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**Get Out to Got Out: Residential Mobility and the Language of Opportunity in
a Black Southern Louisiana Family**

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Senior Honors Thesis, Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Swarthmore College

Professor Edlin Veras, Advisor

Spring 2023

Abstract

This study examines the migration of Black, middle and upper class members of my family from Black neighborhoods in Southern Louisiana into white neighborhoods. Most of the canon on Black residential patterns question why such high levels of residential segregation remain. Thus, the existing literature explores various structural and individual reasons as to why Black households, regardless of income level, continually reside in Black neighborhoods, even though they often exhibit higher rates of poverty and associated characteristics. This research project approaches the topic from the opposite end, centering its analysis on Black individuals who move into white neighborhoods, in order to introduce a new perspective into the academic discourse. Further, I pull from Marxist frameworks to establish the racial capitalist hierarchy as the foundational structure which informs how our broader systems function and infiltrates to the level of individual decisions. This study analyzes four, in-depth interviews with family members and a close family friend, who discuss their, and in the case of one, their parent's, migration out of Southern Louisiana. Autoethnographic sections are interwoven throughout as I reflect on my own relation to this topic, which was the grounding inspiration for this inquiry. I supplement these interviews with a historical review of the era in which my participants grew up in, during the prime years of school integration in the 1970s and 1980s. I conclude that this moment in history made highly visible the connections between one's individual capital and their political and ideological positions through exercises of white flight. This becomes an imperative framework through which the participants of this study view their own practices of residential decision making. Fundamentally, what draws individuals to migrate from Black to white neighborhoods is the quest for opportunity, which signals a trade-off between living amongst

one's community or having access to increased resources. I describe this as the extra, or hidden, costs to Black residential decision making.

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Acknowledgements & Dedication

That we would all have a rhythm to understanding the world. Endless friction belies in these beats rubbing up against each other, sometimes collapsing seamlessly, in relief, and other times, painfully and hideously repelling one another. That we would all have a myth, a root, a home. That we have the means to trace this.

That precisely because of all this myth, there is one undeniable truth: a better world exists within our grasp. With all the lessons spoken and unspoken of those who have left the footprints in the mud, the dirt kicked up in the air, and the ocean a museum. For the precious and dangerous existence of Blackness which has guided us through in more ways than we can imagine.

If I truly gave the thanks owed to each and every person who touched this project, it would end up being longer than the thesis itself. That being said, I give my utmost gratitude to my advisor, Professor Edlin Veras. To Professor Nina Johnson, who shaped my academic path here at Swarthmore, but more importantly, taught me to seek joy in my work and life. To Professors Sangina Patnaik and Anthony Foy in the English Department, who have guided my love of literature during my time here, and opened up ways for me to write soul into this project. To my high school English teachers—Emily Hensley, Barbara Brown, Mark Halpern, and Bill Lynch—who first taught me how to use words to feel the world. To the Swarthmore Sociology and Anthropology Department who inspired me to be intently curious. And finally, to my family, for which this project would not exist. Their support in every way, going as far as being participants, has made this possible. My hope is for each of these people named, and those who have gone unnamed, know that this thesis serves as my love letter to them.

Introduction

It was many years ago that I was gifted Southern Louisiana. And by this, I mean, I was finally brought into the familial fold of this mythical, foreign land that had shaped every condition for my own life, without ever stepping foot there myself. For I had heard many stories of my father's childhood in Baton Rouge. The tales of family gatherings on Sunday evenings under the sticky heat, the gumbo on the stove in the kitchen, the neighbors that encouraged my father to remain on the straight and narrow, the friends my father forged, many of whom I have come to know myself over the years.

That day of the gift, many years ago, we drove over bridges and passed bayous on our way to the infamous "Red Stick". That was what Baton Rouge meant, I was told. It was French. I listened to my father's stories yet again with an eager anticipation, feeling as though I was on the precipice of experiencing this magic for myself. There was an indescribable, animated lightness to my father as he spoke. At a certain point, he turned off the GPS, with the proud declaration that he could never forget these streets. He was home.

We went to the Louisiana State Capitol which sat on a large hill. Of course, these overwhelming monuments of history, which are everywhere in Louisiana, meant little to me as a young child. I don't remember much of the building itself, other than the large elevator which took us to the balcony where we craned over the city. What I do remember, with such visceral intensity, was the grass. As we made our way back down to the lawn, I sunk into the earth and rubbed the dirt between my fingers. Then, I rolled down the giant lawn, ran back up, and rolled back down, over and over again, until I was overcome in a heap of exhaustion. I laid on the lawn, covered in grass and dirt, breathing heavily, feeling the earth underneath me, enchanted by my surroundings.

The ineffable energy of the landscape is only a piece of what I found so special about Southern Louisiana. We walked down streets where people recognized my father from just a glance although they hadn't seen each other in decades. Walking into my grandfather's barber shop, we were met with parades of hugs from friends and family and strangers alike. We heard stories about connections to the Civil Rights Movement, visited the churches, housing one of the only places where Black Catholicism proliferates within the United States. There was community and it was clustered in neighborhoods, which was entirely different from my own childhood that was spent skipping around the white areas of various metro areas.

I had found that striking magic on the lawn of the State Capitol and then again and again each place we visited between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, which had colored my father's stories, and it has never left me once. Now, I finally am able to revisit the very question that has wracked my mind ever since that day: why would anyone leave?

Like myself, researchers and scholars have long since been concerned over the rates of residential segregation in the United States, for a multitude of reasons. One being the sheer fact that it has not disappeared from our society even when many of us have been led to believe in the fantastical idea of racial progress, or a post-racial society. In a report from the Othering & Belonging Institute housed at the University of California, Berkeley, researchers concluded that out of all of the American metropolitan areas, "81% were more segregated in 2020 than they were in 1990."¹ Racial segregation of neighborhoods poses an issue because the neighborhoods

¹Menedian, Stephen, et al. "The Roots of Structural Racism Project." Othering & Belonging Institute, University of California, Berkeley, 21 June 2021, <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/roots-structural-racism>.

are fundamentally unequal in access to resources. It is well documented that neighborhood quality is correlated to opportunity and future quality of life. So much so that numerous projects such as the Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program and the Moving to Opportunity Program (MTO) have been enacted over the decades to course correct families from the conditions of highly segregated neighborhoods. Neighborhoods consisting of predominantly non-white residents exhibit rates of poverty three times higher than white neighborhoods². This has fundamental repercussions on the resources and opportunities available, and makes mobility out of residentially segregated neighborhoods an incredibly arduous task. Moreover this creates an extra cost for a non-white individual facing a residential decision. If they would like to live in a neighborhood with greater access to resources, it is almost certain that this neighborhood will be white. This tradeoff is what drew me into this line of inquiry. What drives Black individuals out of Black neighborhoods? And further, how do Black individuals come to understand this “extra cost” that is tacked onto their residential decision?

For Black families in particular, there has been a significant amount of studies and research that document that many Black families who achieve a class status of middle or upper class tend to reside in predominantly Black neighborhoods³, which tend to have higher levels of poverty, more crime, and poorer school conditions⁴. A recent study concluded that 70% of the majority Black zip codes in the US are designated as “distressed”— the lowest classification on the Economic Innovation Group’s tiers of economic well-being⁵. Thus, Black families who may

²Menedian, Stephen, et al. “The Roots of Structural Racism Project.” Othering & Belonging Institute, University of California, Berkeley, 21 June 2021, <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/roots-structural-racism>.

³Leonhardt, David. “Middle-Class Black Families in Low-Income Neighborhoods.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 24 June 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/25/upshot/middle-class-black-families-in-low-income-neighborhoods.html>.

⁴*Neighborhoods and Violent Crime | HUD USER*.

<https://www.huduser.gov/portal/periodicals/em/summer16/highlight2.html>. Accessed 30 Mar. 2023.

⁵ Economic Innovation Group. “Distressed Communities Index.” *Economic Innovation Group*, <https://eig.org/distressed-communities/key-findings/>. Accessed 27 Apr. 2023.

have otherwise experienced some of the class benefits associated with middle to upper class neighborhoods, often find themselves in neighborhoods surrounded by “distress” if they choose to remain in Black neighborhoods. Importantly, this study centers how few Black neighborhoods there are that exhibit characteristics associated with economic well-being. It is important to note that this study found only 16% of the total US population resides in a distressed zip code, indicating the gross overrepresentation of Black individuals and households. Some have concluded that this is a reason why Black children who grew up in middle or upper class conditions fail to achieve the same class status as their parents at a greater rate than white children⁶. Mary Patillo’s *Black on the Block* examines the relationship between the Black middle and lower class who reside within the same neighborhood, highlighting the residential proximity of different income classes within Black neighborhoods⁷. Moreover, the lack of Black middle and upper class neighborhoods increasingly reinforces the trade-off I described above, as Black families looking for increased neighborhood quality by metrics of opportunity have few other choices than to move into white neighborhoods.

So many sociological studies take a keen interest in, at best, hyperfixating, and at worst, pathologizing, conditions of poverty, particularly as they relate to Black populations. As Blackness and poverty have been nearly inextricably linked through the harrowing histories of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and a myriad of racist policy making, there is somewhat tendency to source the “issues” facing Black individuals and communities through the lens of impoverished conditions. In a poignant article expressing her desire to move towards a new paradigm within

⁶White, Gillian B. “How Black Middle-Class Kids Become Poor Adults.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 3 Dec. 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/01/how-black-middle-class-kids-become-black-lower-class-adults/384613/>.

⁷Patillo, Mary. *Black on the Block: The Politics of Race and Class in the city*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.

the field of social sciences, Mary Patillo argues “that sociology... reproduces stigma in our research and teaching, which then perpetuates negative information about Black people that permeates U.S and world culture”⁸. This stigma, which has clung onto Black people in this country since their arrival on slave ships centuries ago, often leads academics on a quest to unearth what is intrinsically wrong with Black people, or Black culture. It devolves into the perpetual investigations asking why Black people, and neighborhoods, are so frequently impoverished, and rarely questions the people who live at the top of the racial capitalist hierarchy. Although it could not be understated how important it is to map out the structural and systemic conditions which have continually reproduced Black people at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy, there tends to be a voyeuristic obsession with studying poor people and poor neighborhoods. The consequence of this ignores structural and systemic causes in favor of suggesting that “culture” of certain groups is what causes an unbreakable cycle of poverty. Even when researchers investigate structural causes of poverty within poor communities, the continual focus on the bottom, rather than the top, reifies the subliminal implication that there is something inherently wrong with these populations. Additionally, it would be remiss to note once more that since race and class have been codified so intently in the US, that these impoverished populations contain a large number of Black households. My research is focused on the members of the Black community who have an increased amount of privilege and capital through their class status. In doing this, I attempt to avoid a contribution to the pitfalls I described above of pathologizing or voyeurizing Black poverty. However, as stated, Blackness and poverty, or more generally, race and class, have a historically nefarious and significant history. Thus, the

⁸ Patillo, Mary. "Black advantage vision: Flipping the script on racial inequality research." *Issues in Race & Society* 10.1 (2021): 5-39.

conditions of Black people, regardless of their income status, cannot be fully analyzed without considering the interactions between capitalism and racism.

