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Aging, the Life Course, and Oral History: African American Narratives of Struggle, Social Change, and Decline

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Social deterioration and a loss of community cohesion are recurring themes in many narratives of American history. Since the first European settlements in the New World, religious writers, political leaders, and ordinary citizens have frequently decried changes associated with population growth, perpetually deteriorating "family values," increasing cultural heterogeneity, and gains in individual rights and freedoms—to name only a few of the signs of decline.[1] While Americans have become accustomed to such laments from elite white academics, conservatives, and politicians, relatively few European Americans hear a parallel story of community decline and loss from local leaders and former civil rights activists within African American communities. Many of the oral history narratives recorded by researchers for the Delta Oral History Project, a collaborative effort of Tougaloo College, Mississippi, and Dickinson College, Pennsylvania, between 1995 and 1998, echo the stories purveyed by elite white authorities, but with a profound difference.[2]

Many of the one hundred African American community leaders we interviewed in small Mississippi towns and cities told stories of community deterioration and loss. They spoke of a loss of cohesion and discipline throughout their communities and a profound loss of ambition and industriousness among African American young people. They attributed these losses to

developments that they had noticed at neighborhood levels: a lack of firm and consistent parenting, a growing materialism among younger generations, and a lack of respect for elders and authority figures. Many African American leaders believed that school desegregation and increased federal intervention in the forms of public housing, welfare expenditures, and unemployment benefits had caused or exacerbated the unraveling of their communities. As civil rights leaders, many narrators had taken considerable personal risks to bring political rights and federal programs to the impoverished African Americans of the Mississippi Delta. At midlife and late life, they often lamented the results of this intervention and attributed many of their community ills to integration or, more correctly, to the process of desegregation of public schools. A second source of decline was the increased utilization of federal transfer payments and public subsidies by the black poor.

The laments of age against the seeming fecklessness of youth are clichés in narratives of decline. But the tenor and vehemence—and the targeting of the sources of decline—among many Delta leaders beg for explanations beyond the usual complaints of old versus young. In this essay, readers are asked to consider evidence from four of the personal narratives that my colleagues and I recorded. The elders' statements of anger and loss are in fact the expressions of a sense of collective grief and despair that are the products of a history of profound social suffering and collective trauma.[3] Many narrators seemed to be mourning a history of personal and collective losses—their own and those of their communities. Their despair is, as therapist Miriam Greenspan has argued, a "complex emotion that contains core elements of grief, anger and helplessness. It is fundamentally related to social conditions and to how we make meaning of our suffering and pain. It has a distinctly moral and social dimension that cannot and should not be ignored."[4] Part of the elders' sense of loss stemmed from what they perceived to be the evaporation of the values that sustained their own survival and achievement: thrift, industry, and sexual virtue. Postmodern consumer culture, based on spending and debt, was a moral affront to many narrators. Consumerism had made the common virtues of the past seem irrelevant.

The collective suffering inflicted upon African Americans in the Mississippi Delta during the age of segregation forced families into rigorous patterns of personal and collective discipline in order to survive the hardships and dangers of rural life. Families that achieved some security and were able to educate their children for at least several years in rural schools internalized the values of uplift and striving. Their sense of collective hope was linked to personal and collective work, frugality, ceaseless improvement, and vigilance.[5] The civil rights movement of the 1960s raised the level of personal and collective hopes significantly, and these cherished hopes helped narrators to survive the risks and terrors of the movement years.

In the wake of the economic stagnation within poor black communities in the 1980s and 1990s, many narrators saw their personal and individual hopes realized in their own lives and in their children's successes. But the hopes that they nurtured for the larger African American community were undermined by what they saw as alarming changes within local neighborhoods and families. Narrators perceived a loss of collective discipline that they associated with the disappearance of the community-centered, all-black schools of the age of segregation and with the decline of the moral authority of churches and civic leaders. This led, they contended, to the spread of indolence, materialism, and violent behavior among young working-class African Americans and a too-ready acceptance of "handouts" such as subsidized housing and welfare payments.

