual *mobility outcomes* are what develop as the result of mobility projects (see Figure 1). As we will see, varied beliefs interact with varying goals, means, or both, and direct individuals on varying pathways.

It is useful to have terms to distinguish among the elements of these interactions. At the same time, it is important to clarify that this framework is limited, and, though it bears some visual similarity, should not be confused with the directed acyclic graphs (DAGs) used in causal inference. For instance, it does not illustrate a multitude of structural conditions and forces (e.g., labor market discrimination, institutional barriers, neighborhood effects, etc.) that also shape mobility in important ways. Rather, for simplicity's sake, it emphasizes how mobility projects are conceived and managed at the level of the individual.

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Figure 1. Mobility projects
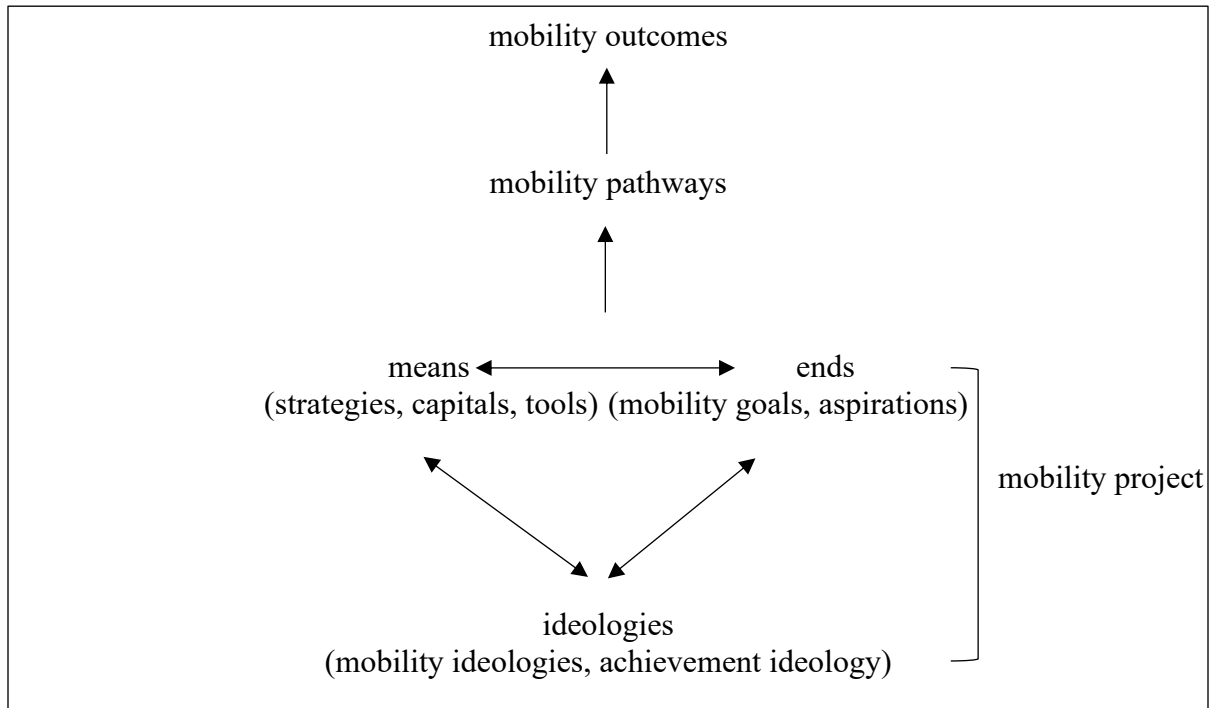
Mobility Ideology, Domination, and Contributions of This Research

My critique of the literature on culture and inequality is thus threefold. First, extant research overlooks mobility in favor of the important work of explaining reproduction, thus leaving key dimensions of inequality underexplored and undertheorized, and it frequently assumes heterogeneity within and sometimes across categorical groups, particularly regarding ideas of selfhood. Second, it has so far undertheorized the links between the various cultural forms it identifies as being connected to inequality. How do aspirations, beliefs, cultural capitals, social networks, symbolic boundaries, selfhoods, identities, and the like interact (or not) in the context of individual lives to shape individual trajectories, and therefore social inequality? This is the intervention of the mobility projects framework.

But, third, culture in its various contemporary theoretical treatments (e.g., Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2012; Swidler 1986 and 2001; Vaisey 2009; Valentino and Vaisey 2022) often (though of course not always) appears as individualized and relatively disembedded from sociopolitical forces: it is frequently too distant, conceptually, from power (though concerns about power likely motivate its authors). Where too atomized into discreet and choice-oriented tools, it can lose its structural dimensions. Where too focused on values, it risks both homogenization and victim-blaming. Where too centered on explaining processes (like adaptation and emulation, or identification and rationalization), it can naturalize without sufficiently critiquing the origins and uses of social hierarchies.

In other words: in recent decades, a significant wing of the (American) sociology of culture has moved away from the cultural questions about power and domination that animated earlier generations of social theorists who linked cultural forms and concepts (such as ideology,

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hegemony, knowledge, and symbolic violence) with forms of domination: exploitation, consent, discipline, and misrecognition (as in classic work by Marx, Gramsci, Foucault, and Bourdieu, respectively). Instead, recent scholarship in this vein has done the meaningful if comparatively technocratic work of illuminating culture's modes and mechanisms, including the ways in which it produces and reproduces inequality. But in so doing, it has too often (though, again, not always) left important questions by the wayside: Whose interests does culture serve? How does it do so in contemporary social life? And with what consequences? Or, to pose these questions differently: what else can be understood empirically and theoretically if analysts extend topically past culture and *inequality* to examine culture and *domination*? These lacunae constitute a feature, though not necessarily a failing (because its priorities and intentions have been elsewhere), of recent culture research, and they urgently beg reengagement.

By analyzing my participants' experiences in terms of mobility ideologies and mobility projects, this research makes one effort in that direction. An important feature of these mobility ideologies and mobility projects is that they contain both (1) information about how my participants perceive and engage their positions within an unequal social order, and (2) elements of this perception and action that appear both reflexive and pre-reflexive, conscious and subconscious. As a result, we can see in mobility ideologies and projects a connection to debates about the nature of domination and its cultural ties. To give these issues a brief and binary treatment: if my participants occupy but are led by mobility ideologies to misrecognize dominated positionalities, then my case is an example of what Bourdieu terms "symbolic violence." But if my participants recognize dominated positionalities, yet are led by mobility ideologies to consciously consent to them in some regards, then my case is an example of what Gramsci calls "hegemony." We will return to these questions in Chapter 6, analyzing mobility ideologies and mobility projects – as well as their ambiguities and contradictions – in terms of both consent and symbolic violence.

Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 respond empirically to the shortcomings outlined above in several ways. First, Chapter 2 demonstrates the striking similarities among my participants, who exist but also strive for advancement under conditions of pronounced precarity. Chapter 3, 4, and 5 then trace how ideology can shape mobility strategies. They reveal that systematic selfhood ideologies vary within categorical groups in ways that are consequential to inequality; and they show how ideologies can act as cultural connectors linking conscious and subconscious cultural modes. We will see that explicit strategy toward mobility is linked to implicit beliefs about the self; that these are related to each other because their logics correspond; and that they shape inequality through the role they play in determining individual actions and pathways toward mobility. In these chapters, I present nine narratives: detailed composite descriptions of individuals who, in different ways, embody the three mobility ideologies I outline above. As I explain at the beginning of each chapter, I represent these mobility ideologies through three metaphors, describing each group of three individuals as *gardeners, climbers,* or *seekers.*

I present these ideal-types as a means of bringing analytical clarity to my argument and of sharpening the distinctions among my participants. However, as mentioned, I do not believe that these are the only possible mobility ideologies. In Chapter 6, for instance, I introduce the possibility of an *interdependent mobility ideology*, and I expect there could be more. Moreover, I believe that movement among mobility ideologies is entirely possible, and that individuals may at times exhibit characteristics of both. Again, I address these possibilities at greater depth and with evidence in Chapter 6. For now, what is most important is the recognition that the gardener, climber, and seeker ideal-types serve as a kind of heuristic for differentiating among patterned

beliefs and forms of action that distinguish my participants from one another. First, though, we turn to their similarities: the precarious existences that they navigate in the aftermath of college access.

CHAPTER 2
FREE FALL: SHARED EXPERIENCES OF PRECARITY AFTER COLLEGE ACCESS

Toward the end of our interview, Jennifer, a twenty-nine year old Black woman who grew up in New Orleans but has since moved to another city in Louisiana, looks at me squarely and states, "I will say life is hard, man. And I just feel like I wasn't prepared. I feel like I was living life just like, 'Oh, yeah, I'm in high school. I'm great. Everything's good. I'm going to college, doing what I'm supposed to do.' And then after college, it was like I was just in free fall." She explains: "Because it's like, 'What do I do now?' …My college plans didn't work out. So how do I navigate through life now? And I don't even know what I want to do or… what I'm passionate about now and how I can turn that into a career. I only know of the jobs that I'm exposed to."

In many respects, Jennifer is an outlier among my participants. She is the one interviewee who attended a private, college preparatory parochial high school in New Orleans, and one of two participants with a parent who holds a bachelor's degree. Jennifer attended a selective, private university in state, and was supported by her single mother, a manager in a multi-level cosmetics marketing enterprise, throughout college, saving on room and board by living at home. She majored in biology, and completed her degree. But, in meaningful ways, Jennifer's experience mirrors that of many of my participants: after college, Jennifer was "in free fall."

College did not go as planned for Jennifer. She struggled with test-taking, and convinced herself that she would not do well enough on the medical school entrance exam, the MCAT, folding on her dreams of becoming a pediatrician by the time she graduated. She briefly considered forensic science, but decided she was too creeped out by death and dissection. Looking for a job after graduation, Jennifer started bartending and supplemented her evening shifts with daytime hours as a seasonal worker at a brick and mortar cosmetics retailer. She performed well in the job, and was hired on a full-time basis; ultimately, she worked her way up to an operations manager role, where she has maxed out her pay at $23 per hour. By working overtime, she has managed to save for a down payment on a simple, two-bedroom house in a sleepy suburb. Despite holding a bachelor's degree from a respected institution, she works in a field that does not require post-secondary credentials – much less her sterling biology degree. Moreover, she feels underpaid and overworked, and, as a Black woman, has "to work twice as hard to get half of what [her white colleagues] have." She lives paycheck to paycheck, little able to deal with emergencies like expensive car repairs. She is dissatisfied with her dating options so largely avoids romance, and, as she approaches thirty, feels her dreams of financial stability and a nuclear family are receding into the distance.

"Free fall" means something different to Jennifer than it does to the large proportion of my participants who are struggling materially in more serious ways: a few have experienced homelessness recently, while others teeter on the financial edge despite living at home and working multiple jobs. Homeownership is a distant hope to virtually everyone else. But Jennifer's words name the sense of instability that pervades both the affective tone of my conversations with participants, and the objective conditions of their lives (which are summarized in Table 2). For all but a few, material existence is a precarious affair, lacking economic tethers, control, or a safety net. Of course, following the urging of their families, schools, and mentors, all of my participants also attended at least some college, and the vast majority are in the first generation of their families to do so. This chapter explores how their experiences shed new light on an urgent question: what happens among low-income young adults in the aftermath of college access, and why?

Table 2. Sample description

	Main Sample	Supplemental Sample
N	40	17
% African American/Black	100	-
% Asian	-	29
% Haitian/Black	-	35
% Latinx	-	12
% white	-	24
% female	60	70
% male	40	30
% non-binary	-	-
% Pell-eligible	100	100
% completers	30	30
% leavers	50	12
% persisters	20	50
% earning >$15/hr	35	18
% earning >$20.73/hr	15	12
% multiple income sources	58	18(64)*
% in-state college or university	78	82
% with student loans	85	88
% living with family	58	47
% with caregiving responsibilities	35	24

*Note: Percent in parentheses includes participants who are full-time students and hold steady jobs, often working 15+ hrs/wk.

Extant Research on Returns to College

Of course, in its broadest form, this question itself is far from new, and has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention across sociology, education, and economics. While extensive, the literature is also divided. A broad scholarly consensus affirms that individuals are generally better off – that is, on average they have higher incomes in higher-prestige occupations – if they complete a bachelor's degree (see Hout 2012 for a summary). Much debate, however, centers on the question of who benefits most from earning a college degree: those who were unlikely to go to college in the first place (termed "positive selection"), or those who were already very likely to attend college ("negative selection").

Jennie Brand and Yu Xie (2010), for instance, use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 and the Wisconsin Longitudinal Survey to show that, net of other factors, individuals who are less likely to enroll in higher education earn more as a result of obtaining a bachelor's degree than individuals who are more likely to enroll in higher education. Similarly, Matt Giani, Paul Attewell, and David Walling (2020) find evidence that college attendance most improves employment outcomes among those least likely to enroll. But, other research argues the opposite, showing that higher education serves to reproduce intergenerational status, particularly when college selectivity is taken into account (Zhou 2019; see also Fiel 2020). Other studies have shown that the income returns to students on the margin of attending college are negligible (Carneiro et al. 2011), and that individual degree attainment mediates only part of the strong

association between parental education and income and their children's income after college (Witteveen and Attewell 2020). Complicating matters further, Cheng and colleagues (2021) find evidence of *both* effects (negative and positive selection) in a single study, arguing that higher education most benefits people with the least *and* the greatest prior socioeconomic advantage. Debate on the question of returns to college attainment remains active.

Yet all these studies emphasize one particular attainment outcome: college completion. In contrast, the large majority of low-income youth who enroll in college do *not* complete their degrees: with data extending through 2020, the Pell Institute calculated that just 15% of U.S. college-going young adults (of all race and ethnicity groups) whose families were in the bottom income quartile had completed their degrees by age 24 (Pell Institute 2022). And even among the highest income quartile, just 59% completed on the same timeline. Degree attainment is certainly an important outcome to study, but, in the United States, starting college but leaving without a degree is almost as common as graduating.

A small but growing body of research uses survey and administrative data to examine the returns to "some college," and is largely focused on estimating these returns in terms of income or wages. Together, these studies tend to estimate that the income returns to "some college" are less than the income returns to completion (on the order of 6 to 9%, compared to the nearly 30% estimated by Brand and Xie [2010], for instance), but are statistically significant (Doyle and Skinner 2016; Giani et al. 2020; Holzer and Baum 2017; Scott-Clayton and Wen 2018; Zeidenberg et al. 2015; but see Carneiro et al. 2011). My own work in this area also finds that, despite these returns, "some college" can also cause financial hardship through the mechanism of student debt (Payne 2023), and that people with "some college" would have had greater income and experienced less financial hardship if they had completed their degrees.

Importantly, these quantitative studies of the returns to college are able to make causal claims, and, through the use of nationally-representative survey data, often are able to do so at a population level. However, they leave many questions unanswered. Through what processes do these outcomes result? How do they vary within the population, and why? How are various attainment levels related to other outcomes, like occupation or living with family members? How do people understand their experiences of higher education, and how do they approach labor market strategies and decisions after they leave college? Including but also extending beyond income or earnings, what are the material conditions of their lives after college?

These are questions well-suited to qualitative analysis. For instance, recent works by sociologists Jennifer Silva, María Rendón, and Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton use interviews and ethnography to examine contemporary young people in the transition to adulthood, revealing the inner work young adult millennials do to make sense of unstable institutions and fractured attachments (Silva 2013), showing their varying and stymied relationships to aspiration (Rendón 2019), and tracing the ways that higher education institutions direct college attenders toward socially reproductive pathways during and after college (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Yet I am unaware of any scholarship to date that has presented a close qualitative comparison of leavers and completers (i.e., Silva 2013, Rendón 2019, and Armstrong and Hamilton 2013 include both college completers and college leavers in their samples, but a cross-attainment-group comparison is not the focus of these analyses). Moreover, there has been very limited investigation from any methodological angle that emphasizes the consequences of "some college" within groups who stand to gain (or lose) the most from attempting a college degree: low-income, first-generation students of color (though see Giani et al. 2020 and Payne 2023 for two quantitative approaches).

In the analysis that follows, I offer a comparison of the college completers, leavers, and persisters within my sample of Pell-eligible, largely first-generation young, Black, college-going adults from New Orleans. I first summarize the college experiences of my participants. These experiences are broadly consonant with a large body of research on college persistence, attrition, and completion, which analyzes what causes people who start college to either stop out or exit permanently without a degree, and what factors support graduation. This literature is too voluminous to review in depth here, but is well-summarized elsewhere (see Goldrick-Rab 2016; Serna and Woulfe 2017; Tinto 1987). However, the exposition below aims only to describe the higher education context of my participants' current realities, rather than to offer new evidence on predictors of college persistence, for example. Next, I characterize common features of my participants' precarious material existence after college and their hopes for the future, before addressing how they relate to these realities and understand them vis-à-vis the American Dream.

College Experiences of New Orleans Youth

Consistent with local, state, and national patterns, most of my participants (78%) started college in-state, and most attended public, four-year institutions. A further 28% have been enrolled at more than one postsecondary institution since leaving high school, transferring from one college to another in pursuit of a degree. For most of my participants, college was a mixed bag. As first-generation students (all except two), virtually everyone struggled to adjust to college life in some capacity; a handful found their stride relatively quickly and did extremely well on the whole, while another small subset struggled early and left quickly. Most, however, persisted for at least several semesters. Some ended up completing, sometimes in 5 or 6 years. Some left after a few terms, usually with a feeling of ambivalence as opposed to finality: they were stopping out for a while, but might return one day. They often had done well in some classes and poorly in a few, watching their GPAs tumble below their expectations. Sometimes they lost scholarships tied to academic performance (in Louisiana, a statewide, four-year "TOPS" tuition scholarship for in-state study is awarded on the basis of high school GPA and ACT scores, but to be maintained requires both college GPA and credit attainment minimums on a semesterly basis), or were placed on academic probation or suspension. (Once suspended, students typically must demonstrate better grades at a different institution, often a community college, before re-enrolling.)

Participants tended to struggle with weed-out classes in which they received little support (most commonly in math and science classes like biology, statistics, linear algebra, and chemistry), or with weed-out requirements to enter certain majors (such as the portfolio a participant named Aden submitted repeatedly, without feedback or success, in hopes of admission to a design major). Some professors and administrators were helpful; some were hard to understand or failed to "break down" difficult concepts; some were discouraging or disrespectful outright. Participants who attended predominantly white institutions (PWIs) sometimes felt this treatment was racially motivated; students attending historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) also struggled with similar treatment (debatably motivated by class difference) from time to time. Many of my participants also were enrolled in college during the 2016 presidential election and Trump administration, and some described a shifting racial climate on their campuses (both in- and out-of-state), in which racist speech and actions visibly escalated.

Several participants also expressed frustration at needing to take pre-requisite courses or courses that fulfilled degree (as opposed to major) requirements: for instance, a young man

named Marcus, who wanted to be an elementary school teacher, did not understand why he needed to take (and pay for) advanced math classes if he would never teach the same content to students. Further, if they decided to change majors, participants would sometimes find themselves "starting over" in terms of coursework, because credits from their previous major did not fulfill the requirements of their new one. The sense of wasted time and money was grating for many.

Some participants, feeling they needed (or being required to make) a change from their first institution, transferred to a second, and sometimes even a third, college or university. But transferring came with costs. First, there was the problem of what is known as "credit articulation," or mapping credits awarded by one institution onto the course offerings and requirements of another. An engineering major named Elijah, for example, started off at a four-year public institution, Central State University, in northern Louisiana. The school was on the quarter system, which made Elijah feel as though he needed to learn core engineering concepts too quickly. He also inadvertently lost his TOPS scholarship when he dropped a class he was worried he would fail:

> Elijah: I lost TOPS and didn't know it.
>
> SP: They didn't tell you?
>
> Elijah: No, they didn't give us warning or nothing. It was because I dropped-- I was under the hours, the full time hours and I didn't know it. I thought once I paid my tuition, I was good. But I ended up dropping my freshman engineering class and something else, because there wasn't enough time for me to get one class to another class without running late. And our professor used to lock the door. So if you were like 5 minutes late, then that was it. And I was getting to class exactly 5 minutes late, and the door was locked every time. And he would give attendance grades, sometimes he would count attendance as a quiz. Wow. So I was like, "Man, I might have to drop this." And I was only at the minimum amount of hours for the full time [TOPS requirement] and ended up dropping it. And I thought I was good. Sophomore year just started and it was like you lost TOPS. And I was like, "How?" Because my GPA wasn't bad. It was like a 3.1.

Short on tuition money after losing TOPS, and struggling with the quarter system, after two years at Central State Elijah decided to transfer to a different public school closer to home, Acadiana University, where he could save money by living with family. But, despite both universities being state-run institutions, virtually none of the credits for his major transferred:

> Elijah: Well, with Central State being on a quarter [schedule], everything transferred except for my math and my engineering courses because they said that Central State was on a different system or something. I don't even know what that means, but they were on a different system. And the way that their hours were calculated, it wasn't going to transfer smoothly to Acadiana's hours.
>
> SP: So your electives transferred, but--?
>
> Elijah: Yeah. All of my English, everything, and I just had to start completely over in math and engineering.
>
> SP: The core courses for your major?

Elijah: Yeah. That's why I got pushed back two years.

SP: So you're just literally starting from scratch in your major?

Eijah: Somewhat. But I'm just glad I don't have to retake the chemistry or the English, but the math is pretty reviewed. But this semester I've finally gotten to the point where it's like, "All right, I've caught up on everything. So now, it's strictly life stuff that I need now, and that's stuff that I've already taken.

SP: And what did that do to your GPA with the transfer? Does that mean that the credits didn't transfer, so the grades don't transfer, and you're starting over in terms of GPA also?

Elijah: No, my GPA stayed. My GPA transferred. Because if anything I would have wanted the GPA not to transfer. But I guess it still comes because I went to Central State. So it was on Central State's transcript. So I guess that is my overall cumulative transcript. So all of that did come over, but just—Acadiana didn't accept it, I guess.

Elijah's credits didn't transfer when he wanted them to, but his grades – which he would have liked to leave behind – did. The transfer decision set him back two years and thousands of dollars in additional tuition (which he did not realize when he made the choice): "I'm hurting," he says. Additionally, there were bureaucratic problems with his financial aid (the financial aid office had neglected to process his aid) and IT problems with his student email account (which meant he could not register for classes) at Acadiana, so he had to sit out another semester, picking up a job delivering packages for Amazon Prime while he waited. Elijah felt trapped in a transfer student catch-22: damned if he did transfer, and damned if he didn't.

Unfortunately, Elijah's case is not unique. Rather, it exemplifies the kinds of academic and bureaucratic hurdles that many of my participants confronted during their time in higher education. Another participant, Janae (who we will meet again in Chapter 3), experienced a related but distinct kind of transfer trap: Janae was placed on academic suspension after two years at her first institution, a public, four-year university in southwest Louisiana. During those first two years, she had not had enough financial aid to cover her full bill, and the university had allowed her to carry an outstanding balance of several thousand dollars semester-to-semester, which permitted her to remain enrolled. But, once academically suspended, Janae had 60 days to pay this money back. When she couldn't, the balance rolled to the Louisiana State Attorney General's office (because the university was a state entity), where it was subject to additional fees, bringing her total state debt (as opposed to federal, which she also has, or private debt) to around $12,000. She is unable to view her transcript or transfer any of the credits she has earned until she pays back this debt, so she has started over from scratch, still working toward her degree at a different institution. In Janae's transfer trap, the credits she would like to transfer are caught, essentially, in hock.

The challenges most of my participants faced in going to college were monumental. Most often the first in their families to go, they lacked a family-based support network with experience navigating the academic, bureaucratic, and social complexities of college life. As Pell-eligible students, they also typically lacked financial safety nets: most worked throughout college, and most took out loans. Most graduated from highly segregated New Orleans public high schools, and felt ill equipped for the independence and rigor required by their collegiate studies. And many also struggled with their institutions' seemingly byzantine rules, customs, and procedures. From this perspective, the fact that only 30% of my 40 college-goers, so invested in higher

education at the end of high school, have completed their degrees is perhaps unsurprising.[13] An additional 50% have left college – some with a view to one day return, some without intention of doing so – and 20% are still enrolled, persisting toward their degrees.

What is life like for these completers, leavers, and persisters? In the sections that follow, I describe the jobs they hold, the money they make, where they live, the obligations they have, the risks they experience, and their thoughts and plans about the future – and examine how their experiences vary by their attainment status. In response to the literature reviewed above, I emphasize a comparison of completers and leavers in particular. What emerges is a story of greater similarity than difference. A larger proportion of the completers are making more money or are on potentially upwardly mobile paths, but the margin is small, and – as we heard from Jennifer at the beginning of this chapter – many if not most participants of all groups feel themselves to be struggling. At the same time, they are all striving relentlessly toward their goals, which are likewise broadly shared.

Incomes, Occupations, and Side Hustles

About half of U.S. states use the federal minimum wage – currently $7.25 per hour, as established in 2009 – as their state minimum, and Louisiana is one of them. Assuming a 40 hour work week and 50 working weeks in a year (a big assumption in an era of rising shift-work), pay of $7.25 an hour yields about $15,000 in annual income. (The federal poverty threshold for individuals was $13,590 in 2022.) Pay of $15 per hour – the demand of the national Fight for Fifteen labor campaign, which was active in New Orleans when many of my participants were in college – yields about $31,200 annually. But to keep pace with rising rents and costs of living in a rapidly gentrifying city, housing advocates argue that New Orleans residents need to earn considerably more. In a 2020 report, for instance, the National Low Income Housing Coalition calculated that New Orleans renters needed to earn at least $20.73 per hour (or about $41,500 annually) to afford average 2-bedroom (i.e., shared) rental housing in the city without being paying more than 30% of their income on rent and utilities (National Low Income Housing Association 2020, 109).

All this puts my 40 participants' incomes in context. Only 35% are earning more than $15 per hour (8 of 12 completers; 6 of 20 leavers), and just 7 earn more than $20.73 per hour (3 completers; 4 leavers). Two additional completers are in graduate school for social work while also working full-time, and credibly expect to be earning over $20.73 per hour soon. Income is of course linked to occupation: of the 32 participants who are not enrolled in college (i.e., who completed or left), two thirds (21) work in the churn of New Orleans's tourism-focused retail and service sectors, including bar, restaurant, hotel, retail, hair, maintenance, security, and logistics jobs, with pay ranging from minimum wage (for an entry-level position at a fast food restaurant) to $23 per hour (for a retail store operations manager). An additional 4 work in education (including pre-school, substitute teacher, and teacher's aide positions), and 5 are in white collar positions (software engineering, non-profit youth development, and real estate; as mentioned above, two are also in graduate school for white collar careers in social work). All but one of the white collar positions are held by people with college degrees, yet the white collar software engineer, a college leaver, makes more than anyone else in my sample ("between 70 and 95k," she tells me). There is also one professional athlete and one music producer (both leavers).

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[13] For context: according to the National Center for Education Statistics, 48.3% of all U.S. first-time, full-time, Pell-eligible college freshmen in the 2013-2014 cohort at 4-year, public U.S. universities completed their degrees within 8 years of enrollment college entry (IPEDS Data Explorer 2021).

Among a preponderance of my participants, in other words, the feeling and reality of economic struggle dominates regardless of whether they finished college. Participants frequently verbalize some version of the phrase, "adulting is *hard*," and then list a series of reasons why; bills and financial concerns often top the list. Everything – from rent to gas to food to utilities – feels expensive, and they often have car, credit card, and/or student loan payments to make. As one participant concisely puts it, "The cost of living way too high. Minimum wage way too minimum."

In response, the vast majority of the young people I interview cultivate additional income sources, working multiple jobs, developing side hustles, and logging overtime. Jayden, a young father and aspiring rapper with two-thirds of the credits he needs for a bachelor's degree, works 40 hour weeks making $15 per hour as a security guard, and appreciates that his job makes it easy to pick up overtime hours at the rate of $22.50 per hour. But this is not enough to relieve his struggle. He says,

> And after 40 [hours], it's $22.50 [per hour] that you get paid. $22.50, it sounds like a decent number. But the job market in New Orleans sucks. $22.50 is not a lot. Please don't let that go to your head. That sucks. The housing down here? It sucks. The economy, it sucks. I have to leave. I have to relocate. That's the only way. And I don't know, everybody say this. I'm pretty sure this not your first time hearing somebody saying, "You have to get out of New Orleans." That's a goal for everybody. It's beautiful down here, but I'm ready to be at the point where I just visit.

Jennifer, the homeowner with a biology degree who we met at the beginning of this chapter, also takes every opportunity she can to work overtime, but still feels financially stuck, living paycheck to paycheck.

Overtime hours have their definite perks – the pay is much higher, and one does not have to coordinate across multiple employers. But for most of my participants, overtime pay is not an option, and they must find other ways to bring in more money. For some, this means holding several scheduled jobs simultaneously, for instance working as a retail cashier and a restaurant hostess, as a young woman named Bree – a trumpet player who fondly recalls learning about the Krebs cycle during her two years in college – does. But, as Schneider and Harknett (2019) affirm in their research on "shift work," this creates problems of both schedule and cash flow (with downstream effects on health and well-being). Bree says, "It's about the days and hours…We used to get off at 2:00. [Now] you coming in at 3:00. Like, 'Oh, no. We're not going to have people off on the weekend like we used to. We can't do back-to-back off days.' Or it'll be, 'Now you can only have back-to-back.' I'm like, I don't even need the one day off because I need to pay rent, and I don't make that much an hour." Bree tries to mediate one job's unpredictability with another job, but that too offers limited hours:

> And I'm just here trying to be a cashier. Why do I have to wait a week [to start working]? Why are you trying to tell me, "Oh, no. I'll have to see." I know you know we're not making enough money. "We can't hire too many people. If we do hire you, it's not going to be too many days." I was like, "Three days is better than nothing," but it's also like I can be so close to what I need and not have it. That'll stress you out even more than not having it at all. It's like, "I need $250 for this bill, and I'm going to make $235? Where in God's great name [am I] going to get $15 if I already worked the maximum amount of hours, the maximum amount of days, [and I] already got the loans I can get from people?" That really

will stress you out the same as, "Dang, I ain't making enough money this month." [It's] like I made nothing.

And, even when money comes in, it may not arrive when it needs to. In Bree's case, her employer posts checks unreliably, changing the pay schedule: "And then when I got hired here, I was promised [I would] get a check… They're like, 'Oh, no. We're not going to have them [checks] come out today. We have [them] come out Friday instead of Wednesday.' My bill's due on Wednesday."

Perhaps because of the challenges of scheduling concurrent shift-work, many participants supplement scheduled jobs with work in the gig economy, or with side hustles of their own design. Many, for instance, drive for companies like Uber, Lyft, Postmates, Doordash, and ASAP (formerly Waitr). This means they can choose when and how much they work; it also makes having a driver's license and a car essential. (Bree, for instance, has neither; this shapes some of her scheduling struggles.) Other participants rely on side hustles to create income. They do hair; offer tax preparation and credit repair services; perform maintenance odd-jobs; run online stores for inexpensive consumer goods (clothing, shoes, body products) by buying from overseas wholesalers and selling via web platforms like Shopify; sell life insurance or cosmetics; do photography; and trade in currency markets (made easy and popular through "forex" apps and groups). Some participants drive for multiple gig-app companies, have multiple side hustles, or both. Notably, cultivating multiple income streams is about as common among college completers (67%) as among college leavers (65%), which underlines the generalized sense of both precarity and desire to get ahead that is shared across these groups.

Labor Market Navigation

Navigating the labor market after college presents a considerable challenge for most of my participants, including those with bachelor's degrees. Devantiara, for instance, applied to a long list of entry-level social work and criminal justice jobs in the predominantly white region surrounding the small city where she went to college. She recalls, "I was applying and applying to all these jobs like state jobs, city jobs and I wasn't hearing back from these people, [so I was thinking] like, *What's wrong? Is it me? Is it my resume?* I've had my professors looking over my resume like everyone was just like helping me out. So I was like, *What is wrong*?" She got no interviews, often hearing some version of "we want someone with more experience." As a newly minted B.A., Devantiara was confused about how she could have such experience, and why it was required for entry-level positions. Frustrated and on the point of giving up, she moved back home to New Orleans – where she was promptly offered three interviews, and three jobs, by Black-led social service organizations. She chose the position in which she felt the supervisor was most supportive, and that woman has helped Devantiara begin graduate training as a social worker, flexing Devantiara's hours so she can take night classes and complete her schoolwork.

Britnee similarly spent months applying to "over 100" positions at the hospital where she had worked in the kitchen during college, as well as at other local hospitals, thinking her degree in health care management would make her appealing to her existing employer. She was rejected every time, finally finding full-time work through her own social network after temping for a while. It is difficult to suss out the precise degree to which race, class, and/or gender bias played out in these cases. But, for Devantiara at least – a woman with a distinctive and potentially racially coded first name (see Pager et al. 2009) – applying to Black-run organizations in a majority-Black city marked an immediate and drastic change in her job prospects, suggesting

that racial discrimination played an active role in her labor market experience. From there, it is not a stretch to infer that such discrimination might affect other participants (like Britnee), too.

For very many participants, the jobs they find after exiting college are strongly informed by who and what they already know. Russell's first job out of college was working for an on-campus office where he had developed relationships as an undergrad. Britnee found her job as a Covid monitor through a friend's mother who worked for the organization. Shonae and Amanda's mothers both work in schools, and helped them apply for teacher's aide positions. Absent network-based opportunities, participants frequently rely on the job-hunting site Indeed.com to find employment. Others "fall back" on existing skills (gained during high school or college) or familiarity with an occupation gained from family members. Jennifer holds a biology degree but works in cosmetics retail, like her mother; Darren learned commercial landscaping to make money in high school, and has worked in landscaping since graduating college with a business degree. Marcus, who wanted to be an elementary school teacher, is handy and mechanically minded, and works in an industrial yard, supplementing his income with maintenance-related odd-jobs. Chanisse completed school at a selective university, but struggled to find work that leveraged her degree and continued her college job as a buyer at a grocery store after graduating, supplementing her income with work in the gig economy. Kimberly did hair throughout high school to make extra money, and sought salon training after stopping out of college, despite her strong desire to become a therapist. Trinice, a studio art major, had experience working in summer camps during college, and makes ends meet today by substitute teaching. Jayden, a gifted writer with two-thirds of the credits he needs for a degree, has found his highest pay to date in his job as a security guard.

In many respects, these patterns – of labor market discrimination, of the use of social networks to find employment, and of socially reproductive skill, status, or cultural capital matching of people to occupations – are unsurprising sociologically (e.g., Pager et al. 2009; Rivera 2015; Smith 2007). What is perhaps more interesting, however, is how these patterns persist despite my participants' experiences in higher education. In the returns-to-college literature described above, higher education participation and attainment is quantitatively estimated to increase incomes on average by roughly age 30. What I see qualitatively among my participants (who are Black, mostly in their twenties, and for the most part concentrated in the New Orleans labor market) is that a college degree or some college appears, so far, to *sometimes* set individuals on a path of higher earnings, but also quite frequently does not. In other words, returns to higher education do not appear evenly distributed within a given group of my participants (completers, leavers): postsecondary training is associated with increased likelihood of higher earnings in my sample, but far from guarantees it. And in some cases, higher incomes appear uncorrelated with higher education: the highest-earning person in my sample, Derricka, attributes her income gains to a software programming bootcamp she participated in a few years after stopping out of college. Similarly, London, a completer, is making her living in real estate, a license she pursued while she was in college, but without her university's support.

This suggests several hypotheses that bear future investigation. First, returns to higher education may vary considerably by the intersection of labor market geography and demographic group. This should be studied comparatively in national context. Second, estimating average income returns to higher education, even within subgroups, may obscure polarities: various attainment levels may have strong effects for some individuals but weak ones for others, with little middle ground. Understanding these possible polarities could meaningfully shift our conception of the socioeconomic consequences of higher education and how they are produced.

And, third: deepening and socioeconomically diversifying first-generation, Pell-eligible students' social networks while they are in college may be a key lever for upward mobility.[14]

Debt, Credit, and Financial Literacy

Debt compounds the complexity of my participants' financial realities. The vast majority (85%) hold student debt as a result of their time in college (75% among leavers, 100% among completers). Many have struggled at times to pay their monthly installments (at least one participant has had her income tax return garnished as a result of non-payment), and many were grateful for the reprieve of the federal repayment pause prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Many also applied for loan forgiveness under the Biden administration's Department of Education guidance – but, as of this writing, that program is stalled in court battles. Participants also sometimes report not knowing how to log in to their loan servicer accounts, not knowing how much they owe, or ignoring requests for payment in the past because they didn't have the money. A large proportion also describe having to learn about credit on the fly, after their credit scores had already taken a hit because of loans or credit card debt. They resoundingly call for better financial literacy education in high school, and have worked to learn about improving or maintaining their own credit scores.

Living at Home & Caregiving Responsibilities

With limited income, high cost of living, and various forms of debt, many of my participants live with family members as a cost-effective way of accessing housing: almost 60% (23) of all participants live either with parents, guardians, or extended family members (60% of leavers and 58% of completers). Ten more live with housemates or partners; one, still enrolled in college, lives in on-campus housing; 15% (6) live alone in their own units. That such a high percentage live with family is unsurprising locally, where multi-generational households are commonplace, but also in national context, where college-going millennials have shouldered more educational debt than past generations, and "boomerang" after college, returning to live at home as they find their financial footing (Houle and Warner 2017). In the case of my participants who attended college in New Orleans, most never actually "left home," instead commuting to college while remaining in the same household where they lived during high school.

Living with family saves money, but, in a number of cases, it is also necessary from a caregiving perspective. Participants Janae and Kimberly each care for a disabled parent; Britnee cares for her ailing grandmother; Mona provides housing for her mother and nephew; Amanda shares with her mother in caregiving for a disabled sibling; Ahmad and Devantiara help care for and raise their younger siblings. Of all these family caregivers, only one, Ahmad, is male. A further group of participants are caregivers to children of their own: Chantel, Jayden, Lamont, Latroya, Maya, and Mikaela. Chantel and Mikaela live with their own parents, who help with childcare. Just one participant who is a parent, Latroya, has also completed her degree. Not one of these participants expresses a sense of resentment about their caregiving obligations (though

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[14] These hypotheses obviously depend on the assumption that my participants are basically similar apart from their higher education attainment and subsequent socioeconomic outcomes (i.e., that no confounding differences exist among them). This is true only in some respects: they do share similar demographic, geographic, and economic backgrounds. Of course, they also vary in many meaningful ways, such as in their unique capacities, aptitudes, mindsets, networks, training, etc. In sketching the qualitative comparisons of this section, I am consciously *not* performing a causal analysis or an assessment of association net of other differences. Rather, I am trying to draw out, from fine-grained qualitative evidence, *speculative* associations and hypotheses that might prompt future, and perhaps causal, investigation.

duty and reciprocity come up), but these responsibilities also create considerable demands of both time and money.