I had initially become interested with the topic of residential mobility and segregation due to my own upbringing, which was defined by being the one Black family in a white neighborhood. Thus, I began by considering the question: why do Black families “get out”, or transition out of Black neighborhoods? And in addition to that central thread, how do these individuals understand, or perceive, the “extra costs” associated with migration into white neighborhoods? How do they decide that they value the potential opportunity of a white neighborhood over a Black neighborhood? As I conducted broad literature reviews, I was consistently drawn back to the stories of my family, and borrowing from some anthropological and literary approaches to writing, I decided to root this as a study of my family unit. I spoke to three family members and one close family friend who had all emerged from Southern Louisiana and moved elsewhere in the country, often into white neighborhoods. In this, I acknowledge the complicated notion of “color” that plays a significant role in racial identity of Louisiana residents due to the long and convoluted history of colonialism in the territory, giving rise to a prominent Black Creole community. The set of questions captures both how race, through apparatuses of racial capitalism, act *on* people, while nonetheless bestowing my participants agency by considering how they make decisions. Embedded within this research inquiry are notions of class, as in order to be in a position of residential decision making, one requires a certain level of personal wealth to do so. Additionally, my arguments are contingent upon Black Marxist theories of racial capitalism which I consider to be the foundational structure of the global socioeconomic order. Thus, class analysis plays an essential role. In essence, this project unearths the migration of my family and our closest friends out of Southern Louisiana. I find substantial insights into

white flight and the processes of racial capitalism. Moreover, I find evidence to support considering residential decision making as a signal of political and social capital for the Black upper class, that reflects their racial identity and political notions of how to advance future opportunities for their own family and the Black community, more broadly. This project has amounted to uncovering what the concept of “getting out”, or, more technically, upward mobility, means for Black individuals emerging from Southern Louisiana. I argue that “getting out”, is first and foremost, a quest for opportunity that my participants did not find in their own neighborhoods. It is the resounding answer as to why the family members I spoke sought to move. I posit that positioning oneself for opportunity includes an extra cost for Black individuals. In the case of residential decisions between a white and Black neighborhood, where opportunity and resources frequently fall on racialized lines, the trade-off of residing in a white community for better resources encapsulates this hidden cost. I further argue that residential decision making is a political choice that mirrors a certain ideology and relationship to identity. This is demonstrated in the historical moment in which my participants grew up, and to varying degrees in the life stories from each of my participants. I find that my research makes reference to identity at various stages. This becomes relevant insofar that residential location reflects a political and ideological position that corresponds to one’s relation to their racial identity. While it is no way the central focus of this project, it does become a recurring theme. One generation removed from the “get out” decision myself, I have had a personal investment to retrace the steps that were taken before my time by my family, loved ones, friends, and kin.

As I will demonstrate in my literature review, there has been a substantial body of work performed on residential segregation and mobility at a meta level. Spatial and statistical analyses in a plethora of the social science fields are plentiful and have confirmed that racial segregation

in urban areas has worsened⁹ alongside the increase in nationwide class segregation¹⁰. This has provided more than enough justification to link many of the disparities facing Black populations in the US to residential segregation. However, there are fewer investigations into residential segregation, or the unit of the neighborhood, that stem from participant interviews. In effect, I posit that we are missing a crucial level of analysis that resides at the individual level. Whereas macro-level studies are incredibly useful at confirming patterns and providing much needed context, testimonies from individuals is what brings vibrancy, precision, and authority to sociological work.

I: Methodology

The principal methodology of this thesis has been participant interviews with three family members and one close family friend. To protect the identity of my participants, I have used pseudonyms for the individuals, as well as the neighborhoods they have resided in. Additionally, I have intentionally obscured my familial relation to each of my participants to allow for their stories and insights to be the focal point. I supplement these testimonies with an autoethnographic component, as seen in the vignette that begins the introduction, and will feature throughout the chapters. This use of autoethnography has been influenced by the methodology of anthropological studies, as well as from literary studies, which critically examine notions of autobiography and narrative. Furthermore, I consider this a life-writing project with a sociological lens and goal. It is a firm stance of this project that narrative is as important as empirical and quantitative social science research, something that has become increasingly obscured in recent years. Since many scholars have conceptualized residential segregation

⁹ Menedian, Stephen, et al. "The Roots of Structural Racism Project." Othering & Belonging Institute, University of California, Berkeley, 21 June 2021, <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/roots-structural-racism>.

¹⁰ Massey, D.S. Still the Linchpin: Segregation and Stratification in the USA. *Race Soc Probl* 12, 1–12 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-019-09280-1>

through empirical methods, such as spatial or statistical analysis, the impacts of residential segregation have been largely hypothesized pulling together various understandings of structural racism, economic access, and opportunity. These findings are now able to be critically examined through the testimonies of my participants, whereas prior, they have existed in a vacuum, unconfirmed at the level of the individual. Academic theory, particularly in the social sciences, amounts to nothing if it cannot be translated and observed through stories of people who live within these structures, systems, and social mechanisms. It also provides insight into how people have agency to either conform or resist against the social world. Agency becomes a recurring theme in my interviews as it acts as a signal for higher levels of personal capital, similar to the way residential decision making does. Moreover, residential mobility is a way in which individuals can demonstrate their agency, which becomes of increasing importance for Black individuals who experience upward mobility in terms of their class status. Since I am keenly interested in the ways in which race and class interact, I borrow heavily from Marxist theory for a framework of racial capitalism that is applied throughout the thesis.

In essence, I am positioning this research in conversation with the body of work done on hypersegregation and residential mobility, two bodies of literature which repeatedly fail to recognize the ways in which they are in communication with one another. Most often these studies look at the patterns of Black families who are unable to leave Black neighborhoods with high levels of poverty due to a lack of economic opportunities and discriminatory housing practices. There is another segment of this work that explores the reasons that Black middle, and sometimes upper, class families do not leave these same Black neighborhoods with higher levels of poverty, and at least partially ascribe this as a factor of why the children of such families have

higher rates of slipping back into poverty. My research question looks at the opposite of this: why do Black individuals leave Black neighborhoods?

II: Overview

The first chapter will examine the existing literature which pertains to my research question. It is divided into two sections, one of which focuses on the history of racial residential segregation, and its particular roots during the period of time in which most of my participants grew up. The following section explores Marxist literature that establishes a framework for racial capitalism that I proceed to draw off of, and introduces concepts such as the base/superstructure model, Ideological State Apparatuses, and reification, which I implement into my analysis of various tools of how residential decision making operates. The second chapter analyzes the historical moment in which my participants were growing up, during the heart of school integration, which produced a unique point in time where residential location explicitly became a political demonstration due to white flight. I proceed to analyze the relationship between capital and ideology that is exercised through individual's residential decision making, proposing a new way to conceptualize white flight using Marxist theory. I assert that this is necessary contextual information to ground the stories of my participants since this was occurring with high visibility during their formative years. There is an interlude separating the second and third chapters, serving as segue into the analyses of my participants. I introduce my family and speak to the color line in Louisiana, which although is not in direct scope of this project, figures largely into racial politics in Louisiana. I include testimony from a family member whose father was among the first in our family to leave Southern Louisiana, and her perspective on his decision since he was unable to be interviewed himself. In many ways, I consider her to be a parallel of my own as the daughter of someone who made the migration out of a Baton Rouge Black neighborhood and

then grew up in white neighborhoods. The third chapter features two stories from family members who attended Baton Rouge High School, a magnet school that was at the heart of the city's integration efforts. Eddie grew up in a low-income Black neighborhood as opposed to Alice who grew up in an upper-income Black neighborhood, and their views on residential location largely counter one another, which I attribute to the poverty level of their respective neighborhoods in their youth. This chapter contends with what opportunity meant for each of them and whether or not this was at odds with their sentiments towards Black neighborhoods. The fourth chapter follows the story of Marcus, the only one of my participants who did not grow up in Southern Louisiana, although he attended Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, and became well connected to the community there. His story solidifies that residential decision making corresponds to one's political and ideological position. I introduce concepts of Du Bois' rebuked Talented Tenth essay to demonstrate the similarities between Du Bois' ideas at that time and Black capitalism, in that they lack a comprehension of racism and capitalism as an interlocking and reinforcing system. However, despite Talented Tenth and Black capitalist notions ultimately upholding capitalism, there are some intrinsic anti-capitalist practices that emerge, such as the attempt to better the racial collective. I describe it both as anti-capitalist and as an extra cost to being Black in a position of economic means, or power. I pen one more interlude which documents my trip to Baton Rouge and New Orleans towards the tail end of this project, in which I reflect on how my own personal feelings towards Southern Louisiana have shifted throughout this project. Finally, the conclusion ties together my arguments on how residential decision making for Black members of my family have been informed by conceptions of opportunity, political, and ideological stakes, and how the lives of my participants contend with or appease the logics of racial capitalism.

Chapter One: *Literature Review*

In order to construct a portrait of residential decision making of Black individuals emerging from Southern Louisiana, there are canons of both historical and theoretical social science literature that need to be considered. All of my participants are of the post Brown vs. Board cohort of Black educated individuals, meaning that the majority of their schooling occurred in tandem with the integration of public schools in the United States. Thus, phenomena stemming from school integration efforts, such as white flight, become a crucial underpinning in understanding how notions of residential decision and mobility were being shaped for my participants. Theoretical applications of the Black upper class, the base/superstructure model, and reification are tied together by their critical analysis of racial capitalism. I employ this to provide a materialist grounding that demonstrates how the historical policies of the post Brown vs Board era constructed the conditions that my participants lived and were educated in, and subsequently, shaped their conceptions of residence and opportunity.

I will first provide an overview of what I group as the historical literature. That is, the bodies of work that seek to examine the residential segregation and mobility of the post Brown vs Board era of Southern Louisiana. I will then present the key elements of racial capitalism, predominantly from Marxist scholars, that are pertinent to the construction of my argument and provide a framework for which I interpret the impact of the historical policies and structures on the notions of residential mobility for my participants.

I: Residential Segregation Literature

If comparing today's racial residential segregation levels to that which were observed in 1970, we observe a modest improvement¹¹, however, if we set the year of comparison to 1990, we find that metropolitan neighborhoods are more segregated today¹². This exemplifies the swiftness to which patterns of residential mobility adjust to policies. A fundamental attribute of a neighborhood is the quality of its education, which sets the course for many of the opportunities and resources provided to the children in the area. Thus, we expect shifts in educational policy to influence residential patterns, which is why the era of school desegregation becomes a crucial moment in time to observe patterns of residential mobility. However, discussions on residential segregation and mobility are defined by how much an individual family is able to actually *choose* their residence. Residential mobility, in the sense that one makes a decision of where they want to live, requires a certain amount of income and wealth in order to do so. Racial residential segregation is often connotated with one, poor neighborhood quality (including education), and two, the inability to reside in a neighborhood with a greater access to resources. Moreover, it is imperative to delineate between who has the capital necessary to make residential decisions, and this will become increasingly salient throughout my review of the literature.

Nonetheless, the period of the 1970s and 1980s, in which all of my participants attended Southern Louisiana schools during this time, was somewhat of a unique time. While racial residential segregation remained to be high, these were the years that saw the highest rates of school integration due to the enforcement of *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Therefore, there

¹¹Wagmiller, R.L., Gage-Bouchard, E. & Karraker, A. Does Black Socioeconomic Mobility Explain Recent Progress Toward Black-White Residential Integration?. *Demography* 54, 1251–1275 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-017-0593-z>

¹²Menedian, Stephen, et al. "The Roots of Structural Racism Project." Othering & Belonging Institute, University of California, Berkeley, 21 June 2021, <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/roots-structural-racism>.

were a number of Black students at this time who were receiving higher educational quality than previous Black generations (granted, metrics of quality are highly contested). For each of my participants, they attended schools with a large number of white peers against the backdrop of white flight.

White flight is broadly defined as the exodus of white households from either a neighborhood¹³ or school¹⁴. First appearing in a 1958 article by Morton Grodzins, the term described the flow of white families out of center cities as Black families migrated in¹⁵. Grodzins proposed the idea of a “tipping point”, wherein if white neighborhoods reached a certain threshold of Black families moving into the neighborhood, their racial animus would drive them to move residences. Here, we see precisely how residential decision making is both a material and ideological practice. As I stated above, to be able to be residentially mobile requires a level of income. Since many white families possessed the means to be able to act on their racial prejudice through the act of moving, this behavior of white flight, as we now understand it as a racially motivated phenomenon. White flight became increasingly tied to the notion of schools as they became the site of integration efforts throughout the country. Public education being so aptly tied to residential location explains why white flight becomes such a ubiquitous term when generally analyzing spatial patterns of mobility. Evidence has demonstrated that desegregation efforts attribute for some degree to the decline of public school enrollment by white families, with a cited reason being a concern over the integration of schools causing integration of residential neighborhoods¹⁶. This highlights the overlap between public education and the

¹³ Crowder K, South S.J. SPATIAL DYNAMICS OF WHITE FLIGHT: THE EFFECTS OF LOCAL AND EXTRALOCAL RACIAL CONDITIONS ON NEIGHBORHOOD OUT-MIGRATION. *Am Sociol Rev.* 2008 Oct 1;73(5):792-812. doi: 10.1177/000312240807300505. PMID: 20221414; PMCID: PMC2835167.