Romantic Hesitancy

Despite a commonly-reported desire for a committed romantic partner in the long-run (most participants "want a family": marriage and kids), just 7 (18%) of my participants are in relationships. Very few are actively dating. Some feel they do not have the time, or that dating is a waste of time. Janae, a persister, says, for instance: "I just feel like it's best to focus on yourself. It's like [wait and see] whoever comes to you… Trying to find love right now, it's a game. It's like play or get played. It's a game that nobody have time to play." Others participants report "taking a break" from dating after long-term relationships ended. Typically, though, participants want to both feel that they "have themselves together" (by which they usually imply financial stability, a place of their own, and an active plan for further advancement) and want to find a partner who has a similar mindset. Devantiara, the completer who is in graduate school for social work, voices a common perspective when she says,

> I do want to have a romantic relationship, but I was always the person who just put myself first and my goals first and I haven't met nobody who… I want you to put yourself first and put your goals first. You put yourself as a priority first. And I haven't met no one that fits those standards. So I still talk to people and date, but I don't go around *looking* to date… I have goals and expectations and I expect you to be the same.

Devantiara wants to find someone whose ambition matches her own. She is busy, so doesn't "go around looking to date," but she also only wants to date people who meet her expectations (and have some of their own). This was an issue in a past relationship, which ended in part because she and her partner had different ideas about the future.

Other participants emphasize wanting to be single in order to have time to develop self-knowledge. Lamont, a leaver who works in building maintenance, doesn't plan on being in a relationship any time soon: he has a daughter with a past partner, and feels like being single is allowing him to "figure [himself] out." He says,

> [M]y whole life, I've been dealing with relationships and people and things like that. And I never got to focus on myself. So now me actually being by myself, I'm actually the best version of myself that I have ever been… So [in past relationships], I still didn't get to figure me out. So now that… I'm by myself, I'm like, "Now I know what I like. Now I know what I don't like."

Although Lamont hasn't ruled out a relationship in the long-run, it remains "a question mark" for him, because being single allows him to do self-development and self-exploration that he prizes. Similarly, a leaver named Aden says, "[For] me and my immediate friends right now, it's more [about] getting myself together before I try to bring anybody else in." For Aden, Lamont, Devantiara, and many others, it is almost as if they perceive an inner threshold of relationship readiness, one that they are looking for in themselves, as well as in other people – and which they believe they have not yet reached. As a result, they are hesitant about committed romantic relationships, despite also desiring them. At the same time, my participants are, for the most part, extremely busy people. It could well be that, in addition to this expressed hesitancy, they simply do not have time to date.

Physical Precarity and Violent Crime

My participants' lives, most of which are being lived in South Louisiana at the moment, are also precarious in ways that extend beyond the economic struggles described above. I began interviewing participants in January 2020, continued intermittently until February 2023, and also lived in New Orleans twice, for a total of 9 months. During this period, and in addition to the historic effects of a global pandemic, people living in South Louisiana experienced various and profound forms of physical insecurity. Hurricane Ida, for instance, was a Category 4 storm that made landfall in late August 2021, 16 years to the day after Hurricane Katrina hit. Ida caused evacuations and widespread devastation throughout southeast Louisiana. New Orleans, spared the worst of the flooding by its massive levee system, itself took months to recover: garbage and recycling collection, for instance, still had not fully normalized when I was doing fieldwork in New Orleans one year later. Several tornados ripped through the city's West Bank during the same period, causing highly localized but extreme and terrifying damage. Street flooding, always a nuisance in a bowl-shaped city, has increased in both frequency and severity with growing heavy-rain events, and the city's aging sewerage and water system struggles to keep pace. Advisories requesting residents to boil their tap water before consuming it occur not infrequently. Due to deferred maintenance and the sinking of compacted marsh land on which the city is built (a phenomenon known as subsidence that is worsened by heavy rains), the city's pothole problem has reached new depths, wreaking expensive havoc on cars. And the industrial spills and flares that have long plagued Cancer Alley continue: in April 2020, for example, lightning struck a chemical plant in nearby Chalmette. In response to the ensuing power outage, the plant flared, or burned, sulfur and hydrocarbon gases, yielding plumes of smoke and an acrid, chemical smell that filled the city. (The plant operator maintained that public health was not at risk, but the local news noted that short-term sulfur dioxide exposure can harm human respiratory systems [Calder and Reckdahl 2020].)

The precarity of my participants' physical environment in New Orleans is paired with a growing sense of danger from violent crime. Carjackings, armed robberies, and murders have been on the rise since my participants graduated high school, contributing to a sense of insecurity. Janae explains:

> They have a lot of carjackings in the East. Like every time you turn on the news, somebody died in the East, or they had another carjacking. People are crazy. Like that's why I'm saying it's like really crazy... I don't know, it's in the air. It's everybody... it's not the same. It's crazy. Nobody have morals no more. Like, there was videos of two guys, they attacked this old lady, stole her truck. Yes. It's just too much.

Janae's perception is not anecdotal: in March 2023, the local paper launched a special reporting series titled, "A Bleeding City: The plague of violence in New Orleans." The lede read, "New Orleans has regained the title of the nation's murder capital, after an 11-year hiatus" (Nola.com 2023). Indeed, multiple participants have lost friends, family members, and fellow students to homicide and gun violence. In addition to growing fear, there is mounting grief.

In the media (especially the national media) and even among some residents, these aggregate challenges are sometimes presented as typical of the place and its people: the dysfunctional consequence of backward and corrupt ways in the Big Easy, the City that Care Forgot. Or, they produce a certain aversion and shame: who would want to call such a place home? While the racial dog-whistling of this style of commentary, aimed at one of the country's

largest majority-Black cities, is obvious, it also belies New Orleans's close ties to pervasive social structures and to the nation-state as a whole. These ties are both historical and contemporary: they are the legacies of slavery and the plantation economy, colonialism and neocolonialism, racial and industrial capitalism, absent or eviscerated social provision, and human-fueled climate change, among others. Indeed, many have pointed out ways in which New Orleans is both ghost and harbinger, haunting and foretelling (Sublette 2008; Woods 2017). Far from merely local, New Orleans's struggles both recall a collective formation and preview what may come.

Critical Attachments to the American Dream

Sharing similar backgrounds and similar experiences of present precarity, my participants also articulate notably similar aspirations for the future. As Britnee puts it: "[W]hen I think of the American Dream, I think about me, kids, and my husband. And me being successful and my kids just being happily ever after." Despite the obstacles she faces, Britnee believes these goals are achievable. Other participants similarly believe the ought to be able to achieve their version of success, which typically mirrors Britnee's: they seek financial stability, home ownership, a family, the opportunity to travel, and the chance to "give back." According to the Pew Research Center, these aspirations are broadly consistent with those held by the majority of Americans, and with most Americans' sense of whether their aspirations are attainable (Smith 2017).

At the same time, my participants are clear-eyed about the obstacles standing in their paths, particularly when it comes to structural domination in the forms of racism and classism. They believe in their own capacities and that they must work hard to get ahead, but also believe that hard work alone will not guarantee advancement and cite existing race and class inequality. For example, when I asked about their views on the "American Dream," many gave me long looks, or scoffed outright. In fact, worried that I would be interpreted as clueless (and specifically, as a clueless white lady) and create distrust, I started phrasing these questions differently. For instance, instead of asking directly about the American Dream, I would ask, "Sometimes people say, 'Anyone can get ahead if they work hard enough.' What do you think about that?"

With very few exceptions (addressed below), most participants rejected the American Dream on the basis of their knowledge and experiences of historical and contemporary inequality. Recall that Britnee, who we met above and will meet at greater depth in Chapter 4, is a young woman in her mid-twenties with a bachelor's degree in health management who earns $15 per hour as a Covid monitor at a childcare center. She lives with her disabled and ailing grandmother, serving as her primary caretaker, and also runs a credit repair and tax preparation business on the side. About the American Dream, Britnee also says,

> The American Dream wasn't really for us from jump. Yeah, we tried to implement it into our [Black] community but it slowly was forced out because of like slavery, and then you move into time, it was a time when in order for the family to get help in the household from Social Security, Section Eight, welfare… In order to get welfare help, you had to be a single mother. A male could not be there…

Britnee rejects a meritocratic version of the American Dream because she recognizes that Black communities have faced structural and institutional oppression and inequality for centuries. At the same time, as we saw above, she imputes her own meaning to the term "American Dream," connecting it to her personal "success" or financial stability, and to the creation of her own nuclear family. She rejects the American Dream at a social level, but believes she individually

can advance. Mikaela, a new mother in her mid-twenties who lives with her parents, has stopped out from her undergraduate studies, and is hoping to complete her training as a phlebotomy technician (which will pay $15 to $18 per hour), similarly rejects the idea of meritocracy:

> I don't think it's [the American Dream is] ideal because I think you'll get it in a way, but it'll never be fully what you think it's going to be. I feel like you feel like you work hard, and you keep working hard. In different aspects, you're always going to have a obstacle that's getting in your way in some type of way. Even if it's big or small, it's going to be something that's always what's keeping you from doing what you feel like you supposed to be doing, and then you got to overcome that obstacle for you to actually get to the point where you want to be in. Then after you get to that point, there's another one. You got to overcome that, and you got to just got to keep going.

For Mikaela, the constancy of difficulty makes her skeptical when hard work is equated with success: she works hard, but obstacles keep coming and her goals recede. But, like Britnee, she believes that it is possible to overcome these obstacles. She adds, "And it don't mean you ain't never going to get to that point, but it just means that you have to go through so many things to actually get there..." This view is also shared by participants who feel themselves to be upwardly mobile. Russell, a young man whose father has been incarcerated since he was small, who thrived in college, and who is enrolled in a Master's of Social Work program at a selective university, also ties together understanding of inequality, skepticism about the American Dream, and belief in personal responsibility:

> I think the core of it reverts back to, I don't know, just before slavery and things like that. I feel as though, as African Americans, we had a lot of things taken from us. Some things wasn't fair at all. And we always had to fight for things that other cultures or races didn't have to fight for. So that inequality still translates to today because we have to work twice as harder as other people. And just that alone. Some people are still stuck in that mentality, so they feel like they can't grow. They can't develop, so they throw their lives away… [There] was always a barrier when it comes to Black people, in general, that's the norm society creates. And we really have to, I want to say, break apart from it. But we'd have to be much smarter. We'd have to realize that it's a real thing, and we have to have individuals who speak up and say this isn't right.

While Russell, Mikaela, and Britnee represent the majority of my participants' views, in rare instances participants expressed a more favorable view of the American Dream. Jeremy, the only participant whose parents both attended college and who has stopped out of a regional university to pursue pro-league soccer (making around $60,000 per year), has a different perspective.

> Jeremy: [W]hen it comes to being in New Orleans, a lot of people are very ready to leave the city, especially their transition of adulthood, because they feel as though there's no opportunity here, and the opportunity is there to be created. And if you feel as though there's no opportunity, create it. New Orleans is a city full of super creative people, and it's extremely hard to transition into adulthood without having a smidge of creativity here…
>
> SP: What do you think about how those opportunities are distributed? Do you think that everybody who's coming up in New Orleans has sort of an equal shot at distinguishing themselves?
>
> Jeremy: Yes, I do. I think New Orleans is one of the few cities in America that you're really judged based off of your creativity.

SP: So it's not so much a question of, "Well, if you're not successful, the opportunities weren't there for you." It's like, "No, there are opportunities."

Jeremy: Everybody can succeed here. I think that's a big thing, especially cities in the south. They do this where there's a real sense of camaraderie, not just in the household or in the state, but in the city, specifically, and New Orleans is one of those cities.

Although an outlier among my participants, Jeremy's views match his comparatively advantaged experience: he is living one version of the American Dream, and believes in a hierarchy of merit. From his perspective, if they have the drive and the "creativity" to compete, "everybody can succeed."

The vast majority of my participants, however, are like Britnee, Mikaela, and Russell: deeply skeptical of meritocracy based on their acknowledgement of Black people's historical and present marginalization in the U.S. But, while my participants do not blame themselves for *causing* the predicaments they are in, they do believe that they should be capable of responding to and overcoming these obstacles. In other words, their rejection of the American Dream is qualified. While they reject meritocratic individualism at a *social* level, they remain deeply attached to its objects at a *personal* level. And, as we have begun to see here and will examine at great depth in subsequent chapters, these attachments are paired with relentless striving, regardless of educational attainment.

In many respects, this is unsurprising: most of my participants have experienced significant and even profound scarcity, privation, and instability, including in food, shelter, health, physical safety, emotional or psychological safety, and access to supportive institutions. And their experience, to date, is of having survived this through considerable effort. Striving seems an obvious choice. What is more surprising, however, is how the ideologies that structure their striving diverge despite similar experiences of precarity.

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This chapter has shown that the majority of my participants are united by shared experiences of precarious existence, regardless of educational attainment. It demonstrates their shared critiques of race and class domination, as well as their relentless striving toward shared attachments and the classic objects of the American Dream: financial stability, home ownership, the nuclear family, a bit of leisure for vacation and travel, and the opportunity to give back to their communities. But, having rejected the idea that hard work will necessarily open the doors of opportunity, how do these young adults direct their striving? What meaning do they make of their experiences, and how does this meaning-making matter to their mobility pathways?

Having argued that profound material and ideological similarities exist among my participants, I now turn to their differences of view: in the chapters that follow, I show how my participants engage in divergent, yet patterned, sense-making about their similar experiences of life after high school. I also ask what consequences their sense-making has, and hypothesize how it may matter to their post-college trajectories. We begin with the gardeners: London, Janae, and Lamont.

CHAPTER 3
GARDENERS: TRANSFORMATIONAL MOBILITY IDEOLOGY

The first three young adults we will meet in depth – London, Janae, and Lamont – differ in a great many ways. London holds a bachelor's degree with honors, works in a white collar job, and has her sights set on law school and a career in government. Janae, on the other hand, struggled in college but is still enrolled part-time (now at her third postsecondary institution). She is slowly yet steadily striving toward her dream of becoming an oncologist while working in retail and in the gig economy. And Lamont, who briefly attended community college, is unattached to higher education, instead focusing his aspirations on raising his young daughter and working his way up in a property maintenance job. But I will argue in this chapter that, despite these differences in profession, education, aspiration, and responsibility, all three hold deeply similar worldviews: they all subscribe to a *transformational* mobility ideology. In other words, they hold specific and remarkably similar perspectives on the meaning of the self, social action, and social context.

For instance, London, Janae, and Lamont believe their *selves* require serious work. For them, the self is fundamentally flawed, wounded, limited, or otherwise in need of development. If the self can be successfully reformed, their worldview holds, then society's opportunity structure will open; therefore, the emphasis of social action is on internal change or growth. Other people play a key role in guiding or shaping this growth, or serve as sources of reflection. These characteristics of transformational mobility ideology are summarized in Table 3.

Metaphorically, transformational mobility ideology regards individuals as the caretakers of a garden. In the garden grows the *self*, requiring close attention and sometimes rehabilitative care so that it can overcome its environmental conditions and grow into a healthy maturity. Success is achieved through growth and development – for the self, as well as for social others. Satisfaction derives from a sense of trajectory or narrative arc: knowing how the garden (or self) looked when it started, nurturing its growth, and watching it blossom. As a shorthand, I call people who hold a transformational mobility ideology *gardeners*.

Table 3. Gardeners: Transformational Mobility Ideology

Domain	Meaning
Self	· Self must be transformed through inner change · Self is flawed, wounded, or in need of growth or development; the self is a project
Social Action	· Opportunity structure is relatively open; accessing it depends on reforming the self · Focus of action is on internal (intrapersonal) change or development (sometimes in service of, or as a prerequisite for, external strategy)

Social Context	· Other people are sources of reflection and growth

In this chapter, I aim to show that gardeners share a common diagnosis of the most salient challenges confronting their early adulthood, as well as a common sense of how they can best address these challenges. But I also hope to illustrate the ways in which their similar worldviews – similar mobility ideologies – do not always lead to similar mobility outcomes. This is because, as I outlined in Chapter 2, mobility ideologies are only one component of a mobility project. Ideology must interact with both means and ends – and can yield varying outcomes as a result. To see how this happens, we must closely examine not just the circumstances of individual lives, but also how people make sense of them, as well as the actions they take. London, Janae, and Lamont, three of the many gardeners I spoke with, help demonstrate the similarity of their sense-making precisely because they are so different in other respects.

London: Healing the Workaholic Self

London looks immaculate. She has come from her work at a real estate office, just across the street from the coffee shop where we meet on a stormy February afternoon right before Mardi Gras. She is wearing a chic and fitted navy dress, knee-length. Her hair is done in a crisp bob that frames her face, which itself is made up with skilled precision. I arrive at the coffee shop just ahead of her, struggling to right my drugstore umbrella, which has been blown inside-out by the wind and rain. The storm should have disturbed at least some of London's neat appearance, but there is no trace of that. She exudes ease, poise, and confidence. We settle into a corner table.

London's Mobility Goals: Investing in Education to Make a Social Impact

I learn that London graduated from Pontchartrain University, a nearby public, 4-year institution, eight months prior, *summa cum laude* with a degree in marketing. College was a busy time for London, as well as a considerable financial cost: she holds over $20,000 in student loans. She enrolled at the same time as her older brother, and together they were the first in their family to attend college. She started off as a sociology major, then switched to psychology, before settling, in her freshman spring, on marketing. She says the major's apparent flexibility appealed to her: "I wanted the business aspect of things because I enjoy learning business but I didn't want to be a business major because it's too broad. But I was like, 'Marketing's specific enough but not too specific you can kind of go anywhere with marketing.' And no matter what job you get in life, you're going to have to brand yourself and you're going to have to market yourself." Marketing it was. She met her best friend, Frederick, in an early class on management, and set about joining student organizations like the campus chapter of the Marketing Society of America, of which she was president for three years, and the Phi Kappa Phi honors society.

At the same time, London worked. Freshman year she worked 40 hours a week at a fashion jewelry outlet earning less than $10 an hour. Then she worked for three years at Hampton Sands, a nationwide retailer of upscale, preppy, nautical-style casual wear, where she was paid $10.50 an hour, worked 25 hours per week, and got an "absolutely amazing" employee discount of 65%. (Their jeans, she notes, are expensive, but "so perfect.") She also had a string of internships starting before her freshman year, including a marketing internship with a food

industry franchise. And, in her junior year, she completed a 90-hour course and took the exam to become a licensed real estate agent (which was followed by a second, 45-hour class).

Throughout college, London built her network, developing connections outside of school through her internships and real estate training, and building mentoring relationships with professors on campus. She also built her cultural capital, developing a sense of middle-class and even elite habits of speech, dress, conduct, and self-advocacy. At Hampton Sands, for instance, she learned to sell products by engaging with affluent customers on their own, highly specialized, terms, which she contrasts to her experience at the bargain jewelry outlet:

> "At [the outlet], you had to stop thieves. I mean, I didn't stop no thieves. If you're going to steal, you're going to steal. It's not worth it, it's really not…At Hampton Sands, you just help people. They usually know what they want when they come through the door because it's a very popular store for the people who come. People who come are very committed and they know everything about the products. So if you don't know a product better than them, they don't want to talk. They *don't* want to talk. So it was mainly learning the product and really, really learning it. Because it's not really having to sell them on it because they're already sold on the brand and the experience of going to Hampton Sands. It's just finding the right thing for them and finding out why this thing is better than that thing. You just know your products there. Product knowledge is a big thing."

London employed very different skills in each of these retail jobs, and her change in diction in describing each workplace reflects her facility with different racialized and classed social registers. At the outlet, she "didn't stop no thieves." At Hampton Sands, the job was to facilitate an experience and add value for people who "are very committed and… know everything about the products."

But London's facility with elite cultural capital extended to other areas of her undergraduate time as well, perhaps most notably in her capacity for self-advocacy, a skill that is both notoriously important for navigating educational bureaucracies and is associated with middle-class childrearing (Lareau 2003). In this regard, London was ready to do whatever it took to maintain her stellar GPA. During the fall of her senior year, for example, she electronically submitted an assignment in a file format her professor could not open on his computer. He did not give her credit, but notified her. She resubmitted it in a different format. He kept forgetting to enter her grade; she kept reminding him; her course grade remained a B and was bringing down her cumulative GPA enough to move her from *summa* to *magna cum laude*. This dragged on into April:

> And then he literally admitted that he forgot but he told [me] -- he was like, basically, "I forgot to put it in but you should have sent it right the first time"…[And] he sent me another email yelling at me…He's like, "If you would have submitted it the correct way the first time, I would have had your grade. Since you submitted it incorrectly, basically, "If I want to fix it, I'm going to fix it. And if I don't want to fix it, that's on you."

London was having none of it. The university President had weekly open office hours for students, and London went. She says, "So I went to the President and then I got an email the next day letting me know my grade has been fixed in the computer." London was pleased not only because she was back in *summa* territory, but also because she made a wider change happen. She describes her meeting with the President:

> I showed him the email. I printed out all my emails and said my professor yelled at me. And I told him, I said, "At this point, I don't feel comfortable reaching out to my professor." Because I don't. He yelled at me. He sent me-- If I would have sent an all-caps email, they would have been calling me the rudest kid to ever exist. And then an email got sent out the next week, it was an email to all the advisors and my advisor had forwarded the email to me. It was talking [about] how we interact with our students. I was like, "*That's* how you do it."

And "*That's how you do it*" is no passing phrase: it is a recognition of the power of feeling that one is (or a group is) entitled to or deserves more or better, and demanding it. Throughout college, London was not only learning marketing and earning a degree, but she was also learning how to move within and across a variety of social worlds and, also, how to get what she wanted – how to succeed – inside them.

Following graduation, London started working full time, on commission, at Terrace Real Estate. She saves money by living at home with her mother and one of her younger sisters. She serves on the board of a small, local non-profit focused on serving young women of color, and devotes many of her off-work hours to running Crescent City Volunteers, a Meetup group she founded with Frederick that connects over 200 volunteers to service opportunities. They average an impressive 8 events per month, ranging from supporting logistics at breast cancer walks to selecting library books for incarcerated people. London describes the group as "one of [her] proudest accomplishments in life." It keeps her busy and lets her give back – but also delivers the side benefit of building her network. She says, "So…obviously, people who are my friends are not buying houses. They're barely even renting houses. So it was-- a lot of times, they tell you to start within your sphere of influence but my sphere of influence were 18-19-year-olds or 20-year-olds so they're not useful to me right now. So I started on my volunteering group and I was meeting a lot of different people. And I was like, 'Wow. I could actually turn this into a business.' And, 'Okay, this makes sense.' So it just fell-on-my-lap kind of thing." People in Crescent City Volunteers – people who tend to be somewhat older professionals who are transplants to New Orleans – know she's a realtor; some have downloaded her agency's app and signed up for her monthly newsletter. She hasn't yet had any sales from the group, but is hopeful.

London is gracious about her successes, and has ambitions for more. She is studying for the LSAT, the law school entrance exam, for instance. Her goal is to score between 170 and 175 (the maximum score is a 180), and she feels good that she is scoring 160 on practice tests after just 3 weeks of studying. She plans to start her legal career in corporate law, and then run for Congress – the Senate, specifically. And these are not casual plans; they are hard-won. When she speaks of these goals, London tears up. Her words come quickly and with intensity as she says,

> I mean, even in the political world, you don't see Londons. In my life, I've never thought, 'Oh, I should get into politics, or I should…' Because I've never seen that. I mean, more recently, obviously, you've seen it more or… I mean, the first Black woman [was] in Congress in the 70s, but you don't think about…you just don't see that often. You're just used to one type of people getting into politics so you don't even, I guess, look at that as a career choice. You just completely bypassed it….But it just…at some point enough actually becomes enough. When you see what's going on in our country or what's being represented and you feel like that's not representing the people who are actually a part of the country, you're just tired of seeing the same things over and over and over again and never changing. And so it's more-- it doesn't even feel like, 'Oh, I'm doing this so I can be a politician or in politics or

can change the world.' It's more like I'm doing this so if another little girl wants to do this, there's a girl who looks like her doing it.

In other words, London's mobility goals revolve around leveraging higher education to make a tandem impact. London wants financial security, which she trusts will develop as she furthers her education and advances in her career. But she also deeply wants to serve both her immediate community and the broader public interest of communities across the country.

All this seems to be going very well. Eight months after graduation, she is in a white-collar job and makes enough money to cover her expenses, notably her car note and insurance, and her $100 per month student loan bill. Her excellent undergraduate record has prepared her to be competitive in graduate admissions, and she is situated to score well on the LSAT. She has translated undergraduate service and leadership into service and leadership in "the real world." And she has built both social and cultural capitals that are helping her to achieve her goals, and will likely continue to do so. But, there is a snag in London's plan – in her mobility goals.

Less than a minute into our conversation, in the midst of pleasantries, London names her biggest challenge in adjusting to adulthood, and it's an interesting one. It is easy to imagine newly-minted, twenty-two year old BAs saying that they struggle – perhaps with finding or adjusting to full-time work, workplace integration, increased financial responsibility (or means), student loan repayment, or finding balance between work, family, and social life. London describes an entirely different problem: too much free time. Odd as it may sound, this isn't a frivolous statement. The issue of free time seriously preoccupies her, and we return to it several times throughout our lengthy discussion. Initially, London presents free time itself as the challenge: she isn't used to having it, and doesn't know what to do with it. But, as we talk, it emerges that the problem isn't *having* free time per se – the problem is the impulse to fill it. And that impulse is a problem, London believes, because of what it indicates about her inner state.

London's Challenge: The Painful Past and The Workaholic Self
Given how busy London's undergraduate experience was (including a full course load, campus activities, working 25-40 hours per week, and becoming a licensed realtor), it makes sense that having free time would be the first thing that comes to mind when considering what has changed in her life since graduating college:

> SP: How have you been [since graduating]?
>
> London: I've been good. I've been adjusting to life, obviously, as an adult, and learning new things and yeah, I've been good, though, overall.
>
> SP: What are some of the adjustments that you feel like you're having to make?
>
> London: I guess more leeway in my schedule, especially weekend-wise. I'm like, "Okay, what am I doing this weekend? What am I actually doing?" And not saying, "Okay. I need to do this homework, I have this project to prepare by next month." It's more like, "Okay. I kind of have some free time. So that's just been exciting."

Initially, London presents increased free time as a good thing: it's "exciting." And, right after graduation, she did take a "long vacation" with the aim of "exploring [her] passions." But, by August, she was in the thick of starting Crescent City Volunteers with Frederick, and growing her real estate business. As we talk more, it becomes clear that London's time is anything but free.

About two hours into the interview, I ask what she feels is currently the biggest challenge in her life. She replies:

> London: I would say a continuing problem that I always had is just being very "This is what I'm going to do. This is my plan." Any time I make a plan, I never-- I wouldn't say I never commit. That sounds bad. But it's… my plans change very fast and not in the aspect of-- even where I've seen my volunteering group go. I'm like, "Okay, this is where our focus is. This is where I want us to grow." At one point, I was only focused on improving our numbers so number-wise we could look better. And I'm like, "Okay. No, no, no. Now that's not my focus no more. My focus is to have this number of events." My focus a lot of times shifts in what I'm doing. The thing that I'm doing will stay the same but my focus in that will shift. I can say my focus in real estate at one point was to have certain numbers and I'm like, "Okay, I need to get these numbers to feel like I'm doing this." And then it was instead I want to provide my clients with this experience so that each one of them will get this experience no matter if they're buying a $200,000 house, $400,000 house, I want them to have this experience. You know what I mean? So I guess what I'm doing doesn't shift but the way and the things that I focus on within that shift a lot.
>
> And then you're just finding time to still be London in all of this. Hang out with my sisters and go to the movies and literally, I will be that person who's at my sister's house trying to talk and pulling out my laptop trying to pull people into my CRM really quick. And she's like, "London, just be in the moment." And I'm like, "Yeah, you're right. I do need to put this all away and just talk to you and get human."
>
> SP: Balance is hard.
>
> London: And finding relationship balance [with her boyfriend of several years] and go on dates and not want to just-- be doing something I guess. Because a lot of times I'll feel like when I'm not being productive, that I'm not doing anything or I'm being lazy even though it's such thing as-- I mean, at the end of the [week] night I have no problem with that at all but I'm talking about on a Saturday. I don't remember the last Saturday or Sunday that I just chilled… A lot of times we were all doing stuff, or trying to go to this event, or trying to coordinate this, or seeing how we could be a part of this, or-- so I guess finding my own life balance in that.

Though she recognizes that her time is more her own than ever before, London has filled that time to the hilt. She fills it with trying to advance in her business; she fills it with service and running her volunteer group; she fills it with constantly searching for ways to improve both and, as a result, is constantly updating her plans. The question is, why does London make these choices? What is her workaholism doing for her?

Answers emerge as London talks about her childhood. She grew up mainly in Chicago, where her parents had met in high school and started a family in their teens. London's father was murdered by police officers when she was three. London's mother has never discussed their father's death with her children. There has never been a direct acknowledgement that he is dead. They simply do not talk about it.

The family moved frequently over the subsequent years, living in both "the hood and the suburbs," and, by the time she entered 11th grade in New Orleans, London had attended 10 schools. She was a self-described "problematic child" throughout much of middle school, getting

suspended for fighting other students and for walking off campus, receiving generally mediocre grades, and behaving angrily and rudely toward teachers and toward her mother.

When London describes these events, she is overwhelmed with emotion several times. We pause our conversation; I grab some napkins with which she carefully dabs the tears that are streaking her makeup. She says,

> It's not until later on in life you're like, "Oh. I went through this and I never dealt with my emotions. Instead, I've just tried to bottle those away and focus on the next class ahead or the next grade ahead."

When I ask if she ever talks about these experiences with anyone, she adds,

> I mean, Frederick knows, [and] my boyfriend knows [what happened]. They know I don't like to talk about that stuff so they know not to bring that up to me, because I will shut down and I don't want to talk and I'll go into this hole and I don't want to come out. So it's not until I'm ready to be bold in that that I'm going to be able to do that. And a lot of times I do see myself supplementing, like, "Okay, if I can just fit my schedule-- almost pack my schedule to the point where I don't have time to deal with this."

These words contain a great deal. They are laden with suffering and grief, but also with strength and determination. Yet the relentless drive to fill her time with work that London downplays as "supplementing" – "focus[ing] on the next class ahead" or "packing [her] schedule to the point where [she] doesn't have time to deal with this" – is, at the moment, a core challenge to London's mobility project. Workaholism has gotten her where she is today: despite the odds, she is a *summa cum laude* college graduate, a practicing realtor, and a community force. But, having achieved all this, she has begun to experience her reliance on hard work and achievement as a liability. First, as her sister pointed out, it prevents her from "being in the moment." More profoundly, she also believes that continuing to use work to escape her feelings could seriously threaten her future goals. She explains,

> I have to allow myself to be vulnerable and hurt and go through these emotions and feel how I feel. And it's like if I don't do this-- at one point in my life, it's going to come out. So either I hold it in now and then all this releases at the wrong part of my life and I'm broken, or I start the journey now and get it going. So even in the thoughts of running for politics, I know this is something that will be talked about or brought up so I might as well do it just now before someone else forces me to deal with it.

Workaholism has been the engine of her success to date, and it temporarily covers her wounds, helping the emotion work of restraint – but it can only do that for so long. Ultimately, it could even jeopardize her dreams, in politics or otherwise. London has a clear belief that she must do work on her *self* in order to continue confidently on the trajectory she has charted. In other words, London feels inner work is a key element supporting her mobility goals.

London's Strategy: Taking Time to "Deal With" the Self and Past Experiences

But how to go about this inner work? London takes two approaches. First, she draws on a longstanding project of conscious self-management: working with the *self* is familiar territory for her. Second, she deliberately makes time to "deal with" painful memories.

Throughout our conversation, London makes frequent reference to various techniques of relating to and engaging with her objectified *self* – or, as Michel Foucault (1988) has it, various "technologies of the self." As she transferred elementary and secondary schools, for instance, she would try on different identities. She recalls, "One thing I always liked about going to a new school is that you can redefine your whole character because no one ever knows your past. So it's like, Okay, this year I want to be the really-into-my-books girl." The self she presented was pliable according to her desires (and, likely, to the situation). This familiarity with stepping back from fixed identity and holding her self at a distance is also audible in her speech: she has a habit of slipping into the third person when describing her own perspective: "I've been trying to-- I don't know. Just really focus on myself and not necessarily the expectations that people have for me. And just genuinely finding what makes London happy and pursuing those things." Right after graduation, she and her boyfriend of several years took a break from their relationship. The issue was not that there was anything wrong with *him*, she emphasizes, but "It was just– London does not fully know who London is, so London needs to know who London is before London can love anyone else. Because until I love me completely, I can't love you." She felt she needed to *get internal clarity* – clarity about the nature of her *self* – before she could proceed in the relationship. London has been assisted in developing this self-knowledge by a number of resources, including a nightly "self-care" ritual of prayer, reflection, listening to music, or journaling, and by listening to podcasts and reading books that describe processes of inner growth (Michelle Obama's *Becoming* is a favorite). In other words, for London, the self has long been the subject of much deliberate effort – like an on-going project or puzzle that demands her close attention.

Recently, though, London's inner work has focused on "bottled-up" emotions from her childhood. As she says, "But lately, I've been taking some time to deal with me," adding, "So I've been actually spending time with myself and dealing with emotions that I may not have coped with in the past." This has been far from easy, however. London feels it has been the right course of action,

> [b]ut honestly, it's been a very up and down, dark/light journey. It's been very beautiful, but also sometimes when I don't want to get out of bed because I'm crying and I don't know how to feel and I don't know how to cope and I don't know what to say. And it's like, "Would I wish it on my siblings?" Probably not. I know eventually, they're going to have to deal with it, but, I mean, bottle that as long as you can, honey, because I know what that's like. I know when it's right for them to deal with it, they will deal with it…And I'm not encouraging them to deal with it because this is a dark hole to go down and I don't know if they're ready for it, because I wasn't. I'm not advocating for nobody to go through no emotional battle they don't need to. Bottle it up and throw the bottle in the river, honey.

In the recognition that what works for her may not work for everyone, particularly her siblings, it almost seems as if London would have chosen a different approach for herself if she felt she could. At the same time, London felt compelled to begin the "up and down, dark/light journey" of unbottling painful memories and strong emotions. It felt like a necessary part of the path she is trying to take – to blaze – in her life. She wasn't ready, she says, but she needed to wage the "emotional battle" anyway.

Treating her self as a project has helped shore up London's past successes. Now, her self appears as a potential barrier to her mobility goals, so she uses the same strategy – work on the self – but from a different perspective. Rather than performing different versions of her self or trying to learn about herself, as she did in the past, she is now trying to change her emotional foundations through a process of inner transformation. This is not to say that London isn't strategic about learning new skills or knowledge, or leveraging relationships (as we will see others do). She certainly is. But, for London, the most important and necessary strategy for achieving her mobility goals is internal. In other words, her *mobility ideology* states that to reach her goals, she must do inner work *on her self*.

This is also not to say that London takes exclusive responsibility for her situation; she is very aware that the origins of her predicament are structural at least in part. She speaks, for instance, about the limited mobility pathways available to young, Black men without a high school diploma in her family's heavily segregated Chicago community in the 1990s, which contributed to her father's involvement in selling illicit drugs and, consequently, to the frightening robbery and her family's economic predicament following her father's murder. She speaks about her mother's obsession with keeping up appearances and with emotional reserve, which served as a way to survive precarious economic circumstances time and time again. She speaks about police violence, about school zoning rules that prompted her to change schools whenever her mother had to change the family's residence, about the increasingly overt racism she experienced on campus with the beginning with the Trump presidency, and about the extra barriers she must overcome as a Black woman in order to reach her goals. She identifies that her pain comes from these complex and interrelated realities. But, it is still *her* pain, her challenge. The remedy is internal first, then external – because the wound itself is both internal and external.

A Complementary Worldview

As an aggregate result of multiple, interconnected early experiences, London has problematized her self. That is, she views her inner self as changeable and as a project to be worked on. Her deliberately flexible orientation to her problematized self helps her shape-shift and accrue social and cultural capitals; it also helps her maintain an ambitious mobility project even though the specific targets of her project (sociology, psychology, business, real estate) change. Changing her self changes London's socioeconomic circumstances, in part because her mobility project is flexible: she can adapt to or skirt barriers as they arise, or take advantage of new opportunities. Her worldview about what her self means and what strategies she should use to pursue her aspirations – her mobility ideology – complements her flexible mobility goals and helps her succeed in executing them.

I saw a similar pattern among other people I interviewed. A young man named Russell, for example, described a process of inner work as essential to his mobility goals. Russell described himself as reserved and "in his own bubble" in high school, but appreciated that he "grew so much as a person" in college, which pushed him "outside of [his] comfort zone." He views adversity (his father's decades-long incarceration; growing up in close proximity to street violence; being the first in his family to attend college) as a kind of crucible which anneals the higher self. He says, "So I always ask myself, "Why is this [difficulty] happening?" And I always found that it was preparing me for greater things in the future. So I knew that any problem that I was going through, it wasn't going to last, and it was teaching me something and molding me into the person that I envision my higher self as to be." This emphasis on challenging himself

toward personal transformation prompted Russell to get very involved in campus activities during college, building his know-how around work in professional spaces, and as well as his social and professional network. He wound up serving as a leader in campus-wide student government, and was offered a full-time job in student services on graduation. Like London, Russell is interested in developing skills and knowledge – but his main focus is on developing his "higher self." He notes, "I think I just wanted to be better. I always wanted to be better than I was the day before….you have to prepare and develop yourself to be a strong person." Russell's worldview is rooted in the idea that his inner self must be worked upon and improved – and that doing so will allow him to reach his goals. And this worldview has supported his goals to the extent that it has facilitated experiences and connections that allowed him to pursue and earn a master's degree in social work. As is the case for London, Russell's worldview and mobility strategies complement his mobility goals.

But this was not always the case among my research participants – even among those who share worldviews similar to London's and Russell's. Sometimes, mobility goals and mobility ideologies appear more misaligned than complementary, as is the case for a young woman named Janae.

Janae: Doggedly Developing the Flawed Self

Janae, a twenty-four year old wearing long, box braids with purple highlights on the day we meet up at a coffee shop in Gentilly, has had the interesting if fraught experience of being taken as a representation of something – or *somethings* – early and memorably in her life. When she was in eighth grade, Janae's father was incarcerated. Not long after, the building in which her family rented an apartment burned down. They lost everything, and then struggled to find a stable, affordable place to live. In the aftermath, Janae was profiled in a prime-time TV segment by a local news station. The piece focused on Janae's excellent grades and extracurricular involvement despite her family's difficult circumstances. Janae had been keeping her family's struggles quiet at school: her teachers and classmates didn't know. But, following the TV spot, *everyone* knew. Janae was suddenly a poster child for perseverance and success "despite the odds." She was the embodiment of the up-by-the-bootstraps ethos familiar to – and familiarly critiqued within – the mythical American Dream.

Janae's family eventually found permanent, public housing, but her mother injured her hip working a service industry job downtown, and had to go on disability. Despite housing being more secure, the family's material struggles persisted. But, Janae also persisted in high school, and graduated at the top of her class, as salutatorian. Success against the odds didn't merely seem mythical; it seemed destined. It seemed like what Janae was born to do – or, at least, like what everyone *expected* her to do.

Janae's Mobility Goal: Medicine or Bust

From an early age, Janae has wanted to be an oncologist and treat people with cancer. She had that goal in mind in eighth grade when she was interviewed for TV, it was her goal when she enrolled at the University of South Louisiana for college, and it remains her goal when I speak with her off South Claiborne Avenue on a bright October day. Like London, Janae's mobility goals revolve around planning a career that can provide financial security, and around using that security to give back to her community. And both are invested in what Jay MacLeod (1987) calls "achievement ideology," or the notion that success is possible through hard work and education. But, unlike London, Janae's mobility goal has a very specific target: becoming a doctor. London

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moved flexibly among several majors during her university time, and in high school never thought she would become a realtor – which was training she ultimately sought outside of her university. In contrast, Janae has been focused throughout college on her pre-med requirements. What is more, because Janae's goal is so specific, an advanced degree – a step beyond the bachelor's degree she is still working toward – is virtually the only path for achieving it. Janae's history of high achievement also leads her to believe that she can attain this goal, even when she encounters set-backs – which she does, time and time again.

Janae's Challenge: The Disappointing Self & Inconvenient Body

When Janae moved onto campus as a college freshman, the high expectations that her teachers, peers, and family had for her moved in, too. Moreover, she held high expectations for herself. Her grades that first semester were mixed. She says, "I got grades I was happy with, but it was like overall, the major classes that I need, like the biology classes, that's the ones that I took and they was just kicking my ass." She failed biology and a math class in her first semester, but she kept going. In fact, her expectations and goals were strong enough to reframe a potentially devastating conversation with a freshman advisor as, instead, *motivating*:

SP: Did you have an advisor on campus?

Janae: I did. Her name was Maggie. That's another thing that motivates me. I remember freshman year... I don't know how we got on the conversation, but I had told her that I want to be a doctor. She said, "You not going to be a doctor, not with *these* grades." I'm just like...I mean, it hurted me! So that's probably another reason... that just keep replaying in my head, and was my freshman year. So I'm like...

SP: Was this a white lady?

Janae: Yes! Like, that was mean. She didn't give me encouraging words or nothing after that. So, yeah, don't believe in me at all. So just by her saying I'm not gonna be a doctor, I'm like, I have to prove to her. So that's another thing that's pushing me, too. Like, I'll never forget her name. Maggie Johnson was her name. I'll never forget it. She told me that I would never be a doctor.

SP: In your freshman year. Was that your fall of your freshman year?

Janae: Right. I don't know, give me a chance! I just got here!

But her academic struggles eventually did begin to erode Janae's confidence. She took and failed biology several times. She recalls her thoughts back then: "Every time I think I do good, I do bad. Every time I fail a test or something like that, like, well, maybe I'm not as smart as I think." And these thoughts developed into a punishing sense of disappointment in herself. She remembers glumly, "It's even harder because I know people like in school and stuff, they hold us to high expectations. And I feel like now if you let *yourself* down… that's another thing."

It turned out that Janae's first semester augured subsequent ones. She stayed at the University of South Louisiana for four terms, taking a full course load in each. She would pass some classes, but also fail some, and she struggled to keep her GPA above the university's minimum threshold. She was placed on academic probation, which she successfully appealed once, and eventually was asked to take a leave. (The university said it would allow her to return,

she reported, but only if she got better grades elsewhere first.) She moved off campus, got an apartment, and enrolled full-time at the community college in the small city where the university was located, and kept trying at the biology and chemistry pre-med classes she needed to pass.

Throughout her time at the University of South Louisiana (USL), Janae had worked. She started off as a server at a sit-down chain restaurant at a nearby mall, but eventually was fired from that job when she had to get her wisdom teeth removed and couldn't find her own coverage for two back-to-back shifts. The restaurant had been a good situation because, although public transportation was limited in the area, there was a campus shuttle to the mall that she could use to get to work. Without a car of her own, finding a replacement job was difficult. Plus, it seemed like jobs were in short supply. She says, "So, I was trying to look for a job, and nobody was hiring, so that was just like... I was stressing about that. So I couldn't really focus on my school work without stressing. Like, how I'm going to pay my rent? Had to wait on [financial aid] refund checks to come in, and that's added on late fees to my rent so that's more money I have to spend." Janae's financial support system was almost non-existent: she couldn't ask her family for help. As she puts it, "I was on my own." She had a close friend with whom she shared an apartment, but the relationship soured:

> Janae: And then you had friends who I was living with. You know, like we were sharing utilities or something like that, like dishwashing liquid, dishes, something like that. I don't know why we fell off, but one day she just... I stopped talking to her and she took everything out the kitchen. I was like, Wow, I'm really by myself.
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> SP: She just moved out?
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> Janae: Yeah, like didn't...
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> SP: Who was this?
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> Janae: I met her out there. She was like my best friend. I don't know. We just... I don't know. I think that really like poured all the little hope I had left in myself right out, just poured all out. So I was just by myself. Like every day I walked. I just had to do what I do with what I had, so every day I would just walk to Dollar General, just to get me a gallon of water so I got something to drink that night. And then sometimes I wouldn't do that, because I didn't have food...
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> SP: And did your utilities get cut off and stuff like that?
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> Janae: No, no it didn't, because I don't think they would do that because you know there's other people that stays in the room. But it was only me and her at the time so, when she left I was just sitting in that big house by myself. And then it was just like... I just had to make do with what I do with anything that I had. It was really something else.

Janae's situation was becoming dire, but she kept trying. She kept trying to get a job; she kept trying to pass her pre-med classes; she kept trying to reach the ambitious goal that she (and others) held for herself. Yet her intense effort was not paying off the way she needed it to. Instead, it was feeding a downward spiral. As her year at the community college wore on, Janae got into what she describes as a "dark space":

Janae: I didn't know what I was going to eat... starving. I was just like... I don't know, I was always locked in my room all day. Sometimes I wouldn't even just get out of bed. I'd just stay in bed. Sometimes I wouldn't bathe, brush my teeth... I was just sulking. Like I told you I would mix pain pills with alcohol just to go to sleep. I was numbing myself... And I never went through with it, but I was having, like, suicidal thoughts, because I was thinking, like, I wouldn't be having to go through this if I wasn't here. It was just thoughts, but when you low like that, it's crazy.

SP: Was that scary to you?

Janae: It was. Because I've never experienced it and I didn't know what it was. And, I always had headaches and I always used to go to the doctor and they gave me medicine that would make you like drowsy because... I'd always go to the doctor and be like, why do I always have these headaches? But it finally hit me that -- not too long ago, like this year -- I'm like, Oh, I was depressed. I was stressing. And that was causing the headaches. But I didn't know that at the time.

SP: Did they give you medicine for the headaches?

Janae: Yeah, they gave me... they thought it was my sinuses, so they gave me like nasal spray, they gave me a cough syrup. So it's like they was giving me stuff for stuff that I was causing myself, that I really didn't need. So I was taking all this medicine for no reason.

SP: Did the headaches clear up once you came home? Do you still have them?

Janae: Oh, when I came home, yeah. Over time, they did. Because I stopped stressing, because I have people to talk to out here. And when you think about it, you tell them, they'll tell you, oh you were just stressing, and I was like, oh. Oh, that's what that was.

Disappointed in herself, struggling academically, lonely, and without much money for food, Janae found that things were going from bad to worse as her usually reliable mind and body gave in to accumulated stress. To an outsider, this situation may seem unsurprising, but Janae experienced it as bewildering. Her rhetorical question, "Why do I always have these headaches," carried to other areas of life. Why was biology so hard? Why couldn't she find a job? Why didn't she want to get out of bed? These were serious, meaningful questions to Janae, in part because of her history of high achievement, but more importantly because *she was doing what she was supposed to do* according to the script of the American Dream. More than that: she was giving it her all. She had set an ambitious goal, she was trying to get a college education, and she was trying to support herself financially. Somehow, not only was her hard work *not* paying off, but things were actually getting worse. This is an example of what Tom Wooten (2022) calls the "effort paradox": young people in the transition to adulthood are sometimes so invested in achievement ideology that they effectively burn themselves out with the intensity of their striving. Eventually, as a number of people I interviewed also did, Janae reached a breaking point. She left the community college near USL, and moved home.

Back in New Orleans, Janae took a break from school. She still struggled to find a job, but, after a few months, landed a position at a national hardware retailer paying $10.91 an hour. She got her feet under her there, making enough money to help her mom out but also to lease a car, which enabled her to start working in the app-based gig economy, driving for Uber, Lyft, and

Postmates. She eventually enrolled in a third post-secondary institution – local Crescent City Community College – where she is still taking classes part-time.

At Crescent City, Janae is starting over from scratch, credits-wise. While she earned enough credits to have sophomore status at USL, she also owes the university a lot of money. Because USL is a public university in Louisiana, debts that are held by unenrolled persons and that are unpaid after 60 days transfer to collections managed by the state Attorney General's office. The Attorney General is legally empowered to charge up to 25% of the principal in collection fees, plus interest.[15] In Janae's case, what was initially closer to an $8,000 balance became a $12,000 balance, which she has begun slowly paying off. When we talk, she still owes $11,000. Until this debt is paid, she is not permitted to access her USL transcript or transfer any of the credits she has earned to another institution. At the same time, even if she wanted to reenroll at USL to try to finish her degree, she is not allowed to do so until she can demonstrate that she has earned better grades elsewhere.[16] (This "transfer trap" [Wooten 2022] experience is shared among several of my research participants.) So, while she is effectively starting from zero in terms of her degree, she is also many thousands of dollars in the hole.

Janae's Strategy: Change Who Is Walking the Path

Despite all this, Janae's core mobility goal – becoming an oncologist – is unchanged. In its pursuit, she has encountered large barriers, including academic, financial, and health-related ones. When Janae meets adversity, her response is not to change what she is doing, but instead to work harder. This was the case when she was in eighth grade being profiled on local TV, it was the case during her years at the University of South Louisiana, and it remains her approach today. True, she returned home after three years away, when she hit the nadir of depression. And, on returning to New Orleans, she "sat out a year" and briefly considered a different major: "I'm like, maybe I'll try business. I tried the business thing, but it's boring to me. I just keep thinking I want to be a doctor." That is, she remains focused on her original aspiration. However, this does not mean that Janae is completely inflexible in pursuing her mobility goal. If the goal is unchanged and hard work is how it is to be achieved, then what must change is the person doing the work. Rather than adjusting her path, as London does, Janae believes she should double-down on the path, but also *change who walks it*.

Janae makes sense of her up-and-down experiences over the past few years through a narrative of personal growth. Looking back on what she describes as her "journey," Janae says,

> It was hard, but I'm glad I went through it, because it was a learning experience, like I said. So that's why I said I wouldn't change it. If I had to do it all over again, I would do it. I'd change some things, but I feel like I had to go through that dark stage to, you know, help me grow into the strong person I am now.

Later on in our conversation, she reiterates:

> Janae: So like something bad happens, I don't get mad. I try and think, What is this trying to teach me? So that is how I try and learn from everything instead of letting it take over me and drag me down. I'm just trying to find a lesson in it.

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[15] This practice is not unique to Louisiana. According to the New York Times, similar collections practices for public university debts exist in New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/03/nyregion/suny-student-loans-lawsuit-albany.html

[16] This policy is common among many four-year post-secondary institutions.

SP: When did you start doing that?

Janae: I don't know, honestly. I think after I moved back home. I just... as time went on I just started like paying attention. I was just like, what this is trying to teach me? *Something*, you know. Because working at [the hardware store]... I feel like working [there] is what really started getting my eyes open. And sometimes we'll talk about life. One colleague, her name is Janet, she tell me things happen for a reason. God put people in your life for a reason. Maybe for a short amount of time, maybe for a long time. And so once I started talking to her and she opened my eyes to like different things. And then my mentor, he trained me, named Andre... he helps me a lot, too. They all like give me advice and that's what really helped me open my eyes up to certain things.

SP: Like what?

Janae: You know when I said like finding life lessons and everything and just having more patience. So talking to them really help shift my thinking and me as a person because... I don't know... I feel like if I didn't start working [there], I don't think I'd be as... I'm not saying I'm completely strong, but I wouldn't be as strong as I am right now, because I'm still growing.

As she talks, something in the repetition of Janae's comments – her emphasis on the ideas of "I am strong now" and "I am still growing" – makes me think she has used these phrases many times over, in conversation with other people or with herself. They seem almost like what cultural scholars call "fetishes," objects or ideas bearing a meaning and a value over and above what they present at first glance. And, it occurs to me that they are deeply consistent with Janae's identity as a high achiever, which has changed since high school. (She says, "I learned I have a lot of problems. It's crazy I never found it out in high school.") Part of Janae's identity as a high achiever was tied to adversity: she was the girl who overcame difficulties. The language of growth allows that to remain true, despite the fact that she has (rightly or wrongly) jettisoned her identification with academic overachievement. Personal growth and development become achievements in their own right. Indeed, Janae expresses pride at how much she has changed since high school. She reflects on how open she has been in our discussion, giggling as she says, "I've really grown a lot. I'm not as shy as I was anymore. Because in high school, you couldn't get me to say all this…I'd be moving, hiding in my sweatshirt. And now I just have to grow." The way *out* is *in*.

Other people I interview engage in similar self-diagnosis of personal attributes that they treat like character flaws. A young woman named Kimberly, who also left college after two years in a spiral of stress, wonders when she will get over her shyness. She describes it almost like a fever: "I don't know why I'm like this. I've been shy forever. It just won't break…It just won't break at all." Another young woman, Shonae, says her problems are her "low self-esteem," and that she is "quick to give up. I don't know why." Latroya says she left her first university after three years (she later graduated from a second one) because of "[her] own mental stuff," which included "too much anxiety." For better or worse, these "flawed" selves shoulder full responsibility for their own situations, and become the site of tremendous effort and struggle to change.

This substitution of inner transformation for outer advancement is a hallmark of what Jennifer Silva, in her book *Coming Up Short* (2013), calls "therapeutic selfood." In Silva's study,

working class millennial twenty-somethings seeking upward mobility are both stymied by a precarious economy and let down by institutions and people they feel have betrayed their trust. As a result, they turn inward, finding meaning and self-worth not in education, careers, or marriage, as past generations have done, but instead in the therapeutic work of emotional self-transformation. The inward turn Silva describes among her participants closely mirrors Janae's turn to the language and practice of inner "growth" to help her navigate disappointment – although Janae remains invested in educational attainment and trusting in her interpersonal relationships. In fact, dubious that Janae feels as sanguine about the role of institutions in her life as she implies, I ask her directly whether she feels upset with either her high school or the higher education institutions she has attended:

> SP: You talked a lot about feeling like you've grown, and like you've changed through the experience, and, "How could *I* do better?" and stuff. Do you ever get angry at other people, or feel resentful or mad or sad at USL, or at [your high school]?
>
> Janae: Mmm, no… The only thing I do get aggravated at would probably be, like, I know you could do better than what you are. I know you could be better than what you doing. I mean, I'm not one to judge. If I see wrong, I just want to tell you you could be doing better. And if you feeding into it, it makes me mad. Especially if I know you, if I'm close to you, like [her friend] Sharell and them. That's why I'm so hard on her, too. Like, I'm your friend, I want to see you do good. You gotta do better.
>
> SP: So it sounds like you don't feel like, Oh, well if USL had been different in this way, or if [high school] had been different in this way, then this wouldn't have happened to me in this way?
>
> Janae: No. I mean, I don't put the blame on other people. Because I feel like, it's you. Some things you could do on your own. I get what you saying, but you can't depend on everybody to make things how you want them to be. You know, you can't use that as an excuse, I feel like people use that as an excuse. So what if they didn't, you know, prepare you as you thought they should? You go, you learn, you figure out, you get resources, you teach yourself, you find someone else that can help you. I used to go to our old teachers and ask them for help. And they were willing to give us advice, too. I used to talk to [a teacher named] Mr. Feldman a lot when I was depressed. I used to talk to him about it. So he gave me encouraging words and stuff like that. So, you know, you just go to someone you know you can trust… I usually... when people ask me how I'm doing in school, I feel bad now. I just lie. I'll be like, oh, I got one more year. Because I don't want them to know. But I told him. I opened up to him, I let him know I was going through a struggle. Because I know people hold me to high standards because I'm Janae.

My first question is clumsy, seemingly conflating people and institutions. But even on clarification, Janae refuses to place any of the "blame" for her situation on anyone or anything but herself – and she extends the same logic to her closest friends. Her anger and frustration is directed toward individuals, not institutions. (She even declines to express anger at the affronts of institutional representatives like Maggie Johnson, the USL freshman advisor who told her she would never be a doctor. Instead, the interaction "hurts," then "motivates," her.) Moreover, she is as committed as ever to the idea of educational attainment. And this is the catch, in Janae's case: she remains persistently attached to her original mobility project.

Strategies Misfit to Cherished Goals

Janae and London share a worldview which holds that their individual mobility goals are best achieved through inner "work" or development. For London, this work is about inner *healing*; for Janae, it is about inner *growth*. Both view the self as flawed in some way; as a project to be worked upon. This strategy is seemingly paying off for London, in part because her adaptable self accrued valuable social and cultural capital during college, and in part because her mobility project itself was flexible.

Janae's strategy of self-transformation, on the other hand, has been less effective so far, in part because her goal of becoming an oncologist has been so stable. Her main strategy – working on the self – is misfit to her mobility goals in the sense that she is strongly identified with a specific outcome. Self-transformation has helped her shift her perspective on *how* she will attain this goal, allowing that a slower, non-traditional, and in some respects harder path is fine or even good for her. Her mobility ideology tells her that, if she grows enough and becomes strong enough, she will be able to reach her target. It has *not* signaled to her, for instance, that perhaps there are other external resources, people, knowledge, or skills, that could help her in her dearly-held quest to become a doctor – or that there might be other, closely-related careers worth pursuing. In contrast, London works to change both her self *and* the specific targets of her mobility goals.

Why the difference? A possible answer lies in timing: London and Janae adopted their shared mobility ideology at different moments in life. London came to the practice of treating herself flexibly at an early age, before she went to college. By the time she enrolled at Pontchartrain University, molding her self into new forms was a practice she had at the ready. Janae, on the other hand, was used to setting her sights on a goal and pushing through any challenges. In college, she pushed right into the ground, and adopted the language of growth after a near-catastrophic experience of failure.

Given the widely familiar logics of achievement ideology and of the American Dream, which so prize the efforts of individuals, it is easy to read Janae's experience as an example of *personal* failure. This reading would view Janae's college struggles as problems of her own creation. Its logic looks at the surface of Janae's situation and asks, Why didn't she switch her major if she failed biology so many times? Why didn't she transfer to a commuter college closer to home? Why didn't she sign up for food stamps? Why didn't she build a better network of people on campus who would be in her corner when the chips were down? But, looking beneath the surface of Janae's situation proposes something else: that her experience may be an example of *ideological* failure. Janae's socially-shaped worldview implied that success was possible through sheer hard work; that she should set big goals and stick to them; that she was individually responsible for her successes and failures; that, further, she should strive to be independent and achieve success on her own. Achievement ideology (as voiced by the media, her teachers, and her peers) had told her so. When she struggled alone or doubled down on a manifestly fraught path it was not because she *wanted* to, exactly; it was because she believed it was her responsibility – and her best shot – to do so. It was the sense that ideology had made for her.

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Janae and London, the two "gardeners" we have met so far, are both invested in achievement ideology: in the idea that hard work plus higher education is the formula for socioeconomic success. We have seen that, although their post-secondary paths so far have been quite different, they both share a worldview, a transformational mobility ideology, about what the

self means and how it should behave in order to achieve the mobility goals motivated by achievement ideology (specifically, to keep their sights on advanced degrees). In fact, most of the people I spoke with who demonstrated a transformational mobility ideology *did* also share these investments in achievement ideology. But, that was not always the case: transformational mobility ideology and achievement ideology do not always imply each other, as the experience of a young man named Lamont illustrates.

Lamont: Bettering the Self through Relationship

I connect with Lamont over video chat: he moved away from New Orleans several years ago, and, at 27, is currently living in Dallas, Texas. Sunday morning was the best time for him, and when I call he is preparing breakfast for his three year old daughter, Imani. He affectionately explains to her that he is going to be talking with me for a little while, and says she can go and get her tablet while he makes her eggs. She chirps, *Okay, thank you!*, retrieves the tablet, and Lamont queues up the animated film "Happy Feet" on Netflix. I remark that Imani seems very sweet, and he jokes, "She's so spoiled! I don't know what I did. I made a mistake. [laughter] I just spoiled her and now I can't tell her no." But Lamont clearly loves being a father. It is not without its stresses, he says, but he enjoys it:

> It's so stressful. It's great. It's beautiful. It's a great feeling. I feel like as long as you're doing what you have to do and, you know what I'm saying, providing and doing what you do for a child, then you should have no worries, because I have not-- she's about to be three, and I haven't had one worry, nothing, since then [since she was born]. But at the same time, that may come from me, what I went through, not letting her have to go through that.

Lamont shares caring for Imani with her mother, his ex-girlfriend. He says, "[Imani] actually stays both places, but we don't have [custody] papers. Me and her mom have a great relationship. We don't argue. We don't fight over her. We have understanding. Whenever I want her, I go get her, and vice versa. If she want her, she come get her. We have a great relationship. That's what I can commend her on, that we have a great relationship." He attributes this to the fact that they separated amicably. He says, "We didn't have a bad breakup. I decided that I wanted to be single. And she was okay with it and we just moved on. We didn't fight. We didn't argue. We didn't have no – we didn't throw stuff around. We just had a regular conversation and that's what it was."

As I come to appreciate, this brief exchange encapsulates a great deal about what constitutes and motivates Lamont's mobility goals, about how he makes sense of his experiences, and about how he works toward his goals. Providing materially and emotionally for his daughter in a way that he did not experience as a child is, for instance, fundamentally important to Lamont. But so is the feeling of peace and satisfaction in his relationships – a marked contrast to the anger that he later describes predominating life in his teens and early twenties. In fact, this shift from anger to peaceful connection through and in close relationships is what Lamont presents as the key to his successes so far.

Lamont's Mobility Project: All Business

Today, Lamont views business and entrepreneurship as his pathway to socioeconomic mobility. He currently works in property management, as a maintenance technician for a blue-chip rental housing company, earning $25 an hour (plus benefits) and a 20% discount on rent. He has near-term plans to become a maintenance supervisor, a position which he held at a prior

property management job, with a different company, in Phoenix, Arizona (and which, at his current company, would entail a raise of five to ten dollars an hour). He also wants to become a real estate agent in time, and sees good prospects for both ambitions: he has reason to believe he will be promoted soon (because he does a good job and because he has been a supervisor before) and he is learning about the real estate industry from a realtor he works with as part of his job. Above all, he wants eventually to own his own business.

However, these goals are relatively new. In high school, Lamont says, he didn't have a clear sense of what he wanted to do in life. I ask him what he "wanted for himself during high school," and he says:

> Honestly, just to graduate. I had goals, but I didn't know what I wanted to do in life. I just knew I wanted to do something, or I wanted to be something. I wanted to be better. I didn't know what it was that was going to make me get to that point. But I knew I had to do something to make me better in life.

A minute or two later, he elaborates:

> SP: Okay. So, you didn't have a sense of, "I want this or that career." It was just, "Let me get through this [high school]"?

> Lamont: Yep. That's basically what it was. And like I said, it's only because I never had somebody tell me like, "Oh, you want to do this when you grow up?" I never even had a direction. I never – just basically never had direction. So, everything in life, even to this day, it's like I'm still figuring things out on my own. I just never had that direction to be like, "Oh, you should want to do this," or, "This is the business that you should want to get into," or something like that.

In other words, Lamont did not have clear mobility goals in high school. He wanted to graduate, but didn't know what he should do after graduation. At the prompting of teachers at staff at his high school, he wound up enrolling as a Criminal Justice major at Crescent City Community College, and then switched to Business Administration after one year. But, in his second year, partying a lot and judging that he didn't need an associate's degree in order to open his own business, he "just stopped going" to his classes.

Completing a post-secondary degree did not then, and still does not, feel relevant or necessary to his goals: unlike London and Janae, Lamont is not currently invested in the educational attainment component of achievement ideology. And he shares this skepticism about the use of post-secondary credentials with other "gardeners" I speak to: a young woman named Derricka, for instance, left a selective local liberal arts college after becoming frustrated that she couldn't see how her prospective degree would help her in a career (she left college after one year and later landed a job in tech making around $80,000 per year). Like Lamont, she nonetheless holds a transformational mobility ideology.[17]

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[17] In describing the process of developing her mobility goals, Derrika told me, "I feel like I needed to learn myself, who exactly I am as far as my personality and the way I think and how I feel…I pretty much just did some journaling and just thought about, "Okay, so what do I want to do?" And I also really reflected on the past because

Lamont's Challenge: Learning an Inner Curriculum

After the frustrations of community college, Lamont began gaining momentum toward his aspirations when he started full-time work. He hungrily took jobs that offered: in restaurants, driving forklifts in warehouses, and eventually, at a job fair in Phoenix, he landed the property management job that served as the foundation for new skills and his current ambitions in the real estate industry. This was a long road, however, fraught with many challenges, including a lack of clarity, limited know-how, and, for a time, a real difficulty in holding a steady job.

Lamont understands these challenges in specific ways. To begin with, he feels he lacked early guidance, or lacked the ability to help mobility goals take shape. He says, "I didn't really get established with myself until I graduated [high school]. And I looked back, and I was like, 'Damn. I wish I was like -- I wish I would have thought about this. I wish I was smarter about this, or I wish I wouldn't have did that, or I wish I would have did this better, or I wish I would've listened to one of these teachers.'" Lamont's regret is about a deferred relationship *to his own life*: he feels he didn't "get established with [himself]" as early as he would have liked. He believes that some of this resulted from a lack of information: he implies that some information about how to "get established" was available (if he had "listened to [his] teachers"), but also that he simply did not understand some key social mechanics, such as how to enter the wage economy:

> Say if I knew what I knew now [when I was] in high school, I would have just took care of myself [financially] in high school. But I didn't have the knowledge that I [have now], so I was always depending on somebody for something or looking for somebody to hand me something instead of actually going to get it myself. And that's what I didn't know, is you can actually get it yourself…And that's what I mean by I didn't have direction for somebody to be like, "You know you can go get a job, huh? Or you know you can do this, huh? Or you know you can do this, huh? Or know you can go get this, huh?"

Lamont attributes this lack of information to his family situation. To start, he is the third oldest of seven children. His two older brothers stayed in Houston, where the family had evacuated following Hurricane Katrina, after graduating high school, and "[t]hey didn't do nothing, just run the streets. Nothing major." So, despite being third in the birth order, Lamont often feels like the oldest, the one that everyone else turns to for advice, even though he does not always feel equipped to give it. He says, "Even to this day, they still look at me for advice and things like that. So, I'm still just trying to figure things out." Lamont didn't have a relationship with his father growing up, and Lamont's mother was on disability, and only sporadically held jobs in fast food restaurants. In his close family, no one before him had traveled the path Lamont is trying to travel. Despite attending a college-for-all high school, he feels his immediate social network lacked the experience or knowledge to help him develop concrete plans for his life while he was younger. Sociologist Jasmine Hill (2021) calls this *misinformation* related to *mobility knowledge*: as a result of racialized inequality that structured his family's socioeconomic

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before, I used to dwell on the past a lot, but I just really sat down, go down, what things happened in the past and how can I pretty much overcome that? How can I, not really fix it because it's already been done, but how can I just get over that? And then once I got over how to get over past things in my life and past mistakes, yeah. So I pretty much-- and I also went to therapy. So pretty much journaling, going to therapy and just really figuring myself out."

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circumstances intergenerationally, Lamont did not have good information about how to participate in the formal economy or about how to develop and take action toward mobility goals.[18]

Lamont also feels the constraint of other people's expectations. He recalls:

Lamont: And I'll be just looking back on other people and things like that and I'll just be seeing people so negative and pessimistic about things. And I'll just be like, "You're never going to get anywhere in life like that." And I see that that's why I was the way I was, because I had so much negativity around me.

SP: Where was the negativity coming from?

Lamont: Just other people. Like talking to you, like I said, "I want to start a business." People would not take me serious. That's what I'm saying as far as the real estate [agent who is mentoring him], she is the first person that actually is taking me seriously because…I do my work on the side so everybody's probably like, "Oh, he's going to be doing that or whatever." I want a truck. I want a building. I'm not just going to be– have my own tool out the back of my car seat. I'm going to have a truck one day. I'm going to have a building, things like that. But people don't. And I'm not going to say… It's just because they were not taught that. I think that's what it was. I think people were not taught. So they seeing me and they like, "How this Black man coming from New Orleans, Louisiana, no support, no nothing, is going to get a business?" And I think that's what it is. Nobody actually sees me putting in the work except the people who I'm actually working for.

Lamont is comprehensive in his condemnation of others' pessimism and negativity: he means to critique both his social network in New Orleans, which did not have the capacity he wished it had for supporting his aspirations, and people that he has met in Phoenix and Dallas, who hold low expectations for him because of his race, gender, and class. But, while Lamont views his lack of knowledge and the negativity of people around him as challenges that impede his development of and progress toward his mobility goals, he also believes that something more personal and more internal has been the true key to changing the way he approaches his life: the transformation of his anger.

Lamont describes how, as an adolescent and young adult, he would get angry and "flash out" at people – this could look like yelling, making a scene, and sometimes physically fighting. Then, he would "get in trouble," whether this was in school or at work. He diagnoses the causes of this anger as being related to the material struggles his family experienced when he was growing up:

I think me being so angry in high school comes from me not having what everybody else had. So to see everybody else get this and get that and knowing I can't get it, it just made me mad. So I think I would act out in a way so that nobody would notice that I didn't have

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[18] Hill distinguishes misinformation and mobility knowledge from cultural capital, arguing that by focusing on the "tastes, practices, and sensibilities cultivated from one's societal position" – or, on cultural capital – scholars of inequality "miss the devastating role that misinformation plays in limiting social mobility." (Hill 2021: 3). https://drive.google.com/file/d/14bFEflNRVK5tu9kY_d_mRpaib__-p2Kd/view

it. They'll just be like, "Oh, he crazy." That was my true self. I didn't always have to flash out, but sometimes you know what I'm saying it was just anger out of childhood or something like that.

While Lamont has many fond family memories from childhood (like the pleasure of simply being around his family: "[j]ust waking up and just having them in my presence was the happiest for me"), he also explains intense struggle. At that time, money was sometimes extremely tight:

> So my mom, she wasn't really like, so… We were not a wealthy family, so she got it how she could or whatever. And then my stepfather, he was there, but he wasn't really a big help like that. So, we struggled, but we struggled with our mom there. We always had a roof over our head, but even though we had a roof over our head, sometimes the water was off, sometimes the lights was off. You know what I'm saying? Sometimes we didn't have food. Sometimes we would have to sleep – when the lights was off, we would [be] sleeping in the car – you know what I'm saying? – just so we can have heat because when it was cold, we have heat. We go sleep in the car so we could have heat. They had a little portable television we would watch in the car and stuff like that.

Not having the money for basic necessities like food or utilities meant that there certainly wasn't money for a fresh uniform for every day of the school week, or for new shoes, or to participate in social activities outside of school that had a price tag. Lamont says, "I remember in school, people would talk about us [Lamont and his younger siblings] and things like that. Nobody never said nothing to our face because they didn't want the-- we were fighters, so nobody never wanted to address us. But I did hear slick comments here and there like, 'Oh, we don't have this and we don't have that.'" The comments angered him – but so did the fact of going without. And, he carried this anger into his relationships, even sometimes into the workplace. When his mother died of an aneurysm when Lamont was 22, he "went do some more partying, got into a couple of fights. And I just said, 'This is not it.' And that's when I end up leaving."

Lamont's Strategy: Becoming the Better Self Through Relationships
Lamont felt that he needed to change his environment, the people he was around. He left New Orleans for Phoenix, where his girlfriend was living. He credits their relationship, and the experience of becoming a father, with changing the way he handles his anger:

> Lamont: But see, I don't have that anger no more. I'm calm. I'm way more chill now. I don't have that anger in-- it's still in there. But now, I know-- you know what I'm saying? And I've definitely learned how to deal with it and handle myself and stuff like that. So I don't just flash out or go off, no more awful, crazy things. And I think my daughter helped me out with that too, a little bit.

> SP: What do you think made that shift possible? What happened?

Lamont: I definitely think it was my daughter and my girl[friend]. We're not together [anymore], but she told me a lot too because when I was with her-- when I first got with her, she saw the anger in me and things like that. She's like, "Why are you so mad? You don't have to react to this like this, and you don't have to react to that like that. And you could be about it like this." So I was just taking all of that in. It's like, "Okay, you're right. You're right." And then I'll come across certain situations where I know I will flash out in, but I wouldn't. And I'll be like, "Wow, that feels so much better." So I was like, "All those times I did and I put myself in trouble, if I would have just bit my tongue and walked away, I would have been a better version of myself."

Through the relationship with his girlfriend, but also, he explains later, through becoming a father (because he "didn't see [him]self not being around…when I got in trouble I was always removed from a situation. So now that she's here, I cannot see myself being removed from her life"), Lamont "learn[ed] how to deal with it or how to control" his anger. He learned how to perform the emotion work (Hochschild 1979) necessary to alchemize his strong feelings by learning specific strategies:

I was able to really visualize myself and pay attention to myself and sit back. After she [his girlfriend] would say that, I'll get into it with somebody, then I'll think. In the midst of me arguing with someone, I'll think about that like, "You don't have to be doing this." So in the midst of that, I'll stop that, and then it will be just done. And I was like, "What? That's all it took, was me to shut up?" [laughter] And that would just be that, so things of that nature. I didn't do it-- it didn't happen overnight. I just had to really pay attention to myself because I didn't do a lot-- I didn't really sit back and look at myself. I always looked at the outside, or I looked at what someone else was doing. I never paid attention to what I was doing. So by her giving me that knowledge about myself, I said, "Let me just look at myself real quick." And I saw what I was doing and I was like, "I had to get better with it."

By objectifying himself – by "visualizing" himself, "sitting back," and "paying attention" to what he was doing – Lamont changed the pattern of what typically would happen (flashing out) when he got angry. And this inner curriculum has had pronounced outer effects. First, Lamont says he simply "feels better." I ask him to elaborate:

SP: It's interesting you say it feels better to not get angry. How does it feel? What's the difference you noticed?

Lamont: No trouble. I'm not in trouble. I'm not in trouble. I don't have to worry about getting physical with nobody. I don't have to worry about somebody calling the cops on me because they're scared because I'm elevating my voice, or-- Nothing like that. It just feels good to just be like, "You know what? It is what it is. Walk away." And it's a different situation instead of being stuck in that moment for hours and hours and hours, just mad about nothing.

The inner curriculum of emotion work produces more peace in Lamont's life: it prevents him from being stuck in anger "about nothing" for hours. It keeps him employed. It protects him from the harms of fights. And, crucially, it protects him against the state. As a Black man, Lamont is keenly aware that expressing his anger even without physical violence (just by

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"elevating his voice") can mean that the cops get involved. If "somebody" – but maybe particularly a white-bodied person – feels afraid of his anger, they may "call the cops" on him. This is because, as sociologists like Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2019) and Adia Harvey Wingfield (2010) have shown, emotions are both racialized and gendered, meaning that Lamont's anger is interpreted as threatening and that "somebody's" fear of him is interpreted as correct or justified. This is dangerous for Lamont for several reasons. First, he keenly does not want to get "removed" from his daughter's life. Involvement with the criminal justice system would also obviously threaten his mobility goals – whether through time, expense, or the "mark of a criminal record" that could seriously damage his employment prospects (Pager 2003). And what he doesn't say outright, but what lingers in the air of our conversation (which takes place less than two years after the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the Black Lives Matter uprisings), is the reality that "somebody calling the cops" could be an immediate threat on his life.

In connecting his anger to experiencing poverty during childhood, Lamont identifies a material and even structural basis of his troubles. But his solution is emotional and interpersonal: he believes that he must work upon his *self* in order to transcend his anger and avoid the heavy, socially-structured penalties he could pay for expressing it. In Lamont's worldview, the self is both what is profoundly harmed by the world outside, and is also where or how that world can – or must – be accommodated. This is a heavy burden indeed; it might even be called perverse. But, for better or worse, by doing inner work to transform his responses to anger, Lamont safeguards and nurtures what is most precious to him. He is very pleased with his situation and his prospects, saying "[S]ince I left [New Orleans], I've been doing great. When I was home and everything, it's a lot of trouble, I'll say. Trouble, and it's just not pleasant. So to be a better version of myself, I think stepping away from my comfort zone might be best, and I actually stepped away and I'm doing great." He feels that the key to the progress he is making toward his goals has been becoming "a better version of [him]self," and he has become that better version through relationships that taught him how to perform inner work on some of his strongest emotions. In his understanding, getting good information and escaping other people's limiting expectations are relevant to success, but are far less important than learning the inner curriculum.

The Wages of Transformation

In his early twenties, Lamont had a strong intuition that he should leave New Orleans and pursue the relationship with his now ex-girlfriend: he needed to "become a better version" of himself in and through interpersonal relationships. Lamont's relational strategy for transformation supports his mobility goals in several ways. First, it drew him out of his New Orleans social network, which he felt could not offer him the information or support he needed to pursue his mobility project, prompting him to establish new networks (first in Phoenix, and now in Dallas) that could provide more of these things. Second, it has instructed him in emotional performances (the outer regulation of his anger) that allow him to control how he is perceived by others. Rather than being interpreted as an angry, Black man from the hood, the emotion work of self-objectification and restraint helps him demonstrate to his social others that he is a person who can "handle" his emotions. Using these techniques probably helps Lamont be perceived, instead, not only as "less threatening" but also as someone who can demonstrate "professionalism," i.e., as someone who can conform to the norms of dominant institutions and settings, and specifically to their racialized, gendered, and classed emotional requirements (see Wilkins 2012; Illouz 2007). He no longer worries about losing his job due to losing his temper,

he has been able to advance in workplace settings, and he is developing a mentoring relationship with a real estate agent he hopes can teach him the business. His flexibility regarding his self (his willingness to do inner transformation) has met the flexibility of his mobility goals (he thinks business is his path, but he stumbled into property management and is open to other avenues in the future) and is helping him experience upward mobility compared to his childhood.

But, if transformation has its dividends, it also has its costs. Lamont is adamant, and happy, that he is "doing great." I don't disagree: he genuinely seems to be satisfied with his situation and to expect that his future is bright. But, in the system that Lamont is learning to navigate, his emotion work is an uncompensated requirement. Not only does he have to work hard *externally*, or through his labor, to earn a paycheck and advance on his mobility project; he also has to work hard *internally* to gain access to or preserve the opportunity to perform wage labor in the first place. No one pays him for this effort; it is the price *he* must pay for admission into the formal economy. He did not choose the childhood circumstances that made him angry, but he must account both for those circumstances and for the people and institutions that interpret his anger as a threat.

Gardeners: Transformational Mobility Ideology

London, Janae, and Lamont differ in a great many ways. They have different concrete goals, investments in both secondary and post-secondary education, occupations, social networks, cultural capitals, responsibilities, childhood experiences, tastes, and personalities. They also differ in what they seek to change about themselves: London is working to heal the wounds that led her into workaholism, Janae is trying to grow out of personal "flaws," and Lamont is transmuting his anger to become his best self. But, they are also profoundly similar in their shared worldview about the meaning of the self and the corresponding meanings of social action and social context. In other words, they share what I call a *transformational mobility ideology* and describe in terms of a "gardener" ideal-type (summarized again in Table 4, below).