¹⁴ Jayapal, Susheela () "School Desegregation and White Flight: The Unconstitutionality of Integration Maintenance Plans," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: Vol. 1987: Iss. 1, Article 16.

¹⁵ Grodzins, Morton 1958 *The Metropolitan Area as a Racial Problem*.

¹⁶ Jayapal, Susheela () "School Desegregation and White Flight: The Unconstitutionality of Integration Maintenance Plans," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: Vol. 1987: Iss. 1, Article 16.

neighborhood, directing us to look closely between the dynamics of school and neighborhood demographics, particularly at the time of desegregation efforts.

Further evidence of the connection between school integration and residential mobility on a meta level comes from a 2017 article by Wagmiller et. al which concluded that the “principal source of improved residential segregation” were the “educational gains for the post–civil rights era cohorts and improved access to integrated neighborhoods for high school graduates and college attendees in these later cohorts”. The post-civil rights era cohort as defined in this paper applies to the individuals who participated in this research. Importantly, this article corroborates claims that increased educational quality led to higher residential integration, providing an operative link between these two variables. However, this paper is limited in its scope as it fails to address the mechanisms at work which drives this connection. The authors themselves call upon “the need for greater attention in the residential segregation literature to the effect of historical conditions... on the formation of residential preferences, expectations, and desires”¹⁷, which is precisely what my research is primed to provide insights into.

Karyn Lacy’s work on the Black middle class followed Black families in three residential neighborhoods in the DC area: a majority white middle-class suburb, a majority Black middle-class suburb, and a middle-upper class subdivision of the Black suburb. She asserts that the Black residents of these neighborhoods have five central social identities-- “‘race, class, status, suburban, or public’-- but residential location determines ‘how and under what circumstances groups of middle-class blacks construct and assert these identities’”¹⁸. Here, Lacy is establishing residential location as a primary shaper of how identity, and subsequently, politics

¹⁷ Wagmiller, R.L., Gage-Bouchard, E. & Karraker, A. Does Black Socioeconomic Mobility Explain Recent Progress Toward Black-White Residential Integration?. *Demography* 54, 1251–1275 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-017-0593-z>

¹⁸Lacy, Karyn R. *Blue-chip black: Race, class, and status in the new black middle class*. Univ of California Press, 2007.

are formed. The scope of this research proposal, then, can be thought of as expanding on Lacy's work by connecting the choice of residential location to the historical conditions of Southern Louisiana that shaped my participants' notions of residence. Her emphasis on identity reflects the need for increased attention to the role of ideology, which I will expand upon in the second section of this chapter.

Furthermore, this topic of migrating from Black to white neighborhoods necessitates a careful consideration into the dynamics of class and their implications for residential segregation. In the Wagmiller paper, residential integration is loosely defined at best. This is because in a discussion of Black residential mobility patterns, moving into a white neighborhood is lumped into the category of residential integration. The label of "integration" quickly conjures notions of progress, however, it fails to capture the hardships associated with a Black household moving into a white neighborhood, including the loss of a racial community. In a spatial analysis of Black families and households conducted in 2014, Patrick Sharkey found that "from 1970 to 2005-9, the proportion of middle- and upper-income African-American households that live in advantaged neighborhoods surrounded by spatial advantage grew from 12% to 34%". In addition to this, there was no increase in the number of predominantly Black neighborhoods that were defined to be advantaged, or surrounded by spatial advantage. These two conditions led Sharkey to conclude that there has not been an emergence in Black middle or upper class neighborhoods, but rather provides evidence of Black middle and upper class households moving into neighborhoods with "higher degrees of advantage". Therein, the wealthy Black families who opt to move out of their neighborhoods are migrating into advantaged neighborhoods that are typically "suburban" or "nonblack". This foregrounds that residential mobility, which by and large depends on one's access to a sizable income, acts as an antithesis to residential segregation.

Moreover, this demonstrates that residential segregation is not simply the separation of racial communities via neighborhood boundaries, but that the very segregation itself implies a degradation of resources to these non-white neighborhoods, such that residential mobility is *not* a decision that many of these families are afforded with. Once it becomes a decision available, a number of these Black households migrate into more advantaged, or white, neighborhoods. Two theories which seek to explain racial residential segregation are spatial assimilation and place stratification. Spatial assimilation asserts a correlative relationship between residential mobility “with social and economic mobility”,¹⁹ which anticipates that with an increased access to economic means, there is greater residential mobility. In other words, spatial assimilation assumes a sort of direct translation between economic mobility and residential mobility. While this makes much intuitive sense, it has been critiqued for its inability to accurately portray Black families’ lack of residential mobility, even at higher levels of income. Place stratification theory, on the other hand, comments on how groups in power “manipulate space to maintain their physical and social separation from groups they view as undesirable”.²⁰ Studies thus far have had generally inconclusive results on which theory is the prominent determinant of residential segregation, with varying results across metropolitan centers. What this pushes towards is an acknowledgement that both theories may be working at the same time.

The dichotomy between spatial assimilation and place stratification somewhat mimics a contemporary discourse within the field of sociology between “race-centric” theories (place stratification) and “class-centric” theories (spatial assimilation). The central distinction between these two groupings of theories is whether the theorist conceptualizes race or class as being the

¹⁹ Pais J, South SJ, Crowder K. Metropolitan Heterogeneity and Minority Neighborhood Attainment: Spatial Assimilation or Place Stratification? *Soc Probl.* 2012 May;59(2):258-281. doi: 10.1525/sp.2012.59.2.258. PMID: 22639470; PMCID: PMC3359053.

²⁰ Crowder, K., & South, S. J. (2008). Spatial Dynamics of White Flight: The Effects of Local and Extralocal Racial Conditions on Neighborhood Out-Migration. *American Sociological Review*, 73(5), 792–812. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240807300505>

operative structural oppression which the sociopolitical order is based upon. However, it is more often than not a reductionist label tossed at theoretical work and research studies that remove us further from the nuance of everyday life that is constructed through structural and systemic forces. Considering how these two theories may be working in tandem presents a much more critical analysis of how neighborhoods and residential mobility patterns are established.

In the following section, I will present several applications of Marxist theory which will ground my analysis of racial capitalism. This will serve as the materialist grounding for understanding racial residential mobility patterns and decisions. I argue that it is necessary to employ a framework which works towards an understanding of the interactions between race and class, particularly in a topic which explores a class-driven migration across racial neighborhood lines.

II: Racial Capitalism Literature

Race and class operate in a peculiar, cynical relationship in this country, dependent on a hierarchical structure. Many of our pitfalls in explaining away systemic racism by attributing pervasive inequalities to intrinsic cultural faults, come from an inability to decode the ways in which race and class work alongside one another. Yet, for as blatant as our recognition of this is, such as instances where “Black” and “impoverished” become synonymous, it is common for this to be taken as it is, rather than challenged, or probed further. This is where we lose the focus to see these issues as structural and systemic, as opposed to individual or cultural. Our structures become obscured. Simple dichotomies that parallel one another, such as Black versus white and poor versus wealthy, are so pervasive because racial politics were informed by and codified into law by a capitalist economic order that necessitates a top and a bottom.

Marxism is fundamentally an analysis of capitalism. From there, there are various political claims that become contested extrapolations from Marx's original theories of capitalism, however, those do not fall within the scope of this project and will not be discussed. What is of particular interest for this research inquiry is conceptualizing the interaction between materialist reality and ideology. Further, if we consider residential decision making as a practice of both material action and ideological practice, it becomes a crucial task to decipher the relationship between the two.

Louis Althusser famously proposed the base/superstructure model to situate the interactions between ideology and material realities in his seminal text, *On The Reproduction of Capitalism*²¹. For Althusser, and anyone vested in materialist thinking, the base corresponds to the economic, material reality of the social world. Politics and ideology are superimposed on top of this base, in that they are determined and reified by the conditions of the economic order. His model is interactive in that ideology can feed back into the base, but the material reality must be constituted in order for any ideology to take route. Thus, ideology is a superstructure, or an addendum, to the economic, material reality, and hence, a capitalist, material reality. Under capitalism, only a few can amass an excess (the capitalist class), which requires a large majority of people to experience an extreme deficit (the proletariat). For Althusser, and other materialist and Marxist thinkers, one of the roles of ideology is to draw this line between the classes among other differences. In doing so, erects invisible, yet entirely real, obstacles between the way the socio-political world appears to be operating and the material conditions that allow it to function. Thus, racism is an extremely useful tool in being able to maintain a distinct class formation by manipulating racial antagonisms that have existed since the inception of global capitalism. The

²¹ Althusser, Louis. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*

ideology is then itself reified as it becomes exercised by material demonstrations, such as white flight.

Althusser's base/superstructure model becomes an increasingly significant addition to conceptualizing white flight, as it provides a theoretical framework that accounts for this interaction between ideology and material conditions. Framing white flight and its impacts on neighborhoods and schools through the sole lens of racism-- to only examine it at an ideological level, that is-- is a one dimensional perspective that fails to account for how this behavior reflects the material realities of communities clustered within a city, and continues to codify racial division through concretizing material separations. The economic conditions for white families to move residences as a reaction to integration required a certain amount of access to capital, which constitutes the "base" that Althusser refers to in his model. That was the particular economic condition which allowed for these families to substantiate their ideological racism into a material action, which was moving residences. It is crucial to recognize how this becomes a reinforcing loop, as the material access to capital permitted an ideology to become increasingly entrenched in the landscape of the city. In this way, the ideology, racism, is given more of a substantive political reality and the economic divisions between white and Black households simultaneously intensify.

A neighborhood can be considered a medium of reification²², a process coined by theorist Georg Lukacs, whereby social relations are viewed as inherent characteristics to certain objects or things. Ultimately what this produces is an ideological tailspin that allows individuals of a society to perceive their social reality as fixed, rather than an interweaving, responsive web of social relations that are dependent on one another. The neighborhood becomes an example of a reified construct through the association between a Black neighborhood and an impoverished

²² Luckas, Georg, *History and Class Consciousness*

neighborhood. It naturalizes Black households living in neighborhoods with high levels of poverty so that it becomes an unquestioned societal norm, which in effect, strengthens the racial capitalist logic that situates Black people at the bottom of the hierarchy. Further, it strengthens the formidable capabilities of white supremacist and racist ideology because material discrepancies between racial groups are perpetually reified, in this case, at the neighborhood level.

III: Conclusion

The primary intervention I am making through this review of literature is the need to consider how ideology, identity, policy, and material reality are working together for the subset of my family who migrated from Black to white neighborhoods. While social science research has been increasingly concerned with the isolation of singular variables to approach findings, I am interested in casting this aside in order to reflect an analysis of racial capitalism wherein all of these forces are interconnected. Since my data set is a relatively small number of interviews with close family and friends, I have a leveraged position to be able to dive deep.

Chapter Two: *A Case Study of White Flight at Baton Rouge Magnet School*

Prior to the interviews with my participants, I decided to dive into research on related topics to racial residential segregation at the time in which my discussants were largely growing up. I was curious as to what historical contextual themes might pop out that would lend itself as a point of conversation in my proceeding interviews. I began to chart a relationship between residential choice and ideological position, namely through the phenomenon of white flight that was enormously prevalent following school integration efforts. Through this exercise, I solidified my own framework of how to understand residential decisions that were made in the era of white flight.

In the fall of 1970, sixteen years after the landmark ruling of *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, the East Baton Rouge Parish School System finally made an attempt to integrate the school district. Since 1963, the school board had been operating on a “freedom of choice” desegregation policy that was failing to have any serious impacts on the demographics of the schools²³. Representatives of the NAACP fought against the school board, arguing that the interests of the Black children in the district were not being seriously considered or represented. This prompted the school board to form a biracial committee to address desegregation, and they ultimately landed on a “neighborhood zoning” desegregation model that would integrate not just the student bodies, but “faculty, staff, transportation, extracurricular activities... and school facilities”²⁴. In addition to the neighborhood zoning, they also incorporated a majority-to-minority transfer program, wherein any student who was in the racial majority at

²³Watson, Jessica , *Quest for Unitary Status: The East Baton Rouge Parish School Desegregation Case*, 62 La. L. Rev. (2002) Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.lsu.edu/lalrev/vol62/iss3/8>, pg. 954

²⁴Watson, Jessica , *Quest for Unitary Status: The East Baton Rouge Parish School Desegregation Case*, 62 La. L. Rev. (2002) Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.lsu.edu/lalrev/vol62/iss3/8>, pg. 955

their current school would be allowed to transfer to a school where they would be in the racial minority²⁵.

Upon first reflection at the numbers that came out of the 1970-1971 school year, the plan perhaps appears to have worked. Whereas in 1969, only 13% of East Baton Rouge Parish's Black children were enrolled at schools with white children, in 1970, the number skyrocketed to 86%²⁶. Despite this, in the following years, this combination of neighborhood zoning and majority-to-minority models were largely seen as a failure for two reasons. One because of its inability to recognize that the neighborhoods themselves were segregated, and two, because of its reliance on voluntary action²⁷. Further, by cementing the link between neighborhood composition and student body composition, residential mobility-- and immobility-- of East Baton Rouge residents became a primary political tool to respond to desegregation efforts. As previously all-white schools became populated with Black students, white children isolated themselves, and white families moved into different neighborhoods of the parish, or different parishes all together²⁸. Throughout the 1970s, private schools began popping up all over the state of Louisiana where white families would send their children in order to prevent them from attending integrated schools. This combination of white flight and private schools intended for white children caused the demographics of previously predominantly white Baton Rouge schools to become predominantly Black schools.

²⁵Watson, Jessica , Quest for Unitary Status: The East Baton Rouge Parish School Desegregation Case, 62 La. L. Rev. (2002) Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.lsu.edu/lalrev/vol62/iss3/8>

²⁶ Lussier, Charles. "50 Years after Desegregation Order, Baton Rouge Schools Look Nothing like What Was Intended." *The Advocate*, 29 Nov. 2020, https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/education/article_1819e600-f902-11ea-997c-9b66b06467b5.html.

²⁷Watson, Jessica , Quest for Unitary Status: The East Baton Rouge Parish School Desegregation Case, 62 La. L. Rev. (2002) Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.lsu.edu/lalrev/vol62/iss3/8>

²⁸ Lussier, Charles. "50 Years after Desegregation Order, Baton Rouge Schools Look Nothing like What Was Intended." *The Advocate*, 29 Nov. 2020,

Baton Rouge Magnet High School was one of these schools that experienced several dramatic shifts of their student body composition throughout the course of the 1970s. Since its founding in 1880, the school only served white students despite several Black neighborhoods surrounding the campus. The first cohort of Black students enrolled in 1963, and in 1969, a measly 8% of the student body was Black. But by the fall of 1970, following the neighborhood zoning desegregation plan, Black student enrollment jumped to 31%²⁹.

An incident occurred halfway into the 1970-1971 academic year at Baton Rouge High School, which had not yet received its magnet school designation. The school had refused to lower the school flag to half-staff in honor of Martin Luther King Jr's birthday, who had been assassinated three years prior. A significant number of students-- as many as 250-- walked out of class and refused to return at the school's action³⁰. The superintendent of the district at the time, Robert Aertker, told the students they had fifteen minutes to return to class before pointing to a cluster of police cars on the street, and warning them that they would be arrested. Aertker described this incident as the "the closest thing to open defiance that [he] encountered" following the desegregation efforts of that school year³¹.

This event is a perfect example of how racial politics were playing out in East Baton Rouge Parish at the time. All throughout the South, white violence and protests were erupting in response to desegregation efforts, but in the fall of 1970 in East Baton Rouge, there were

²⁹Lussier, Charles. "50 Years after Desegregation Order, Baton Rouge Schools Look Nothing like What Was Intended." *The Advocate*, 29 Nov. 2020, https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/education/article_1819e600-f902-11ea-997c-9b66b06467b5.html.

³⁰Lussier, Charles. "50 Years after Desegregation Order, Baton Rouge Schools Look Nothing like What Was Intended." *The Advocate*, 29 Nov. 2020, https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/education/article_1819e600-f902-11ea-997c-9b66b06467b5.html.

³¹ Davis, Douglas Raymond, "Crossing Over: an Oral History of the Desegregation Experience of Public School Personnel in East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana." (1999). *LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses*. 6984. https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses/6984, pg. 132

surprisingly few incidents of this. Any attempt from the students to acknowledge race, such as lowering the flag in honor of Martin Luther King Jr, would have been seen as a highly political move, one that the school and the superintendent made it clear they would not be tolerating. Thus, their threat of police and arrest quickly quelled the moment of student protest, and the students eventually returned back to class. News of the incident circulated to the student body's families and white student enrollment dramatically decreased over the following years until Baton Rouge High School was 67% Black in 1975³².

Here, we see precisely how white residential mobility was exercised as a political tool to evade integration. Rather than defensive and combative strategies of violence, rioting, and protesting, white families in East Baton Rouge often resorted to leaving in response to desegregation efforts. Interestingly, the school board made the decision in 1976 to give Baton Rouge High School magnet school status and subsequently, white enrollment flipped back to 80%³³. What this reveals is that decision-makers were well aware of how white families were utilizing their ability to relocate and move in order to choose the best schools for their children.

The white flight of the 1970s has had incredibly lasting effects on the students who belong to the East Baton Rouge Parish School System. Prior to the neighborhood zoning plan of 1970, the school system served predominantly white students, but as more and more Black students were introduced to the schools, the number of white students trickled down. Just as important as the residential mobility of white families that allowed for white flight, was the residential immobility of Black families, who due to redlining and housing practices, were severely constrained to move into different neighborhoods to access better schools. Today, 81% of East Baton Rouge Parish School System students are Black, and the public schools are almost

³² See 29.

³³Lussier, Charles. "50 Years after Desegregation Order, Baton Rouge Schools Look Nothing like What Was Intended."

entirely Black³⁴. The story of East Baton Rouge is imperative to our understanding of how crucial residential location is in constructing racial politics and identity.

As I continued to investigate, the conditions that shaped the future residential decisions of my participants were largely influenced by the desegregation policies of the 1960s and 1970s. In the way that white flight was a political response to integration efforts in 1970s East Baton Rouge, what politics are represented in the decision of Black upper class families to leave Black neighborhoods? White residents of Baton Rouge, although could theoretically exist anywhere on the class-income scale, had by and large a superior amount of capital at their disposal, which allowed them to enact on ideological impulses, further cementing a racialized, material social order. The ability to move residence requires access to capital, and subsequently, white flight is not only a racist ideological pattern, but displays precisely how this example of racism has been foregrounded in the economic possession of capital.

These desegregation policies of the 1960s and 1970s established the conditions of the Black upper class that subsequently gained the capital necessary to leave Black neighborhoods. As evidenced by the history of East Baton Rouge Parish, seemingly minor decisions, such as designating a school with magnet status, had enormous ramifications on the racial landscape of the city. Residential mobility became a primary political response of the parish's white constituency, and one that foregrounded its transition from a predominantly white collection of neighborhoods to a primarily Black one. Not only did these desegregation policies have impacts on K-12 education, but also opened the doors to higher education to a wider degree than ever before, which allowed many of today's Black upper class to receive higher degrees. In the way that these policies shaped the hypersegregated landscape of many American cities today, it also

³⁴<https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/call-to-action-toolbox/district-snapshot---east-baton-rouge-parish.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

shaped the decisions of the Black upper class families who chose to situate themselves within white neighborhoods.

Interlude I: *The Louisiana Color Line & Residential Decisions*

In the fall of 2022, I attended a family wedding which served as our first reunion since the start of the pandemic. It wasn't in our typical spots of New Orleans (the family meeting grounds) or Las Vegas (cheap airfare for everyone), but instead, Kansas City, because the father of the bride wasn't able to travel. I felt a bit that this served as my reintroduction into the family. This time I was joining everyone as an adult, which for us, adulthood is marked by whether or not you can sit in a bar. I arrived with a purpose to finally *know* my family members and bypass the courtesy sentiments that naturally arise when you only see relatives every couple of years. I was patiently simmering with enthusiasm to talk to all of these people I had only known in snippets, and yet, were so integral to how our family came to be.

The first night there was a dinner held in a large banquet room with dark wood blanketing the walls. We piled on Kansas City barbeque staples onto our plates and everyone held their tongue from commenting that we missed a pot of fresh seafood gumbo being shared amongst ourselves. I sat with my more immediate family and we danced around the other tables, planting kisses on older relatives' cheeks, sharing hearty laughs, listening to medical issues, and raising our glasses to various cheers. This side of the family, the Black Creole branch which belongs to my patrilineal grandmother, organized themselves through The Siblings, the last full generation of Duchan's to have been born and raised in Southern Louisiana³⁵. I had always thought of my brother and I to have been the first Louisiana exports, that is, the first grandchildren of The Siblings to have been born and raised elsewhere. However, it dawned on me during this trip that this was not at all the case. Over a decade before my brother and I were born in our retrospective

³⁵ Note that my patrilineal grandmother is one of The Siblings. Pseudonyms are used for surnames.

non-Louisiana states, two family members of mine, the children of the eldest member of The Siblings, had been the first descendants of the Duchans' to be born elsewhere.

Navigating racial identity on the Black Creole side of the family had always been a bit complex. Black Creoles are exclusive to the Southern Louisiana region, and emerged as a population from the various periods of colonization in the region. Creole refers to an amalgamation of African, French, Spanish, and Indigenous ancestry, and throughout the centuries were often designated as “free people of color”, granting them increased economic, social, and political mobility³⁶ up until the 1850s. However, as Louisiana became more entrenched into the American socio-political order, as did the color line, and Creoles became increasingly segregated with the Black non-Creole population³⁷. While this enforced the notion that Creoles were Black before anything else, their fairer-skin still allowed them greater mobility than their darker-skin counterparts.

The Duchans' were all Black Creoles, and with skin the color of a light caramel, depending on their whereabouts, their Blackness may have been all together disguised under the veil of racial ambiguity. As The Siblings grew up in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s (they were spread out over quite a number of years), they were undeniably considered Black in the context of Southern Louisiana racial codes at the time. As a result, many of them were witness to and subjects of racial violence throughout their childhood. For some of The Siblings, they thought relocating to a different city would allow them to pass close enough to white, or at least, racially ambiguous enough to not be associated with being Black. This is precisely what the eldest

³⁶ Wills, Matthew. “The Free People of Color of Pre-Civil War New Orleans.” *JSTOR Daily*, 20 Feb. 2019, <https://daily.jstor.org/the-free-people-of-color-of-pre-civil-war-new-orleans/>.

³⁷ Wills, Matthew. “The Free People of Color of Pre-Civil War New Orleans.” *JSTOR Daily*, 20 Feb. 2019, <https://daily.jstor.org/the-free-people-of-color-of-pre-civil-war-new-orleans/>.

sibling, Frank, did once he was old enough to leave the region. He moved up North, married a white woman, and had two daughters, who were the family's true, first Louisiana exports.

Since my Louisiana family is composed of both Black Creoles and non-Black Creoles, I had always felt more connected to my Blackness in comparison to the Creole side of the family. Some of them never spoke about being Black, or if they did, it was veiled in codes. Partially because of this, I had failed to consider my two relatives as being Louisiana exports. However, at the dinner, the elder of Frank's daughters, Josie, presented everyone with a hardcover, published copy of stories collected from the matriarch of *The Siblings*. I flipped through the book eagerly, scanning the dozens of pictures that complimented pages and pages of stories of *The Siblings'* childhood years in Southern Louisiana. It even included a section of a relative answering why they wanted to leave the region. This was not some small project in the slightest, I knew it must have taken Josie countless hours to create something like this. It was a complete project of love towards the family, and it dawned on me that she may have been looking for something very similar to myself.

I ended up speaking to Josie for this project, because it was clear she had as much of an interest in the family history as I did. More than that, I knew that she had probably thought deeply about her father moving out of Southern Louisiana, and at this point, he was too sick for me to ask any of these questions to him. While I had expected our conversation to be fruitful, I hadn't anticipated how deeply touched I was and how similar our longing for a home was.