London, Janae, and Lamont, along with many others I interviewed in this research, view the *self* as a project. As "gardeners," they tie success to an on-going process of inner transformation. This transformation, often framed as *inner growth*, happens through deliberate effort, reflective practices, and seeking out people who have complementary perspectives. To grow, the self must be cultivated – but also changed. Implicitly, the self that "needs to grow" is misfit to the conditions it encounters: it is weak, wounded, afraid, or otherwise in need of development if it is to achieve its goals. The self is a work in progress; the self must heal its wounds (like London), grow strong (like Janae), or get outside of its comfort zone (like Lamont).

This conception of the self also implies beliefs about how individual goals may be reached. "Gardeners" believe that their mobility goals are attainable in an objective sense, depending on how successful they are at *re-forming themselves*. For instance, London, Janae, and Lamont all grew up in families that had extremely limited economic resources. They confronted various institutional barriers to pursuing their dreams (perhaps most acutely exemplified by Janae's "transfer trap"). And they have all experienced racial, gender, and class bias in combination, as London painfully distills in contemplating her political ambitions, as Janae received from freshman advisor Maggie Johnson, and as Lamont registers in others' negativity about his ambitions and in his avoidance of "trouble" and the cops. Yet, despite experiencing both long-term material distress in childhood, institutional barriers, and racism, classism, and sexism, London, Janae, and Lamont all believe that their dreams are still attainable if they do the right work on their inner selves. Rather than viewing it as closed, they believe that society's

opportunity structure is relatively open – if they can affect the right inner transformation. Their action is therefore directed at *internal* change, which is often viewed as a necessary first step toward other strategic actions that may be more externally directed. These actions are also shaped by a temporal focus on the *past*: the growing inner self must reflexively examine prior experience in order to achieve change or to trace its own growth trajectory.

Finally, this ideology of transformation entails a specific perspective on social context. For gardeners like the three described here, the people that form their social networks are, first and foremost, sources of reflection and growth – whether as guides in reflective processes, as sources or illuminators of deep, relational pain, as inspiration for change, or as interlocutors in testing the bounds of a comfort zone. London's deep cathexis to her family bonds is both the source of her wound and the site of her transformative work; Janae looks to her coworkers to guide her perspectives on growth; and Lamont credits his relationships with his ex-girlfriend and his daughter for enabling his work on the inner curriculum of alchemizing anger.

Table 4. Gardeners: Transformational Mobility Ideology

Domain	Meaning
Self	· Self must be transformed through inner change · Self is flawed, wounded, or in need of growth or development; the self is a project
Social Action	· Opportunity structure is relatively open; accessing it depends on reforming the self · Focus of action is on internal (intrapersonal) change or development (sometimes in service of, or as a prerequisite for, external strategy)
Social Context	· Other people are sources of reflection and growth

Transformation and Mobility

Despite their shared worldview regarding the self and social action, though, gardeners experience the *consequences* of their transformational mobility ideology in varying ways. For London and Lamont, for instance, transformational mobility ideology complements the flexible ways in which they understand their mobility goals: they are both open to changing the specific targets (paths or professions) of their goals, as long as the big picture of their aspirations (e.g., financial security) remains broadly consistent. Changing the self helps them access and adjust to new opportunities. For Janae's highly specific and highly challenging mobility goal (becoming an oncologist), however, transformational mobility ideology offers less of what she needs. It has helped her change her perspective on what institutional paths she will take to reach her goal, or on what timeline she will achieve it – by, essentially, humbling her. But it has not helped her

leverage new resources or develop alternative paths to a more broadly conceived mobility goal. So far, she is less upwardly mobile than either London or Lamont as a result.

Of course, all three young adults are just that: still rather young. Their mobility goals, ideologies, and outcomes may change in time. But so far, the fit – or lack thereof – between their mobility goals and mobility ideologies plays a meaningful role in shaping the mobility outcomes they are experiencing.

Gender and Transformation

Women are slightly overrepresented among the gardeners I spoke with: while 60% of my participants identified as women, 73% of gardeners did so. This may be explained by gendered patterns of self-criticism: to the extent that women have been socialized to be more self-critical than men, this may incline slightly more women toward a transformational mobility ideology. Interestingly, there are also seems to be a pattern in gendered approaches to the meaning and work of transformation *within* the gardener ideal-type: women gardeners tend to emphasize fixing flaws and healing wounds (as London and Janae did), while men gardeners tend to approach transformation as a project of learning to become their best selves (as Lamont did). The former perhaps denigrates the self more than the latter.

Regardless of gender, though, gardeners were united in the kinds of meaning they made about their selves (that they should be transformed) and about social action and context (that it should facilitate this transformation). And many – in fact, most – women who participated in this study did not hold a transformational mobility ideology, subscribing to either agentic or emancipatory mobility ideologies instead. A prime example of this is a young woman named Britnee, who is best described not as a "gardener," but as a "climber."

CHAPTER 4
CLIMBERS: AGENTIC MOBILITY IDEOLOGY

Britnee, Darren, and Quentin – the next three young adults we will meet – have a great deal in common with gardeners like London, Janae, and Lamont. They share aspirations of creating financial security, attaining home ownership, raising families of their own, securing enough leisure to take family vacations, and giving back to their communities. They similarly grew up with considerable material constraints, attended public high school in New Orleans, and all enrolled in college with the belief that it would help them access a different material future. They articulate sharp personal critiques of race and class inequities. And, like the gardeners, they share a distinct worldview about the meaning of their selves, attaching to these views specific understandings of how to navigate their social worlds in order to attain their goals.

But, unlike gardeners, who seek to cultivate a changing self, Britnee, Darren, and Quentin regard their selves as whole and capable. They are engaged in learning new skills to help them take effective action, but they do not believe that they need to change something intrinsic to themselves – how they understand or engage themselves or the world – in order to reach their goals. Instead of being sites of necessary transformation, their selves are trusted vehicles through which they act upon the external world. In their case, the self is an agent: focused on action, rather than introspection. And, the external world these agentic selves encounter is characterized by ups and downs, help and hindrance. Opportunity exists, but is accessed by successfully navigating these oscillations; the theme of strategic navigation is the predominant way they characterize their efforts toward mobility. In this pursuit, they perceive other people as either tactical supporters or creators of obstacles. They emphasize taking the right risks, making the right moves, learning the right skills, and building the right networks. In other words, they hold an *agentic* mobility ideology, summarized in Table 5.

The selves that Britnee, Darren, and Quentin inhabit in their shared, agentic mobility ideology are similar to climbers on a mountain. These selves come to the landscape ready to make decisions and take risks, with the understanding that the climb involves a degree of chance: some routes will be better than others. Their task is not to change their orientation to risk, or to question the landscape, but to choose and ascend their routes as strategically as possible. They may change their *skills, knowledge, or networks* over time, but they do not need to change their *selves*.

Table 5. Climbers: Agentic Mobility Ideology

Domain	Meaning
Self	• Self must act upon the world • Self is whole and capable; the self is a vehicle
Social Action	• Opportunity structure is navigable, with possibilities and barriers • Focus of action is on external (interpersonal) strategy and tactics related to personal "getting ahead"

Social Context	• Other people are sources of strategic help or hindrance

At the same time – and just as gardeners do – climbers differ in important ways. As I aim to show by describing the experiences of Britnee, Darren, Quentin, and others, climbers vary in their interests, tastes, attachments to higher education, and, importantly, in the mobility pathways they walk. These differences, though, underscore what they deeply share: a distinct worldview about the meaning of their selves and how they should take action in the world.

Britnee: Making the Right Moves

Britnee is a reserved 26 year old woman who graduated from New Orleans's Pontchartrain University (like London) and lives in subsidized housing with her 83 year old grandmother. She encompasses a great deal when she declares, "I [come] from a lot of strong women." She means many things. First, she is referencing the considerable struggles that her grandmother, her mother, and she have experienced, both individually and collectively. They have needed to be strong. The phrase also alludes to how closely enmeshed their lives have been: Britnee and her mother lived with Britnee's grandmother, her mawmaw, ever since she had to have a leg amputated, a result of untreated diabetes. Britnee's mother, Bella, was a caregiver for both of them – but Britnee was herself a caregiver for Bella, who struggled with substance abuse. Bella passed in early 2020, so now Britnee has taken over primary caregiving for her grandmother. Britnee has witnessed their collective strength. Finally, "coming from a lot of strong women" constitutes a significant, positive statement of her own capacity: as we will see, Britnee believes she is strong and capable, and uses this to her advantage. She says, "People really believe in me. So I am very powerful. I just got to put that into myself and take action."

Britnee's Mobility Project: Financial Independence Against the Odds

Like London, the "gardener" who is an aspiring lawyer, Britnee is both relentless about her goals and flexible about their details. In high school, Britnee had planned to become a physical therapist. Although she initially declared a Kinesiology major in college, she switched to Health Care Management after struggling in math and science classes. She worked in the kitchen at a local hospital throughout and immediately after college, but the hospital was "stressing me out. I'm still part time. They're not trying to increase my pay. And I couldn't move around the hospital. I did over a hundred applications for all the hospitals and could not get in at all," even with her freshly minted bachelor's degree. So, she quit the hospital job and started working through a temp agency. Eventually, a friend's mother helped her get a job as a Covid-19 monitor at a community services organization that provides daycare. She works full-time and makes $15 an hour, but expects that the job will lead to a promotion to the salaried role of family advocate, with a pay scale of $35,000 to $50,000. The organization also will pay tuition for graduate training at a local public university.

All this seems promising to Britnee, who is willing to go where opportunity leads. In the meantime, she has launched a few side hustles. First, she started an online retail business selling body products. Looking for something more lucrative, she trained in tax preparation and credit repair services, and recently incorporated her own L.L.C. Over the previous tax season, she earned around $10,000, and is planning to expand her client base in the coming years. She also trained as a realtor on the side during college, but never took the exam – she regards this as something she could return to if needed. She monitors her credit and saves money (serving as her

grandmother's live-in health aide cuts down her expenses considerably) so that she can one day buy her own home. In addition to pursuing graduate school in social work in order to advance in her current organization, she also hopes to own successful businesses – she mentions real estate and elder care – and to give back to her community, perhaps by opening a youth center.

Rather than aiming at a specific career path, Britnee is focused on making moves that seem practical or feasible given her current situation: her skills, knowledge, and networks. In the long term, what is most important, she says, is that,

> Britnee: I want to be successful. I want to live stress free. I want to be able to say, I'm off this weekend. Let's go out of town. That's go out the country on my two weeks off of vacation of my job because my job is off every holiday, every weekend. They [her future children] got summer breaks. I can work around that. I don't think my job would be too stressful for me to have the job and to balance the other things I want to handle. And if so I'll just be successful enough to just get out.
>
> SP: Yeah. And it's interesting to me that you mention your children. I'm curious what do you want for kids if and when you have them? Like, what do you want for them, for their lives?
>
> Britnee: I want my kids to not ever, ever experience me…I watched my mom many days cry because she can't pay this bill or her head dropped because she can't get help with things or... I don't want my kids to ever see that. I want my kids to just be innocent as long as they can be. A good life. I want them to go to the best schools New Orleans has to offer. I want them to be able to experience the world. I want them to have options in life. If they want to say they want to play soccer, softball and jump rope, I don't care, they gonna do it.

Her goals relate strongly to financial security for herself and her prospective family – specifically, one goal is to make enough money for leisure activities and hobbies. While Britnee wants eventually to find a husband, she feels it is important to be able to provide materially for her children without relying on a partner. Britnee's father was only sporadically involved, emotionally or financially, in her life, and this made a strong impression on her. She explains,

> Britnee: …since I know that you need money to do things, that's why I always try to work, to have the money, to do things that I want to do. And I don't ever want... Like I have my dad, who, when he got a new family, he took everything from under me. So I don't ever want a man to be able to have control over me to where it's only *his* income. I want to be able to have my own.

While Britnee is striving for "success" – while she is striving for middle or upper-middle class leisure and choices – she is keenly aware that she would be one of the first in her family to achieve it. She feels she is working against the odds, which she illustrates by sharing a generational history.

Britnee's grandmother, Ms. Jackson, was born in the late 1930s and lived in Mississippi. She is old enough to remember (and to have imitated countless times to Britnee) Carolyn Bryant claiming on the radio in 1955 – the year Britnee's mother, Bella, was born – that Emmett Till whistled at her. Eventually, Ms. Jackson moved to New Orleans and worked for a white family that was part of the city's power elite (Britnee says, "She was the help. She was their nanny,"), and raised four children of her own, including Bella. Britnee says that her grandmother, who was

herself raised in foster care, had a tough life, and is a tough person to be around: "Like she'll tell me, because I feel like I went to college and I've been around people, I think I know it all and all this type of stuff… She don't uplift her people. She tear 'em down. That's because she don't know how to love…" Bella and Ms. Jackson had a strained relationship, in part because Ms. Jackson "didn't protect my mom and my uncle... She protect the baby [her youngest child], and my [other] uncle that's on drugs. It's weird how she protect them, and that kind of hurted my mom and it kind of hurts my [other] uncle to this day, too…" But Bella took care of Ms. Jackson in her old age, moving in with her after her amputation, shouldering a filial duty that she passed on to Britnee.

Britnee is Bella's only child. Bella worked mainly in the hospitality industry when Britnee was growing up, sometimes as a housekeeper, other times at hotel front desks. Britnee recalls one time when a famous white actor visited a hotel where Bella worked, and made a demeaning, racist and sexist comment to her. Bella let him have it. Britnee says, "She's got a mouth on her. She didn't play that. So I think that's how she lost her job and she went downhill from that." They were homeless at least once, but Britnee also recalls a long period of stability between their return to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and her junior year in college. After that point, though, Bella started using drugs and partying again:

> Britnee: She was just trying to live her life again, because she had settled down for years, probably over 15 years. [After] Katrina, she was doing fine and, you know, smoking just the weed. But she just took that wrong turn. She went to hanging out with the men I didn't like. I was getting into it with her about those men she was bringing to the house. Because I wasn't comfortable with them being in the house. It just was a lot… I got into it heavy with them. And they was telling me basically I was tripping. Or I was doing too much. But nothing was right. And like, it's crazy because everybody looking at me like I'm crazy, but, my mom is dead, my uncle back on drugs. So who the crazy person? Like, when stuff not right, I try to fix it. And I couldn't. I wanted to get my mama help so bad.

Britnee tried to help Bella financially, by saving to buy her a car after she wrecked hers drunk-driving, and tried to help her physically, by talking with her about drug treatment, and even repeatedly getting her emergency care, "try[ing] to save [her] mom and rush[ing] her to the hospital." But things were out of Britnee's hands. In January 2020, she got a call that Bella had collapsed at work. Britnee was nearby, and when she arrived, she knew immediately that Bella was gone. She says, "I couldn't save her that time."

Bella's death was a profound loss for Britnee, and still feels fresh: she weeps recounting it, and says that she sometimes still struggles to cope with her grief. At the same time, it brought other changes. Britnee, who had recently graduated from college and just secured her own apartment, moved back in to be her grandmother's caregiver. She spent the money she had saved for Bella's car on the funeral, and took over the work of shopping, cooking, and managing her grandmother's healthcare. This means her rent is "cheap, cheap, cheap," but the work is thankless. Like Bella and Ms. Jackson did, Bella also has a strained relationship with her grandmother:

> Britnee: We talk. It's not love. It's not... Like, she don't say, I love you. I told her, "I love you," for New Year's when I called because I had left and went out of town and I called her and I told her, "I love you." And she said, "I love you," but she just... You don't feel it. It's not sincere. My cousin told me that because I'm not her child, that's why it's different. Like that love gonna be different. But I feel like as a grandmother, that love should be pure

through, like it should be throughout the whole generation or whatever… She don't get out much and she complains about not getting out much. But then when you try to take her out, she don't feel good, she don't want this, the third, and the fourth. It's hard to please her no matter what you do. It's never good for her. Well and that's how it was with my mom. Like mama cooked the food... "Is too salty, it's too this, it's too that." And she do that to me, but I don't let her do what she did to my mom to me. Cause I feel like that pushed my mom to turn back [to] the drugs.

SP: The criticism.

Britnee: Right, it's tough.

In other words, Britnee's mobility project is shaped in deep ways by her family: her family relationships and circumstances have defined her aspirations for financial security, her desire for a nuclear family, and her understanding of – and patience for – working against long odds.

Britnee's Challenge: Navigating Life's Ups and Downs
At the same time, Britnee's responses to her family situations also illustrate how she understands the core challenge confronting her mobility project, which is to successfully navigate life's hills and valleys. Unlike her gardener peers, Britnee's assessment of her circumstances is *not* that she is somehow flawed or needing to change internally. Instead, she narrates the central problem confronting her mobility project as one of navigating a cycle of ups and downs. Sometimes things are better; sometimes things are worse; regardless, it is up to her to figure out how to make use of, or respond to, any given situation.
For Britnee, this up/down cycle takes many forms. She narrates her early education in this way, for instance, explaining that she was held back twice in early elementary school, and "couldn't even read a book and…had little cousins that was reading better than [her]." She says, "And I was in the fourth grade and I had to relearn all that stuff after Katrina. And I kind of taught myself to read again, to understand math and things of that nature." And, while Katrina was extremely disruptive, it also meant that she attended different schools: "And then once I went to school in Mississippi, too, that also helped me." In high school she was a B student, but felt passed over for academic accolades. She was a first-generation college student at Pontchartrain University, and "faced a lot of challenges with some difficult courses and trying to get help from the professors." She explains,

Britnee: So I can remember one in particular was my statistics class. I think that was statistics, math. And like the lady... I would sit in the front of the class and everything, and she would lecture us, but it's like she wouldn't have normal office hours. But people was able to go to her and get help, like I'll be at a line outside her door. But it just seemed like when it got to me, I couldn't get help from her.

SP: And she would be like, Oh, I'm not seeing anybody else today?

Britnee: No, she would just be... Pushed. She'll pushed me off on some stuff, like she'll just..It was like an ill vibe that I would get from her. And I felt that she did not want to help me personally because of, I'm gonna be real, because of my color.

SP: She's a white lady?

Britnee: Yeah, she is. And so I felt that from her. But I ended up... After that happened to me, because I was on the verge of failing her class, I ended up getting blessed by actually waking up early in the morning, going to the math lab. And it was a Black lady in the math lab and she was a teacher, but she was supposed to get her PhD I think. Like, I think she...I want to say middle school she was teaching. But that lady knew statistics. And when I tell you she broke it down for me to where I think I passed that class with a B. And I was about to fail. Yes. So, many times at PU I wanted to give up because of those reasons. Like I remember a computer class I was taking. The guy he created the book and he was just saying, "It's in the book, it's in the book." And I'm like, sir, I don't understand this. I'm not really too tech savvy and stuff like that. So he would brush me [off] also. And I feel like that was the same situation [regarding racism]. But I had a friend that was real savvy with the computer and that friend pulled me from an F to a A I want to say.

In other words, Britnee's experience is that plenty of challenges come her way. They are both personal and structural in nature. These include the challenges of growing up with few material resources; of relating with her mother or grandmother; of bad schools; weather-related disasters; feeling overlooked at school or at work; academic struggles; and racist treatment. At the same time, help to meet these challenges also exists, in the form of caring friends (like her college friend, but also like the friend's mother who helped her get the covid monitor job), family (like her uncle and cousin, who advise her), tutors, teachers, mentors, and, currently, a life coach. (I ask Britnee, "What do you think it is about her coaching that's so helpful," and Britnee replies, "How is how positive she is. She's very positive... She's very, very, very positive. Every situation that's bad as she'll point out the good in the situation and like she say, Well, maybe they wasn't supposed to be in your life from jump. Think about it.") As she understands it, Britnee's core task isn't to change; it's to figure out how to parry life's jabs with the help of the people in her corner.

Britnee's Strategy: Constant Assessment, Constant Adjustment
        As such, determining who to trust – who to allow and keep in her corner – is of paramount importance. But, first and foremost, she trusts herself. She stands up for herself when she thinks things are wrong, as she did with her mother and the men she was bringing around. She argues; she tries to "fix" situations. She rejects her grandmother's narrative that she "does too much," and rejects the idea (produced by white coworkers) that she wasn't "a good fit" at the temp job that fired her when she came to work sick with a stomach bug (she had needed the money). She self-identifies insecurities and flaws, but does not take them to mean that her self is broken, or needs to change or heal. Instead, she accepts her self on its own terms. She is "not a test taker," for example, so she hasn't yet taken the real estate licensing exam, and instead pursued side hustles – tax preparation and credit repair – without testing requirements. (She recounts learning about tax preparation from a hair dresser: "I'm like, wait, what all you gotta do? You have to take a test? Because I don't like tests. She was like, No, they gonna teach you everything.") Similarly, she relates that PU "is really a tough school," but she figured out how to make it through by asking for help. She adds, "I was limited so much in life to where it was a point in my life to where I was scared to step out on my own and do things." While she "let go that guard of being scared," she admits, "I'm still kind of scared. Like I don't like to do public speaking. I don't like people really looking at me so much, but they do. I just don't like to be stared at too much." Rather than believing that this is something she needs to change in herself,

she accepts it, instead hoping for a different outcome in her children: "But I want my kids to not have those type of fears," she says.

And, though she is imperfect, Britnee trusts herself with the practice of constantly assessing her situation, and constantly adjusting to it. She says, "I just [don't] want to make the wrong moves." To avoid pitfalls, she relies on people she trusts, and on her own capacities, knowledge, and skills. She sums up her approach to her goals by emphasizing the contingency of action, her trust in her self, and her relentless strategizing about how to make the *right* "moves":

> Britnee: So it is up and down, but I will say that I have more optimistic moments than anything. Like I just feel like I'm gonna be powerful, I just got to place my hands on the right things, like I got to educate myself on this stuff because I don't wanna make no false moves. You know, I understand you can make your mistakes out there, but I feel like I don't have time for mistakes. I have to get this. So I do feel very powerful. I feel very, very optimistic about it all.

> SP: You mentioned there's ups and downs, too. How do you maintain that feeling of optimism?

> Britnee: To maintain it I go to doing research. I go to reading stuff, I look at money, dollar signs. I go to seeing how I can better myself. I'll talk to my life coach. I'll just try to stay positive. I'll call one of my friends and say, Tell me something positive, I need to hear something positive. I just try to find ways to get more money. I love making money. I love working…I tell [my life coach] everything that I'm dealing with and have been dealing with and she just tries to help me get through these things, mentally, like you might give me tips. 'It's OK, it's not you, you're not the problem.' Because I can blame myself for everything, but it's like I have to learn how to look at the situation for what it is and say well what did you actually do in this situation? And it's like all I ever did was be me. Kind, sweet, try to help people. I have my moments, I'm not perfect, you know?

> SP: No, who is perfect?

> Britnee: But the moment I mess up, it's like all fingers are pointing at me. I mean, it's like, ma'am, what, you thought I was perfect? And I probably thought I was perfect, too. But I learned how to look at the situation for what it really is and see, like the people's actions. I watch their actions towards me, what they have done to me and stuff like that. And that is what helps me get through my sticky situations.

For Britnee, "bettering herself" does not imply a project of inner transformation, as it does for the gardeners. Rather, it means taking action to change her external circumstances: doing research, building her business, making the right "moves." She does sometimes seek ways to change her mood, relying on her life coach and friends to help her "stay positive." But she sees her setbacks and mistakes as the product of circumstance or ignorance, rather than as indicators that she must change something fundamental about herself. Like many gardeners (such as Janae and Russell) Britnee is deeply invested in learning – but her learning is focused on *knowledge and skills* that could allow her to take specific actions, as opposed to the personal, inner growth or healing that the gardeners emphasize. Rather than looking to her social network to help her effect inner change, she looks to other trustworthy people to help her make connections and develop practical abilities.

Many other young people I talked with express parallel orientations to the self, social action, and social context. For instance, Mikaela, a new mother in her mid-twenties and aspiring phlebotomist, has a similar sense of needing to navigate obstacles in order to "build [her] situation and come out better than [she] already was before." Mikaela attended an HBCU in town, but stopped out after struggling with unhelpful administrators. Over the years since high school, she has moved out of and back into her parents' house twice. She had been living with her boyfriend and became pregnant during the pandemic, but found out he was unfaithful – a "deal-breaker" for her – and left him, moving back in with her family during the pregnancy after she developed preeclampsia and could no longer work. She has been enrolled in another local four-year university on and off. Mikaela responded to these situations by making tactical decisions, not trying to change herself. She says, "…if you lose your job or if something happens to where you can't really do it, you've got to be like, 'All right. Now I've got to think about a backup plan.'" Of the many challenges she has faced, "…that's the hardest part, especially learning certain things you have to go through, certain situations for you to be like, 'Okay. This is possible if I have this.' If it happens to me again, then I know how to handle it differently." Far from focusing on inner change, Mikaela – like Britnee – treats her self as stable, understood, and reliable – and she depends on it to help her deal with what she views as life's inevitable challenges.

Gardeners, Climbers, and Inequality

While, as a climber, Britnee holds a different worldview, her awareness of race and class inequality closely tracks the race and class awareness that the gardeners I spoke with possessed. Like London and Russell, her awareness of racial injustice is historical, transmitted to her through both family experience and history and through more abstracted or formalized history learned from school, books, social networks, and the media. Like London, Janae, and Lamont, she also talks about personal experiences of racial bias, discrimination, and injustice in educational institutions and in the workplace. Yet, they make different sense of how to advance in a society that they recognize in broadly similar ways as racialized, classed, and unjust. The gardeners turn inward first, believing that they can access outer opportunity in an unequal society if they do inner work. But Britnee takes a different approach: she doesn't believe she needs to change something intrinsic to her self, but rather acts externally, focusing on cultivating the right relationships, learning new externally-oriented skills, and making moves. To be sure, gardeners can be strategic in their relationships as well: London, for instance, started her volunteering meet-up as both a way to give back *and* as a way to build her network and a real estate client base. A key difference between Britnee and London, though, is that London believes she needs to prioritize inner work in order to reach her aspirations, while Britnee does not. London devotes considerable strategic energy to inner development; Britnee learns and develops new side hustles. Their similar sociopolitical critiques coexist with differing worldviews: different senses of self, social action, and social context.

Rewards of Increment

Britnee is very focused on social capital – on making connections and on determining whom among these connections to trust – and on using her connections and skills to "make the right moves." She perceives an opportunity structure that is less open than the one gardeners perceive, yet that is still navigable: she identifies both obstacles and opportunities, hindrance and help.

The headway she makes in her mobility project is halting and partial. She struggled in college, for instance, but completed her degree in five years. She encountered difficulty on the labor market, but eventually was able to use her connections to land a job she feels has promise. She is making just $15 per hour (or about $31,200 per year before taxes), but has built skills that allow her to significantly supplement her annual income (by a further $10,000). She is employed within a field (human services) that is different from her college major (health care management), but that is at least somewhat related. Her current role does not require a college degree, but she expects to be able to advance within the organization (through a new, salaried role and by attending graduate school). Though she envisions much more for herself, these gains are enough to make Britnee "optimistic" about the future.

Britnee's flexible goals – the "ends" of her independence-oriented mobility project – enable these incremental gains to the extent that they allow her to change course (change her major; change her career track or income streams) when she feels she needs to. Her focus on "making moves" in the near term has directed her to spend considerable time learning about financial services, an area that is socially accessible to her and can help her make some extra money, but diverges from her longer-term ambitions. And, although she names real estate as a more lucrative field she would like to enter, and while she has taken the lengthy requisite classes, she is too nervous to take the licensing exam. The moves she makes are effective, helping her win more financial stability than her mother had, yet they are also constrained: by fear she is unwilling or unable to confront, by her social networks, and by a labor market that she has experienced as prejudicial and unwelcoming.

Incremental as they are, Britnee is making mobility gains through the efforts directed by her agentic mobility ideology. But this is not the case for all climbers, as we will see next in the case of a climber named Darren.

Darren: Learning the Codes

I first interview Darren via video chat from the apartment he shares with his girlfriend in Columbus, Ohio. He sits on a bar stool in their bright kitchen, hunching his squat frame toward the camera. His hair is done in a neat fade and he smiles easily. After six years at two different institutions, Darren graduated with a business degree from Saint Mary University, a four-year institution in Columbus, one year prior to our conversation, and his pride at having recently earned his bachelor's degree is evident. His girlfriend, who he met in Columbus and who attended a university there, graduated the year before. He comments playfully, "I was kind of jealous, but, you know, it's whatever."

Darren's Mobility Project: Leaving "the Hood," But Not Leaving the Hood Behind

Over the course of the interview, Darren shares more about the context of his pride about earning his degree. Darren grew up in what he calls "the *hood* hood" in New Orleans. He is the first in his family to go to college, as well as the first to complete high school. He says, "when I was younger… I didn't know nice things… I honestly didn't know those type of things existed. I didn't know people have marble countertops and had such nice houses and things like that. I didn't know that until I was shown that. …[L]ike, if you go to college and get a college degree, your chances of having these things is way more than you just having a high school degree." I ask what marble countertops represent to him, and he adds:

> [In] the hood, you don't got marble countertops. You got the plastic countertops and things like that. None of my [childhood] friends' houses is really nice. It was just like—if they did

have nice cars then it was around tax time and it was used cars. When you grow up in the hood, your mama don't really have a blue-collar job or something like that. It's like you get things when Christmas come. You get a lot of things when Christmas come, tax time, and maybe for your birthday. So you don't really get that nice things and I have never really been on nice vacations and things like that. Not really seen nice things. But the marble just represent-- I want to say it represents success. You made it. It's like you're not in the ghetto no more. You're not poor. You're not wealthy but you're not poor, struggling, you know what I mean? And you're not eating syrup and bread, you know what I mean?

To Darren, marble countertops are a proxy for income, but also for neighborhood characteristics. He says, "I'm not living where there's people standing on the corner, you've got crackheads everywhere. I'm not living in them type of areas [currently or in the future] because I know now it's not the way you want to live. I've lived like that my whole way growing up." Today, he and his girlfriend share a nice apartment in a safe part of Columbus, an accomplishment that he connects to earning a degree.

But graduating from college is not only an economic feat for Darren; it is also an academic one. He recounts "one of the worst stories of [his] life," which dates to his 8th grade year. One day, he recalls,

I was in class. And this girl that I went with, that I had dated in elementary… The teacher asked me to read. And at that time, I couldn't read. So I was like, "No." And the girl was like, "He can't read. That's why he don't want to read." And everybody looked at me. And that was one of the most embarrassing moments in my life.

For Darren, learning to read was a major challenge during high school. It also meant that preparing for college was infinitely more difficult – more compressed – for him than for most of his peers. When it came time to apply to college, one of his high school teachers and a close mentor, a man named Sam Hooper, encouraged him to apply to a community college in Dayton, OH, where he was confident he would receive adequate support services and where he could pursue his interests in sports and business. The college was small, tight-knit, and included an option for residential living. Darren was accepted, and enrolled.

Dayton Community College was fine for Darren socially, even though it was "overwhelming" at first, and even though "the south and the north is just two different worlds, in [his] opinion." The area was "mostly white," and there were a lot of commuter students from the surrounding communities, but it was mostly "Black people that stayed in the dorms." He quickly made friends by joking around in the dorm hallways, and by getting involved in pickup basketball games. Classes were more challenging. He built relationships with his professors and tutors, but he struggled with assignments. He says, there were "times when I really wanted to just give up and quit. Honestly, there were times where I thought about it like, I am the only person that's doing this. I can honestly get a regular job. I don't have to go to college. I can get a regular job like everybody else. I had to graduate high school, why I have to graduate college? Most people that I know didn't graduate high school." Still, by the semester he was set to graduate with an associate's degree, he had a 3.0 GPA.

But, that semester, Darren was expelled from the community college. The school had a strict three strikes policy, and Darren had two strikes from minor infractions. The first strike came at the very beginning of his time at Dayton Community College, when he tested positive for marijuana on a random drug test he did not expect (but which was technically allowed,

according to the fine print of the student handbook he had not read). The second strike was because he was caught with an unopened bottle of liquor in his dorm room (DCC was a dry campus). The third strike, three months before graduation, resulted from what was essentially a trap. Darren's roommate had gotten in trouble with the town police, who found drugs in his car while it was on loan to someone else. But, because the car was in his name, the local cops involved the campus police:

> One of the [campus] police, obviously that we was real cool with, before they came and searched our room, he came to us and he was like, "Hey, they about to come search y'all rooms. So if y'all got anything in y'all room, just give it to me now, and--" I guess…we was thinking that he was just going to take it and just dismiss it. But, he came, and when he came and searched our room, they found weed in our room. And that was our third strike. Well, they didn't find it in our room. We gave it to the officer that we was cool with, thinking that he was just going to like, throw it away. But, yeah. He gave it to the head police officer of the school.

It was his roommate's first strike, but Darren's third. He adds, "I kind of felt like they tried to make us out to be big-time drug dealers on campus and stuff, when we was really just kids trying to get high, basically." He appealed, but lost—and was expelled and banned from campus. He had two days to move out of his dorm, and, being without a car and far from home, wound up moving all of his belongings into an expensive storage unit before heading back to New Orleans. He says, "It was just a lot of money and just a lot of annoying stuff."

But Darren wanted to finish college. He enrolled at a New Orleans community college while he applied to four-year colleges. He applied to institutions in Louisiana and Ohio, and ended up choosing a private university in Columbus because it had the major he wanted and was not as big as state schools. Only a few of his credits from Dayton and New Orleans transferred, so Darren spent another three years in college, graduating in spring 2020, just as the Covid-19 pandemic was peaking for the first time in the U.S., and having accumulated a total of $61,000 in student loans. He wanted to pursue a career in sports management, but hiring had bottomed out due to the pandemic. He had made money in high school and college as a landscaper, so his college career advisor connected him with a landscaping company in Columbus, where he is making $18 an hour. He was glad to have income, but also disappointed. "I got my degree," he says, "so I wasn't here to do hard labor. So, by me doing hard labor, I'm like, Dude, what are they going to give me, cause I didn't need a degree. I didn't need a degree to do this. So why am I doing this? But I said it was good, it's just a learning experience because like, I want to open my own landscaping company." And, he likes the owner, who built the company from scratch and has taken Darren under his wing:

> He tell me all the time if I have any business questions, just call him and ask him. Happens all the time. He gave me his personal number, and he was like, "Just call me, ask me. Cause with my company, I'm all about growth, and I just want you to stay at landscaping. I want to put you in a position where you're not landscaping anymore, but you're like a salesman or like a project manager." And that was my whole thing. That was my whole thing about being a landscaper, even if I did decide to do it for a long time, I wouldn't want to just do landscaping my whole [life]-- like I want to move up.

In fact, Darren is planning to move home to New Orleans and open his own landscaping business. He lays out his plans:

[B]efore I left New Orleans for the summer to move [to Ohio] I was working, I was working for the [high] school [he attended]. And over me working for that school for the summer, I realized-- I heard them at a conversation where I ain't going to say they paid somebody $20,000 just to come in and landscape by the front doors of a school. And I did more work than he. I landscaped more of the grounds than he did. He got paid $20,000. I landscaped the whole perimeter-- he only did by the doors and the parking lot for $20,000, and they paid for all the materials. And I was like that's 100% gain. They pay for all the materials. All you're really doing is the labor. And from what I was seeing, he did it by itself. So I was like, "Why can't I do that?" They know I know how to landscape. They just don't want to-- they just wouldn't offer me $20,000 because I don't have a business, or they're not looking at me like that. They're just looking at paying me hourly… I was getting paid $11 an hour, 11-something an hour, and that was like-- I was okay with it. I was getting paid-- I was getting paid every two weeks. I was okay with it, but I could have been getting paid way more for my services.

Darren expects to use his existing network in New Orleans to launch this business: he adds, "I know a lot of people that work in schools and I feel every year, every summer, schools want their school to be landscaped. So if I could just get a contract with schools around [New Orleans], and get me a nice little crew together… I can start myself a nice good business. I can bring in a nice piece of money."

Darren's aspirations include maintaining a comfortable standard of living, and landscaping seems the most sensible near-term route. In the longer run, he would prefer to have a white collar job in sports management, or to pair business ownership with coaching high school athletic teams. (He says, "I want to become a coach because I love sports and I just—[there's] nothing like seeing an athlete or a person-- you're grooming a person and they just turned out-- they just explode. You're teaching somebody how to read and once they finally learn how to read and you're seeing them read fluently, it's just--man.") Darren also wants to use his future success as a vehicle to shift the fortunes of his family and his community. In ten years, he says,

I would hope to have my own business up and running to where I'm just at this point I'm just an overseer of everything. I check-in and make sure everything is running smoothly, all the numbers is right, and all the business is handled and everybody is happy. In 10 years from now, I would hope to have my business going and just putting people I love and people that need it in a good work position. I want to be able to-- there's a lot of people that I went to school with that I just feel like that didn't-- they're just not in a good position right now. And there's a lot of people I know, a lot of people that are in my family is just not in a position that I feel like if I can create my business and just give people opportunity, it will be better.

As for many other participants in this research, giving back – in this case, through coaching or through creating jobs – is deeply important to Darren. He wants upward mobility for himself, but also for people he cares about.

Darren's Strategy: Learning the Codes

What becomes clear in our conversation is that Darren believes that he can achieve his goals by learning the right codes. This is true in a number of ways. At the most obvious level, Darren talks about code switching, or changing his use of language according to his audience: he

will "talk straight" so as not to be seen as "too aggressive" or "too ghetto." There is also a material code, or a code of consumption, which values "nice things" (like marble countertops), living in a "nice area," and eating "good food." But the relevant codes consist of more than codes of language or consumption for Darren; they also include codes of operating.

For instance, Darren draws a distinction between what he calls "hood rules" and rules for outside the hood. Contrasting the two, he says that outside the hood, "It's like a new world, like another world." Darren describes how he sees hood rules:

> I just feel like in the hood, it's like everybody's trying to get ahead. Everybody trying to get ahead of the next person. Everybody trying to be successful. Everybody trying to win. And another thing, in the hood, it's like everybody's fighting over one-- everybody's fighting over one territory or one piece of land. Whereas this is like there's enough to go around. People are not greedy. People will help you out. If people see you struggling, people will help it out. And in the hood, people are like, "Mind your business." There are people in the hood that see you struggling, and they'll just be like, "Man, you don't know-- don't." They just wouldn't help you just because they don't know if you're going to do them something. They don't know if you trying to get over on them. They don't know if you trying to rob them. It's just so many things in the hood. It's like you've got to be on all ten toes. [Whereas] [w]hen you reach a certain [socioeconomic] level, it's like people are willing to-- I don't know. It's just like people help. Do you know what I mean? People look out for one another. Whereas it's like in the hood, everybody's trying to get ahead. So it's like, "I can't look out for you because you'll probably be getting ahead of me." And it's just like nobody-- I don't know. It's sad to say people in the hood, they want to see you when you come from the ghetto, it's just like you're born with a certain amount of rules, a certain amount of rules that's instilled into you that you've got to follow. You're not supposed to be a rat. If you get money, if you come through and you get money, you've got to go back to the hood and show love. If you're from the hood then you become rich, you're not supposed to change. It's another thing, you're not supposed to move out of the hood. It's so many things when you come from the hood where it's like, when you don't, then it's like those things-- it's not no rules. There's no rules. I don't know, it's like-- I don't know, it's kind of hard to explain. [Outside the hood,] [i]t's just you're not-- you don't have this world. If a person needs help, help them and if they're doing good, congratulate them.