Josie is about fifteen years older than I am, sandwiched in the generation between my father and I. Her own father, Frank, had been so gravely affected by the racism he experienced growing up, he never acknowledged to his own children that he came from a Black Creole family. Since their mother was white and Frank was light-skinned, Josie and her sister appeared

white for the most part. Josie described putting pieces together as she grew, such as watching performers on TV who looked similar to her dad (they lived in an all-white neighborhood, so she was never in any close proximity to other Black people) or meeting family members with much darker skin. By the time she was an adult, she had come to her own sort of understanding of her father's racial identity, and that of the family's, but it required her asking questions. It was evident that there was a longing in her voice. A longing for the recognition that this history was a part of her too and the access to it. Her father kept it from her, under the veil of silence, in act of protection, but alienation is a fickle and, at times, dangerous weapon. Josie was searching to belong to something that stemmed from the depths of history, and as it was for me, this was rooted in the landscape of Southern Louisiana.

I asked her if growing up she associated Louisiana with a sense of magic, to which she did. I came to recognize that the reasons our respective parents moved out of Southern Louisiana were similar in some ways, and entirely different for others. My father, for example, would never had the ability to escape from Blackness by moving cities, in the way Frank did. Escaping Blackness was not something my father clamored for, but removing himself from poverty certainly was a principal goal. Frank, who was several decades older than my father, and witnessed a different era of racial violence, was willing to shed his familial history if that meant having a greater access to freedom and opportunity for himself and his family. The commonality was the search for opportunity, implying that for them, Southern Louisiana was a somewhat of a dead end. For Josie and I, it was everything that laid beneath the surface.

To Frank, who passed away during this project. I was honored to hear more of his story through his daughter, Josie, and found it to be a gift. His presence was a force.

Chapter Three: *Neighborhoods as Reified Instruments*

The August of 1970 was quiet in comparison to the turbulent and charged years of the 1960s. The era of the fight for Civil Rights was coming to a close, and Black individuals in the United States had been irrevocably touched by surveillance, violence, and death. The air, which in the South sits hot and heavy, was tinged with the hope of a more just society for many of the families who watched, participated, and fought for equality, and particularly for the equality of opportunity. It was this very August of 1970 in which the East Baton Rouge Parish School District finally implemented their integration policies³⁸, sixteen years after the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* case.

This patient, simmering optimism was articulated by one of my participants, Eddie, whose family lived in the newly emerging Black neighborhood contained in South Central Baton Rouge, Magnolia Courts. It was a “working-class” neighborhood of “homeowners”, he remembered fondly with a subtle pride towards the people who populated the surrounding blocks. It was one of the first neighborhoods of Black families that took root outside of North and South Baton Rouge, emerging at the tail end of the 1960s, and hinted towards a migration of Black families out of their previously designated regions of the city. In a way, this existence of a new, Black neighborhood, in a previously white area of town foreshadowed the integration efforts, and failures that would come to define the landscape of the city, and its residents.

³⁸“East Baton Rouge Parish School Desegregation Timeline.” <https://www.wafb.com>, 18 June 2003, <https://www.wafb.com/story/1326535/east-baton-rouge-parish-school-desegregation-timeline/>.

Magnolia Courts was still, yet, years to come before the school district of East Baton Rouge Parish implemented their majority to minority integration policy³⁹, which would open up the Parish's majority white schools to Black students across the city. Eddie had attended a Black, Catholic school up until its closure in the early 1970s, which briefly led him and other Black students to attend a predominantly white, Catholic school before entering the public school system for his junior high years that he remained in until his high school graduation.

Eddie attended four different schools throughout his childhood in Baton Rouge. Interestingly, he noted that had it not been for the closure of the Black, Catholic school, he likely would have completed his entire K-12 education there. The Black, Catholic high school, which only graduated six classes, cites the integration of Baton Rouge schools as a reason for its closure⁴⁰, as it caused an exodus of the students' households into other parishes. All the while alongside the beginning school changes, Magnolia Courts was continuing to "turn over" into a Black neighborhood. Eddie recalls several "older, white residents", like his next door neighbor, Mr. Jones, but as the years passed and those families moved out, Black families moved in.

For a young Eddie, social life and community existed solely within the confines of Magnolia Courts. Coming home from school, where he was surrounded by mostly white students, meant coming home to his friends, where they would spend their afternoons and evenings playing games around the neighborhood. Since he had attended a majority white, Catholic school from third through sixth grade, in lieu of his zoned public school, he identified his friends with his neighborhood. There was a significant rupture between school and home that was a continual theme throughout Eddie's story. As he spoke about waiting all day at school to

³⁹ Runnels, Gabriella. "Breaking Apart: Confronting Race in East Baton Rouge Parish." *Women Leading Change: Case Studies on Women, Gender, and Feminism*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2, Oct. 2016. *journals.tulane.edu*, <https://journals.tulane.edu/ncs/article/view/1109>.

⁴⁰ <https://diobr.org/st-francis-xavier-baton-rouge>

play with his neighborhood friends, the sense that he occupied somewhat of a double life, or at least, compartmentalized the segments of his day emerged readily. While Eddie was a premier witness to the changing school climate of Baton Rouge, as was he a keen observer of the shifts that took place during his childhood in Magnolia Courts.

As I spoke to Eddie, Magnolia Courts represented aspiration in his earlier years. He described a strong ethic of “work and church” that guided its residents, who had every intention of forming the foundations of a middle class neighborhood, despite most of them being members of the working class. Eddie’s own parents, a teacher and a barber, were proponents of education and highly invested in ensuring him and his siblings had access to opportunities that would set him up for success in life. This came to fruition by the time Eddie reached the ninth grade.

Baton Rouge High School had recently been designated with magnet school status and Eddie had been accepted due to his exemplary grades. Eddie remembers the school being predominantly white, with a cohort of Black students who were bussed in from all neighborhoods of the city as long as they had met the acceptance criteria for enrollment. The school itself had undergone a number of extreme changes in racial composition that encapsulated the strong reactions of Baton Rouge residents to integration, which was documented in Chapter One. These changes were not only present at the public school level, but within the Catholic schools, as Eddie recalls his predominantly white, Catholic school transforming to become nearly half Black in only a three year span, in the early 1970s. Moreover, this demonstrates that school integration did not only have implications for public schools. The effects trickled into other domains of Baton Rouge including private schools and neighborhoods.

As rapidly as the schools were bringing in Black students, white families were reacting with a similar speed, uprooting their children to private schools, or moving residences altogether.

This phenomena is commonly referred to as white flight, and has been documented in nearly every city that underwent school integration processes. Many scholars find white flight to be significant in so far as it demonstrates the magnitude of racial antagonism white families and individuals held to incoming Black children. However, it is imperative to simultaneously understand white flight as an exercise in capital that corresponds to an ideological and political position. White residents of Baton Rouge, although could theoretically exist anywhere on the class-income scale, had by and large a superior amount of capital at their disposal, which allowed them to enact on ideological impulses, further cementing a racialized, material social order. Capital, in the way I use to advance this argument, encapsulates social, cultural, and economic means of wealth. Although social and cultural capital largely depends on one's access to material wealth, an individual's status as a member of an advantaged group (such as the designation of "white" in the American context), permits them a certain ease in moving about society. One way to visualize this is through redlining practices. They were not employed upon poor, non-ethnic white residents. Instead, redlining was a largely targeted practice to Black residents that confined them to particular neighborhoods⁴¹. In this example, the social and cultural capital that the poor, white population enjoys stems from their status as white and they do not experience systemic practices that dictate their residence. Whereas, the Black residents, placed at the bottom of the racial hierarchy, have little to no social and cultural capital in addition limited access to economic capital, and subsequently are subject to racist, systemic practices and policies. I conclude that the very ability to move residence requires access to capital, and consequently, white flight is not only a racist ideological pattern, but displays precisely how this example of racism has been foregrounded in the economic possession of capital.

⁴¹ Jackson, Candace. "What Is Redlining?" *The New York Times*, 17 Aug. 2021. *NYTimes.com*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/17/realestate/what-is-redlining.html>.

Baton Rouge High School which had served a student population of mostly white students had become predominantly Black by the 1975 school year⁴², just five years after the introduced integration policy. In order to quell the white flight, the school board voted to designate Baton Rouge High as a selective magnet school. Their plan not only worked, but with rapid speed, as in the following school year, white enrollment skyrocketed back up to 80%⁴³.

This would set up the demographics of the school by the time Eddie enrolled, it was predominantly white with a select cohort of Black students from all areas of the city. With its newly minted magnet school status, Eddie found himself among other high-achieving Black students, and his social world began to transition from his neighborhood to his school. The compartmentalization of school and neighborhood from his earlier years began to take on new meanings at Baton Rouge High. His educators spoke to them about college and plans following graduation, and he found a kinship with the other Black students who were beginning to identify themselves with opportunity. On this period of time in his life, he remarked:

“I realized I had a lot more in common with my future with those kids.

My neighborhood, at that point in time... was falling into more of the lower-class, poverty stricken [environment]. You know, people who had a hard time keeping jobs, crime was [increasing], the values of

‘work and church’ were also eroding.”

Here, Eddie goes on to identify many of the factors that are associated as negative predictors of future quality of life, including poverty, crime, and unemployment. All of which are correlated with one another, and are common characteristics of Black neighborhood due to the devastating

⁴²Lussier, Charles. “50 Years after Desegregation Order, Baton Rouge Schools Look Nothing like What Was Intended.”

⁴³Lussier, Charles. “50 Years after Desegregation Order, Baton Rouge Schools Look Nothing like What Was Intended.”

impacts of racist policies and structures. This is the point at which Eddie recognizes these attributes of his neighborhoods as hindrances to his future. Importantly, Eddie was alongside other Black students at Baton Rouge High School, and thus, his associations with success, that are wrapped up in the “future” he saw for himself, were not in contention with being Black. However, what was in opposition was his neighborhood, Magnolia Courts. He began to associate it with poverty, and therefore, the *lack* of opportunity. Thus, the future, for Eddie, began to take root *elsewhere*. When he first entered the school, he said “it never crossed my mind that we weren’t going to live in Louisiana for the rest of [our lives]”. As they were encouraged to think about what colleges they were going to apply to, Eddie became excited about the idea of New York. He exclaimed, “I was like ‘yeah, New York! That’s where business is, that’s where you heard success was... It was the center of finance.’” The sincerity in his excitement made me smile in our conversation. It was as if Eddie had been transported to that moment as a teenager once again, learning about the world that was stretched out before him. A world that existed beyond Baton Rouge, Louisiana. It struck me that what stood out to him about New York City was its designation as “the center of finance”. In other words, Eddie was looking to move to where money was, and this was wrapped up in the industries of business and finance.

It is, then, not a shocking sentiment in the slightest that Eddie begins to identify opportunity with wealth, as he expressed in our conversation. He pinpointed New York City, the financial epicenter of the global capitalist economy, as the destination point, the beacon of futurity for him and his fellow, high-achieving Black peers. Moreover, a connection has been formed between one’s residential decision and making a material, political stance that reaffirms one’s ideological persuasions, which for Eddie, was to make money. However, one has no ability to make a residential decision if one does not have the capital to do so. Residential decision

implies residential *choice*, and thus is inherently linked to a material reality that is informed by one's amount of capital.

I was lucky that another family member of mine happened to be enrolled at Baton Rouge School during the same years as Eddie. Alice is now in her mid-50s and speaks with a quiet precision. In contrast to some of my other participants, who I knew a fair amount of their life stories, I had never had a long conversation with Alice myself. It made for a compelling interview, and at several points, we found ourselves lost in tangential conversations, or I ended up on the receiving end of loving, familial advice. She started with telling me about her parents who were both educators, and her father was a principal at a Baton Rouge public school. They lived towards the suburbs of Baton Rouge, in a predominantly Black neighborhood that was composed of middle class Black professionals, called Washington Estates. Since her mother was a teacher, Alice was given permission by the district to enroll in the elementary school her mother worked at, Green Hills Elementary, which was outside of their zoned school, and almost entirely white. Alice recounted that during her final year of elementary school, the integration order was becoming more strictly implemented, and so they began bussing Black students “literally from across the railroad tracks” to enroll at Green Hills.