These rules – among them, minding your own business, looking out for yourself, not snitching on people ("being a rat"), sharing money, staying in the hood, and not changing – constitute a strict code. Darren is both disillusioned with these rules, and feels conflicted about his disillusionment. He says,

> I realized when I got older those are not rules of life. Those rules are so fake. I mean, I do believe it, I don't believe it, right? And I believe if you're doing something bad and you get caught doing it, take your lick. By all means, take your charge. But also I believe if you get money, you shouldn't stay in the same situation because the people around you don't have money. So you're basically showing off to them. You're looking down on them and they're never going to accept the fact that you're not looking down on them, you just got money. And you can't spread it all around because then you ain't going to have no more. So I just look at it like I just want to go back and show the younger kids you don't have to follow these rules. Just be a person that thinks for yourself and just be comfortable with you. That's another thing, me in the hood. You get influenced by so much stuff. It's like we don't really know what's real or what's good or what's bad because some of the things that may be good

is bad to the people in the hood. And some of the things that's good to the people in the upscale world is bad to the people in the hood. I mean, it's just certain things that work and certain things that went on, I got to choose. You got to do what's best for you in this world, right? And if that means leaving the hood and never going back to the hood, then it's what you've got to do. If people from your block feel like you left and as soon as you got money, you became bougie and you just changed, that's what you're supposed to do. When you make it out of the hood, you're supposed to change. You're not supposed to stay the same. All things change with time. It's just people in the hood don't get that, in my opinion.

Darren believes "those rules are so fake," yet feels pressure not to change. Ultimately, though, he believes that "you're supposed to change." The *way* in which he changes, and how he feels about it, is critical to understanding Darren's mobility ideology. I ask him,

SP: Do you think change is how you get good things? Or is it change is what happens along the way? Do you feel that you had to change yourself?

Darren: I don't feel like I had to change myself personally but I had to change some things about myself to co-exist with the people in the world I'm trying to live in because you can't be super ghetto and live in a white collar world. So you just can't be. You can't. It's just not going to work because you're going to make some people scared of you. You're going to make some people feel uncomfortable around you. You're going to make some people just don't want to talk to you. Some people are going to feel like, "He's too aggressive or he's too--" what's the word I'm looking for? "He's too ghetto." Or, "He's just not-- it's hard to talk to him." So for me, I felt like I had to change some things. I don't really have to change my beliefs and my way of thinking but I would have to change the way I perceive things, the way I talk, the way I act around certain people, my actions around certain people. Because everybody just not comfortable with everything. Everybody not ready to meet the full you. So you have to-- if that makes sense, you have to keep part of yourself in the shadow.

SP: How does that feel to you? Does it feel fine to do that, to have this kind of filter situation? Does it bother you? Are you happy to do it? How does it feel?

Darren: In some situations, it's necessary and in some situations… I don't know. I'd say sometimes I'm happy about it, sometimes I'm not. Just because I just find it-- sometimes I just feel like I'm being so fake. I'm just not being the real me. And sometimes I think everybody's not ready for the real you. So to answer your question, yes. Sometimes I do have a problem with it. Sometimes I don't. I would say like how I'm talking now to you, I don't have a problem with-- I'm talking proper or talking kind of straight. I don't have a problem with it because I don't want to talk to you like I would talk to one of my friends and curse and things like that. So I don't have a problem with me switching up the way I talk a little bit. So sometimes I do and sometimes I don't, I guess.

SP: Depends on the situation, it sounds like.

Darren: Yeah. Yeah. That's another reason I feel like when I make my own [business] and I got to hire people, I want to meet the full extent of people. I don't want to meet half a person because I want to feel like I want all my employees in my company, I want them to feel like they can be 100% theyself around people in the company. I don't want to be surprised with how you act one day. If we out or something, you acting different. I don't

want to be surprised. I want to know this is who you are and if I'm willing to deal with it. If I'm not, I'm not.

SP: Right, you just want sort of honesty or transparency.

Darren: Yeah, 100%. I want you to be 100% you around [me]. I don't want you to be one person here and then one person there. I guess that's what I'm doing right now.

SP: Well that's interesting, right? You sort of switch and you do it. Sometimes it feels okay. Sometimes it feels less okay. But you're sort of willing to do it because it's how you can get to what you want. But part of what you want is to build a business where other people don't have to do that, it sounds like.

Darren: Yeah, that's 100% what I want to do.

This passage is long, but illuminating. Several important understandings emerge. First, Darren draws a distinction between inner and outer change. He says: "I don't feel like I had to change myself *personally* but I had to change some things *about* myself to co-exist" (italics mine). He didn't need to change who he deeply *is*, but rather how he is *perceived* – because "[e]verybody not ready to meet the full you… you have to keep part of yourself in the shadow." He does this by managing his social performances: like Lamont, the gardener who transformed his anger, Darren works to ensure other people don't feel "scared" or "uncomfortable" around him. But, unlike Lamont, Darren does not try to transform his inner world. He says, "I don't really have to change my beliefs and my way of thinking." Instead, he outwardly changes "the way [he] talk[s], the way [he] act[s] around certain people, [his] actions around certain people." Instead, Darren values or trusts himself as he is: earlier, he said he would advise younger people to "[j]ust be a person that thinks for yourself and just be comfortable with you." He thinks for himself by differentiating hood rules from outside rules, and by choosing to leave the hood.

However, Darren sometimes feels the strain of his double performance (similar to W.E.B. DuBois's "double consciousness" [2005(1903)]) in moving between worlds and their rules. The performance "is necessary," but "sometimes [he's] happy about it, sometimes [he's] not… [S]ometimes [he] just feel[s] like [he's] being so fake. [He's] just not being the real [Darren]. And sometimes [he] think[s] everybody's not ready for the real [Darren]." This is strikingly different from Lamont, who views the inner transformation of his anger as an unambiguously positive change in his life. Darren, in contrast, can negatively feel "so fake" moving across codes and keeping "part of [him]self in the shadow." If Lamont is comparatively happy to pay the price of transformation, Darren is less so. Changing codes costs him—but he is still willing to do it out of a feeling of necessity. His vision for the future, however, includes creating employment opportunities in which people like him "can be 100% [themselves] around people in the company" – where they don't need to worry about the codes.

More broadly, Darren charts the ups and downs of his trajectory by narrating his relationship to these codes: what codes he needed to learn or unlearn, and when he made mistakes about them. For instance, when discussing his response to the embarrassment of his 8th grade illiteracy, Darren marks two phases. His first thought was the imperative, "I'll never get caught in a situation like that again." And his first response was not to ask his teachers for help with reading, but to ask them not to embarrass him. He says, "I just automatically prevented it and ask[ed] the teacher not to call on me or [I would] tell the teacher before class like, Yeah. This is what I got going on. I'll appreciate it if you not do this." Eventually, a teacher recognized what

was going on, and stepped in to make sure Darren learned to read. But he didn't become comfortable with asking for help in school until much later. He explains:

> [If] I didn't know something, I would just go to sleep. So honestly, it's like almost I was too good to ask for help or just didn't want to seem like I needed help…I didn't really grasp it [asking for help] until I was 18, honestly. And I honestly feel like in the hood, access to help is a sign of weakness. So you don't want to ask for help. So that was kind of another reason why I didn't ask for help because you don't want to seem weak because when you seem weak, people target you. You don't want to be targeted.

The rules of the hood prevented him from seeking out literacy help that he badly needed. But, over time he learned to "advocate for [him]self" and to build relationships with teachers, mentors, and later professors who could give him practical help and assist in his skill-building. This was a different kind of code-switching: he learned a behavioral code of help-seeking and self-advocacy within educational institutions that, as Annette Lareau (2011[2003]) writes, is often more associated with the middle class.

The logic of codes comes up in other areas as well. When Darren was kicked out of Dayton Community College, he blamed himself for the tactical mistake of misrecognizing the codes of the situation. Describing his reaction to being turned in by the campus police officer he trusted, he says,

> Darren: I was so mad at myself. And I was just mad that I was even in that situation. That was a rough time in my life. That was the first rough two years of my college career. It was like, oh my God. But it was okay.
>
> SP: Why do you think you were mad at yourself?
>
> Darren: I was mad at myself just because, me, honestly, me just being a Black man from the hood, I shouldn't have gave him [the bag of weed], I shouldn't even have gave it to him. I shouldn't have trusted him and gave it to him, I should've just made him-- like, if his job was to come search my room and tie it up and look for it,… I shouldn't have gave it to him. So I should've made him work for his paycheck.

Darren feels he knew better: he should have both used hood rules of distrust and self-protection to guide his actions, and should have recognized that he would be stereotyped as "a Black man from the hood." Instead, he made the mistake of trusting a cop on the basis of a friendly relationship. I push him on his self-blaming:

> SP: Somebody might look at the same situation and not blame you and [instead] blame a criminal justice system that has criminalized weed. I mean, this is mass incarceration, right? Black men get locked up, and white folks who smoke more weed are not behind bars. But that was not where your mind went. Your mind went to, "I screwed up."
>
> Darren: Yeah, all right. I took it into-- I just straightly blamed it on myself just because the simple fact was I felt like it all could've been-- I don't want to say it could've been avoided because it couldn't even had been avoided. I don't know. It happened. So it's like I don't know what I could've did different to prevent it…I just looked at it like I could've did things smarter or better. I don't know. I don't know. And I didn't feel like the people at my school was racist because it's like any time I needed help, they helped me. I felt like there was

racist people in the area. I have heard racist comments and things where I was going to the school. But I never felt like my teachers or anything was racist or nothing like that. At the end when they denied my appeal, I felt like they felt like I was endangering other students or something like that when really it was just a bad situation at a bad time.

For Darren, what was to blame in his expulsion was a combination of dumb luck and his own error in mistaking behavioral codes.

Darren's emphasis on codes is retrospective in that he uses it to explain the past, but is also prospective in that he uses it to shape his future strategies. For instance, he wants to start a landscaping business using his existing skills, but recognizes he needs to complete bureaucratic steps and create a brand to be legible to potential clients—in other words, to get paid a higher rate for work he already knows how to do. Speaking about existing institutional contacts, he says, "They know I know how to landscape. They just don't want to-- they just wouldn't offer me $20,000 because I don't have a business, or they're not looking at me like that." So, his strategy is to learn what he needs to do to "make it official":

> Before I get into it and start [the business], I want to have a name. I want to have a name for my company. I want to be able to make it official, make sure I have my paperwork and stuff done before I go around and ask people for work or get clientele. But it takes a lot. I've just been watching videos on how to start it, the things I need to-- the paperwork I need to get done, and things like that. And it's just like-- this stuff is hard to just get the ball rolling. So I like getting videos on YouTube and just talking to [his current boss at the landscaping company], too.

Darren is trying to learn the markers that will signal legibility to his target audience (white collar professionals), and actively recruits help to do so. This is a far cry from his previous posture of avoiding asking for help: now, recognizing a different code, he seeks it out.

On the whole, Darren's mobility strategy is explicitly *not* tied to changing anything internal to himself. In fact, he wants to start a business that deliberately creates employment opportunities for people "from the hood" so they can be their "full selves" on the job. Instead, he takes the approach of trying to identify codes, build relationships, learn the right information and skills, and use the right tactics.

New Skills, Same Network

On some levels, Darren's approach seems to be paying off. It got him into and through college, and now into a job that pays $18 per hour. This compares favorably to many people from home: "They're not in a good position financially," he say, "not in a good position working. For instance, my sister, she's a caretaker and she make $11 an hour. She been doing it since she was 18 and she's 30 now. It's like, you're making $11 an hour. I made what she was making in high school. And it's not like she can't make more. It's just she haven't been given the opportunity to." Darren feels he has such an opportunity. But, his current job doesn't require a college degree. Though his passion is for sports management, he lacks connections in the sports industry, and the timing – launching a career in the middle of a global pandemic – is off. He would be happy applying his business degree in other managerial positions, especially as the manager of his own company, and has both a skill set and contacts in landscaping. The path is perhaps risky – many small businesses fail – but Darren judges it is probably his best bet at the moment.

In a follow-up call about nine months after our first conversation, Darren has moved home to New Orleans, but hasn't been able to get the landscaping business off the ground. He says, "Work has been really up and down," and that he's "not sure if moving back from Ohio was a good move or not." He was fired from one job without explanation, and has gotten a different one as a security guard. He is making wages comparable to Ohio, but his car has broken down and will cost between one and two thousand dollars – more than he has on hand – to fix. Uber rides to and from work are draining his bank account. He is applying to lots of jobs on Indeed.com, focusing on "sports management, arena management, any type of management. Sales, marketing. Operations management." The optimism he felt in Columbus has stalled out a bit – but he is still trying to make moves.

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Darren and Britnee both differ from their gardener peers, believing their selves are whole and sturdy (as opposed to needing change), taking action oriented around building their networks, skills, and knowledge (as opposed to focusing on inner development), perceiving a riskier opportunity structure, and relying on other people as sources of know-how and contacts (rather than as guides for internal growth). In these respects, they are similar to our third climber, Quentin. But these three also differ from each other: if Britnee was primarily focused on making the right moves, and Darren on learning the right codes, Quentin, in contrast, is mainly focused on gathering the right people.

Quentin: Gathering the Right People
Like my other participants, Quentin also grew up in New Orleans. Today, though, he lives in a Baltimore apartment he shares with his girlfriend of three years. They met when they were both students at a small liberal arts college in a rural part of Maryland. "The college love story," he quips, sipping a mug of cider as we talk via video chat in mid-October.

Quentin likes Maryland. "Maryland is totally the South of the Northeast," he says. "[T]he people, the vibe. It is so country and southern-y to a sense, the personalities. I can say *honey* to some of these people and they feel my vibe. They understand it's not me being flirtatious. This is really how I talk to people. This is a normal gesture back at home and nobody should take this to offense. And it's kind of the same way in Maryland. They just have an interesting accent up [here] every now and then," he jokes. Quentin brims with liveliness, and seems to appreciate it when others engage him with similar energy. In high school, he says, he was recognized with an award for "Mr. Enthusiasm," and was known as a "class clown." He recalls that people would say about him, "'He's goofy. The popular kid.' I had a lot of different titles." Then he adds, "But I also wore those masks very well to cover up what needed to be handled on my personal levels."

For Quentin, "personal levels" refers to family life, in which he experienced a considerable amount of responsibility from a young age (he uses the academic term, "adultification") and also a considerable amount of stress. He is the youngest of four siblings. His father finished high school and was accepted to college on a scholarship, but was unable to enroll. His mother ended her schooling in middle school. Both parents worked long hours at multiple, concurrent jobs, mainly in cleaning services and fast food restaurants, throughout Quentin's childhood. He and his siblings needed to care for themselves and each other:

> We had our youth, but we kind of grew up accelerated almost. We took care of each other for the most part… But it was kind of hard. Family never home when you come home, but you got instructions how to operate, clean the house, do homework, then you go outside, kind of a thing…Even when I go to school and see how the kids talk about their families,

the dynamic was different. We didn't eat together as a family. That's not how it went. We had instructions on if the food was left for us, how to reheat something. All that information was left for us to how to handle those things. Catching a trolley, the bus. We learned that stuff very early. I'd probably say the earliest memory I ever had of getting on the trolley was age five, by myself…Had a lot of responsibilities very early on.

He also had a car and a job (with a 5 p.m. to midnight shift) by 15, contributing toward the family rent and utility bills. And, in addition to taking on significant household responsibilities at a young age, Quentin also shouldered regular caregiving shifts in high school when his aunt was diagnosed with late stage cancer. He would look after her young daughter, and stay with his aunt in the hospital.

Around the same time, Quentin's parents separated. This came as a surprise, and he was asked to decide on the spot which parent to live with. He chose his father, but over time the relationship got "rocky." He says, "And at that point, I was just ready to go. I didn't say anything to him. I didn't say anything to anybody. I didn't even tell my mom I was coming, to be honest. I really just packed up my stuff, got on the bus, and headed back to [his mom's house]… It's time to go. I knew what I needed to do for myself." He appreciated the environment at his mom's place, in part because of the independence he was afforded. He adds, "with my mom, it was-- I felt like she always respected me as a young adult, and she always respected my mind and my brain, but it felt different. I felt like she started to see me as an adult very early on because she [let] me make stronger decisions and better decisions for myself. I don't need supervision. I never really have. I always been great by myself, and I can do just about everything by myself."

Quentin's Mobility Project: Stability and a "Social Justice Heart"
All this was happening while Quentin was in high school, and his grades suffered. After scoring well on a practice ACT test in 8th grade, Quentin had begun to believe that college was a possibility for him. Like many schools in New Orleans, his middle school had emphasized college, but, he recalls, "I never really bought it into [the] whole going-to-college thing this early on. I really didn't. I was like, Oh, maybe it was what [teachers] were able to do, but that don't mean we're able to do things. It's different circumstances. And that's truly what I believed." Scoring higher on the practice test than the level required for admission at local universities changed his mind—but, due to what was happening in his family, by 10th grade he was missing a lot of school:

> So it was difficult. I kind of dropped out. Without [most of my teachers] realizing, I kind of dropped out. I think I only communicated to [one teacher] what was going on at the time because she was also my coach and my teacher at the same time. So I explained to her what was happening. She was able to collect all of my work and everything, so I was able to get that and get it done without a problem. And then I guess after that hump, I was able to see the light a little more. I think I took school way more seriously than I did freshman and sophomore year because I truly wasn't able to give it. So when I was able to give it [in junior year], I gave it. And the results showed in itself. I was able to accomplish a lot.

Quentin brought his grades up to a 2.8 and applied to over 20 colleges. He wanted to leave Louisiana, and was pleased to accept a scholarship at Arundel College, a small, selective liberal arts school forty five minutes outside of Baltimore. Describing his transition to college and the way that he quickly found jobs and supportive resources on campus, Quentin says, "My personality, my biggest skill of all time, came in clutch when I needed it the most. So not being

great on paper doesn't always have to be the thing. If you have great communication skills and people skills and being able to network is very powerful." And, the same could be said of countless other important moments in Quentin's trajectory, both before and after leaving high school.

Quentin leveraged relationships to ensure he reached his goal of college access, and he did the same to navigate college itself. Almost immediately on arriving, for instance, he ran into trouble with FAFSA verification and income he had earned to cover family expenses while his mother was out of work caring for his aunt.

> So I had to map that out for them and give them some receipts on certain bills just to prove that I didn't have that money and that money honestly did not exist. But then they were able to give me back my funding, and in that, I made a great relationship with financial aid and probably to any person. You want to be besties with financial aid. I got really close with the head and VP of Financial Aid at Arundel College. So whenever free money just so happened to appear at Arundel, it went to Quentin. Quentin was able to get access to that just because who I knew. Oh, I'll just walk in, "How you doing, [Vice President]? I need money for books. I'm just short on this amount. I got this amount already secured. I just really need this book for this particular class, and it's not at the library." And people were like, "Oh, no. Here's a voucher for that. It's loose money. You don't have to worry about that."

Beyond shoring up financial aid and books, Quentin recognized he was far from home in an unfamiliar place. He moved quickly to connect with other people and find a job:

> So I had to learn how to create a family very quickly. I got a job literally my second day on campus. Went to HR and just like, "Yeah, I'm looking for work," with documents that needed to be completed [to] secure on campus work." Went straight to [Founders Hall] because that's where a lot of the underrepresented [student] resources were at. So I saw that they had a Upward Bound program…and I knew they had to offer a position for college students. I just figured it. Interviewed right on the spot, no application. I got the job in one day. We just bonded over being from the South…and I took care of the job.

Then, in his first month working with Upward Bound, he met a local high school principal, and bonded with her:

> I met her that one time. Literally, just met her that one time and explained I was from New Orleans. She was like, "Yeah, my people are from Mississippi." And she was just like, "Sweetheart, if you need anything, a coat, just let me know." And literally the next week she came with scarfs, she came with jackets, gloves. I literally had everything I needed for that winter and I would have never had that if this person just didn't give it to me… And to this day I am super close to this woman and her children because it's really great to build those connections. Right? Like I said, the networking piece. And that was a relationship created that I wasn't expecting. I literally met her on a limb, just introducing myself to folks at the school and now we have this great relationship.

Quentin used his confidence and charisma to build a network of support around him. But he also used them to become a student activist and social justice leader on campus. Quentin had enrolled in a predominantly white college less than a month after the police murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, that would eventually spur nationwide protests and uprisings. He

recounts, "At first, it wasn't too bad. I think I wasn't seeing anything very clearly at the moment. But my second semester freshman year, we had a racial incident on campus, and it just so happen[ed that] on the dorm that I stayed in -- and one other black person stayed in that dorm -- and it had the "N-word, die" written on the wall." Similar messages appeared in other places across campus at the same time. Quentin says, "The school just did not respond accordingly the way I imagined it was supposed to happen. The email was very dry. It was very university centric. So they were targeting the city, blaming townies for the racial incident, because Arundel just could never believe that their students will be capable of saying such a thing, right?" The Dean of Students reached out to people living in Quentin's dorm, and Quentin took it upon himself to have a conversation.

> I guess I gave him the energy. Like, I wanted to do something about this, I guess, and that led into my journey of being a programmer and coordinating events on campus around racism and whiteness and stuff. I got really into it, working for his office, like, putting on demonstrations, marches. Like, I started really making a name, very naturally, of course, for myself on campus. And I started feeling, like I was saying, [like] high school Quentin all over. The natural leader, the person everybody called. 'My Quentin can handle that. Oh, no problem.' And this was different because I didn't know these people. But then they started coming to me and see me as one of those people, a freedom fighter, necessarily. I'm that person in the movie I looked up to, and it was a great feeling.

Later, the director of the college office for diversity and inclusion recruited him to work for her. He remembers her telling him: "'Quentin, you have a great rapport on campus. People love you, and I need you on my team.' She literally said those words, 'I need you on my team.'"

Academically, Quentin also developed what he calls his "social justice heart" into a major in American Studies and a senior thesis on Black student activism in the 1960s. He won a prestigious fellowship for first-generation undergraduate researchers, and through it was supported to apply to graduate school in American Studies. Once again, his deep involvement with commitments outside of the classroom meant his GPA – a 2.7 – was not as competitive as he wanted. But, he again relied on his skill with relationships – getting recommendations from mentors at Arundel, but also talking to professors in programs he applied to – to secure several offers, and accepted a spot in a master's program at a respected university in Baltimore. He then started emailing around, contacting the director of a research center on campus and landing a research assistantship to boost his funding.

But Quentin became disillusioned with academic research. He was fascinated by the social construction of race, and wrote a seminar paper on whiteness. But, he says: "I only had four professors in that department who really understood what I was doing. And I only had one professor openly admit, "To tell you, I'm struggling with grading [your] paper because I don't know what whiteness is" …And he had to have a whole other professor grade my paper because he just never touched the Whiteness Studies before to no capacity, and he didn't feel comfortable grading my assignment." Though Quentin was close with his advisor and a few other faculty members, he came to feel his work "wasn't being respected by the entirety of the department" and that he was "in the wrong program maybe." He finished the degree, but started planning for a career outside academic research.

To do so, he did what he had always done: he met people. He went to a career fair at the university, holding 50 copies of his résumé. "I get there, I'm dressed up, I'm looking snazzy, and it's time to put the game face on," he says. He liked a conversation he had with a recruiter for a

youth development non-profit, and asked for the contact information of someone in HR. Then, he says, "I literally called that woman the next day. 'Hi, Rachel. How are you doing? My name is Quentin Howard. I met with such and such representative at the career fair. Really excited about your program and things you guys have to offer [or] about any positions that can be opened in the coming spring.'" He was ultimately offered a program associate position, and negotiated for a higher salary.

Quentin feels good about earning $43,000 in his first job out of academe, and recently turned down an offer of $63,000 to return to his undergraduate alma mater in the Office of Diversity and Inclusion (he was skeptical of the politics). In the longer term, he envisions a career in higher education administration, because he is "really passionate about grad school readiness," and is mulling returning to school for an Ed.D. The timing of all this is somewhat contingent on his partner, who is building a career in animation. In time, Quentin hopes they will have children. He adds, "I always crave stability in my life, and I think that's because I always felt like I never really had it. So I want that for myself as a future aspiration, but I also just want that for my own family. I want that traditional family picture. I really want that, but I want it to be so non-traditional at the same time."

Quentin's Challenge: Mediating Ups and Downs

From one perspective, Quentin's forceful personality and strong sense of himself seem to be, as he says, "his biggest skill[s] of all time." Time and again, they have helped him meet the challenges of the moment, whether navigating lower attendance in high school, transitioning to a college hundreds of miles away, or building a résumé and connections that got him into graduate school. But, from another perspective, one could argue his personality gets in his way: Quentin also describes moments when it appears that his personality *created* challenges. For instance, he recalls the circumstances that caused him to be held back in middle school:

> I had got kept back [in middle school] for literally refusing to just do work. I wasn't interested. I was very intelligent for that group. And I don't think the school was able to recognize that my disassociation was very centered around me not being academically challenged enough. So instead of me, I guess, communicating that issue…I just refused to not do the work. I would take your exams, but I would not do any coursework, homework, anything of that nature. I would just pass the exams and just…pray it's enough. And unfortunately, it was not enough. In the end, I failed one class by a few points, and they were like, "Oh, you have to pay $700 for this one course for summer school." And being low on income at the time, but still thinking my parents had a certain type of wealth, I was just very much so, "Yeah, my dad is going to pay this. This is not a problem. He wouldn't want this embarrassment of his son being kept back kind of a thing," just for him to really throw it in my face and tell me that he's not paying for that because I chose not to do the work. And it was insane. All my friends were moving on, and I'm just like, "Wow, this is crazy. What does this mean?"

Bored with school and assuming his father had the money to prevent Quentin from being retained (which he did not), Quentin's independent-mindedness set him back a year. Something similar happened during an ACT prep class in high school:

> And me and an instructor got into an argument on the first day of class. And me being very prideful and very into myself, and I think I know everything, so I was like, "I don't think I

need this class to score high." And he was like, "If you can break 20." Without him not knowing, I had already broke 20 before. So he was like, "If you can break 20, you don't have to come to the class anymore." I said, "That's perfect."

Free of the instructor's low expectations, Quentin left the class—and missed learning test-taking strategies that perhaps could have boosted his score regardless of his baseline. During his sophomore year, he reports essentially leaving school for a time, too – in this case to do his part in caregiving for his sick aunt. In describing this, Quentin treats it like a no-brainer: obviously he was going to help his family, and obviously he was going to figure out how to get his school to go along with it. As we've seen, this worked, to a point – except that his GPA suffered, working against his college goals. He attributes his GPA to his rejection from his top choice school, Townsend University, a selective private university in Midwest, of which his school principal was an alum. Quentin says, "[I was] banking on [his] letter of recommendation being the key for getting into that school, but obviously [it] wasn't enough."

Quentin also brings up instances in which his personality seems to be "too much" for people. He recounts a story about his current work:

> I don't make friends at work. I don't think friends are appropriate relatively at work. It's just we're work colleagues, we can be friendly. That's about it. I'm super blunt and right to the point. I do not know how to sugarcoat whatever I got to say, I just say it. And a lot of people take that very interestingly because I'm very personable. But yeah, I can be so closed off a lot of the times, and I can seem like I don't want to be bothered, so I can see how they can come off. I don't seem as empathetic all the time with certain situations. Like, an example can be the social awkwardness, right? So I had a coworker, I don't even know who she was laughing at, but it didn't seem funny. It really didn't. And I just gave her the sigh and I was like, "Andrea, you're too old to be laughing hysterically at work like that." And she just looked at me and didn't say anything for like two weeks because she was literally scared to talk around me at that point. I was like, "Wow, I didn't mean to do that. I was just trying to tell you how I felt."

Quentin is personable, yet sometimes struggles interpersonally. He also says that "[his] patience [is] very slim, relatively." Then he adds, "And I know this is a part of my traumas and stuff." But, like Darren, he also frames his impatience as cultural and situational, not psychological: "I have to remind myself [inaudible], "Quentin, [we are] not in New Orleans, first of all. We are not in the streets. Second of all, you are a working professional and you need to act accordingly in these spaces. You don't want to always be deemed as aggressive." Sometimes, though, he has a hard time drawing the line. Once, during graduate school, he was under a tight deadline and had to file paperwork that he had been assured was correct. He got to the administrative office, and "[went] in polite, as nice as [he] c[ould] possibly be," and was told – rudely, by a white staffer – that the paperwork was wrong:

> This man threw [the papers] literally in my face. Actually in my face. And for that moment, you could not have told me we were not in New Orleans because I punched the wall and really whispered to him in his face, "Do not try me today. This is not the day." I called my advisor and I'm crying. I'm like, "Dude, they're going to kick me out. I just got into it with a white man."…And he was like, "No, he had no business throwing [the papers] in your face." … But my advisor got that under control really quickly, which was really nice, and I appreciated that.

In this instance, Quentin was worried his impatience and actions were going to threaten his graduate school trajectory. However, he believes the strength of his mentoring relationships helped him avoid that.

Quentin's Strategy: Securing Strategic Supporters

At different times, it seems to an observer that Quentin's "personality" – his way of being in the world – has moved him nearer and farther from his goals. But, Quentin believes his personality is his greatest asset, and his general strategy has not been to *change himself*; rather, it is to use his personality to *keep people in his corner,* compensating for the sticky situations he sometimes gets into. He leverages his confidence and charisma; he builds and maintains relationships with people who have more power, influence, or status than he does (but invests less in his hierarchical peers). And he has done this consistently since at least high school.

Lately, though, Quentin has also been learning new skills related to emotional regulation. Unprompted, he brings up the notion of trauma, mentioning both mental health first aid training he has received at work, and his experiences working with "Gen-Z folks" (who he also lovingly calls "these 2000s babies"; Quentin identifies as a millennial). He says appreciatively, "We have a generation communicating to us the importance of mental health in ways we never talked about it." Regarding his own experience, he shares: "[Trauma] bleeds into my everyday life. But it's not to say I'm not making progress. I think I've made a lot of progress in being able to do my steps, my breathing. To work through these difficult situations and how trauma affects me and how I communicate when being traumatized [triggered]."

But, for Quentin, these "steps" and "breathing" strategies are *coping tools*, aimed at *assistance*, not transformation: it is plain from our conversation that he views his self – his "personality," in his words – as a trusty vehicle, able to get him into spaces he wants to be in, and out of others, usually via the relationships his efficacious self builds. He reports learning new ways to approach situations in which he is having intense emotions, but he is not trying to stop *feeling* these emotions; rather, he is trying to *respond* to his feelings in a different behavioral manner, or to change "how [he] communicate[s]" in moments of emotional intensity. Importantly, Quentin is undertaking this learning after he has already, by some measures, become upwardly mobile: he has a graduate degree and works a salaried job in a white collar profession. This is markedly different from Lamont, who views his younger, angrier self as the source of problems inhibiting his mobility, and who does inner work so that he's "not angry anymore," keeping him out of "trouble." In contrast, Quentin's self has always been his mobility ace. To Lamont, transforming his anger was a necessity; to Quentin, emotional skills are useful, but not essential.

Whereas gardeners talk about deep healing, stepping outside of their comfort zones, or inwardly changing themselves, climbers like Quentin talk about learning new interpersonal skills, or, in this case, identifying assistance for responding to emotions that they are experiencing and view as justified. But, importantly, these emotions are not intrinsic or problematic features of their selves. If it is empirically true that most humans experience psychological pain, suffering, anger, grief, and the like within our lifetimes, the comparison of Lamont and Quentin shows that their differing worldviews prompt them to make sense of and respond to such experiences in differing ways. That many people would, in the contemporary moment, articulate this sense-making through the ubiquitous language of trauma or therapeutic discourse is perhaps unsurprising (Bellah et al. 1985; Illouz 2008; Leys 2000; Silva 2013).

Listening "past" the discourse makes varying individual use (and meaning) of its language more clear: many participants use words like "trauma" or "growth," but mean many different things. In this case, Quentin notes the widely remarked-upon shift of social discourse toward mental health and trauma, describing it in generational terms, but accommodates the discourse within his agentic, as opposed to transformational, worldview.

Climbers: Agentic Mobility Ideology

Climbers like Britnee, Darren, and Quentin believe the people in their social worlds can both create obstacles and offer strategic aid. Devantiara, a climber with a BA in criminal justice who is in graduate school for social work, intentionally builds friendships with people who can help her learn the things she believes she needs to become upwardly mobile, such as information about credit, home ownership, and investing—and avoids people she feels bring her down. Riannia, who left college after a semester, earns $13/hr (or about $27,000/yr) in an office job, and also drives for a ride share app, stresses how important other people are in her pursuit of her goals:

> Riannia: And it's not even about being smart anymore down here [in New Orleans]. It's all about who you know, who will get you in the door first. And I don't think it's bad, but it's just the nature of how it is in the world today.

Emphasizing that both professional and personal support are important, Riannia also believes that outside support must be met with a strong, trustworthy self:

> Riannia: You got to make the best of any situation. Because you could be thrown curveball after curveball. It's like, it's up to you on how you respond to it. Some people just don't have the strength that I do to go on with my life and believe in myself that I can be better than what I was, better than what I am. And so it's all about yourself. It takes self, and a good support system. My good support system is my cousin [also her housemate]. Me and my cousin, we motivate each other. That's where the support comes from.

Equipped with a trusted "self, and a good support system," climbers feel that society's opportunity structure is navigable. It is perhaps less open, in their view, than it seems to gardeners (who believe that opportunity is available if they do the right inner work), but climbers nevertheless believe that they can get ahead if they make the right moves (like Britnee), learn the right knowledge or skills (like Darren), and build the right relationships (like Quentin). Other people can both create obstacles for them, and offer them key strategic support in navigating their upward climb.

Climbers & Achievement Ideology

Climbers also differ from each other in considerable ways. Some climbers are like Quentin: outgoing, confident, and charismatic. Some, like Britnee, are more reserved. They differ in occupation, tastes, and – importantly – educational attainment. Britnee, Darren, and Quentin all graduated from four-year colleges, so it could appear that agentic mobility ideology is correlated with investments in "achievement ideology" and its claim that education plus hard work equals success. In fact, many climbers reject the idea that higher education attainment is necessary to their mobility projects. Rianna, who left college after a semester, affirms:

Riannia: College is not for everybody. And I felt like [teachers in high school] were just like, 'Oh, you got to go to college to be successful.' You really don't. I know a lot of people, real life, have good degrees and guess what they're doing? I'm doing better than them…

Marcus, a climber who wanted to become an elementary school teacher but became frustrated with his university's requirements for an education major, says,

Marcus: So when you're going to teach, let's say preschoolers, they're just learning the basics: addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and I'm like, on a college level, there's no need to take like a college-level trigonometry class. I'm like, there's no student I'm going to teach in preschool that's taking college-level trigonometry. There's no student who's trying to type out a 10 to 15 page essay in preschool. I kept asking, "For a major such as elementary education, why are these classes necessary?" And no teacher could give me a straight answer for it. And I'm like, "I have no issue taking this class, but I need an explanation. Why is this necessary for the age group I plan on dealing with?"

Seemingly arbitrary requirements made Marcus increasingly frustrated with university life. He left college after several semesters for a number of reasons (including a family member's illness), later training to be an electrician – but he was frustrated with how hard it was to "break into the field" and how little he was making as he "paid his dues." After again changing professional tacks, he currently makes $45,000 a year working in an industrial services yard (mechanically skilled, he also takes on odd-jobs for a network of acquaintances, which bring in another few thousand a year). He feels content: he says, "I tell a lot of people I'm very basic in pretty much what I want out of life. I want hunting property, [a] place to stay; I already have a boat, I have a truck, and food. It's pretty much all I want. Family, friends, and all that, that just comes with life and how things go. So for me, [there's] not much I want, but [there's] not much for me to really push for." Trusting his own judgment, Marcus (like Riannia) is navigating his social world to his satisfaction, without earning a degree.

Agency and Mobility

The three climbers we have met at greater depth – Britnee, Darren, and Quentin – all graduated from four-year colleges. As we have seen, their mobility pathways (so far) diverge: Darren is struggling the most economically, Britnee has made modest upwardly mobile gains, and Quentin, who additionally holds a master's degree, has moved into a higher income bracket at a white-collar job with greater occupational status than either of his parents. (Similarly, Marcus is making a good deal more money than Riannia.) In other words, agentic mobility ideology is not always connected to upward socioeconomic mobility. Quentin's mobility certainly appears to be contingent on his skill in relationship-building, which is related to his trust in his self. But different climbers trust their selves in different ways: Darren trusts he can learn social codes, for instance, while Britnee trusts she can gather the knowledge she needs to make strategic moves.

These approaches also interact with both their aspirations (the ends of the their mobility projects) and the resources (or means) they already have. Britnee is making moves toward her usefully flexible goals, but within the limitations of the skills and social sphere available to her; Darren's study of codes helped him access college and earn a degree, but, right now, he lacks both a network in his preferred field (sports management) and the capital to launch a business in his backup field (landscaping). Quentin's strategy has been to build relationships within higher

education, which was advantageous in the short term because it helped him advance, but is also potentially advantageous in the long term, because these relationships exist within a field (higher education administration) he aspires to enter in the future.

Gender and Agency

While women are overrepresented among participants who are gardeners, men are overrepresented among participants who are climbers: of my male participants (16), fully half (8) are climbers. Again, this is perhaps unsurprising, to the extent that gender stereotypes socialize men to be more externally oriented (rather than more internally oriented, like gardeners), or to be focused on "taking action." Still, half of all the climbers I spoke with identified as women (8). This patterning is disrupted somewhat in the third mobility ideology ideal-type we will examine: the seekers. Seekers are in the minority among both men and women participants in this study: about one quarter of each group exhibits the emancipatory mobility ideology characteristic of the seeker type. In some ways, this seems sensible: more than gardeners or climbers, seekers are iconoclasts, working against majoritarian mindsets. But in other, important respects, seekers share deep similarities with their gardener and climber peers: the contents of their worldviews are different, but these views are nonetheless structured around beliefs about the self, social action, and social context.

CHAPTER 5
SEEKERS: EMANCIPATORY MOBILITY IDEOLOGY

In their own ways, gardeners like London, Janae, and Lamont all believe that self-transformation is a key element of their individual mobility projects. They work hard at deeply changing or healing their inner selves. Climbers like Britnee, Darren, and Quentin, on the other hand, have a different perspective on the self. They view their selves as whole and capable agents, but ones that nonetheless need to take the right risks, gain the right skills and knowledge, and develop the right relationships. Like the gardeners, they talk about "growth," but their growth is different, oriented externally, as opposed to internally. The third group of young adults we will meet – a group I describe as "seekers" – is also characterized by their orientations to the self. Yet their selves are neither wounded or flawed (like the gardeners), nor are their selves free to act (like the climbers). Instead, seekers experience their selves as constrained and restricted.

Like gardeners and climbers, seekers are striving toward dreams they hold dear. Likewise, they all attended public high schools in Orleans Parish, come from similar class backgrounds, and went to college. However, unlike their gardener and climber peers, who are focused respectively on transformation and agency, seekers attach their aspirations to something else: freedom. In different ways, seekers feel confined by their circumstances, including, sometimes, by social structure. They are looking for a way out; they want to emancipate their "true" selves. Unlike the gardeners, they view their selves as whole and useful – especially, as worthy of expression. Unlike the climbers, they see opportunities for advancement as limited, but believe that these limitations can be transcended, or in some sense *do not matter*, if the self can be liberated.