Alice described the middle school she matriculated into as the site of “compromise”, in which white students were shuffled into a predominantly Black school. There had been some backlash due to only Black students having to uproot themselves to attend different schools, and so the school district finally gave in and began having some of the white students enroll in previously, predominantly Black schools. Despite the integration efforts, students socially segregated themselves along racial lines, and the school implemented honors classes where most of the white students, with a few Black students, including Alice, found themselves. Strong

achievement in the honors courses led to Alice's acceptance to Baton Rouge High. However, in stark contrast to Eddie, Alice did not find Baton Rouge High's strict, college preparatory curriculum aspirational. The GPA requirements felt like a "weeding out" and she found it "difficult to maintain friendships" at the school, because Black students would be kicked out due to poor academic performance. There was an overarching tone of suspicion Alice held towards the academic standards at Baton Rouge High, which she viewed as targeting the relatively small cohort of Black students.

Much more of Alica and I's conversation emphasized the institutional patterns that were limiting the potential success of Black students, such as the separation of cohorts into honors and non-honors, and the more rigid academic standards. She also identified the class differences as a fundamental challenge while integrating the schools:

"The difficulties were more because of economic class differences rather than the racial differences, because it was two different classes of kids. You know if you think about it, it was a neighborhood school where kids would walk to school and a lot of their parents were students at LSU or instructors. It was a different level. The kids across the railroad tracks were mostly lower socioeconomic [status]."

This identifies precisely the ways in which class differences have been mapped onto racial identity and subsequently set up Black students to do poorly in comparison to their white counterparts. There was never any moment where Alice, or Eddie, for that matter, attributed any of the lack of opportunity or poorer performance of their Black peers and friends to being Black. Both of them always held that having access to a certain level of material resources defined one's access to opportunity and success. As both of them were singled out through strong records of

academic achievement they were placed in environments that encouraged them to obtain success through college. For Alice, however, this was never contradictory to the neighborhood she grew up in as it was filled with Black professionals who had already achieved success in the sense of financial well-being. The concept of success was not defined by “getting out” of a neighborhood that looked like hers, although it was for Eddie. The trade-off between living in a white and Black neighborhood did not exist for Alice, because she knew that it was possible to live in a more advantaged neighborhood that was also Black.

Both Eddie and Alice attended Southern University, an HBCU (Historically Black College or University) in Baton Rouge. Alice graduated with a degree in psychology before attending Southern Law School. Eddie transferred to Louisiana State University, also in Baton Rouge, with a degree in Chemistry and Chemical Engineering. He later went on to earn an MBA at Purdue University and entered the corporate workforce, building his career for several decades with the goal of reaching the executive level. Following law school, Alice went into civil rights work with the government. Both of them left Louisiana, which they attributed to opportunities taking them elsewhere. For Eddie, moving for opportunity was synonymous with moving into white neighborhoods, while Alice intentionally sought out middle class, Black neighborhoods in the new cities she moved to.

Despite their similar education patterns, their future residential decisions diverge and reflect the notions of race, class, and success that they attested to in our conversations. As mentioned, Alice grew up in a middle to upper class neighborhood of Black professionals. Despite her schooling where she was more often than not the only, or one of few, Black students in her class, her father encouraged her to attend an HBCU because of an experience he had of racial violence from a group of white, LSU students. It touched him so deeply that he wanted to

shield his daughter from the racial horrors that he viewed as imminent in the integrating landscape. Alice repeatedly mentioned that she was aware of the violence possible in white environments, whether outright or more discrete, and her family and neighborhood was a barrier against this. Although she knew that racism was possible anywhere, there was no sense of giving up her sense of security and community for the aspirations of success, and the community around her demonstrated that it was well within the realm of possibility to achieve independence and financial well-being in a Black neighborhood.

On the other hand Eddie's neighbors, family, and friends were all encouraging him to get out of his neighborhood. The friends he had as a child who by the time they were in high school were now getting in trouble with the law, reminded him that he had the opportunity to live better than their current conditions. In many ways, Eddie attributed his ability to work hard and succeed in these challenging academic environments because of the steadfast encouragement from the community in his neighborhood.

The implications of this distinction between Eddie and Alice's perception of Black neighborhoods have to be carefully framed and consider the interaction between ideology and material conditions as paramount to any subsequent analysis. One possible takeaway could be that there needs to be an increase in middle to upper class Black neighborhoods, in order for those who grow up there to not feel a desire to separate themselves from their sense of racial identity and community as a means to accomplish what they view as success for themselves, such as Alice. This is a congruent line of thought that has been popularized through discussions of having more Black households in higher income brackets, only it seeks to concretize the increased, higher income representation through the presence of Black neighborhoods which reflect this class status. What fails to be considered, however, is that an increase in middle to

upper class Black neighborhoods does not change the fact that low income Black neighborhoods will still remain. The correlation between neighborhood characteristics associated with poverty and a predominantly Black neighborhood might decrease if more upper class Black neighborhoods take root, but this fundamentally does not pose a threat to racial capitalism. This relies on the intuitive capitalist hierarchy wherein a middle or upper class cannot exist with a lower class. Thus, households who remain further detached from opportunity, such as Eddie's childhood friends from Magnolia Courts who went to their zoned, public schools with significantly less infrastructure and resources, are more likely to remain trapped in cycles of poverty.

As explored in the second chapter, neighborhoods function as a medium of reification, a theory coined by Georg Lukacs⁴⁴. Eddie did not have the desire to settle into Black middle and upper class neighborhoods, in part because they did not exist in the new cities he found himself, but more to the point, because of this reified concept of the neighborhood. The reverse of the reified logic is to associate white neighborhoods with high levels of wealth and resources, and for someone like Eddie who wanted to prove his career success by his material conditions, he sought to buy into these well endowed, white neighborhoods. Although it seems like Alice's position of seeking out middle to upper class Black neighborhoods is in contradiction to the concept of racialized neighborhoods, it is instead pointing towards a different reified concept that is less capable of being reaffirmed through a white supremacist logic. Instead, it remains to perpetuate the idea that there must be a lower class and people living in poverty. The only difference is that it does not necessitate it is Black individuals who should be associated with this impoverished class. What this reveals is that Eddie and Alice are both viewing the world through

⁴⁴ Lukacs, Georg, *History and Class Consciousness*

capitalist, reified logics, and the residential decisions they made in their life reflect a difference in how they connect race into this picture.

It would be remiss to not mention how fondly Eddie thinks back on Magnolia Courts. It is not at all the case that he viewed his neighbors as less than him, only that he wanted better for himself, and this required him to be elsewhere. Eddie does not exhibit internalized racism in the sense that he negatively views himself or other Black people as less than their white counterparts. Rather he has a strong sense of a capitalist work ethic that allowed him to excel throughout his schooling and career. His sense of community that was formed around being Black transformed from his neighborhood to other high achieving Black students in high school and college, and throughout his career, became an transnational collective of highly successful, upper class Black individuals who could relate to Eddie's career struggles and successes. As success in his career became more and more important to him, as did having a community that could understand what navigating a corporate workplace entailed, specifically when one is Black.

Alice, who went into work with the federal government surrounding issues of civil rights, also worked with predominantly white people. However, because the nature of the work surrounded socio-political struggles that were more often than not related to race, the same desire to have a collective of Black individuals who connected to her work wasn't present in the manner it was for Eddie. Further, because she was residing in neighborhoods of Black professionals, her daily life was connected to a Black community that mirrored her success and career. Eddie, at the heart of capitalism in its financial, corporate core, was alienated from other Black individuals.

Eddie and Alice's stories are compelling testaments to how integration and residential decisions are often overlooked as solely phenomena of racial animus, without critical examination of systemic practices and the ways material conditions are determining the landscape that ideology is taking root from. Similarly, theories of capitalism such as Althusser's base/superstructure model and Luckas' reification can be difficult to articulate at smaller levels of scale. It requires a conjunction from these two vantage points to bridge an analysis that is responsible to the stories to the individuals and is grounded within the material conditions of our world.

Additionally, returning to the racial residential theories explored in the literature review on spatial assimilation and place stratification, we observe both at work in Eddie and Alice's accounts. Place stratification, defined as the group in power manipulating their capital to maintain their distance from "undesirable" groups, is another way to conceptualize white flight. This theory captures much of the relationship between ideology and material capital that I explored through amending Althusser's base/superstructure model to explicitly acknowledge white flight. Furthermore, spatial assimilation is discerned through Alice's neighborhood which demonstrates the correlation between residential and economic mobility. Importantly, there was a Black upper class neighborhood available for her family to move into to exercise this relationship, which is not always the case. For Eddie, the relationship between residential and economic mobility required moving into a white neighborhood.

Chapter Four: *The Hidden Costs of Black Capitalism*

If you ever find yourself speaking to people who found themselves in Louisiana after living elsewhere, as I did several times throughout this process, there is a universal sense of intrigue and mystique that penetrates their observations. While Southern and Louisiana State were the local colleges and universities for those who grew up in Baton Rouge, like Eddie and Alice, Marcus likened matriculating into Louisiana State to being a “fish out of water”. Hailing from rural Mississippi, Marcus toured the university the year prior to stepping foot on campus as a freshman. He spoke of his awe at the sprawling streets, lined with estate after estate, and the curling overhead branches of magnolia trees that imprinted shady patches onto the sidewalks. He had several friends who had attended Southern, the city’s HBCU, so when he made the college tour trip his senior year of high school, he visited both campuses. Despite the fact that Marcus knew people who attended Southern and that it was an HBCU, he was undeniably drawn towards the sheer “wealth” and striking elegance of “antebellum homes” that he saw on LSU’s campus.

Marcus was one of the kids that the neighborhood rooted for. He was smart, and identified as a stellar student from early on. Although the city he grew up in was largely, residentially segregated, his high school was “well balanced” in terms of the racial demographics. This speaks again to the specific moment in time following Brown vs Board of Education, where all school districts were called forth to integrate their schools. This generation experienced one of the rare moments in American history where schools were integrated to a large degree. 1988 was the peak of school integration, where more Black students attended school with white students than at any other point in time. Marcus graduated high school in 1984, so only a few years prior, and had constantly found himself in proximity to white students

and teachers throughout his schooling. He described himself being the “only Black guy” in his enrichment classes, which he was sorted into for his exemplary academic performance.

There is something that Marcus articulates with extreme clarity when speaking of his childhood, that while hinted while Eddie spoke, was never directly stated. While elaborating on being the only Black student in his advanced classes, Marcus explains the following:

“Often times, enrichment group, or gifted classes, early grammar school, and what not, [have] people telling you how smart you are, and you don’t really think so, but they’re saying it... teachers, and other kids, and you start to believe. So you realize that you, maybe, are kinda special, you know what I mean?”

There is a tentativeness laced in the statement towards the end, as he throws in “maybe” and “kinda” to offer cautionary disclaimers in the effort to avoid potentially sounding arrogant or boastful. There was no trace of anything other than complete sincerity as Marcus explained how this feeling of being special directly informed his lack of hesitancy in attending a predominantly white university. Importantly, this connection between being special was in conjunction with Marcus’s position as the only Black student in a classroom. There is a body of literature which examines racial identity formation in gifted Black students⁴⁵. Often these children find themselves in predominantly white spaces, such as Marcus, Eddie, and Alice, which has potentially damaging implications on how one views their identity as Black. I expected, to some degree, for this to arise more concretely in my conversation with Marcus as it did with Eddie when he described a separation between himself and his high-achieving Black kids and then neighborhood, Black kids. However, there was never a moment in our conversation where

⁴⁵Ford, D.Y., Harris, J.J., III and Schuerger, J.M. (1993), Racial Identity Development Among Gifted Black Students: Counseling Issues and Concerns. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 71: 409-417. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.1993.tb02657.x>

Marcus explicitly distinguished himself from the other Black children in his school or his neighborhood. Instead, much of his cues about wanting to get out of his Mississippi town had to do with this sense of “destiny” and a self-confidence that “I could do as well as I wanted”. His pull specifically towards LSU was partially driven through the seduction of wealth and resources that the campus had to offer. It was not that he chose LSU to avoid going to the HBCU, Southern, but that he associated LSU as more aligned to the future he was envisioning for himself.