The freedoms my seeker participants hunt for are framed in very different ways: some feel constrained by love and family responsibility and unable to live in a way that expresses themselves or their dreams. Some, like a young man named Darius, want to escape from "the matrix" of social structure, while others seek the "spiritual freedom" of a career in art or design. Yet they all deeply hold and act upon the desire to know, free, and express their "true" selves. These selves sometimes must be uncovered through a searching discovery process, and sometimes are already known. But, revealed or not, these selves are understood as *whole*. Unlike gardeners, whose selves must be *transformed* in the process of moving toward their desired goals, or climbers, whose selves are free to *act*, seekers aim to *emancipate* or express the selves they know or seek to understand. Liberating the held-hostage self will, they feel, move them closer to their goals.

As a result, their aspirations and actions are largely focused on self-expression and individuation. Unlike most other participants, they do not have side hustles. Rather, they deliberately limit their working hours to create time for self-exploration and expression. They also tend to view the social networks they build or are embedded within through the lens of emancipation and expression, in either a positive or negative sense. A young woman named Aden, for instance, feels that living with a group of like-minded and artistically oriented friends is essential to her own process of self-discovery; other seekers, like a young woman named Mona, view their social and familial ties as the bonds from which they must be freed. For seekers, constraint is everywhere – in society, among family – but a more free expression of the self defines the hopes they hold for the future and the way they approach their own mobility projects (see summary in Table 6). Metaphorically, seekers are questing for a way to escape the social and economic forces they feel constrain their true selves. They seek almost on faith: they

believe that a way to emancipate the self exists, but do not always know where it is or how to access it.

Table 6. Seekers: Emancipatory Mobility Ideology

Domain	Meaning
Self	• Self must be emancipated or expressed • Self is whole but confined; the self is a hostage
Social Action	• Opportunity structure is relatively closed or limited, *but* these limitations can be transcended if/when the self is freed • Focus of action is on self-expression or individuation
Social Context	• Other people are sources of connection for self-expression and self-liberation *and/or* of confinement and limitation

Mona: Getting Unstuck

    I talk with Mona at a Mexican food franchise in Metairie, a suburban city that borders New Orleans, where her extended family has recently relocated. She grew up in a part of the city known as "New Orleans East," or more simply "the East," a large, traditionally Black and immigrant neighborhood separated from the rest of the city by the Industrial Canal. Tall and broad, Mona wears long braids that frame her long torso. Our conversation is rangy, stretching more than three hours into a foggy January night.

    Mona grew up in a large family, one of the youngest of eleven siblings. Money was scarce. She grew up in public housing, and around considerable domestic violence: both her parents drank, and got aggressive with each other. Several times in elementary school, Mona felt she needed to protect her younger siblings or enlist the neighbors to break up her parents' fights. "I was so mad at my mama," Mona recalls. "Why stay so long? He been beating on you." Her parents eventually separated, but things with her mother's new boyfriend were also volatile. Mona and her younger siblings grew up mainly in her father's sister's house, a nearby two bedroom unit they also shared with her aunt's four children. Her aunt, who was the sole provider in the household, worked two service industry jobs to try to make ends meet; Mona's older siblings pitched in when they could. But there was often very little to go around. If she needed something, she recalls, "it was either my aunt, and if my aunt didn't have it, I'd ask one of my teachers. It kind of got embarrassing. For example, [one teacher] bought me a new jacket and shoes… and I'm like, 'That's embarrassing.' Because I couldn't ask my mama, my mama didn't have it. Couldn't ask my daddy. [And] my aunt got seven of us [kids] to look at."

    Like most of my participants, Mona went to public schools that emphasized college access. College was not something she envisioned for herself, but her mother learned about her school's college focus, and told Mona, "I think this is going to be a good fit." Mona didn't think so. "I was like, 'I hate this,'" she says. "And then, I'm like, 'They keep talking about college. Nobody's going to college.' [At the time] I didn't know nobody who was going to college. So I'm like, 'Nobody's going to college.'"

But, Mona says, "I knew for a fact that I wanted to graduate [high school]." Mona worked hard, earning high honors and playing three sports throughout her secondary schooling. She especially liked math, which was fun and came easily. She also loved working with kids, and dreamed of becoming a pediatrician. She wound up attending Pelican State University, a four-year public university a couple hours away, and enrolling in pre-med classes. Her first semester was tough: she got great grades in some classes, like math, but failed English and biology. She admonishes herself: "But I didn't do good in English because I didn't apply myself, right. It wasn't nobody's fault but mine." She also took a nursing class: "That was interesting, too. But then I realized how many years [of school] you'd have to do, because I wanted to be a pediatrician, and I'm like, Nah. I can do something else with kids."

Mona liked college on the whole. But, she worried herself with her failing grades in English and biology:

Mona: I wasn't used to failing. I've had tests where I didn't do good, but I always had make-up or something like that. It wasn't like that.

SP: And did you then think, "Okay, I need to do something different"? Is it like, "I don't want to be here anymore"? How did you feel?

Mona: So I felt like I definitely need to do something different. And I really buckled down and get serious, but then I also brainwashed myself into, "Maybe you need to be closer to your family." I started believing it, like, "You're doing bad because you're not with your people."

SP: Brainwash is an interesting word to use there.

Mona: Yeah. I really kept saying it. So I'm like, "I have to come home. I'm getting homesick." That's what I was telling everybody, "I'm homesick." And my high school coach called me. She was like, "That's bullshit." She said it. She was like, "No. You're not homesick. I know you. You're probably not doing good with your grades, and you don't like it. You're trying to come up with an excuse." And that was the truth. I came up with an excuse, and I believed that excuse. And I'm like, "I can come home." So I got everybody else to be like, "Oh, you're homesick. Come home," because I knew it was easy.

Rather than fail, Mona invented a reason for leaving school that both she and her family could accept: she missed them too much. Moreover, she convinced herself that she was failing because she had left her family ties. But, she says, she regrets the decision: "I miss the whole college thing. I feel like once [the] college part did get in my head, I felt like I was letting myself down. You've worked hard for this. You can do this. But I don't know if it was my fear… I hate to fail." Mona *was* invested in higher education after all (and still remains so: she "miss[es] the whole college thing" and would like to return). She believed she could succeed there. She doesn't attribute her "failure" to an internal problem, exactly. She believes in her self and her capacities. Rather, she is mystified about the way she "brainwashed" herself into thinking that she needed to return home to her family.

By the evening we are eating burritos in Metairie, Mona has been out of high school for six years, and feels she is doing pretty well. She lives in an apartment, has a car she bought for $2,000, has a job with health care benefits, and is making what she feels is pretty decent money – enough to help her family out.

Mona left college at the end of that first semester, moved back in with her aunt, and got a hotel job paying $8.50 per hour to help with the bills. She stayed in the job for two years, even though her bosses were racist and unkind. On one terrible occasion, one of her brothers was murdered in gang-related conflict late one night. She told her (white) boss immediately, but they still demanded that she show up at work the next morning. "They kept calling me. It was never, "How you doing? You okay?" It was never that. Miss Brenda kept saying, "You [need to] come into work." I guess they read the [news] article and they was like, 'Well, he must've was doing something he ain't had no business [doing].' It was never said directly to me." Feeling she lacked alternatives, Mona remained in the job for two years, taking on more responsibilities and seeing her pay increase to $10.50 per hour. Eventually, she and one of her cousins enrolled in a job training program, and she was placed in a commercial logistics office, coordinating dispatch. The internship turned into a full-time job paying $13 per hour plus benefits, and she and her cousin moved into their own apartment in Metairie, near where Mona's aunt had also recently moved.

Mona's mother usually stays with them. Her mother, now in her sixties, still drinks heavily, and they argue frequently, leading to on-going tension in the apartment. It bothers Mona. She says she doesn't like "to fuss and do all that." Mona also takes care of her brother's (the one who was murdered) three year old son. She shares caregiving with her aunt, who still has some of Mona's siblings and some of her own children living with her. Meanwhile, Mona and her cousin are very close, but sometimes this closeness becomes overwhelming. Mona says, "She's always blowing up my phone, regardless of where I'm at… [I]f I'm out she's going, but if she's out, I give her her space. Like, it's okay for us to have space. We stay together, we do everything together. Like, we can do stuff with other people." Mona loves her family dearly, but sometimes the closeness and the responsibility is too much:

> Mona: Sometimes I just feel so overwhelmed like, "Somebody come help. Take something off my plate."
>
> SP: Responsibilities-wise?
>
> Mona: Yeah. Responsibility, and just everyday life with my family. I just need a break. Give me a break, like, "Where's the vacation?"

Yet, while family life can be overwhelming and suffocating, Mona also finds that it can motivate her. She says of her relationship with her cousin, "I feel like when we do things together, it's easier for us to accomplish it. We have this sisterhood. You can't quit because I can't quit. And then it's also kind of like a competition, a good competition."

Mona's Mobility Project: Stability Outside New Orleans
For now, though, Mona has achieved something important to her: a degree of stability inside New Orleans. Her family has gotten out of the East, where neighborhood violence had killed or seriously injured multiple family members, and out of the projects. She has a long-desired degree of security and independence in the combined form of a car, a steady job, benefits, and an apartment. She is able to help her aunt, mother, and nephew, and to keep a close eye on her brothers. With her job's regular business hours, she even has time to assistant coach a middle school sports team.

In the longer term, Mona wants to finish college, become a speech therapist, and buy a house. She says, "I really just want to be stable. Stable enough to help if I need to." She wants

kids of her own, but is nervous to raise them in New Orleans. She worries about "if there was something to happen" to them, and wants them to be able to attend "a nice school where they feel safe." She says, "I really thought about Atlanta, but I feel like all New Orleans people feel like they problems could get solved if they move to Atlanta." Mona also worries about her younger brothers. She feels that opportunities are very limited in New Orleans, and that to get opportunity, you "really have to know somebody. Because they don't have a lot of people who just willingly want to help." She watches many men around her meet the challenge of limited opportunity by turning to neighborhood networks that are sometimes violent, and by dealing drugs. She wants a different future for her younger brothers: "I kind of want to get [them] out of New Orleans," she says, "because all of my brothers into something. And one of my older brothers in jail right now. And he's sweet as gold, but he just got caught up. You know, selling drugs. He got caught up." Mona's longer term mobility project is to build a safer, more comfortable, and less stressful life for herself, her family, and her future children, and to do it outside New Orleans.

Mona's Challenge: Limitations of School and Family

Mona knows what she wants. But she also finds that her goals are constrained or challenged in meaningful ways. Mona believes that the core constraints on her mobility project are limitations imposed by outside entities or forces: in her case, limitations of educational institutions and limitations of family.

Reflecting on her high school, for instance, Mona wishes that college had not been presented as the only path: "It's drill[ed] in our head, 'Y'all going to go to college, y'all going to succeed.' It was never a second route. Like, 'If this don't work out, then here's what's coming'… I just wish it was different in the sense of just like, 'Okay, maybe college not for everybody. Here's some other options like a trade school…[or other ways you] could get certificates. And moving to a job.'" But, as someone who is still invested in completing her degree, she also wishes that her high school would have "show[n] us that not everybody is going to hold our hand. Not everybody is going to be like, Okay, if you don't do this, then [this consequence will happen]… [In college, there] wasn't really nobody who was like, "Mona, this is next. This is next." I didn't know how to bounce back from that. Or when I got a bad grade, I would be like, Oh, I could make this up. But there was no make-up work." She feels "disappointed" that her school was so focused on college, yet did not prepare her sufficiently for the challenge of adjusting to college. She adds, "I feel like we should have had more of like a breakdown of who to reach out to. Or like, Okay, you're in college. If this situation happen, you look for this person."

Mona attributes part of her struggle in college to her secondary preparation. But she also connects it to her family's limitations and how alone she felt in the pursuit of a college degree:

> I don't know if it really be a college problem or a parenting problem…When life throw you curve balls, how you bounce back? I feel like, for me, it was learning, trying. By myself. I didn't know who to reach out to. My family…[I was] like, "None of you all went to college. None of you all can help me." And my cousin tried like, "Let me help you." So I would show her my biology assignments and she was like, "Oh, no," [laughter].

Mona doesn't fault her family, but rather is expressing some of the realities of her family and their situation. She recognizes that, had members of her family known how to navigate academic and bureaucratic life in college, her college experience might have been radically different.

Mona's family is a source of constraint in other ways, too – in part because of how dearly she loves them. For instance, Mona has taken on considerable family responsibilities that require both time and money: providing her mother with a place to live, and taking care of her toddler nephew. She also devotes energy to keeping an eye on her brothers. These seem like obvious choices to Mona: *of course* she is glad to make them. Recently, Mona faced a tougher choice. Her supervisor at work learned that Mona wanted to reenroll in college, and said that she could arrange a transfer to the company's office in Mona's college town. At first, Mona was excited. She says, "For a good week, I was like, Yes. That's perfect." But, she ended up turning down the offer – at least for now – out of a sense of duty to her aunt. If Mona left, her aunt would shoulder the responsibilities Mona currently carries:

> I don't want her to have to do that all over in life. Just going to work and coming home and raise kids. I feel like she did that her whole life. And even when she was younger -- she had my cousin at 16 -- she never really did the whole party thing how we did when we was growing up. We had friends, we was going out. She couldn't do that. She had a job. And she had to go to school. And she had to take care of [all of us], too. Sometimes my mama would go out and get drunk and my aunt had to watch me and [my brothers]. So, she kinda was robbed of her childhood. Her decisions and my mama's choices.

In other words, Mona feels constrained by both present responsibilities and debts of care— enough so that she turned down an opportunity that could have moved her closer to her professional goals.

And there is another, important way in which Mona feels constrained by family. Mona is gay, and her family is not very accepting of her sexuality. This ranges: some family members say outright that being gay is a sin, that they are disappointed in her, or that they don't like that she dates women. Others say they support her decisions but then are cold and unwelcoming around women she is dating. Others say that they love and accept her but think she would be happier dating men and having kids. As a result, Mona withdraws, from her family but also from life:

> I really have like a bubble, right? When I get off from work, I go inside and I turn off the light and I'll just not be here, right? I don't want to be like that I want to be active and go on dates and stuff like that, but. I think I care too much. It's good to care about what other people feel and how other people, you know, what other people think. But I think I care way too much. And I now it's like, "How do I get out of that?" I'm so stuck. I'm so used to my family telling [me] this, this, this.

Mona feels "stuck" in that she feels she can't date around her family and is around them all the time. She won't bring women home, for instance. She says, "I'm thinking about getting my own space. Not just because of that, but I feel like with my own space, it'll make me want to get out and interact because then I'll be in the house by myself… It'll still make me want to get out and not just go home, take a bath and be in bed." Getting her own space would help her feel more free in her romantic life, and also, she thinks, in her social life more broadly. But, she is nervous about sharing this with her family, and hasn't communicated her desire with them, or made concrete plans.

Mona's feeling of stuckness comes up at other points in our conversation as well, and permeates other parts of her life. She says:

Mona: I feel like I'm stuck. I just feel like I'm not really doing much, so I feel like that. But they have some people who are doing way worse.

SP: With the stuck feeling, what do you feel stuck in?

Mona: I feel like it's really school, because it was drilled in my head like, "College, college, college." And I feel like I see my friends that graduated or going to college, and they're doing big things… I feel stuck because I feel like school would've helped with a lot. I want to break the cycle.

SP: Which cycle?

Mona: Especially with my family. I just knew I was going to be the first college graduate also. I was like, "Okay. You graduated high school. You was the first down to college, right?" And I'm not doing it like this.

In addition to feeling stuck in her dating life, Mona feels that a college degree could have helped her break generational cycles (implicitly, related to mobility). Without a degree, she is stuck inside them—and family obligations are keeping her from pursuing opportunities (such as the offer of a transfer at work) that could help her finish her degree. She wants to get free of this stuck feeling, but so far has only found a margin of freedom by creating retreating into the mental and physical "bubble" of her bedroom.

Other participants I talk with feel similarly constrained by family. Michelle, a young woman several years younger than Mona, narrates her childhood through a retrospective recognition of neglect and verbally abusive behavior on the part of her family. A major challenge has been to free herself mentally from this influence. For Michelle, "growth" means "just spending time teaching myself things, like journaling and meditating and stuff like that. Being able to dibble and dabble and stuff like that. I'm focused on me. I was able to see, just to see who I am as a person from out of everybody else's view, to how I find stuff. I don't know, like think about myself." In her case, to grow is to learn about her self. Like Mona, Michelle wants to find expressive freedom—to liberate or emancipate a self that she believes is whole, but needs to get to know, independent of "everybody else's view" of her.

Mona's Strategy: Low and Slow

Mona, slightly older than Michelle, knows her self and her preferences. She is clear on her desires and her aims, and doesn't seek to change them. But she shares with Michelle the deep wish to be able to express herself – in Mona's case, to express her professional passions (for kids, teaching, and coaching) and her sexual orientation – and the claustrophobic feeling of confinement.

Mona's strategy is to take care of family responsibilities, and to slowly make plans below the radar to move toward greater independence. Her near term and clandestine goal is to concentrate on getting her own apartment. Next she might try to take community college classes. Unlike both gardeners and seekers, Mona is focused on stabilizing herself and her family emotionally, rather than on working side hustles to make more money. She trusts in her own self-

knowledge and abilities – but does not feel free to act in ways that would express who she feels she is.

In Mona's worldview, opportunities are few and far between: "you have to know someone," she says. And, Mona does "know someone," who is willing to help her get a position at a regional office of her current company, in the same town as her university—enabling her to return to college. But, she has turned down this opportunity due to current caregiving obligations and because of debt of care she feels she owes her aunt. The same family bonds, she feels, prevent her from finding a romantic partner and creating her own family. As a result, Mona feels "stuck," equally stalled out in her romantic and mobility pathways. She knows where she wants to go, but does not feel free to do so.

Darius: Escaping the Matrix

I meet with Darius on a warm February afternoon. He asks to meet at a coffee shop on St. Charles Avenue, close to where he's just gotten off work as a docent at the Audubon Zoo, where he teaches young kids about the zoo's animals. Darius is about 5'8", compact and muscular, with dark skin and close-cut hair. He has a broad face and a broad smile. He's wearing jeans, a green t-shirt with purple lettering on the pocket, a black mesh baseball cap, and black sunglasses that wrap around his face and look sporty, aerodynamic. He declines to be audiorecorded, consenting to notetaking instead.

Darius starts our interview by interviewing me: what am I up to in this research, why did I choose to become a sociologist, what books can I recommend on capitalism and how to fix it. He took a sociology class his senior year of college, because an ex-girlfriend was a sociology major, and he wishes he would have taken it sooner: he liked that it was about problems, and finding different paths or arguments to solving them. We talk about his senior thesis, which was on Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* and *Notes of a Native Son*. He wants recommendations for other social critics and theorists to read.

Darius attended a highly selective liberal arts college out of state with a prestigious national scholarship for low-income youth. His college was also very expensive, and did not guarantee that its financial aid packages would "meet full financial need" of admitted students (a common commitment among highly selective liberal arts colleges). So, while Darius had a sizeable scholarship and an Expected Family Contribution, according to the FAFSA, of zero, his college did not offer him grant money to cover the difference. Instead, he took out federal loans. When I ask, Darius declines to specify exactly how much student debt he has. "It's *a lot*," he says. I ask if he'll give me a range, and he looks at me impishly. "Over $100,000." "Wow," I exclaim. He laughs. "Gotcha. No, it's not that much. But it's *a lot*."

Darius says he felt prepared for college, but also "should have taken a year off," to get to know himself better. He started college at 17. Darius describes being perceived as "exotic" in college, which was "like 98% white," but not disliking it. He found the difference in setting and people exhilarating. "We were consuming each other," he says. And he adds, "You know, I'm Black, I'm from New Orleans, but…you know… I like anime and stuff." I ask if he ever experienced anything that felt like racism or racial discrimination, and he says, "No, not really."

Darius started off as a physics major, but also took his first political theory class in the spring of his freshman year. He kept trying in physics, but kept struggling and dropping classes. "Linear algebra, man!" he exclaims. Eventually, in his junior year, he says, he had to reckon with

himself. He wanted to graduate, but physics wasn't working out – so he switched to a major, political science, that he liked well enough, having already taken a number of classes in the discipline. Plus, he liked that it was still, to his mind, systems dynamics, something he had always enjoyed about physics. It also helped that he had been able to transfer in 24 credits, about a semester's worth, of dual-enrollment credits he earned taking college classes while in high school.

Darius also made good friends, and generally had a good time in college. A professor who left for a different institution gave him a book of Audre Lorde's collected essays, which he keeps meaning to read. He started dating, got "confused about love," saw a therapist who he halfway trusted, ended a relationship right before his senior spring, and was able to focus on school enough to complete his required senior thesis project, which he had neglected all fall. Darius graduated "on-time," four years after graduating high school.

After college, he became an Americorps VISTA volunteer in New Orleans, and worked in an afterschool program for low-income middle schoolers. He liked it okay. Working with kids was fun, but he wanted to do his own lesson plans, which he thought were "amazing" compared to the scripted curriculum he was supposed to follow. He didn't want to push it, though, and backed off doing his own stuff. Americorps was roughly a year-long commitment, and got him some student loan deferment. He's not looking forward to starting his loan payments soon.

Darius's Mobility Project: Self-Expression for One and All

Darius moved back to New Orleans to "reconnect." He talks about how four years is a long time, how he changed a lot, and he wanted to both be closer to people, to his family, in a daily sense. ("You know, you're in touch with people, but you're not there, so you don't really know what's going on in their lives," he says.) Darius talks briefly about thinking about connecting with his father at some point, who he doesn't really know, but who lives in Florida. Darius's two younger siblings (by his mother) both graduated high school (he is aware of at least 2 half-siblings by his father, but guesses it's closer to 4). His middle brother, "is doing whatever, like always." This brother didn't go to college, and Darius isn't sure where he's working right now. His youngest brother just started an electrician program at a community college. But, beyond reconnecting with family, Darius also viewed coming home as a way to hold up a kind of mirror: "people help you see how you've changed." He doesn't have a lot of friends in New Orleans: he's not close with anyone from high school. He enjoys some of his colleagues at the zoo, who he describes as "very intelligent" and "like-minded people."

Darius currently works part-time, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. (or similar durations) five days a week. He makes $10 an hour. He lives with his uncle (who is in his 60s) and his daughter (who is in her 40s) across town, in the Lower 9th Ward. (Of his uncle, Darius says, "He's kind of like the other patriarch of the family.") Darius commutes uptown by bike and bus, biking 10 miles a day round trip. After work, he usually goes to a bar, has a few drinks, talks to people. He was working two other jobs until recently: one was working for his family's business (running an ice cream truck) and the other was as a canvasser for a local non-profit.

Darius's attachments to achievement ideology are ambivalent: he views college as only *maybe* worth it. "I really don't need it," he says. "You can read all that stuff on your own." And his student loans weigh heavily on him. But he did having "amazing experiences," he says. In the longer term, he is interested in civil engineering and environmental psychology. But he doesn't want to take out more loans, and doesn't want "another useless paper I can't read" (meaning that he doesn't read Latin, the language that dominates his undergraduate diploma). When I ask

where he sees himself in 10 or 20 years, he says, quite seriously, "Developing an alternative to capitalism." He also speaks about wanting to eventually have a "partner" and children, "if she's open to that, because it's her body." He mentions wanting to "get [him]self together," to be more appealing as a partner and provider.

Darius's Challenge: Escaping the "Matrix"

The concept of "the matrix" comes up many times in our conversation; it's clearly an important frame of reference for Darius. He talks about "taking the red pill," an allusion to the moment in the film, "The Matrix," when the character Morpheus offers the character Neo a choice: a blue pill that will return him to blissful ignorance, or a red pill that will take him "down the rabbit hole," into uncomfortable truths. But Darius doesn't just talk about "the matrix" in reference to the movie. For him being "in the matrix" means "being a vessel to pour in other people's ideas and desires and demands." It means trying to make money just to spend it again in order to survive, with no time for self-expression or meaning. He hates the feeling of being in the matrix, and he wants to get free from it. He's trying to figure out how, and it's difficult, confounding.

Darius's confinement is different from Mona's. Whereas Mona feels constrained by family bonds, Darius deliberately returns to New Orleans after college to reconnect with people he left here. Instead, Darius feels constrained by socioeconomic systems that constitute him as a "vessel" for "other people's ideas and desires and demands."

The feeling of being trapped in a perverse reality is not unique to Darius: a number of other young adults I speak with express similar sentiments, though they use different vocabulary. As another seeker named Trinice puts it, like "everybody's trying to just shove you in a box. It's like, *No*." Trinice, a recent college graduate who works part-time for a youth development organization, has creative interests much like Darius does. But she doesn't feel "the box" inhibits her art, exactly. Rather, the box masks the experiences and emotions that fuel her art. She says, "Just getting put into that box is like being accepted without [accepting] all the traumas that you've had to go through. It's trying to get you to be quiet about everything you're going through: your traumas, your doubts, your guilt, all that. And it's like all that makes you who you are or who you're going to be." This statement contrasts strongly with the gardener worldview: instead of believing that trauma, doubt, and guilt require her to *change* herself, Trinice finds that these feelings and experiences *constitute* her self, which needs to be expressed. She adds forcefully, "I refuse to be anything normal. It's not fun to be exactly like the person next to you. It's a terrifying concept. It's like, why would I want to do that when I can be spontaneous, impulsive, and maybe all these other things instead of being normal?... I feel like I don't want to be the stereotypical person that works and works and works just to retire and be old. I don't want to do that. I don't want to play America's game.*"*

Trinice calls what she is trying to escape "the box" and "America's game," while Darius calls it "the matrix." Another seeker named Sam describes it as "the system" and "the pattern," hidden by perceptual "filters." But regardless of the language they use to describe it, they are all looking for a way to escape organized, external forces that they believe deeply constrain their lives.

Darius's Strategy: Cut Costs and Hours to Make Time for Self-Expression and Inquiry

In response to this feeling of confinement, Darius has not been ramping up his side hustles to try and earn his way out of his predicament, as both gardeners and climbers typically

do. On the contrary: Darius has been thinning out his jobs to make more time in his schedule for "figuring out [his] passions," eating better, exercising, reading, and for "expressing [him]self." Self-expression is important to Darius, and he feels that he does not have enough time for it "in the matrix." He's interested in many forms of self-expression – music, art, sculpture, writing – but figures that he'll probably start with writing, because its tools are so available. He says he carries around a notebook in which he jots things down throughout the day, snipped of phrases that come to him. He says, "I don't believe I was put on this earth to teach little kids about animals, which so many other people could do." I ask if he has people that he talks to about this search for his passions and self-expression, and he says he talks to family sometimes, but also to strangers. He says, "Sometimes strangers are the best because they're unbiased." In other words, Darius feels hemmed in by wage labor, and in response minimizes both his expenses (by using a bicycle and living with family) and his working hours (by trimming back side gigs) so that he can pursue specific liberties: self-knowledge and self-expression.

We talk about various past mentors and adults who he knows and who are in positions of relative influence. I ask whether Darius is in touch with these people as he tries to figure out his next moves. There are a few people who Darius feels it would be good to talk to, and would definitely help connect him to other people – except that Darius doesn't know, right now, what he would want to ask them for. He is reluctant to reach out to his network of established professionals without a clear goal in mind, so he hasn't done it. He has a sense that networking, or using one's network, can be important and useful, but he is reluctant to do it right now.

Near Term Use, Long Term Uncertainty

At the moment, Darius's mobility ideology is well-suited (and closely tied) to his near-term aspirations: treating his self like something to be discovered or released (not needing reform yet also not totally known or free to act), he seeks self-knowledge and self-expression. His strategies of cutting back on his expenses and working hours and of engaging with a wide array of people help him create more time and context for both. But, whether his beliefs about the self, social action, and social context will be as useful if he starts to pursue his expressed interests in civil engineering and environmental psychology – fields which will most likely require him to earn an advanced degree – is less certain.

As we exit the coffee shop and say goodbye, Darius lights a cigarette, or tries to. I'm unsure if it actually catches. He's framed against a backdrop of live oak trees, Spanish moss, the mansions of the city's elite, and the wide, green, low-ceilinged sweep of St. Charles Avenue. He walks over to his bicycle, getting ready for the trip home.

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Darius's elite education may seem like a likely source of his critical orientation to freedom, yet, among my participants, the search for an emancipated self is not particular to graduates of liberal arts colleges. Aden, a young woman who stopped out of her regional public university, also feels confined by society (like Darius) rather than by family (like Mona).

Aden: Finding "Spiritual Freedom"

I talk with Aden one morning in early fall. We meet at a coffee shop in a small city outside New Orleans, in a part of the state sometimes called Acadiana, or Cajun Country. Aden is slim and petite, barely brushing five feet in my estimation, and wears her natural hair in short twists. She's chosen clothes in khaki green and black mesh fabrics, contrasting textures and playing with depth.

Just as my other participants did, Aden grew up in New Orleans and attended a public high school focused on college access. Her parents also emphasized college, attaching high hopes for all three of their children to degree attainment. College was not much on Aden's mind, however, until her older brother enrolled. But, she says, "even when he would talk about it, it still wasn't nothing to me." She applied because it was expected of her, but felt she didn't have enough direction, as a high school senior, to go to college. She remembers, "I asked my parents if it was possible for me to take a year off before I went to college to get to know who I am outside of high school because that's a whole other story. But that didn't happen, so I went right in." Her hesitation was "because I didn't know what I wanted to do." Her parents, though, took a different view, "like, 'I want you to go in and get it all done in one sitting, and you can worry about that later.'" She enrolled at a regional public university in the fall after her high school graduation. Looking back, Aden has mixed feelings about this decision:

> I don't regret it, but I regret it. It's like college can be two things. They give you, I guess, the educational side, and they give you more of a soul-searching side. It was the right time in the sense that I got to meet everybody who is still in my life today and kind of impact who I'm going to be. And it's good energy, because maybe they would have came up [come into my life] a little later or not at all had I chose to stay out. Most of those decisions, I don't regret. But I still regret not having figured me out because it would set me back a lot, from changing majors to not having the drive to do anything when you're so unsure.

Aden is glad to have met good friends who are still important to her, but also feels that her lack of self-knowledge and clarity about her path seriously hindered her college experience. She felt she had a lot of "soul-searching" to do after high school, and wishes she could have done it before starting college.

Aden made an easy social transition to college, but she recalls feeling a "mix of excitement and fright at the same time because it's like, Ugh, I'm alone. I get to make my own rules, so to speak because you get that jump on adulthood. It's like, Okay, I don't have to answer to nobody. But it's like, you kind of do, in a sense. It's like you have to become your own adult and you have to deny yourself and grant yourself certain things to be responsible. It's a slippery slope." She stayed on campus her first year, but encountered more of these responsibilities in her second year, when she moved into an off-campus apartment with friends. She learned how to prioritize her schedule, and work harder on her academics than she had in high school. But academic life also frustrated Aden. When describing her freshman year classes, she turns down the corners of her mouth. I ask why, and she says,

> I didn't see the point in it. I guess a lot of problems that I have with college is that you do things that aren't necessarily needed for you to do. So it's like you will do your classes but then sometimes you'll have to take unnecessary classes just to get a certain amount of things like in credits but it's like if it's not going toward my actual career why am I having to pay for it for any reason other than that.

To Aden, college was supposed to be the beginning of adulthood – and was costing her a lot of money – so basic, intro-level classes (particularly a required freshmen class on "just learning the university") frustrated her. Moreover, she was encountering bureaucratic hurdles. Aden first tried to major in design, but students were only admitted to the major if a panel of professors approved a portfolio of their work; freshman year coursework was used to prepare this portfolio. Aden's portfolio was rejected on her first try, as well as her second. She received only

"vague" feedback. Discouraged, she switched her major to liberal arts, which felt too general, and then, lacking a concrete plan, changed again to management, which seemed at least broadly applicable to an array of careers. With each change, she needed to fulfill new intro-level requirements, and could not use many credits from her previous majors toward the new ones. Frustrated and uncertain about her path, Aden decided to take a break from school.

Today, she lives in a town near campus, renting a house with friends from school. She used to work in brick-and-mortar retail, but tired of "dealing with" the customers, and now drives for a delivery app. She intends to return to school eventually, but is in no rush.

Aden's Mobility Project: A Stable, Happy, Creative Life Outside the South

Aden is taking her time in restarting college in part because she is formulating her vision of the future. Aden explains that she wasn't artsy in high school (she played in the school band, but "that's it"). But, since leaving school, she has taken up a number of creative pursuits, including painting. She speaks to learning new things frequently, through a combination of social media, reading, talking with friends, online classes (sewing) and watching videos on YouTube. She seems to especially value YouTube, which has taught her about a number of topics, including how to run a business, interior design, fashion careers, and sewing. Aden adds, "I like expressing myself. And I like expressing myself through painting or drawing or through interior design or fashion. Just any type of artistic way I could express things would be nice. And if I get my drawing and my arts at the same level, I could do freelance work for illustration or things like that." Aden says that her "goal is to get a business degree and then figure out the next chapter from there." She hopes that a business degree "will help me a lot in my artist ways because it's like I have a business degree and, hopefully, that will give me access to different fields, business fields. Like a fashion company or an art building or something. Anything that gives me access to be able to enjoy the other things that I can't enjoy right now. So it's like my stepping stone." Eventually, she says, "I do want to try going to an art school. And I know most of those schools are either in New York or California or just not here, [or] anywhere in the south, actually."

Aden finds that surrounding herself with creative people – her housemates are musicians and visual artists – helps her develop her own creative talents and "craft," and find her own path:

> We all kind of want the same things in life as far as just getting to a place of financial freedom and spiritual freedom and being able to have access to happiness as an adult. Because you can really get swept up in the plain, day-to-day life of working and paying bills and then sleeping and then doing the same thing. It could get monotonous and depressing at times. So it's just making sure you have enough of financial freedom, so to speak, to assist with having spots of happiness and your passions because we all have artistic ways of expressing ourselves.

By maintaining a community with shared interests in the arts, Aden secures social support for her project of working toward a "place of financial freedom and spiritual freedom" that will remove her from the workaday grind. Importantly, like Darius and Mona, Aden works only as much as she needs to in order to cover her expenses, allowing her latitude to pursue self-expression: to Aden and her friends, financial freedom does not mean wealth, but time.[19]

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[19] It is unclear where the language of "financial freedom" comes from for Aden, but it is the title of a bestselling personal finance book by Greg Sabatier; is a phrase used by personal finance guru Dave Ramsey; and is featured widely in contemporary media.

Aden's Challenge: The Unknown Self

Aden's mobility project is one of self-emancipation, containing financial, expressive, and geographic components. She treats the major challenge confronting her mobility project as one of self-knowledge: she believes she cannot make the kind of headway she desires until her self is known, recognized, or understood. This manifests at multiple points in Aden's experience and in our conversation.

When she was graduating high school, for instance, Aden wished to take a gap year before enrolling in college so that she could "get to know who [she is]." She approached college as having a dual purpose – an "educational side" and a "soul-searching side" – but "still regret[s] not having figured [herself] out" while she was there. She recalls having some "dark days" in college that resulted from a combination of stress and a sense of uncertainty, "a lot of, Why am I here, what the hell am I doing? kind of thing." This also led Aden away from dating during college: her approach was "more of getting myself together before I try to bring anybody else in on my little hurricane of a ride. So I think, freshman year, you get there, and for some people, it's like, Ooh, I need to find me somebody. And then for others, it's like, Ooh, I need to find myself, and that was me. I was like, Ooh, who am I?" Indeed, Aden still holds this position: she says, "I think my friends and I are at a stage where it's, I'ma get my life together, and then I want to find somebody who would push me to get my life to even a better spot. And I could be that somebody for them too. And that's the biggest thing right now. It's like the self issues right now. It's like, I'm all about me." And we have seen that, since college, Aden has also felt a strong desire to build a career in a creative field that somehow expresses who she is, or speaks to something fundamental about her self. Professionally, romantically, and artistically, Aden is on a quest to reveal her true self.

Aden's Mobility Strategy: Making Time to Find "Spiritual Freedom"

At the same time, Aden believes that coming to know her self takes times and focused attention. To reach her goals – to execute her mobility project – Aden believes she needs financial freedom and spiritual freedom. Financial freedom means covering the basics so that she has time to create spiritual freedom:

> Aden: You really are the only one standing in your way. And it's like, every day is supposed to be a better... It's like, if you push off from doing the little things, even if it's like, researching, YouTubing something that you want to do, it's like, every little thing that you can do to make you closer to someone that you want to be…Once you know what you want and you know how to get there, there's nobody that can stop you. So, it's like, you gonna go for it. So, to deny yourself from being a better you, it's basically just... it's like you beating up on yourself.

> SP: Is this what you mean by spiritual freedom? You said that earlier that there's a financial freedom and a spiritual freedom, and you want both.

> Aden: Yeah, it's like... We all know that we need money to take care of basic needs, that's just the way it is. To... keep a roof above your head, to feed yourself, to shower... all that is needed, but there's still pieces in you that...you want to take care of. And you want to explore. But... you deny yourself the exploration, because you don't have enough finance to do that thing…It's like, once you're at a place where you're able to take care of your bills, knowing where to get next month's rent from, and then, once you're able to do that,

you're able to have time to just... do anything, like art, or practicing the piano, like song writing. To take care of your basic needs without worrying or stressing allows you to be happy, to just explore all the passions without distractions.

In this sense, Aden feels that stopping out of college actually moved her closer to her goals because it gave her more "spiritual freedom":

[Leaving college] helped me. Because you get a lot of alone time, you're not so busy hopping from class to class and assignment to assignment, so you get that freedom to figure out who you are. Like, what you do in your own time, what habits to pick up, like, what you feel so free doing... or, I'm looking... you know, researching, it's like, "Okay, so these are the list of things that you do, and there's the list of things you don't do." It like, makes space and kinda gives you insights on who you are, what you want.

For Aden, spiritual freedom is expressive, in the sense that it entails having the space to study and practice creative pursuits. But, it is also internal and revelatory, in the sense that it implies taking time to develop a contemplative or introspective practice that leads to insight or self-awareness (mirroring a form of selfhood that Michal Pagis describes in *Inward: Vipassana Meditation and the Embodiment of the Self* [2019]).

After leaving college, Aden began attending a women's group where the members "would just talk about life and our mental health and relationships." Aden liked the group because "It gave [her] a platform to always be aware of [her]self" and taught her how to meditate. It gave her perspective "on [her]self, on the world, on what [she] wants." One common practice was a journaling exercise, in which the group leader selected a topic, such as relationships with people or with money, and:

…asked [us] to write how we feel about it. And then she told us to ask ourselves why we felt that way and then why we feel that way about feeling that way and so those deeper thoughts. It opened a lot of things, but that's a good practice to have for anybody because you get a real basic understanding as to why these things affect you the way that they do, and it's like, "Okay, how can I fix this and approach this a different way, so I don't feel this way?" so that's nice to have.

The emphasis of the inquiry was self-understanding, a peeling back of ever-deeper layers, and of learning different ways to respond to various situations. In other words, the group did not require her to believe she was flawed or needed to change; rather, she needed to *understand* herself and *respond* using new skills.

Although she uses the language of "spiritual freedom," Aden was not raised in a religious family. Her family attended a Lutheran church for a while, but stopped after Hurricane Katrina. Religion was never a big deal in their house, and she says she "always knew [she] wasn't necessarily a religious person," adding, "You go to church , [and] it's like, 'What did I do this time? What am I getting in trouble for?' That could be overwhelming. So it [was] that kind of thing breathing down the back of your neck." But, she says, "I know there is *something*…And that kind of made it okay for me to go to those meditations because it wasn't religion-based. It was more so spirituality… I can meditate and listen to everything. Meditation is just a different form of prayer. You're just one with yourself and you talk to yourself."

Like the gardeners and climbers, Aden also uses the familiar language of "growth." But, she uses it in a distinct way, framing growth not as a process of inner change (like the gardeners)

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or external skill development (like the climbers). Rather, for Aden, growth entails an inner process of discovery, an "unfolding," a "learning [of her] own mind," and self-observation:

> I'm constantly growing, constantly surprising myself with ways that I have to grow and that I can grow, blind spots that I have, possibilities that I have that I didn't know. And I think I'm learning about how so much of the work is figuring out how to just roll with uncertainty and roll with this sense of unfolding, when I really want a sense of stability. That's a great desire that I have and so I'm learning how to not deny that I want that, but also not cling to it, not be too attached to it so that I can, yeah, deal with the waves that come. And I'm learning my own mind a lot. I'm learning meditation, and I'm trying to observe myself.

For Aden, in other words, growth is the liberation of an already-whole, yet also opaque or obscured, self. She believes that she can reach her goals by pursuing this self-emancipation: by making enough money to live on while also leaving plenty of time for inner and expressive freedom. She might learn how to "approach [things] in a different way" but not in the sense that she needs to change something fundamental about herself; rather her self needs *understanding* and *support* in order to become more free.

Freedom as Cause and Consequence

Aden believes that she needs to find spiritual freedom in the present to set herself on a path that will lead to even greater spiritual freedom in the future. In her view, spiritual freedom constitutes both the predicate and the prospective outcome of her mobility project. And, though they use different terms, Mona and Darius share similar beliefs: they also seek incremental freedoms in the near term as a strategy for securing freedoms of larger magnitude in the long run. The sources of their perceived confinement vary: for Mona, it is mainly her family, while for Darius and Aden it is broader, related to the social system writ large. But they all express a feeling of limitation, and prize freedom.

Aden's strategy – the beliefs and tactics that form her mobility ideology – has led her, so far, to postpone a return to college (despite having five semesters under her belt). At the same time, it has not led to her to rule out college completely; finishing her degree remains part of her plans. Similarly, it has led her to defer, but not permanently rule out, pursuing romantic attachments. Like Darius, Aden's strategy seems well-suited to meeting her goal of near-term freedom; whether the same strategy will help her finish college, build a creative business enterprise, and leave Louisiana is less clear.

Seekers: Emancipatory Mobility Ideology

As we have seen, seekers vary in what they aim to free themselves *from*, and what they want freedom *for*. But, they are deeply connected by a shared sense of constraint and the belief that their selves, while whole and capable, are not at liberty to act or exist in the ways they vigorously desire. As a result, they seek emancipation, both *from* (like Mona) and *through* (like Darius and Aden) other people. They avoid side hustles, preferring to trim their expenses so that they can devote more time to their non-monetary passions and to the self-exploration that so strongly characterizes their worldview. While many seekers do have creative pursuits (music, art, writing), not all do – and many of my participants who have some kind of creative practice are not seekers (for instance: Russell, a gardener, is a photographer and writer; Rashad, a music producer, is a climber). And, while each of the other two ideal-types corresponds with an over- or

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under-representation within gender groups (women are overrepresented among gardeners; men are overrepresented among climbers), seekers are more evenly split: 21% of my women participants are seekers, and 25% of my men participants are seekers.

Seekers & Achievement Ideology

The seekers presented here also vary in educational attainment: Darius holds a bachelor's from a prestigious liberal arts college, Aden has five semesters of post-secondary schooling at a regional public university, and Mona has two (including one semester at a community college). They are not invested in the labor market value of a degree per se, or in the idea that a college degree is objectively valuable. Darius, in fact, is especially derogatory about having a "piece of paper [he] can't read." But, each is nonetheless interested in pursuing higher education in the future, because they regard it as likely necessary to the specific paths they want to pursue. Mona needs a bachelor's degree to become a speech therapist (and she liked college from an intellectual perspective); Darius would need an advanced degree to become a civil engineer or environmental psychologist; and Aden wants to get more business training so she can launch her own venture. Their desires to pursue further education, in other words, do not stem from investments in achievement ideology (a sense that education paired with hard work will necessarily make them successful), but rather flow from attachments to their own, specific projects of self-expression and self-liberation. For other seekers whose mobility projects do not require post-secondary training, educational attainment is comparatively uninteresting or unimportant.

Emancipation & Mobility

Seekers strive as relentlessly as gardeners and climbers, but their goals are only rarely material. Unlike gardeners and climbers, they typically do not have side hustles, choosing instead to scrape by with less money in order to have time for cherished pursuits (like volunteering, playing music, or making art). Deliberately restricting their working hours to focus on non-monetary pursuits means that they are less often achieving markers of upward mobility observed among my other participants: Mona, Darius, and Aden make similar amounts of money, are all in shared living situations, work in relatively low-status jobs, and do not have near term plans for professional advancement. (Again, this is true despite their variation in educational attainment.)

Even in the rare cases when seeker participants pursue more lucrative careers, they tend to emphasize occupations that will allow them flexibility (in terms of both time and money) to pursue their passions. This is the case for my participant Sam, for instance, who stopped out of college and eked out a spare living for a few years running his own music production business full-time. Sam, a softspoken young man who stopped out of college after a few semesters, is an exception: he is considering applying for a coding bootcamp to become a software engineer. Like Darius and Trinice, he sharply critiques "America's game," or, in his words, "those who want to keep everybody under their palms and control people. The people who have power but don't want to change." But his assessment is that learning to code will give him professional flexibility as well as financial freedom. He says, "It will really benefit me because I've always been really good with computers, and I feel like it would just be enhancing my skills and I could make money from it. It will also help me pursuing any other music dreams. I could get a lot of [musical] equipment with that job, and they both could help sustain each other." Higher pay facilitates the expressive freedoms Sam seeks, rather than being an end in itself: even when

pecuniary, the goals that seekers pursue are more transcendent than material. If gardeners want to transform, and climbers to act, then seekers hope to emancipate.

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My participants bear many striking sociological similarities to each other: they are alike in terms of race, class, geography, college attendance, and the experience of struggle in precarious presents. Gardeners like London, Janae, and Russell, climbers like Britnee, Darren, and Quentin, and seekers like Mona, Darius, and Aden share similar social origins and are all striving for their dreams in the face of considerable difficulty. However, gardeners, climbers, and seekers differ from each other in three key dimensions: in their beliefs about the meaning of the self, of social action, and of social context. Among my participants, the worldviews expressed by these ideal-types shape belief, action, and therefore the interaction of mobility's means and ends. Yet individuals within each type also differ significantly from one another, varying in terms of their tastes, personalities, attachments to achievement ideology, unique histories, and specific aspirations.

The analytical aim of the foregoing chapters has been to show that, beyond my participants' obvious similarities and differences, it is possible to observe otherwise obscured patterning in the worldviews that shape their actions. Characterizing groups of individuals by their hidden similarities generates ideal-types: three distinct ideological systems (mobility ideologies) which alternatingly emphasize transformation, agency, and emancipation. The typology is intended to offer language for this systematic variation, but is of course limited: my aim is not to create yet another categorical classification system with arbitrary yet rigid boundaries (as so many social categories entail). As we will see in Chapter 6, the typology is both more flexible and more limited than has been explored so far.

At the same time, demonstrating the patterns typologized in mobility ideologies raises many important questions, which I also engage in the chapter that follows: Why do mobility ideologies matter? What determines who holds a given mobility ideology? Where do mobility ideologies come from? Who else holds mobility ideologies? And what, if any, implications do mobility ideologies have for social policy?

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION: MOBILITY, IDEOLOGY, AND THE SELF

The Aftermath of Access

In New Orleans, as in communities across the country, a generation of young adults have become the first in their families to access higher education. Hopeful that a college degree would translate into higher earnings, professional opportunities, and upward socioeconomic mobility, students and families have risked time, toil, and coin on postsecondary schooling. Chapter 2 argued that, among my participants, this has had mixed results. For completers like London, Russell, Quentin, and Devantiara, higher education pays clear dividends: their bachelor's degrees are helping them access both graduate school and white collar professions where diplomas are prerequisite and middle class salaries and benefits are proffered. Other completers, like Britnee, Darren, and Darius, have not yet translated their degrees into earnings higher than those of their peers who do not hold degrees, but are potentially positioned to do so. And a few – leavers Lamont, Derricka, and Jeremy – are making $50,000 or more per year without a bachelor's degree.

But for many more of my participants, higher education has not rewarded them as hoped. Chanisse, Latroya, and Trinice, for example, have completed their degrees, but are struggling to find work, in their fields of study or otherwise, that compensates them with a living wage. Further, for many leavers, their time in college seems disassociated from their current earnings, usually because they are working in jobs that do not require postsecondary training. Some are earning a living wage, but many are not. Most participants have educational debt, side hustles, earn less than $15 per hour, and/or live with family members. Despite their precarious entry into adulthood, many remain hopeful or optimistic about the future, but are struggling in the present – including participants who completed their degrees. While completers in my sample are more *likely* to be on upwardly mobile paths than leavers or persisters, holding a bachelor's degree far from guarantees the advancement for which so many are striving. The evidence presented here does not isolate a cause for this, but suggests that a combination of factors – such as labor market discrimination and configurations of social and cultural capital – are likely in play.

In this telling, many members of New Orleans's college-for-all generation are struggling. But, it is important to emphasize that in many respects and cases, they also feel that they are making headway. After graduating college with highest honors, London has entered a white collar profession and has designs on law school. Despite serious obstacles, Janae is persisting toward her bachelor's degree. Lamont feels solidly upwardly mobile compared to his upbringing, and delights in fatherhood. Britnee finished college, runs a business, and is optimistic about opportunities for advancement at her current job. She says she feels "very, very powerful." Quentin has earned a master's degree and is settling into a middle-class lifestyle with a committed partner. Darren is struggling financially, but draws some solace and expectation of a better future from holding a bachelor's degree. Mona is pleased to be living independently and to be able to share in family caregiving responsibilities (even if she simultaneously feels trapped). Darius, while eager to escape "the matrix," is pleased to be making time for expressive activities, like writing. And Aden, who has long wanted to prioritize getting to know herself, is glad to be pursuing "spiritual freedom." While these young people experience hardship, they are not defined by it.

All told, however, college-for-all is not operating in New Orleans as its proponents once believed or hoped it would. That is, for a majority of the first-generation young adults in this study, college access has not yielded upwardly mobile pathways to date. It appears to have helped *some* advance, but this is far from *all*. And, due to student loans, some are arguably worse off financially.

Meaning-Making in Precarious Adulthood

Yet, despite similar socioeconomic backgrounds, aspirations, and relatively precarious presents, my participants make sense of their experiences in differing yet patterned ways. Chapter 1 introduced the concept of *mobility ideologies*: specific belief systems about the meaning of the self, social action, and social context that guide how individuals engage their *mobility projects*. Among my participants, three types of mobility ideology predominate, centered on themes of transformation, agency, and emancipation (see Table 7 below for a summary). For short, I metaphorically call people who hold each mobility ideology *gardeners*, *climbers*, and *seekers*, respectively. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 demonstrated that people within a given mobility ideology type vary in their educational attainment, occupations, incomes, investments in achievement ideology, genders, social networks, cultural capital, interests or passions, and childhood experiences.

Table 7. Mobility Ideologies by Ideal-Type

Basic orientation to…	**Transformational**	**Agentic**	**Emancipatory**
Self	• Self must be transformed through growth • Self is flawed, wounded, or in need of change or development; the self is a project	• Self must act upon the world • Self is whole and capable; the self is a vehicle	• Self must be emancipated or expressed • Self is whole but confined; the self is a hostage
Social Action	• Opportunity structure is relatively open; accessing it depends on reforming the self • Focus of action is on internal (intrapersonal) change or development	• Opportunity structure is navigable, with benefits and barriers • Focus of action is on external (interpersonal) strategy and tactics related to personal "getting ahead"	• Opportunity structure is relatively closed or limited, *but* these limitations can be transcended if/when the self is freed • Focus of action is on self-expression or individuation

Social Context	• Other people are sources of reflection and growth	• Other people are sources of strategic help or hindrance	• Other people are sources of connection for self-expression and self-liberation *and/or* of confinement and limitation

Gardeners London and Lamont, for instance, lead very different lives. She is a *summa cum laude* bachelor's degree holder with a real estate license and plans for law school, while he is a single father who works in building maintenance and has no intention of continuing schooling beyond his few semesters of community college. But the ways that they understand their selves and strategize toward their goals are strikingly similar: they each treat their self as a project, something to be transformed, and focus their effort and relationships on making this inner transformation possible. Climbers like Britnee, Darren, and Quentin likewise differ in many ways, but all share a belief that their selves are capable vehicles for taking measured risks, and that they can best pursue their goals through external action: making the right moves, learning the right codes, and building the right relationships. Seekers like Mona, Darius, and Aden differ from both the gardeners and the climbers in that they feel their selves to be neither flawed nor free to act, but rather trapped and in need of liberation. They trim down commitments, like side hustles, in order to pursue expressive freedom. But they also differ markedly from each other: Darius, for instance, is dismissive of the bachelor's degree he earned from an elite liberal arts school where he studied political theory and carves out time for creative writing, while Mona longs to leave her job in logistics and return to the regional university she left after one semester so she can pursue her white collar dream of becoming a speech therapist.

But, while the foregoing chapters aim to reveal the pattern of mobility ideologies, they also raise many further questions: Can people change their mobility ideologies? Who else holds mobility ideologies? Where do they come from? Are they only relevant to Pell-eligible Black youth from New Orleans? What makes some people hold one mobility ideology as opposed to another? How do mobility ideologies matter to mobility projects and mobility pathways? And, recalling the theoretical questions raised in Chapter 1: what can mobility ideologies tell us about culture and inequality, about the American Dream, and about social domination? I offer responses to these questions in the concluding arguments that follow.

Moving Between Mobility Ideologies

As social phenomena shaped by cultural forces, the three mobility ideology ideal-types identified so far could be, theoretically, widely available to my participants. If so, one might expect to see instances of individuals referencing multiple ideologies, or perhaps demonstrating evidence of shifting among ideal-types over time. Indeed, the utility of the ideal-types is not to fix individuals into immutable roles, but to describe the belief systems that enable and constrain their actions.

Rashad, a skateboarder, rapper, and music producer who stopped out of college, provides a useful case of one individual shifting ideologies. Rashad hopes to get an audio engineering job at a recording studio in Atlanta, where he would make $25/hr. Aside from his music production gigs and various side hustles, he has cycled in and out of retail and restaurant jobs, and currently earns $10/hr (plus tips) at the same carry-out restaurant he worked at in high school. In the

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course of our interview, Rashad articulates both gardener and climber perspectives. On one hand, he is self-critical regarding procrastination, but also perfectionism. I ask him,

> SP: What is your sense of what you need to do? To make those goals happen?

> Rashad: Take more risk. I remember I hesitated a lot on like-- I'm a perfectionist. It's a gift and a curse, cause you never-- being a perfectionist, you never [finish] anything. I have so much music that's unreleased. So, I'm trying to stop being such a perfectionist. And be okay with imperfection. Cause I feel like the people that had…success, [they] know how to make decisions fast. I make decisions slow, which is not always a good thing.

Like a gardener, Rashad expresses a self-improvement project, and the feeling that his inner limitations are a major barrier. But, like a climber, he later emphasizes the importance of "[m]aking the right decision. Making the right decision because there's a lot of things you can do, but there's only certain things that you can do that are going to make you successful. It's easy to pick the wrong decision. It's easy to pick the easy route." At one moment, Rashad even sounds like he is actively changing his approach to his goals. He mentions reading, and I ask what kinds of books he likes to read:

> Rashad: I like self-help books, but I'm transitioning out of those type of books. A lot of them are just people trying to make money. They're saying obvious things like, 'believe in yourself,' and all this stuff. I feel like you don't have to spend money to get that information.

> SP: As you're reading self-help books, did any stand out as particularly good?

> Rashad: Yeah. I'm looking at one right now. This one. [Holds up book.] *Living Above the Level of Mediocrity*. Charles Swindoll. That book is talking about the distractions in life, just instant gratification things, are just not always good for you. Living above the level of mediocrity is saying no to drugs and thinking about sex and stuff and just things that are not about to make you better as a human being… It just talk about standing out. They have the eagle on the front of the book, because eagles are like-- they stand alone, and they don't do what other animals do… They hunt by themselves. They have a vision. But definitely has a bunch of good things in it.

Though they used to appeal to Rashad at some level, books aimed at changing his self-esteem are no longer enticing. What he now values is a book that speaks to a more agentic sense of self.

Rashad is developing new aspirations and changing his sense of how to pursue them. But, he also seems unsure about where to focus his energy: should he work on self-improvement, or on taking risks? Of course, these are not necessarily mutually-exclusive. But shifting ideologies seems to muddy action for Rashad, rather than clarify what he should do to advance on his goals.

Janae, a gardener whose narrative was presented in Chapter 3, similarly recounts shifts in her perspective. An overachiever in high school, Janae viewed herself as extremely capable at the beginning of college. But, as she struggled semester after semester, she came to believe that

she needed to change her self. When her academic achievement faltered, she shifted her view of what achievement meant, transposing it from external success to inner development. She says: "I learned I have a lot of problems. It's crazy I never found it out in high school." Then she adds, "And now I just have to grow." In other words, Janae narrates a shift from the agentic mobility ideology of a climber toward the transformational mobility ideology of a gardener.

Yet, while Rashad and Janae demonstrate that they certainly exist, such cases of shifting mobility ideologies are rare in my data. In most cases, my participants strongly cleave to one mobility ideology over others, and draw on its implicit logics to narrate their beliefs and decision-making. At the same time, there is some evidence that other mobility ideologies exist beyond the transformational, agentic, and emancipatory ideal-types. In particular, the cases of two young women from my supplemental group of non-African American participants suggest the existence of at least one additional mobility ideology.

Interdependent Mobility Ideology

Marie is Haitian, and Daria is Persian. Both are extremely close to their immediate family members, as well as to a broader familial and cultural group. For Marie, this includes her large nuclear family and the community around a Haitian church that her grandparents founded in New Orleans. Her sense of how she will achieve her goals focuses on her self as a vehicle (i.e., she exhibits elements of the climber ideal-type), but it is also extremely important to her to remain connected to her family throughout her life. She envisions leaving New Orleans for a better life in Houston – with her entire family. Her strategies for taking action revolve around other people as both the means and the object. In other words, a significant part of Marie's sense-making about her life draws on her membership in her family and the broader Haitian community in New Orleans.

Daria is also the daughter of immigrants. Her family of four feels culturally isolated in New Orleans where there is not a large Persian community, and maintains strong ties with family and friends in Iran. They talk often, and visit Tehran frequently (as the political situation allows). Growing up, her happiest memory is the family ritual of having tea together each evening and talking about their days. She has followed her older sister's path into a joint BS/MD program, and they attend the same elite university. While she also expresses an agentic sense of self, navigating the world by learning new knowledge and skills and by building relationships that will help her advance, she is extremely committed to community, to public service, and to a future shaped by bonds with her natal family. When she feels overwhelmed by the world (which has happened often as protests engulfed Iran over the past year), she looks for ways to reach out, and finds comfort in human connection – not because she is hoping to *go somewhere* or *gain something* as a result of the connection, but because she recognizes it as a kind of home. Like Marie, Daria's sense of self is far more externally-grounded and rooted in abiding connection to other people (than that of most climbers, for instance).

This indicates the possibility of an *interdependent mobility ideology*, or a "connector" ideal-type, in which the meaning of the self is to relate and be related to; the self is made whole or realized through connection to others, as a type of conduit; the focus of action is on meeting group needs, which include individual needs; and self and others are mutually dependent. For comparison, all four mobility ideologies are summarized in Table 8.

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Table 8. Mobility Ideologies by Ideal-Type

Basic meaning of…	Transformational *gardeners*	Agentic *climbers*	Emancipatory *seekers*	Interdependent *connectors*
Self	• Self must be transformed through growth • Self is flawed, wounded, or in need of change or development; the self is a project	• Self must act upon the world • Self is whole and capable; the self is a vehicle	• Self must be emancipated or expressed • Self is whole but confined; the self is a hostage	• Self must relate and be related to • Self is made whole or realized through connection to others, in relationship; the self is a conduit
Social Action	• Opportunity structure is relatively open; accessing it depends on reforming the self • Focus of action is on internal (intrapersonal) change or development	• Opportunity structure is navigable, with possibilities and barriers • Focus of action is on external (interpersonal) strategy and tactics related to personal "getting ahead"	• Opportunity structure is relatively closed or limited, but these limitations can be transcended if/when the self is freed • Focus of action is on self-expression or individuation	• Individual social mobility affects and is affected by the movement of the entire web • Focus of action is meeting group needs, which include individual needs
Social Context	• Other people are sources of reflection and growth	• Other people are sources of strategic help or hindrance	• Other people are sources of connection for self-expression and self-liberation and/or of confinement and limitation	• Self and other are mutually dependent

Mobility Ideology Across Difference

Are mobility ideologies particular to my Black, low-income, New Orleanian young adult participants? Preliminary evidence suggests not. First, despite the fact that all 40 participants in my main sample met federal definitions for low-income status when they entered college, the evidence presented above illustrates that there is some economic variation among them. Some grew up in concentrated poverty, while others came from working class and lower middle-class families.[20] I observe transformational, agentic, and emancipatory mobility ideologies within and across these groups. For instance, Jennifer, Jeremy, and Aden all grew up with relative class privilege compared to the rest of my main sample, yet, they differ in their mobility ideologies:

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[20] Regarding class variation: although all my participants were Pell-eligible, we have seen that parental educational attainment and occupational status and compensation vary. Pell grant amounts also vary. For instance, in 2022-2023, students with FAFSA-calculated expected family contributions (EFCs) of less than $6,895 are eligible for partial Pell grants. Students with parental income of less than $27,000 have a $0 EFC and are eligible for full Pell grants. The economic eligibility qualifier for this study was an affirmative in response to "Did you receive a Pell grant in college?" This includes students with both partial and full Pell grants.

Jennifer is a gardener, Jeremy is a climber, and Aden is a seeker. Similarly, we have seen that Lamont (a gardener), Darren (a climber), and Mona (a seeker) grew up with relatively more *disadvantage* than some other participants.

Further, I observe mobility ideologies among the 17 non-African American young adults I interviewed, who identify as Asian, Black/Haitian, Latinx, and white, and who also grew up in New Orleans, went to college, and were eligible for Pell grants. It is from within these groups that I also observe a fourth, interdependent mobility ideology (in "connectors" Marie and Daria).

Distribution of mobility ideology by race and ethnicity for the full sample (main plus supplemental groups) is displayed in Table 9. I observe transformational, agentic, and emancipatory mobility ideologies across other racial and ethnic groups. The reader will note that none of my five Asian participants or of my four white participants employed a transformational mobility ideology, and that neither of my two Latinx participants employed an emancipatory mobility ideology. However, the supplemental sample is too small to draw conclusions about the distribution of various mobility ideologies within other ascribed categories. Instead, what the supplemental data make clear is that racially diverse, Pell-eligible, young, New Orleanian adults outside my main sample of African American participants also make use of mobility ideologies as worldviews. Mobility ideologies describe far more than the worldviews of Black youth alone. Analysis of mobility ideologies within and across these socioeconomic groups should be extended in future research; it should also be extended across age groups.

Table 9. Mobility Ideology by Race and Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	Count	Transformational *gardeners*	Agentic *climbers*	Emancipatory *seekers*	Interdependent *connectors*
African American/Black	40	15	16	9	0
Asian	5	0	3	1	1
Haitian/Black	6	2	2	1	1
Latinx	2	1	1	0	0
white	4	0	1	3	0
Total	57	18	23	14	2

Note: For the purposes of this table, the rare individuals who employ multiple frames are coded by the frame that dominates how they narrate their experiences and are counted once. For instance, Rashad is coded as a climber; Marie and Daria are coded as connectors.

At the same time, anecdotal evidence from specific interviews points to the further possibility that mobility ideologies may actually be widespread in American popular culture. Rashad's discussion of self-help books gives a first hint in this direction: he contrasts books that focus on self-acceptance with books that focus on independence and action. Sociologists have critiqued self-help books as a genre for the way that they echo a therapeutic cultural ethos (Bellah et al. 1985). But, considerable variety exists *within* the collection of bestselling contemporary self-help books, and different approaches imply different logics about the *meaning* of selfhood. These include: a healing or psychological approach (e.g., recently, books by Brené Brown, Bessel van der Kolk, Resmaa Menakem, Glennon Doyle, and Martin Seligman); a life-hack or habits-based approach (e.g., books by James Clear, Tim Ferris, and Steven Covey), an expressive approach (e.g., Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*), and a collectivist approach (e.g., bell hooks's *All About Love*). These groupings broadly track the various meanings of the self observed within mobility ideologies.

Jennifer, the "free-falling" cosmetics retail manager with a biology degree who we met at the beginning of Chapter 1, also provides clues about links between mobility ideologies and pop culture, in her case through the lyrics of her favorite songs. When Jennifer and I meet on Facetime, she sips periodically from a black mug with a bust of Beyoncé as Nefertiti, as seen in Beyoncé's *Homecoming* (2019) film poster or in the "Apathy (Sorry)" segment of the visual album *Lemonade* (2016). I say, "Nice mug," and Jennifer says, "I *love* Beyoncé." She then shows me around her living room: on the mantle she has gathered a painting and other objects that make up a kind of altar to Beyoncé. The painting is of a now-famous still of Beyoncé in costume for "Formation" on *Lemonade*: head down, oversized flat-brimmed black hat covering her eyes, red lips, hair in two long braids, 19th century black, off-the-shoulder gown, heavy silver jewelry, both arms held bent in front of her, middle fingers up, and red nails. Over the course of our conversation, Jennifer brings up several other hugely famous artists and specific songs of theirs that she loves: Jill Scott and the song "Prepared" from her album *Woman* (2015), and Adele, her album *30* (2021), and the song "I Drink Wine."

After the interview, I re-read the lyrics of "Formation," "Prepared," and "I Drink Wine." The familiar chorus of Beyoncé's "Formation" reads like instructions I hear my climber participants giving to themselves and others:

> I see it, I want it, I stunt, yellow-bone it
> I dream it, I work hard, I grind 'til I own it
> I twirl on them haters, albino alligators
> El Camino with the seat low, sippin' Cuervo with no chaser
> Sometimes I go off (I go off), I go hard (I go hard)
> Get what's mine (take what's mine), I'm a star (I'm a star)
> Cause I slay (slay), I slay (hey), I slay (okay), I slay (okay)
> All day (okay), I slay (okay), I slay (okay), I slay (okay)
> We gon' slay (slay), gon' slay (okay), we slay (okay), I slay (okay)
> I slay (okay), okay (okay), I slay (okay), okay, okay, okay, okay
> Okay, okay, ladies, now let's get in formation, cause I slay
> Okay, ladies, now let's get in formation, cause I slay
> Prove to me you got some coordination, cause I slay
> Slay trick, or you get eliminated

Like a climber, the speaker of the lyric is focused on capable and confident action toward advancement, not inner change: "I work hard, I grind 'til I own it…Cause I slay." In contrast, the opening verse of Jill Scott's introspective "Prepared" sounds like it could be voiced by many of my gardener participants:

> I been reading my old journals
> Checking to see where my head has been
> And I been apologizing to some people
> Some bridges I needed to mend
> And I been eating more greens
> Getting my body out the line, oh
> I'm gonna be super fine
> And I been lettin'
> Been lettin' some old ideas go

I'm making room for my life to grow
I just wanna be prepared, yeah
I just wanna be, I just wanna be prepared
I just wanna be prepared
Getting myself ready
For what's comin' for me yeah yeah yeah
I am (I just wanna be, I just wanna be prepared)
I just wanna be prepared

Like a gardener, the speaker here is doing inner work, reading old journals, repairing her relationships, and "making room for [her] life to grow." And in "I Drink Wine," a poignant song permeated with questions, doubt, and confusion ("How can one become so bounded by choices that somebody else makes? How come we've both become a version of a person we don't even like?"), Adele's searching lyrics allude to what can be read as a mashup of transformational, emancipatory, and agentic perspectives. She sings:

[agentic]	You better believe I'm trying (trying, trying)
	To keep climbing (climbing, climbing)
	But the higher we climb
	Feels like we're both none the wiser
[transformational]	So I hope I learn to get over myself
	Stop trying to be somebody else
[emancipatory]	So we can love each other for free
	Everybody wants something
	You just want me

A gardener, Jennifer herself expresses a predominant transformational mobility ideology, but her reference to these three popular artists and songs helps demonstrate that the schemas mobility ideologies represent may be widely available in public musical culture. Rashad points out how they may be widely available in the public culture of popular non-fiction. This evidence is anecdotal, but nonetheless is suggestive of the potential for broader patterns extending well beyond my demographically narrow group of participants. Yet, the three main mobility ideology categories I identify here also resonate strongly with diverse accounts of Western (and, particularly, American) individualisms that have been developing over more than a century and which have consistently linked ideas about specific meanings of the individual or of the self in society to strategies of social action and to beliefs about what social actions and outcomes are possible, right, or good.

To briefly review these works, I will begin with *Habits of the Heart* (1985), which made a nationwide splash with its diagnosis and critique of American individualisms and the chronic problems ailing American political life. Authors Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton laid out utilitarian, expressive, and therapeutic individualisms, which, they argued, arose from earlier (biblical, republican), colonial-era forms and corresponded with major currents in American cultural and political thought (Whitman and Emerson are authors *par excellence* of expressive individualism, for instance). These individualisms shape, Bellah and coauthors argue, individual commitments to social institutions (like marriage), organizations (like religious or civic bodies), and moral views on the meaning of

justice and the nature of a good society. Particular groups, mainly related to class status, cleave to particular individualisms.

    Habits of the Heart echoed threads woven throughout an earlier and similarly influential work, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) by David Riesman, Reuel Denney, and Nathan Glazer, which argued that modes of individualism (tradition-directed, inner-directed, and other-directed inclinations) followed demographic patterns of population growth and decline and similarly bore significant socio-political consequences. And subsequent works have echoed *Habits of the Heart*. In *Talk of Love* (2001), her book on cultures of romantic love, Ann Swidler (who also coauthored *Habits of the Heart*) studies middle class white Americans in California, and identifies a three-part typology of American ideologies which "develop images of how to create enduring relationships": utilitarian individualism, fundamentalist Christianity, and a therapeutic ethic (Swidler 2001, 146). She writes:

> In all three of these understandings, the key to enduring connection is work on the self, although the nature of the self differs. The utilitarian self is composed mainly of wants. It risks mistaking those wants (failing to 'get its priorities straight') and thus not getting what it really desires. For the Christian fundamentalist, the self is the source of egocentric, sometimes unruly desires that must be tamed through will, through love of God that strengthens the will, and through obedience to God so that the self becomes a vehicle of His will. For the therapeutic individualist, the self is the seat of authentic feelings and needs that must be explored, brought to light, and expressed (Swidler 2001, 146).

In this concise passage, the correspondence with mobility ideologies is particularly clear: Swidler's "utilitarian self" mirrors the agentic mobility ideology of the climbers, her "fundamentalist" self echoes the inclination toward self-improvement of gardeners' transformational mobility ideology, and her "therapeutic individualist" desires to bring forth the "true self," much as emancipatory seekers aim to do.

    Working from the philosophical and anthropological traditions respectively, Charles Taylor (1989) and Richard Shweder (2003) also develop similar, tripartite typologies of individualisms, but make the broader claim that these types apply to societies throughout the global West (Taylor 1989) or even, in Shweder's case, across human civilizations. Indeed, the breadth of these claims echoes similar ones made in foundational texts of sociological theory.

    In *On Suicide* (1897), for example, Durkheim argues that egotistical suicide results from a lack of integration, either in religious institutions (the church), in the family, or in something akin to civil society. Altruistic suicide results from the other extreme: a very great degree of integration, as in "Eastern" societies and military officers in the West. Anomic suicide results from anomie – rulelessness or normlessness – that obtains during periods of intensive societal upheaval or change. In other words, Durkheim argues that variation in the predominant types of suicide and suicide rates results from variation in the degree of social (dis)integration. But, his argument extends farther: he argues that egotism, altruism, and anomie are in fact moral ideals or currents that run throughout all human societies:

> There is no moral ideal that does not combine egotism, altruism, and a degree of anomie, in proportions that vary from one society to another: social life assumes both that the individual has a certain personality, that he is ready to give it up if the community so demands, and finally that he is to some extent open to ideas of progress. *This is why there is no people in which these three currents of opinion do not coexist, though they incline humankind in three different or even contradictory directions* (Durkheim 1897, 356, italics mine).

Durkheim's moral ideal-types – altruism, egotism, and anomie – again bear striking similarities to the kinds of differences I typologize in mobility ideologies. His altruistic individuals bend the self around the demands of their environment, working upon and even sacrificing the self to conform to strong social norms in ways that are not so dissimilar from the gardeners of mobility ideology. Like the climbers, Durkheim's egotistical individuals are most involved in their own affairs, decisions, and, especially, in their individual will. And like the seekers, Durkheim's anomic individuals desire an escape from society's lacunae or disjunctures. These correspondences are elaborated in Table 10, and, given his universalizing claims, would likely be unsurprising to Durkheim.

Table 10. Correspondences of Durkheimian Moral Ideal-types and Mobility Ideologies

	Altruistic	Egotistical	Anomic
Durkheimian suicide type (by cause)	Individual is too tightly integrated into social institutions (culture, religion, military)	Individual is too loosely integrated into the church, family, or other social institutions; when "religious individualism" prevails	Individual integration in society is disturbed by rapid or widespread social upheaval
	The person is unworthy of group membership; the person longs for erstwhile membership; the person hopes for virtue or righteousness; the person annihilates the self to confirm group membership	The person is an individual; the person is "too free" and can act too independently	The person must be freed from chaos/the impossibility of action
Mobility ideology	The self must be changed	The self must act upon the world	The self must be emancipated or expressed
	Agentic	Transformational	Emancipatory

Yet it would be a radical oversimplification to claim that each of these typologies is rooted in some universal sociological truth; to say that mobility ideologies are the same as Bellah and coauthors' individualisms or Durkheim's moral ideals; or, worse, that mobility ideologies apply across cultural contexts. I do not believe the evidence supports these claims. However, I find it useful to draw out these resonances, for three reasons. First, the works reviewed above indicate that scholars across varying times, places, and data sources have noticed social patterns in cultural meanings of the self and have linked beliefs about the self to social action. Second, the patterns of mobility ideologies seem, in this analysis, to follow a similar organization. And third, the contents of the various ideal-typical categories, including mobility ideologies, bear some notable resemblances to each other. Together, this suggests that mobility ideologies may be far more ubiquitous, and far more historically-rooted, than can be confidently claimed from evidence within the present study. This possibility should be examined in future research.

Ideology and Social Structure

Mobility ideologies seem to have social origins, but does society also shape which mobility ideology an individual holds? Or is a person's mobility ideology essentially random? As

we have seen, mobility ideologies vary within race and gender groups, are observed across them, and are closely similar to other patterns of individualism observed in other groups in Western societies. There is also some evidence here that mobility ideologies vary within levels of relative advantage and disadvantage (see the notes on Jennifer, Jeremy, and Aden, and Lamont, Darren, and Mona, above). And we have seen that, while women are over-represented among gardeners and under-represented among climbers, meaningful proportions (20% or more) of participants of both genders observed here each hold transformational, agentic, and emancipatory mobility ideologies. Further, my data contain three sets of people who either are siblings who grew up together or are closely related family members who similarly grew up in the same household. In each set, the participants differ from each other in their mobility ideologies: there is one climber-seeker duo, one gardener-climber-seeker trio, and one gardener-climber-climber-seeker quartet. So, there is some indication that mobility ideologies vary within family units as well. What determines, then, which mobility ideologies are inculcated within individuals?

Gender seems to make it relatively more or less *likely* that individuals will hold transformational or agentic mobility ideology, but does not strictly determine that a person will hold one or the other. Unless mobility ideology is otherwise stochastic, something else is in play. And indeed, thought the causes may seem diffuse in context, they are social and institutional in origin. By reexamining key cases, we can see that they revolve around two entities that strongly organize the lives of children, adolescents, and young adults: the family, and school (see also Bourdieu 2000[1997], 148, 167; Bourdieu and Passeron 2000[1970]).

Apart from being social settings in which young people spend the vast majority of their time, family and school also constitute a nexus of considerable needs, expectations, and cultural narratives. Children are dependent on adults for their care and safety, for example, and also, as Bourdieu argues, for recognition (Bourdieu 2000[1997], 167). Families are socially expected to behave in certain ways; school is "supposed" to look or feel a certain way and deliver certain benefits; or young people are "supposed" to feel and act a certain way toward school (which is bound up with achievement ideology). Through experience, young people recognize dissonances or consonances between their needs or expectations and reality – and this becomes the new set of facts about which they must make sense.

Janae, for example, saw throughout high school that she could overcome any obstacle (such as her father's incarceration and losing everything in a fire) and achieve at a high level. College, though, presented her with a new institutional setting, unfamiliar challenges, unsympathetic and sometimes racist advisors, and a string of academic failures. Her old strategy of doubling down on her ambition no longer worked, her trust in her capacities faltered, and she reached a crisis moment. In the aftermath, she needed a new way to make sense of her experiences, and turned, with the help of her church-going colleagues, to a narrative of growth and inner transformation. Similarly, Lamont's anger (at root, about his family's poverty and how they were treated) was socially interpreted in strongly negative ways, in school, in the workplace, and in his community; he sought to change this interpretation so that he could remain in his daughter's life and live in safety and comfort. He pursued an inner curriculum of anger transformation in order to work toward his goals.

Britnee, by contrast, had a more mixed experience of educational institutions: in both elementary and secondary school, as well as in college, they were places to be navigated, as opposed to places of truth-telling about herself. Sometimes she was treated well, and sometimes she wasn't – but she experienced both help and hindrance in these spaces, learning that she could navigate them if she made the right moves. And, throughout Britnee's childhood, her family was

mostly secure: she had an unshakeable bond with her mother, who was the caregiver she remembered from childhood. Darren also had a mixed experience of educational institutions: they failed to teach him to read, then helped him access college, then kicked him out right before graduation, then helped him become the first in his family to earn a degree. The belief in the ups and downs of opportunity, and the belief that he was capable of meeting them, that characterizes Darren's agentic mobility ideology reflects his life experience.

Family experiences appear equally profound in shaping worldview. Family is a fundamentally important institution in Mona's life, for instance, in part because it has been under sustained threat, and she is deeply attached to maintaining its security. At the same time, she experiences these attachments as confining, in part because of homophobia, and in part because her younger brothers are involved in beef in their neighborhood, which is one of concentrated disadvantage. She is confined in very real senses, and her mobility ideology reflects this. Trinice's emancipatory mobility ideology also seems linked to her family, by which she feels unprotected and betrayed, the result of childhood abuse. Jayden, another seeker, spent lots of time with the family of his middle class best friend as a child. He noted the many contrasts between how they lived and interacted and how his own family, which was low income and struggling, did; he saw there was a different way some people lived, but recognized that the luck of the draw meant that his life would be shaped by his family's circumstances. He talks fervently about not wanting to "fall into statistics," or what he understands to be the likely social outcomes for someone of his race, class, and gender. He seeks a way out of what he learned to view as his sociological fate.