Marcus’s plan was to study medicine, but he switched his degree plan a couple times before ending up with a degree in microbiology. He found his classes “isolating”, as a single person in a three hundred person lecture. It was a fend-for-yourself culture, with classes so large that made it nearly impossible to forge close relationships with professors. This is where the internal self-confidence he earned throughout his childhood became vital, because the culture by and large required students to either figure it out themselves, or simply, fail. It wasn’t until after his time in Baton Rouge that Marcus found himself at an HBCU in Houston, on a professional track pharmacological program. He broke out into a large grin as he reminisced about the school, calling fondly upon the environment where “the goal was to get everybody through the program”. In a direct juxtaposition to LSU, there were “no weed outs” or classes intended to “eliminate” half of the student body. It was a collective effort in which peers were meant to help peers, professors were there to help everyone accomplish the “common goal” of graduating.

I couldn’t help but think to myself what Marcus’s experience would have been like had he attended Southern instead of LSU, or if he were in a joint program, such as the one that Eddie enrolled in. This is not to say Marcus was cut off from a Black community in his time in Baton Rouge. He was a member of the Black fraternity, where he met lifelong friends, such as Eddie.

There was just ever so slightly the shadow of isolation that tinged his retelling of his academic years in Baton Rouge.

I found myself particularly captivated by Marcus describing how he had attended up on business career trajectory. In his pharmacy program, he was performing at a high academic level, and almost returned to his original idea of pursuing medical school to become a doctor. However, he recalled a moment of reflection where he asked himself why he wanted to be a doctor:

“I realized, though, that I was motivated by the wrong thing... You know it was about the money, okay? [It was] about money versus helping people, caring for people, and creating healthier lives, saving lives and all of that. The status, prestige of it versus actually caring about medicine... [that] wasn't the motivating piece for me, it was money and status... And then I realized... well doctors aren't the wealthiest people in the country, I said it's really in business.”

What was so compelling about Marcus's testimony is the clarity and candidness through which he identifies different periods of his life. At this singular point in time, he was able to identify for himself what he wanted for his life and career, and it unabashedly came down to “money”, “status”, and “wealth”. There is nothing at face value in the statement that is conflated to these notions of status and prestige. It does however mark an interesting shift that was also seen in Eddie's account. That is, both perceiving the epitome of wealth as being concentrated within the corporate sector. In one way, this reveals the ways in which young people at this time were acutely in tune with where money was congregating. Moreover, whether they explicitly understood it as such or not, they were demonstrating a comprehension of capitalism, to the

extent that they knew where they wanted to go-- where the money was and that required finding one's way to the top of the hierarchy.

Marcus had begun to position himself with a Talented Tenth identity. The goal of making it to the top references a long lineage of discourse surrounding what it means for Black individuals to be members of the upper or elite classes. W.E.B DuBois is frequently referenced in regards to his essay "The Talented Tenth" which appeared in a collection of texts assembled by Booker T. Washington called *The Negro Problem*⁴⁶. Published in 1903, the book was intended to provide guidance to Black Americans on how to navigate the landscape of a post-Emancipation America. "The Talented Tenth" referred to the segment of the Black population who were positioned to be the "leaders" of the race. That is, DuBois's thinking at the time of the essay, posited that gifted Black children should be given formal education so that they would become highly respectable figures of the community. Ideally, they would become lawyers, politicians, educators, doctors, and other high-status professionals who would be able to represent the Black community as a whole, and particularly those who were not members of the so-called "Talented Tenth". This was not so much of a theory, as it was a framework that DuBois was proposing on how to advance the wealth and stability of Black Americans. It relied on his belief that Black individuals who attained high-status positions would prioritize the needs and desires of their specific Black community over any other individual or communal desire. This maps neatly onto current discourses on the fight for representation, or more broadly, identity politics. The argument holds paramount that if only a certain minority group, in this case, Black people, were to have more representation among those who make decisions for neighborhoods, cities, and

⁴⁶Du Bois, W.E.B. "The Talented Tenth," from *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-day* (New York, 1903).

entire countries, then much of systemic and structural racism would be done away with because people who have our interests in mind are occupying positions of power.

Although representation by many metrics has not been substantially achieved, there has been considerable evidence that this idealistic vision does not hold when implemented. For example, racial residential segregation continuing during and following Obama's presidency is one case study out of many that shows representation is not the sole solution to structural racism. As to why aspirations such as the "Talented Tenth" fail depends on one's conception of the state, and particularly as to if one views the state as an instrument for a set of interests. For obvious reasons, this is labeled as the instrumentalist perspective, and originated from Marxists who were theorizing the relationship between capitalism and the state⁴⁷. They saw the state merely as an apparatus through which capitalist interests worked through. This would be consistent with the logic of the "Talented Tenth" in that high status, and presumably wealthy, individuals would be vested with the highest degree of decision making power. Most important in this however, is that these individuals would make decisions that act in their best interests. Thus, as members of the capitalist class, decisions of the state such as war, governance, social assistance and welfare, would all be made to reify the high status position of the capitalist class and allow it thrive, effectively resulting in a capitalist state. Marcus never gave the impression that he thought his encounters with racism would disappear as he amassed more money. However, he did have an allegiance to wealth and status, as evidenced in his above quotes, which demonstrated an endorsement of capitalism even if it were not explicitly stated. He saw racism and capitalism as two distinctly different entities, in that, for him, a racially equal society was possible under a capitalist system of labor. This will become more prevalent throughout the remainder of his story.

⁴⁷Barrow, Clyde. "Plain Marxism"

One of the failures which emerges out of a strict instrumentalist perspective is that it produces a fairly circular logic. For a capitalist state to exist because of the capitalist class holding positions of power, assumes the existence of capitalism which although is constituted on a basis of economically situated relations, is still inherently linked to power and the state. So, it fails to provide a clear genealogy of the capitalist state. Further, if we consider the state purely as an instrument, that is, it has no autonomy of its own, then theoretically, identity politics and representation should work as a solution. That is, if you were to replace people in positions of power with a diverse group of individuals who have differing interests, all of those interests should be reflected in decisions. Even in the “Talented Tenth” model, if the Black populace were to be represented through a select group of high status leaders, said cohort would belong to a different class of individuals. It would not be equivalent to the “average” Black individual, rather, it would be folks who had accumulated wealth, status, and prestige, who may have self-interests that are diametrically opposed to the interests of the broader Black community. What I find through my conversations with Marcus (and it extends to Eddie as well) is that no theoretical model or framework well captures that high-status individuals with marginalized identities can both want to help their broader community, in this case, the Black community, and in doing so reify the very social order which produces racial hierarchies because of the unacknowledged relationship between racism and capitalism.

Once Marcus made the decision to go the business route as opposed to medical school, he committed wholeheartedly. He read extensively on how to become successful while working as a pharmacist at a large healthcare company, which I will refer to as Venturia. The most pivotal takeaway of his independent studies was to have an entrepreneurial mindset, in contrast to being simply an employee at a corporation, Marcus learned that he needed imagination and a degree of

risk-taking to reach a point where “[he] worked for [himself]”. This became the ultimate goal once he began to think of himself as an entrepreneur. It distinguished himself from other corporate employees, because he was constantly strategizing how to get himself to the next level, and quickly into his career, he was figuring out how to land a position in management. It struck me that considering himself as an “entrepreneur” performed a similar function to being labeled a “special” or “gifted” child. It gave him a goal and direction, but also an internal sense of confidence that he was doing something different from others.

Venturia had come up with a new business model which involved streamlining the sourcing of certain medical products. Rather than individual hospital units having their pharmacists provide a product, they decided to spin-off their own business which would distribute these universally necessary products to hospitals all across the country. They needed people on the management team who were not only business savvy, but had their own degree of pharmaceutical knowledge, so Marcus was asked to be on the management team for the Venturia spin-off. The headquarters were to be located in none other than a deeply rural town in the Mississippi Delta, Marcus’s homestate.

A town of a little over 10,000 people, situated northwest of the Louisiana border, Cleveland, Mississippi moved at an entirely different pace compared to Houston and Baton Rouge. It seems like the exact opposite sort of town where one might end up becoming a high-level executive or member of a management team, and certainly not the sort of place where one envisions coming into lots of money and wealth. As of a July 2021 estimate, about 30% of the city is under the poverty line⁴⁸. So, Marcus was faced with quite a decision, because although he was being offered a management position, which is exactly what his goal had been, it was

⁴⁸*U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Cleveland City, Mississippi.*
<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/clevelandcitymississippi>. Accessed 30 Mar. 2023.

certainly not what he expected. There were numerous reasons to have reservations for taking the job. During the job offer process, Marcus spoke to the executives housed in the headquarters in Chicago and one would have to think that just about anyone would rather find themselves in Chicago than Cleveland, Mississippi. Nonetheless, Marcus decided to take the job, and thus the risk, because he had confidence in himself that he would be able to make this a successful business.

The town is fairly evenly split between Black and white residents, with the Black population taking a slight lead. Marcus made it abundantly clear that it was completely segregated with a distinct Black side of town and a white one. He described that life in Cleveland revolved around Venturia, “the white guys ran the plant” and the “[Black] folks were labor”. For Marcus, life and work came to collapse into the same entity, which is evident by his above statement. There was nothing more to life in Cleveland than Venturia, it was the complete centripetal force of the town. This made it even easier for Marcus’ life to be entirely revolving his job at Venturia. The work it required of him to reach this managerial position and remain there was practically all-encompassing. In simple terms, his life was his work. I asked him what side of the “railroad tracks” he lived on, a reference to how he described the segregated landscape. He responded that he lived on the Black side, but intentionally never bought a home so the executives in Chicago wouldn’t think that he had settled. He very strategically wanted them to see him as mobile and flexible, so whether it were for travel assignments or a promotion that necessitated his relocation, he would always be seen as available.

In this sense, Marcus’ residential decision making reflects something completely different from Eddie or Alice. Whereas those two were communicating something about how they identified and were shaped by their childhood environments, Marcus’ refusal to take root in

Cleveland is based upon wanting to be viewed as increasingly appealing to employers. However, it also says something about his subliminal desire to relocate out of the town once it became an option. It was thoroughly clear, although not explicitly spoken, that Marcus knew he was not going to settle in Cleveland, there was surely going to be a destination afterwards. For this reason, his choice of residence had less stake than Eddie or Alice, who were either buying homes or expecting to root themselves entirely in a different landscape. However, for all intents and purposes, Marcus was planning to eventually get out.

As one could predict in a rural Mississippi town, Cleveland was fraught with racial tension. Such to the degree that the project Marcus was tasked with was almost completely derailed once the managers at the plant realized he was their new coworker. They did not know he was Black, and were not particularly pleased when he showed up. He had built up connections with the Chicago headquarters, however, and this protected him because he had high level executives defending him as a choice to help lead the spin-off to the other managers at the Cleveland location. As Marcus developed the team there, he noticed that a lot of the Black workers had taken note of his position at the firm. He described to me realizing that he had the ability to open up opportunities to these Black workers where “they could come in and... get a fair shake”. He wanted people to accumulate skills that they could take and apply outside of Venturia and the spin-off, so they would always be in positions to find work. It became his “mission to give them an opportunity”. Not only did this lead to Marcus leading a majority Black team at this plant, but it became one of the highest generating revenue parts of Venturia at the time. They were beating the branches that were in rich pockets of the country, and although a Black team would still be a complete anomaly today, it was almost unheard of as this took place several decades ago.

Marcus took it upon himself to advance his community in the way he best knew how. It is readily in this that he identified himself with the Black community in Cleveland, but specifically in a leadership type of role. Whether it be the gifted child or the entrepreneurial mindset, Marcus had assumed a Talented Tenth identity, with the explicit intention of furthering the opportunities of other Black people. In a more modern update to the terminology, this could also be referred to as Black capitalism. That is, the belief that the more representation we attain at the level of the capitalist class, the better Black communities will fair by all metrics.