In other words, people come to hold mobility ideologies through profoundly social and structural means. My participants try to make sense of the world around them, and draw on mobility ideologies to do so, matching ideology to their subjective experiences of objective conditions. In a society that prizes individualism, identity, and the self (Bellah et al. 1985), it is unsurprising that the sense-making ideologies individuals draw upon would revolve around similar themes. The on-going process of accounting for reality means that mobility ideologies appear more open-ended than fixed, for example: they are not so deeply inculcated that they cannot be changed if or as people's experiences or objective conditions warrant it (as we see in the cases of Rashad and Janae). This also explains why people from the same families, who grew up in the same households, can hold such varying worldviews: individuals may interpret similar events or experiences in different ways, but usually draw on public culture schemas to do so. Which schemas people draw on may be further shaped by gender stereotypes, as we have also seen.[21]

Ideology and Mobility

How do mobility ideologies relate to mobility? A neat response to this question might claim that specific ideologies put individuals on upwardly mobile trajectories. In this case, the data do not support such claims: throughout Chapters 3, 4 and 5, we have seen that people who hold the same mobility ideologies are developing very different mobility pathways.

Among the gardeners, for instance, Janae's belief that she "just need[s] to grow" in order to reach her goal of becoming an oncologist keeps her doggedly taking pre-med requirements on an excruciatingly slow community college track. Her social network, though supportive of her

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[21] It is also possible that the distribution of mobility ideologies varies across race, ethnicity, class, age, and other groups, as is suggested in the case of gender here. Because my sampling strategy does not aim to be representative of these groups, the present data is unable to draw conclusions on this point.

personal development, is not helping her navigate higher education or consider alternative goals. The combination of her specific (and inflexible) aspiration, her extant social capital, and her beliefs about her self, action, and context (her mobility ideology) mean that Janae persists exhaustingly, but makes little headway. Yet Russell, the formerly shy student government leader and aspiring social worker, experiences something different as a gardener. As he tells it, his belief that he needed to grow "out of [his] comfort zone" pushed him into campus activities and jobs that built his network and résumé, and both oriented him to and helped him access a selective MSW program. His mobility ideology helped shape the exposures, aspirations, and social and cultural capital that have set him on an upwardly mobile path.

From the cases of Janae and Russell, it could seem that educational attainment shapes mobility, not ideology. Certainly, Russell's degree is playing a key role in his trajectory. But, Russell attributes his college success to his mindset about exiting his "comfort zone." And other cases, like Lamont (the property manager with "anger issues" who stopped out of community college), help differentiate between mobility ideology and educational attainment. Lamont is on an upwardly mobile path, earning $25/hr (plus benefits and a housing discount), and expects soon to be promoted to supervisor (with a $5-$10/hr pay raise). This path opened to him when he changed his social network by moving—first to Phoenix, then Dallas—and when he used "anger management" to change how he related to people and regulate how, as a low-income Black man in America, he was perceived. Having "worked" on his anger, the big difference, for Lamont, is peace and stability. He says, "I'm not in trouble. I don't have to worry about getting physical with nobody. I don't have to worry about somebody calling the cops on me because they're scared because I'm elevating my voice, or-- Nothing like that. It just feels good to just be like, 'You know what? It is what it is. Walk away.'" By believing he needs to change and by doing inner work, Lamont leverages his handiness and new capacity for relationships to shape his aspirations and become upwardly mobile.

Despite their focus on skill, knowledge, risk, and strategy, climbers demonstrate a similar variation when it comes to mobility pathways. Although Darren, the college grad who is making $18/hr as a landscaper, has clear aspirations, and has gained cultural capital (knowing how to "co-exist with the people in the world [he's] trying to live in because you can't be super ghetto and live in a white collar world") as well as a bachelor's degree, he has not gained access to the field, sports management, he wants to work in, despite many applications on Indeed.com. His agentic mobility ideology may be necessary to some of his gains to date, but—absent different social capital or access to job opportunities—may not be sufficient for reaching his goals. His path is uncertain. On the other hand, master's degree-holding Quentin has already achieved upward mobility in terms of both income and occupational status relative to his family of origin—which, as shown above, he attributes to his belief in himself and his capacity to network. In other words, he attributes his success to the development of social and cultural capital that he pursued as a result of his agentic worldview. Among both gardeners and climbers, mobility ideology relates to mobility pathways in complex, highly individualized ways.

Seekers, however, disrupt this open-ended pattern. Because seekers aim to free or express their true selves, the vast majority disdain workplace advancement (like Mona, who prefers volunteerism over more work hours) or side hustles (like Darius, who quit his), and actively deprioritize wage labor (like Aden and Trinice, who live inexpensively and work only as much as they need to get by). Sam is an exception: he aspires to a career in software engineering specifically because it is lucrative. (But, part of its appeal lies in what a flexible schedule and more money would allow him to do musically.) Regardless of degree attainment, many of their

current mobility paths are more reproductive than upward because their aspirations are more expressive than economic (like Darius, Aden, and Trinice), or because they do not feel at liberty to pursue their aspirations (like Mona, who wants to become a speech therapist), even when opportunities exist (as in Mona's case, because of her supportive supervisor).

In other words, the evidence shows that mobility ideology does not straightforwardly determine mobility paths among my participants. Yet it demonstrates that mobility ideology is nonetheless consequential to mobility processes: mobility ideology interacts with aspirations and social and cultural capital, and through this interaction shapes the mobility pathways my participants are developing. It is important to be clear on this point: as I emphasized in the Introduction and in Chapter 1, this project is not focused on mobility *outcomes*. Instead, it traces intermediate moments of mobility projects as they develop, examining how mobility pathways are taking shape, and recognizing that they could well change in the future. My argument is not that mobility ideologies determine whether or not individuals become upwardly mobile, but rather that, as belief systems, they shape how people strive toward their goals (and can shape what their goals are, as is particularly striking among the seekers). From a cultural sociology perspective, this open-endedness is unsurprising, because 1) culture is generally not understood to be systematic in a narrowly predictive way, and 2) culture is instead understood as complex and interactive, composed of elements of many different types that interface relatively closely or loosely, in varying ways (Lizardo 2017; Swidler 2001). At a broader theoretical level, these findings show that culture, in the way that it shapes ideology, relates to inequality by enabling and constraining mobility processes, in addition to its role in social reproduction (cf. Hochschild 2012[1989]; MacLeod 1987; Willis 1977).

It may be tempting to infer from these findings that social policy and programs should coach individuals toward certain mobility ideologies and away from others. Or, similarly, a hasty read might lead some to conclude, echoing culture of poverty arguments, that if individuals fail to advance it is simply because they hold the wrong ideologies or are using the wrong strategies. I believe the evidence presented here strongly cautions against such interpretations. First, it is clear that mobility ideologies are themselves socially structured, and operate, at least in part, at a subconscious level. They also regard the meaning of the self. Trying to address inequality by transforming the meaning of the self at an individual and subconscious level implies that individuals are personally responsible for structural conditions, and, further, are responsible in (subconscious) ways that are difficult to access. Second, experiences of social institutions (like family and school) and of inequalities within social structures shape the mobility ideologies individuals hold over time: in addition to being in significant part subconscious, they also appear relatively durable. Third, mobility ideologies interact with social and cultural capital, which also play an important role in shaping mobility pathways. Mobility itself is far from monocausal. And, more concretely: in this study, people with all three mobility ideologies contend with racial prejudice and labor market discrimination, low pay in unstable jobs, high costs for housing, food, and transportation, and considerable caregiving responsibilities. No amount of altering individual views on the self, social action, and social context would change those facts and the practical and material challenges they create.

Race, Mobility, Ideology

How does race matter for my participants? Race matters in their experiences, meaning making, and mobility pathways in the sense that they have been racialized as individuals, and exist within racialized social structures. Racialized inequality profoundly structures my

participants' *means* of mobility by shaping the family backgrounds, communities, institutions, and workplaces with and in which they interact; it also shapes their social and cultural capitals. We have seen that they very often express the ways in which this is plain to them. By constraining their exposures, racialized inequality also structures my participants' aspirations and sense of what is possible (as we can see, for instance, in Jennifer's comment about not knowing "what kinds of jobs are out there").

At the same time, social scientists are used to thinking about racial inequality (and other forms of inequality, like class and gender-based inequality) as being driven and shaped by differential treatment, access, resources, etc. meted out on the basis of racial and ethnic identity. That is, racial inequality is promulgated on the basis of socially-constructed categorical *difference*. Mobility ideologies suggest something additional and distinct: that U.S. inequality, including racial inequality, is also shaped by a patterned set of ideological forms that are potentially widely *shared* across categorical groups. Precisely because of their ubiquity, mobility ideologies' presence and effects are obscured.

To extend this point slightly farther: in theories of racial capitalism, differential treatment and status assigned on the basis of socially-produced, ascribed categories (like race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.) enable exploitative social relations, facilitating the growth of capital and the reproduction of social inequity (Robinson 1983; Roediger 1991). Mobility ideologies seem to function on a related, but inverted, principle: culturally-produced differences (in beliefs about the self) are broadly shared across ascribed categories. This masks their presence. Being hidden makes them effective in contributing to social reproduction: they enable and direct individual striving within a system that the strivers simultaneously recognize as unfair (more on this below). In other words, the production of social difference may serve social reproduction in both relatively overt or declarative ways, as in the creation of ascribed groups, and in relatively covert or nondeclarative ways, as in the creation of differing and obscured selfhoods.

Ideology, Means, and Ends

Does everyone have a *mobility* ideology? As presented here, some mobility ideologies appear more focused on achieving individual upward mobility, and others less so. The gardeners and the climbers, for instance, use somewhat different strategies to pursue essentially the same upwardly mobile ends. They orient their striving around differing logics, cleaving toward either inner transformation or external, agentic action – but most take on multiple jobs or side hustles to make ends meet and work toward goals of financial stability, perceiving some degree of opportunity for advancement. Seekers, however, perceive confinement, and follow a logic of emancipation. As such, they reject side hustles and the idea that they ought to "play America's game" in the near term, focusing instead on their own expressive freedom as individuals. (Like the gardeners and climbers, though, seekers' long-term hopes mostly still revolve around financial security and the nuclear family—a contradiction which they have not resolved.) And the pair of connectors I interview, who follow a logic of interdependence, do not reject the near-term pursuit of upward mobility but rather expand the definition of who it should include. Whereas seekers reject the American game of advancement, connectors reject its implicit individualism.

In other words, using the term "mobility ideology" to encompass this ideological range is not meant to imply that my participants have equal investments in the American Dream's imperatives or in upward mobility per se. Instead, it is meant to signify a range of ideological positions relative to the concept of mobility. In this I follow, for instance, Arlie Hochschild's use

of "gender ideology," in *The Second Shift*, to indicate a category comprised of three ideal-types, each describing specific beliefs about gender relations[22], as opposed to following Jay MacLeod's use of "achievement ideology," in *Ain't No Makin' It*, to describe a single ideal-type linking hard work, educational attainment, and success. As I mentioned earlier, I believe it entirely likely that other "mobility ideologies" – other belief systems linking self, social action, and social context – exist. In fact, I suspect most people living in the United States today could be said to have a mobility ideology of some kind.

Indeed, the *range* of mobility ideologies helps to illustrate what Robert Merton called "adaptations" in his classic article (introduced in Chapter 1) querying the social consequences of America's cultural obsession with wealth and social ascent ("Social Structure and Anomie" [1938]). For Merton, five "adaptations" (or ideal-typical cases) represent various degrees of "acceptance" or "rejection" and "substitution" of socially-sanctioned ends and means.[23] Social agents' degree of acceptance or rejection of existing ends and means depends on the degree of inner tension or frustration they feel regarding their ability to access or take effective action toward these ends and means. People who accept both ends and means enact "conformity" to social norms; people who accept ends but not means enact "innovation"; people who reject ends but accept means enact "ritualism"; people who reject both ends and means enact "retreatism"; and people who reject ends and means while replacing both with "new goals and standards" for achieving them enact "rebellion" (Merton 1938, 676). Merton does not use the language of ideology, but his typology clarifies the nature of my participants' varying mobility ideologies.

Gardeners and climbers, for example, encounter and are reflexive about the tensions between their aspirations and the availability of effective means for attaining them: they recognize and repudiate race, class, and gender-based discrimination and structural inequity. They know they face far more obstacles than, for example, their white and wealthier peers. But the recognition of structural barriers does not, in their cases, lead them to dismiss the possibility of upward mobility. Instead, guided by beliefs that their selves are either changeable or capable, they navigate around obstacles, treating them as intractable (if also abhorrent) elements of their social existence, and remaining invested in both upward mobility and socially legitimate strategies for achieving it. They most closely mirror the "conformity" case of Merton's ideal-types.

Seekers, on the other hand, most closely mirror Merton's "rebellion" case: they reject prescribed goals and methods, substituting their own aspirations and strategies. But, their rejection (and thus substitution) is often incomplete: they reject the imperative of upward mobility, but not of individualism. Darius comes closest to a full-throated rebellion: he says that he wants to develop "an alternative to capitalism." Yet his accounts of how he spends his time

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[22] Hochschild writes, "Each person's gender ideology defines what sphere a person *wants* to identify with (home or work) and how much power in the marriage one wants to have (less, more, or the same amount)" (Hochschild 2012[1989], 15). She identifies three types of gender ideology: traditional, transitional, and egalitarian.

[23] Merton writes that "[t]he result [of which adaptation a person enacts] will be determined the by particular personality, and thus, the *particular* cultural background, involved" (Merton 1938, 678, italics original). By "cultural background," Merton means experiences which define the norms, moral imperatives, and courses of action that an individual finds to be socially valuable. Mobility ideology would form part of what Merton calls "cultural background," because it similarly derives from the aggregation of particular – that is, individual – social experiences.

describe a hunt for individual, as opposed to collective, emancipation: he is more focused on finding and expressing himself than on joining social movements that share his views. What remains obscured by his mobility ideology, which emphasizes the liberation of the self, is the social construction of his subjectivity; what is legitimated by his mobility ideology is a supremacy of the individual consistent with the American Dream.

Why Mobility "Ideology"? Part Two

This returns us to the important topic of the subconscious. In Chapter 1, I argued that "mobility *ideology*" was the most appropriate term for the patterns I have observed because the sociological use of "ideology" implies a belief system that both originates in or reflects material and social reality and simultaneously obscures and legitimates other elements of the social order. The existence of this illusory side of ideology remains hidden or subconscious. So, what has the foregoing analysis of mobility projects and their attendant mobility ideologies revealed about what is subconscious versus conscious to my participants? Further, my data are drawn from in-depth interviews, not participant observation: I do not follow my participants around in their daily lives, but instead rely on my participants' self-reports about their inner and outer experiences. How, then, can I observe what is subconscious, operating outside of my participants' conscious and verbalized awareness?

Here the "mobility projects" framework also introduced in Chapter 1 is useful. By parsing the interactions within mobility projects of means, ends, beliefs (ideologies), and pathways (shaped by action), we can see several subconscious moments to come to the fore. The first subconscious moment is revealed in the disconnect between my participants' rejection of the American Dream and their relentless striving. They verbally dismiss meritocracy, but the degree to which they remain subconsciously invested in its key tenets – particularly, in hard work toward advancement – is revealed in their reported thinking, decisions, actions, and habits.[24] Participants directly describe the strategies they use to pursue their aspirations, and their beliefs about why those strategies will be effective. They articulate what they believe about the opportunity structure and why; they similarly and explicitly name their beliefs about the role of other people in their mobility projects. (However, as Swidler [2001] and Lizardo [2017] point out, the fact that my participants can articulate strategies does not mean they are always skilled, resourced, or effective in using the same strategies.) Their critique of the American Dream is pointed and structural—yet they still strive for individual advancement, exactly as the American Dream advises. Here, the subconscious emerges in comparing individual beliefs to individual behavior, or comparison among the elements of a mobility project.

The second subconscious moment is revealed in considering what is obscured from my participants' direct understanding. Inequality, for instance, is de-naturalized for my participants. They understand the ways in which they are categorized and structurally subordinated; they

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[24] Jerolmack and Kahn (2014) argue that using interview data to link beliefs and behavior produces what they call an "attitudinal fallacy," meaning that reported behavior (as gathered in interviews) is a poor substitute for directly observed behavior (as in ethnography). They write, "self-reports of attitudes and behaviors are of limited value in explaining what people actually do*"* (Jerolmack and Kahn 2014, 178). (Arguing for what they call "methodological pluralism," Lamont and Swidler [2014] rebut that this critique depends on a narrow view of both interviewing and ethnography, and argue that interviewing usefully facilitates comparative research designs, allows access to individuals' imagined meanings and inner experiences, and permits probing on counterfactuals, among other uses.) In this instance (comparing my participants' views and actions regarding the American Dream), I highlight something different: discrepancies between reported beliefs and reported actions. Because both are reported, we might expect consonance between the two, making their dissonance more striking.

recognize that they lack certain knowledge and skills associated with different social positions than their own. Inequality is not obscured to them. However, what remains naturalized or obscured is the self and their understanding of it. Rather than extending their social critique to their inner lives, my participants view the self as a natural – as opposed to social – object: something that simply *is*, not something that is socially structured. We see this in two senses.

First, we see it within individual mobility projects. For instance, as Janae moves from a more agentic stance (believing that her track record of overcoming adversity to graduate at the top of her high school class means her self is capable and will ensure her success in college) toward a transformational one (believing instead that she "just need[s] to grow"), she understands the shift as the revelation of a greater truth about herself, not the transition from one socially-constructed frame to another. She says, "I learned I have a lot of problems. It's crazy I never found it out in high school." Similarly, Rashad, describing his transition from enjoying books about self-transformation to preferring books about behavioral control and action, seems to think that this change represents an edified development in his reading tastes. Why the change? The old books "are just people trying to just make money…They're saying obvious things like *believe in yourself* and all this stuff. I feel like you don't have to spend money to get that information." He is subconsciously choosing books that correspond with his changing operating definition of the self. He perceives the change at the level of action – he used to read one kind of book; now he reads another – but does not link this to change at the level of the self.

Second, and more broadly, comparing across different mobility projects demonstrates the naturalization of the self among my different participants. They tend to believe that they themselves hold the correct or universal understanding of what a self is and means: what they believe is both true, in their view, and is probably what most people believe. The meaning of the self is so obvious it goes without saying; I derive it from what is implied in our interviews. What they do not appear to see is how what is obvious to them is in fact socially formed (from a combination of available cultural scripts and their own social experiences), nor do they seem to perceive the variation in how their near peers understand and approach selfhood.

The two subconscious moments – the misrecognition of persistent investments in the American Dream, and the misrecognition of socially constructed selfhood – are linked in the sense that the latter enables the former. For the gardeners and the climbers in particular, ideas of the self permit and even in some sense require beliefs about socioeconomic opportunity and how it may be pursued. Mobility ideologies constitute this link as belief systems that connect notions of self, social action, and social context.

Mobility Ideology and the American Dream
Two foundational puzzles have motivated this research. In opening the Introduction with the stories of Janae, Britnee, and Mona, three young women who share similar backgrounds and present experiences of precarity, I first asked why low-income Black young adults from New Orleans make different sense of similar experiences. I have argued that, because of variation in their individual experiences of family and school, they draw on different elements of public culture – different mobility ideologies – to make sense of their experiences and structure their aspirations and actions.

The second puzzle, developed further in Chapter 2, regards the American Dream. I showed that my participants are deeply skeptical of meritocracy: they have personal and historical knowledge of profound inequality, particularly related to race and class. They also believe that they are deserving, hardworking, and possess talent, skill, and good character. They

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believe they merit advancement, but reject the ideas that opportunity is equally available in American society and that hard work and merit reliably yield upward mobility. They are ambivalent about achievement ideology's emphasis on educational attainment. Nevertheless, faced with considerable obstacles and cognizant of structural inequality, they strive relentlessly toward their goals, which themselves reflect core objectives of the American Dream: financial stability, home ownership, a nuclear family, and a bit of leisure time or resources with which to "give back." Given that they reject the American Dream at a social level, but remain personally attached to its ends, what structures their striving?

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 demonstrated that my participants organize their relentless efforts through the lenses of mobility ideologies: belief systems rooted in specific meanings about selfhood. In other words, they replace an ideology of merit with an ideology of the self. The individualism that characterizes the American Dream is alive and well, but its meaning is altered: instead of believing that they will be fairly judged by an external standard of individual merit, my participants assess and plan using various, seemingly internal meanings of selfhood, which nonetheless have social origins. This accommodates disenchantment while structuring striving, allowing individuals to both consciously reject and subconsciously reproduce (by participating in) the social order.

Consent v. Misrecognition

Why do people consent to living in inequitable societies if they are not physically coerced to do so? Beginning with the work of Antonio Gramsci (1971), scholars have studied this question keenly. They have pointed to the way that labor processes secure consent to capitalist exploitation in industrial settings (Burawoy 1979), to the production of docile and responsibilized neoliberal subjects (Foucault 2004 [1979]), to the misrecognition of domination (Bourdieu 2001[1999]), to the role of mass media in producing consent (Herman and Chomsky 1988), and, as has been more extensively reviewed in this project, to the legitimating ideological roles of liberalism, meritocratic and other individualisms, and the American Dream (Bellah et al. 1985; Chinoy 1957; Sennett and Cobb 1973).

The evidence presented here generates an additional hypothesis: in contemporary America, one way that consent to participate – to strive – within an inequitable society is generated is through subconscious investments in transformational, agentic, and emancipatory versions of selfhood. Among my participants, and perhaps much more broadly as well, consent is produced through ideologies of the self that affirm the supremacy of the individual and tell it how to take action, while also leaving room to acknowledge structural inequity by jettisoning investments in the traditionally meritocratic dimensions of the American Dream.

Of course, among my participants, there are degrees of consent: many want to "give back" to their communities in some regard, making life less hard for the people around them. They do not accept unequal terms on face value, but rather want to help change them, in varying ways and over the long haul. The seekers in particular tend to opt out of side hustles and material striving in favor of expressive or, as Aden puts it, "spiritual" freedom. Their emancipatory mobility ideologies define their selves specifically as trapped or confined – and their participation in what Trinice calls "America's game" often looks different as a result. But the freedom the seekers search for (as well as the transformation and the agency sought by the gardeners and climbers) is usually for themselves first and foremost; it still embraces individualism in this key regard. This makes the suggestion (in this data, by Marie and Daria – but also from many other sources, including indigenous cosmologies [e.g., Simpson 2017]) of a

selfhood in which individual selves are defined in relations of mutual dependence all the more interesting.

The contradictory coexistence of conscious consent and subconscious misrecognition among my participants poses an interesting challenge to two prominent theories of domination in particular. In Chapter 1, I briefly introduced these as Gramsci's theory of consent to hegemony and Bourdieu's theory of misrecognition of symbolic violence.

In Gramsci's theory of hegemony, a ruling class presents its particular interests as the interests of all members of civil society through the diffusion of such ideas in cultural and institutional life, thus "manufacturing" a broad social consent. At the same time, "organic intellectuals" and other members of dominated classes have the "good sense" to recognize their subordination, and can wage counter-hegemonic struggles (through strategic positioning and direct confrontation) against the dominant classes (Gramsci 1971). In Bourdieusian theory, symbolic violence is the symbolic action of power that produces its own misrecognition: that is, symbolic violence causes social agents to mistakenly take the interests and effects of power – very often, their own subordination within a power hierarchy – to be legitimate and "common sense." Unlike Gramsci's organic intellectuals, members of subordinated groups generally misperceive their domination in Bourdieu's account (Bourdieu and Passeron 2000[1970]).

My participants could be said to misrecognize power's constitution of individual selves: this constitution is implicitly recognized as legitimate by gardeners, climbers, and seekers (though is troubled by connectors). The existence and nature of the self appears to my participants as both self-evident and legitimate, scarcely rising to the level of consciousness within them. At the same time, however, my participants see clearly their variously subordinated positions within race, class, gender, and sexual hierarchies. Some remain attached to, or legitimize, educational attainment (education systems being one of Bourdieu's prime examples of institutionalized symbolic violence), but many others do not. They generally have integrated a recognition of domination into their belief systems (i.e., their mobility ideologies), and have rejected the premise of meritocracy as a result. They recognize both their subordinated positions, and the social and cultural capitals whose acquisition could change their positions (for instance, they are actively learning the right linguistic and behavioral codes, strategically leveraging or expanding their social networks, or learning about debt, credit, and personal finance). They grok the social construction of classification-driven social hierarchies, but not the social construction of selves. Consequently, and in varying ways, they turn toward their selves for the solutions to their mobility-related problematics (even including rejecting the imperatives of upward mobility in order to free the self, as the seekers do).

In other words, my participants' relationships both to what Bourdieu would call "symbolic power" and to what Gramsci would call "hegemony" are ambivalent: their belief systems both accurately perceive some of its workings (regarding social hierarchies) and contain an element of illusion (regarding the self). My participants' attachments to their respective notions of the self are in many ways an excellent example of what Bourdieu describes (in different context, regarding taste) as the violence of making a virtue out of necessity: given the reality of constrained mobility opportunities, fostering the transformation, agency, or emancipation of the self becomes a procedure for mediating the punishing disjunctures of expectations and reality (Bourdieu 1984[1979] [*Distinction*]; Silva 2013 makes a related argument focused on transformation, or "therapeutic selfhood"). But such virtue-making underlines the ways in which their practical experiences link elements of Bourdieusian and

Gramscian theory: it is possible that, in the American context, living with the good-sense recognition of socioeconomic inequality requires misrecognition of the common-sense self.

Limitations and Future Directions

Of course, this analysis is limited in important ways. There are, for instance, the basic limitations of the sample in terms of its size, geographical constraints, gender balance, and race, class, and age distributions: the sample is not representative on these dimensions. Future work should considerably expand sampling, examining whether the patterns observed here hold among other groups, including patterns regarding the qualitative aftermaths of college access. Also, the interviews I conduct are neither longitudinal (while I gather retrospective accounts, I do not directly observe change over time) nor ethnographic (I do not observe participant behavior apart from the interview context). I am unable to make claims about mobility *outcomes* (focusing instead on the development of their antecedent *pathways*), or to verify individual reports of behavior against independent observation.

Further, I am inferring subconscious (or nondeclarative) cultural forms from semantic evidence: from the descriptions people offer about their meaning-making. In the Introduction, I argued that semi-structured, in-depth, life history interviews (like those I have conducted) are useful for revealing both action and practical consciousness in important ways, but many more analytical approaches to the study of conscious action and subconscious selfhood are unexplored here. Further, this study focuses on nondeclarative and declarative *private* culture, while tracing semantic or symbolic elements of *public* culture in secondary ways (i.e., through individual discussion of the American Dream; through self-help books and song lyrics referenced in interview content; and through a review of research on Western individualisms) (Lizardo 2017). It does not attempt a thorough-going empirical analysis of contemporary, public selfhood discourses, which would be illuminating.

Despite these limitations, the evidence presented here makes meaningful claims about both the existence of mobility ideologies and what they reveal regarding culture and inequality, and the self and the American Dream. It also raises further questions. For example, although this analysis cannot comment on population or subgroup distributions of mobility ideologies, by closely examining a non-representative sample, it generates theory that could be tested at the population level. The fact that the mobility ideologies this study inductively identifies resonate with interdisciplinary and cross-class work on Western perspectives on individuality and the self suggests that such broader examination would be fruitful. Further, this research is suggestive, but decidedly inconclusive, about a potential relationship between mobility ideology and mobility outcomes; this should be explored, potentially using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The project is also suggestive about the "selection" of mobility ideologies in individual lives, but much more evidence is needed to clarify these processes. The relationship between mobility ideologies and political ideologies is also not directly examined here (although it is perhaps indirectly approached through beliefs about inequality), and could be revealing.

Implications and Recommendations

Ideology permeates mobility. But, it does so in surprising ways. The idea that the American Dream – American ideology par excellence – shapes aspiration, action, and even public policy regarding mobility is not new. Less expected, however, is evidence that ideologies linking beliefs about the self, social action, and social context shape both individual beliefs about mobility and action toward it. That some of these ideologies are associated with a rejection of the

American Dream, or of its individualism, is likewise unanticipated. And, compared to voluminous scholarly accounts of the relationship between cultural forms and inequality, it is surprising to find that these ideologies vary so meaningfully within an intersectional (race and class) category, yet also may be shared by people whose lives are markedly different (despite being members of a homogenized group). This complicates theory about the operation of ideology.

Yet what is to be done? The lives of the young adults I interview have been deeply shaped by ideology, by institutions, by social policy, and by other forms of social structure. And their struggles have been profound. What could have made a difference for them?

Secondary Schooling

First, curricular and/or instructional improvements in their high schools could have made my participants better prepared for college-level academics, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) courses. Their high schools additionally could have given them more practice in managing independence and in developing the kinds of academic and interpersonal skills that are essential to college success. Resoundingly, my participants also have called for improved financial education at the high school level: they wish they had gained not only greater literacy in areas like budgeting, taxes, and credit, but also that they had learned about wealth-building, including saving, investing, and home ownership.

Some of my participants also shared a wish that their high schools had been honest about the fact (in their eyes) that "college is not for everybody." This is a complex statement. It seems to express both a desire not to be guided down one path to the exclusion of others, but also an embarrassed sense that maybe college wasn't *for them* individually (which perhaps could be true in some objective sense, but more likely is related to the level of preparation they received, or didn't, in high school). Public, college-preparatory high schools should ensure both that their students receive adequate preparation, and that they are apprised of a range of post-secondary options (including but not limited to higher education).

At a structural level, the data also raise concerns about the functioning of New Orleans's intended "market of schools." Proponents of charter schools argue that "school choice" creates a market, which, through competition, should both offer an array of educational options to families and boost overall performance by driving out underperforming schools. These dynamics in practice are far too complex to adequately summarize here, but are being closely watched and reported on by interested parties on both sides of the debate. From the evidence my participants share, however, it seems that the college-for-all imperative infused their experiences in a wide range of high schools citywide. This speaks to "market" homogeneity, rather than a diversity of choice, and is a challenge choice-oriented education reformers should take seriously. It also underscores some of the fundamental tensions of attempting the provision of public goods (like schooling) through ambiguously private means: the underlying philosophy assumes that school administrators will be aware of and responsive to "market" forces and "consumer" preferences, rather than be guided by personal experience, beliefs, ideology, or other, less public-minded concerns.

Higher Education

One of the enduring ironies of American higher education is that it demands teenagers become responsible for life-changing decisions (student loans, career tracks) seemingly overnight while simultaneously infantilizing college students as populations needing to be

alternatingly catered to and governed. Congress should directly involve students in college governance by requiring that higher education institutions which receive federal funding become meaningfully democratic at the campus level. (If this feels like a provocative idea, it is worth asking: why?) I have never been on a campus where the students did not have every bit as clear a sense of what was going on and what to do about it as did the faculty or administrators. The contents of their priorities and critiques may vary somewhat, but their insights are no less astute. Students are the single largest undervalued resource on American college campuses (and in American high schools) today.

For instance, the following are some areas for reform suggested by conversations with the current and former college students who participated in this research. In the areas of curriculum overhaul and faculty training, for example, postsecondary institutions should identify and investigate weed-out classes and explain or reform curricular decisions regarding course requirements and sequencing. They should further require on-going pedagogy training and development for all teaching faculty, including diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging training and ongoing support. They should increase student support with small-dollar monetary awards, sustained and effective coaching for navigating college's hidden curriculum; improve administrative efficiency in areas such as FAFSA verification and credit articulation; and reduce tuition and fees (see also Goldrick-Rab 2016; Mitchell 2021). They should also make both campus- and system-level administrators accountable to better experiences and outcomes for students by setting clear benchmarks and tying them to accessing the power, privileges, or compensation of their roles.

Career Education, Training, and Transitions

The burden of improving career education, training, and transitions should be shared by both high schools and colleges. Young adults need a much deeper sense both of career possibilities, and of how to evaluate personal fit for them. They need support to build networks in their chosen fields, and to learn how to develop a career trajectory over time. They also need help in transitioning between fields when necessary. Existing public institutions like community colleges and public libraries could serve as excellent hubs for the concentration and diffusion of resources in these areas.

Debt

The headline here is simple: end predatory inclusion in higher education (see also Cottom 2017; Taylor 2019). Crushing student loans that enrich the wealthy while immiserating young adults are what make inclusion predatory in this case. Ways to end this burden include: (1) relief for existing debt via federal loan forgiveness, (2) ending predatory state-level lending and ending the practice of withholding transcripts, which uses a student's past to ransom their future, and (3) making it illegal to profit off of the most vulnerable college students by abolishing student loans at public institutions (see also Debt Collective 2020; Mitchell 2021).

Wages & Care Work

My participants also highlight the ways they are both underpaid and under-scheduled for paid work. The federal minimum wage has been $7.25 since 2009, when it was worth about 44% more (according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics inflation calculator). To be worth what it was in 2009, the federal minimum wage today would need to rise to $10.44 – still far less than the more than $20 an hour New Orleans residents (and people across the country) need to get by

amid a hot housing market and the present high costs of food and other consumer goods. Meanwhile, the corporations many of my participants work for, their shareholders, and their executives have logged record profits and compensation. This calculus is an unnecessarily raw deal for workers, one which government at all levels should work to rectify.

Care work is a related and equally crucial topic raised by the experiences of my women participants in particular. As we have seen, many of them have caregiving roles, tending to family members who are sick or disabled, caring for their own or others' children, and helping to raise their siblings. This work, whatever its emotional benefits (and costs), is usually uncompensated financially. It is time-consuming, and unequally distributed by gender. Changing this reality by professionalizing the necessary labor would require fundamental shifts and expansions across multiple fields (from health care to education), but would be transformative in the lives (and economic prospects) of many young women I interviewed – and many others beyond them.

Collective Action

If many of these recommendations sound familiar, it is because they are. Some have circulated in public policy debates for years. As is often the case, at issue is not so much *what* to change, but the political will to change it. This points to the necessity of collective action. For instance, faculty and staff at both the secondary and postsecondary levels could play a key role in advocating for change within their institutions; nationally-powerful teachers unions could do the same at the state and federal levels. New and existing workers unions could help workers advocate for a greater share of the wealth they help to create, and for more favorable labor terms and conditions (regarding scheduling, for instance). Collectives of people (like high school or college students) who share similar interests could form at other levels, too: we see powerful examples of this in nationwide student organizing against gun violence in the wake of the 2018 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL, or, earlier that decade, in the 2011 Occupy movement for socioeconomic justice. And current justice movements, such as the Movement for Black Lives, could further amplify these concerns. They might also see fit to reject the premise of mobility entirely, electing instead to work toward a world in which trying to out-compete social peers in order to gain material advantage is simply unnecessary or nonsensical.

The Self in Society

In putting ideas about the self at the center of this analysis, I risk reproducing the cultural emphasis on individualism that animates them. Do I believe that mobility ideologies, mainly framed around individualistic selfhoods, preclude people from joining social movements or from engaging in collective action? Certainly not. They may make such participation less appealing, less obvious, or less possible in some cases—but they also could motivate individuals toward pursuing alternative versions of the future, as is suggested in the case of the seekers in particular, but also emerges in London's aspirations for public office and Quentin's "social justice heart." The evidence presented here shows that mobility ideologies shape mobility projects—but their relationship to other projects, such as political projects, begs further investigation.

Ideology claims a monopoly on truth. In this case, mobility ideologies claim to know the truth about the self: it is flawed, it is capable, it is trapped, or it is contingent. It must grow; it must act; it must break free; or it must relate. Mobility ideologies strongly organize individual action around one of these claims or another, but usually not multiple ones. In reality, though, all

of these (and more) claims about the self are likely to be true. Possibilities of transformation, agency, emancipation, and interdependence coexist in whatever we mean by our "selves," and permeate social life. They also are not the only available paths to a liberatory future.

One of the operations of sociology in general, and perhaps work on ideology in particular, is to make what is subconscious conscious, or to make the taken-for-granted strange. In making legible hidden ideologies about the self, social action, and social context, I hope that deeply interrogating the perspectives of people like Janae, Britnee, and Mona helps make strange some aspects of contemporary selfhood, and opens questions and new possibilities for meaning-making and action, both sociologically and socially. Given how our selves have been shaped, how may they also be shaped by us? To what do our selves already consent? And what selves can we call upon to meet our individual and collective moments?

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METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

Interview Guide

1. In what ways would you say your childhood was similar or different to that of your parents or caregivers? (Probe: Who did you live with? For how long? Where? Do you have siblings? Were they older or younger? What was your relationship with them like when you were growing up?)

2. What would you say were some of the happiest times in your childhood?

3. What would you say were some of the most difficult times in your childhood?

4. How would you describe your experience in elementary school? (Probe: Where did you go to school? What was it like there? What were some high and low points?)

5. What did you want for yourself at the beginning of high school? (Probe: What were your hopes for the future? Why?)

6. How would you describe your high school experience? (Probe: Did you feel you got a good education? What sorts of activities did you participate in? Did you feel a sense of belonging in high school? What were your friends like? Were they interested in college?)

7. When did you first start thinking about what would come after high school? Did anyone influence that thinking? Who and how?

8. How did you decide what to do after high school? (When did you start planning to go to college? Why? Where did you apply to college? Why did you choose those places? Where did you get in? Which did you choose, and why?)

9. Take me through your college experience. You're a freshman, arriving on campus. What was going on in your mind? (Probe: where did you live that semester? Did you have a roommate? What classes did you take? How did they go? Did you join any organizations? Did you have a job? Were you happy? How were your grades? What happened in the following semesters?)

10. What was the hardest time for you, in college? Why? What happened?

11. If you had a magic wand, what specific things would you change about college? Anything else?

12. In college, did you ever feel like you were being treated differently because of your race? (Probes: What happened? What did you do?)

13. In college, did you ever feel like you were being treated differently because of your gender or sexuality? (Probes: What happened? What did you do?)

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14. Did you make new friends in college? Tell me about your college friends. (Probe: How did you become friends? Are you still in touch?)

15. How did you pay for college? Did you take out any loans? How much? (Probes: are the loans in repayment? How much? Who is the debt servicer? What is the interest rate? What is your repayment amount? Did you negotiate it? Have you thought about refinancing your debt? Can you afford this debt right now?)

16. Tell me about life after high school/college. Are you working currently? Tell me about your job. What do you do? How did you get that job? Do you like it? (Probes: How much do you make? Do you feel you are paid fairly? What was your next job after that? How did you get that job? Do you have free time? How do you spend it? Do you have time for friends? How are you feeling about dating at the moment?)

17. What do you feel is going well in your life at the moment?

18. What has been the biggest challenge in the transition to adulthood for you?

19. When you think five or ten years into the future, what do you want for yourself, or for your life? (Probes: How will you go about attaining those things? Do you think there will be any obstacles or challenges? What are those?)

20. What do you think about the state of things in New Orleans and in the country? (Probes: Are things getting better or worse? Why do you think that is? Is this fair? Who or what do you think is responsible for that? What do you think should be done, and who should do it?)

21. Sometimes people say, "Anyone can get ahead if they work hard enough." What do you think about that? (Probes: Why? Did you always believe that? What changed?)

22. Is there anything that we've talked about today that you want to go back to or clarify? Is there anything I should have asked, but didn't?