I want to raise a level of complication to this notion of Black capitalism, both in its definition and by extension, its subsequent critiques that are launched. By the defining characteristic of viewing oneself as a member of a community accompanied with the expressed goal of bettering that community, is in and of itself an anti-capitalist principle. Capitalism by definition is an individualistic enterprise. One's position is determinant by being placed ahead of others on a hierarchical ladder. Thus, an individual configuring themselves as a part of a community beyond the realm of American determinism or supposed meritocracy fundamentally threatens how capitalism operates at the micro level. Blackness as a distinct racial category is distinguished by a particular history, and from there, has given way to methods of survival that depend upon community and familial networks. That we view ourselves as a vital piece of a broader community has been the very nature of our survival through unimaginable harm.

Any scholar who is already critical of capitalism does not hold Black capitalism to be any exception. To this, I agree. As I detailed earlier in the chapter, once one reaches a position of higher income, increased wealth, and an increased proximity to the capitalist class, their self-interests align more and more so with their ability to sustain and further their wealth. This is inherently dependent on the exploitation and lack of means of others, which is why capitalism is

described as an individualistic socio-economic reality. In the case of Marcus, his self-interest is advancing himself through a major healthcare firm, but the other dimension is that he envisioned part of his role as furthering the opportunities and landscape of the Cleveland Black community. Importantly, although I posit that this desire and goal of Marcus is anti-capitalist in principle, it does not disrupt the capitalist mode of production or structural reality. This is important to raise because it centers that individual desires are not enough to thwart global systems. It also underscores that racism and capitalism are not separate entities, but rather nefariously interlocking systems. People still have to make less for others to make more. Workers, even at the managerial level, do not have access to the means of production. The economic base which continually refuels the racial inequities lives on, unscathed. Fundamentally, this demonstrates that while individual actions may alleviate some of the superficial burdens of racial capitalism, it does not pose a threat to the entity in its whole. There was never a moment Marcus did not buy into the logic of capitalism. From the moment he stepped foot in Baton Rouge, it was the wealth which drew him towards LSU, and the allure of status and money which dictated many of his career decisions.

Forty five years following the publication of “The Talented Tenth”, DuBois went on to rebuke the tenants of his original thesis. He proceeded to heavily criticize the notion that Black communities should be dictated by a select few leaders. This was directly connected to his increasingly outspoken criticisms of capitalism, in which he was one of the first thinkers to tease out the relationships between capitalism, colonialism, and racism. He began to realize that the complication of self-interest that arises once a person draws closer and closer to the capitalist class would always disrupt any notion of racial solidarity and community advancement.

In my conversation with Marcus, as I tried to probe further into the neighborhoods he moved into as an adult, or the one he lived in growing up, his responses were more quipped. He seemed to dwell much more on his school environment as opposed to his neighborhood environment. Even when he responded to my questions regarding where he lived in Cleveland as he took the job with Venturia, his decision appeared more as an afterthought. It was clear that work and career was first and foremost the central factor in Marcus' life. As opposed to Eddie, who purchased homes in each of the places he found himself living following college graduation, Marcus resided in apartments to keep up the appearance of flexibility to his overseers at Venturia. I found that residential location was less salient to Marcus than it was for Eddie or Alice. It was telling in a different regard. In the way Eddie chose his neighborhoods in adulthood to reflect his economic position, and hence found himself in white neighborhoods, Marcus took a different path. His choice to live in the Black side of Cleveland was not something he gave much of an explanation for, he more so emphasized living in an apartment. It remained to correspond to his economic position in the sense that being seen as a person with the ability to get up and go at a moment's notice was an advantage for his career. This was a more valuable approach to further his opportunity than living in a white neighborhood. As Marcus is currently retired and working on other projects, he now finds himself living in a white neighborhood.

The idea of a hidden or extra cost is something I have explored with explicit reference to residential choice. However, Marcus's story introduces a different hidden cost that was imposed on him. This is the assumed responsibility to better one's entire community, beyond oneself and their immediate family. Marcus had an expressed desire to help the broader Black community of Cleveland, however, this reads as an expected duty of Black people who make it into positions of power. Just as the ideas in the Talented Tenth echoed that Black leaders were needed to advance

the whole of the community, it is a very common expectation for Black people to always be considering how to aid the Black community. As I mentioned above, this is an anti-capitalist practice as it prioritizes a collective instead of solely an individual. However, because this responsibility is bestowed under the conditions of capitalism, it can also be considered an extra cost, because white members of the elite are never burdened to think beyond the realm of their self. The entire structure of racialized capitalism benefits white individuals, and thus, individuals themselves do not have to worry about advancing their community. Structures and institutions do it for them.

Interlude II: *The Return*

It had been a long, winding five years in between my most recent trips to Southern Louisiana. The imposition of a global pandemic was reason enough to stall a return, and in those five years, my world, and the world as a whole, had changed many times over. I was lucky enough to be able to return towards the end of this project with the company of my father and my brother. I had spent so many months at this point talking to various family and friends, writing about the very place I was about to return to, so much so that I began to wonder if this romanticized notion of Southern Louisiana was just that, romanticized. For everyone I spoke to, at least for the sake of this research, had left, and they had done so for a reason. That had never dissuaded me from my sentimental view prior, but I began to wonder if it would all come crashing down this time around. If, now at a different stage of adulthood, the cracks would reveal themselves to me.

It just so happened that coinciding with this trip, an English course I was taking on contemporary Black autobiographies was reading Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*⁴⁹. This text originally began as a history-oriented quest to find the lost stories of enslaved people as they were forced from their homes in West Africa, namely Ghana, to the United States. However, it ended up being written as an autobiographical narrative of Hartman's own experience living in Ghana as an African-American woman, interlaced with various historical accounts of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The central tension was Hartman being cast as a stranger in Ghana, which ultimately forced her to reckon with the romantic notion of a return she had arrived with in tow. As I read, I couldn't help but grow wary that I might find myself in a similar position. While Southern Louisiana was only a three hour flight from me, and certainly not on another

⁴⁹ Hartman, Saidiya V. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. 1st pbk. ed. New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008.

continent, it was the pinnacle of what I considered to be my ancestral home. Perhaps, I would have to dissolve my own fantastical notions of a homecoming.

Upon arrival at the New Orleans airport, my father, brother, and I piled into a car and made the trek to Baton Rouge as we had done many times before. I marveled at the trees and the swamp from the back seat, just as I remembered doing as a child. The sun soaked into my skin and my fears began to slip away, as I allowed myself the joy of being in this familiar place I had not stepped in for many years. Since it had been so long, my father did the ceremonious drive around Baton Rouge, pointing out the houses he had grown up in, the schools he attended, and the parks he played at. We visited family, who we all realized were aging. We had wanted to forget that it had been five years, but time was evident on all of us. And so we sat together and shared crawfish boils, we reminisced, and enjoyed one another's company. It was beautiful, not because it was triumphantly magical, but because of its simplicity. This was home because my family was here, because history had spurred up from the earth of this very place and given root to all of our beings.

My greatest joy of the trip was watching my brother's fascination. He was younger, and somewhat disinterested in Baton Rouge and New Orleans whenever we took trips as we grew up. While he always enjoyed being with family, we didn't necessarily share the same sentiment towards Southern Louisiana. However, this time, I observed his eyes grow large at stories he had never heard before. Question after question tumbled from his lips as his curiosity with this place and our family history swelled. It was as if I relived the awe that took hold of me so many years ago through him, and I was honored to witness it.

After a couple of days in Baton Rouge, we returned to New Orleans. My brother was only able to stay for a day there, so it was mostly my father and I for the remainder of the trip.

We went to the first house that he ever bought, in the Seventh Ward, and the house of my great-great-great aunt, the namesake to my middle name, who lived till nearly one hundred years of age, passing away shortly after I was born. We visited the bar that my parents had met at, and in the same walk, passed by the plaque of the Transatlantic Slave Trade which sat in front of the banks of the Mississippi River. Somehow, in the span of a twenty minute span, the whole of my history had been covered, from my ancestors' forced arrival to the spot my parents had found one another. It served as another reminder of just how special this city, and the region, is to myself and my family. It is truly our ancestral home in every sense of its meaning.

All of this can be true, and yet, I genuinely understood, perhaps for the first time, why my parents had made the decision to leave. We stayed a short distance from the French Quarter and this was where I found myself most days, writing under the branches of great magnolia trees or running alongside the bank of the Mississippi. People asked where I was from, as it was naturally assumed anyone in the Quarter was a tourist. I responded that my family was from here and it had been awhile since I had last visited. On one occasion someone remarked that of course they could tell I was from here, that I looked as Creole as one could be. I smiled at the recognition, but knew that my very being in the Quarter said more to me being an outsider than what I would prefer. At the end of the day, I was a visitor. My daily life wasn't marked by the systemic and structural forces that shape Southern Louisiana. I was not there when the city flooded from Katrina. I had access to better public education growing up. I had exposure to industries other than tourism. And thus, the migration of my family into white neighborhoods did the task it was intended to do in many ways. It set me up for many more opportunities than were available to the generation before me, or even the members of my own generation that still remain in Black

neighborhoods in Louisiana. I was both of this place and not of it. Home can be far and near at the same time.

Conclusion

I must admit that this project weaved in directions I did not anticipate, and this was one of the great joys of the process. In my research leading up, I had begun to piece together a portrait of residential decision making for Black individuals that involved the neighborhoods and schools they grew up in and the relationship between ideology and material means. This was heavily influenced by the historical moment in which all of my participants were growing up, in the dawn of the integration era of schools following the *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling. While these factors certainly held resonance in varying degrees for each of my participants, the theme which burst through was the quest for opportunity, whether for oneself, their family, or their community. For Eddie, Alice, and Marcus, this was all communicated in slightly different ways. Eddie chose to live in white neighborhoods because he found those to be the locations that matched his class-income position, and provided the best opportunities for his children. Alice, for almost the whole of her life, lived in Black neighborhoods, but had a somewhat unique chance to do so, as she found herself in cities where middle class Black neighborhoods existed. Marcus, for whom decisions of residential location seemed the least salient, selected his neighborhood to reflect a flexibility and to his firm.

For Black people, opportunity comes with a hidden cost. I was initially interested in the trade-off that is imposed on Black household's residential decisions. If we forgo the existence of Black middle and upper class neighborhoods for the sake of the argument (which is fair considering how few exist), the choice for Black families between living in a Black, likely more disadvantaged, neighborhood, or a white, likely more advantaged neighborhood includes a hidden cost for either choice. Living in a neighborhood with close family, friends, and kinship networks is often highly valued, and clearly is important as many members of the Black middle

class live in predominantly Black neighborhoods, even when they could afford to live in more advantaged neighborhoods⁵⁰. Therefore, to reside in a neighborhood with more access to resources and opportunities likely requires sacrificing this community and potentially subjecting oneself to blatant, interpersonal racist attacks and commentary. This was articulated through Eddie and Marcus's testimonies as they clearly defined the steps of their life as inching closer and closer towards opportunity and success, which meant white schools, white coworkers, and white neighborhoods. Alice's story functioned as a layer of nuance to this argument. Growing up in an upper class Black neighborhood meant that she did not see Black neighborhoods, or broader Black institutions, as inherent roadblocks to success.

All four of my participants currently live in white neighborhoods, but their processes to arriving there differed from one another. Eddie is the only one who has spent the majority of his adult life in white neighborhoods, and as a result, had more to offer when asked direct questions about why this was. Alice indicated her apprehensiveness to her new white neighborhood and addressed concerns about finding adequate health care providers, or a broader community. I found Marcus to be the most carefree in his response to his residence in a white neighborhood. For each of them elaborated much more more on their lives leading up to living in these neighborhoods, as captured in Chapters Three and Four.

Residence, and neighborhood, is encoded in the language of opportunity. In our world, opportunity is inherently embedded within the schema of racial capitalism, thus, supporting the use of such frameworks to make sense of residential decisions. In any regard, all three of my participants leveraged their economic position to reside in a neighborhood that aligned with their

⁵⁰ Leonhardt, David. "Middle-Class Black Families in Low-Income Neighborhoods." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 24 June 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/25/upshot/middle-class-black-families-in-low-income-neighborhoods.html>.

career and familial aspirations, and this drove their migration from Black neighborhoods into white ones.

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