Narrators had infused both personal and collective hopes for progress and betterment with the values of uplift, community service, and hard work. It is important here to distinguish personal hopes for success from social hopes. As psychologist Rudolph M. Nesse has maintained, "Hope at the individual level is fundamentally conservative, but hope at the social level deeply threatens those at the top."[6] Individual activists' hopes for the future were realized by their experience of improvement and by the achievements of those close to them. Such success stories validated the rigorous moralistic virtues of uplift ideology, which contained an implicit condemnation of individuals and groups who did not appear to practice the dictates of relentless striving, frugality, and sexual monogamy. The

class-based civil rights "movement of the poor" in the Mississippi Delta directly threatened the interests of white elites and other groups who had profited from segregation. Yet the institutional successes of the movement—which had allowed considerable economic mobility to the African American middle class and to members of the striving working class—did not seem to significantly change either the status or the prospects of the black poor in Delta counties. Thus the social hopes of many activist leaders collapsed in the face of the seemingly intractable condition of the black poor. Unfortunately, the values of uplift, which had propelled activists into politics and community improvement efforts, included an explanation for neither the economic stagnation of the region nor the long-term effects of structural violence on the most vulnerable segments of the population. Indeed, as Kevin Gaines has indicated, one consequence of the internalization of the values of uplift has been the tendency among some African American elites to blame the poor for their own condition.[7]

Such collective grief and despair are in fact the products of the lifetime *costs* of social suffering, elevated collective hopes, and the risks and strains of the movement years.[8] Lives marked by economic deprivation, unending hard work, and considerable risks in the movement had been sustained by promises of personal and collective liberation and progress. Movement expectations, in turn, reinforced the values of frugality, striving, and virtue that were promoted in the African American ideology of uplift in the twentieth century. The narrators' adherence to the virtues of uplift as the mechanisms of community progress clouded their ability to assess the choices made by subsequent generations of African American poor people. Their vision of decline is a reflection of their own individual and collective life experiences rather than of seismic changes in the hopes and behaviors of the poor.

Several concepts from the literatures of the life course in sociology and social gerontology unpack the relationships between narrators' accounts of their personal and collective experiences and the sources of their visions of decline. The structures that support and constrain human agency provide a framework for understanding the impact of lifetime social change upon subjec-

tivity in midlife and late life. Also, consideration is given to the American values of progress and improvement that helped shape the expectations—and hence the disappointments—of leaders of a successful social movement.

Concepts and methods drawn from life-course studies and social gerontology benefit oral historians in a number of ways. First, such concepts as the intersection of historical, social, and biological timing in individual lives can help explain sometimes troubling or counterintuitive narratives among different groups and individuals. Notions of individual agency expressed in specific choices of "institutional pathways, developmental trajectories, and [life] transitions" aid understanding of the grounding of individual lives in specific social contexts and constructs. Further, an emphasis on the "construction of lives [and] . . . linked or interdependent lives" and attention to the specific constraints inherent in particular historical times and places[9] contribute to an understanding of the sometimes complicated relationships that narrators negotiate between their own autobiographical narratives, the surrounding narratives propagated by local communities, and the national narratives produced by governments and the media. National narratives cohere as "official stories" of wars, social movements, and flush or hard times. These metanarratives often intersect with local knowledge in surprising and confounding ways.[10]

The Narratives

"My experience in school—Mama sent her children to school. I did graduate from Booker T. Washington in Memphis, Tennessee, and the business school. I had a degree at Coahoma Junior College and studies at Delta State University in library science." At fifty-four, Juanita Scott was an administrator in the Head Start program in Bolivar County, Mississippi. Her own success story included early work in the house where her mother raised ten children after her husband deserted the family. Scott and her siblings also labored on the sharecropping tract that her mother worked. All of the children went to segregated schools in Sunflower County.

From a life of early hardship and collective labor, Scott viewed with dismay the changes in the Mississippi Delta's schools and in their students in the 1990s:

Students today are not taught discipline. They are not taught to follow authority, and they don't have any goals in life, especially the ones which is the majority. The parents are not training them. But out of my family, we were taught to reach for the stars, and we have PhD's in chemistry in my family, principals of schools, nurse anesthetists, computer programmers, environmental specialists, registered nurses, medical doctors, commercial arts and graphics. . . . All of us are making it for ourselves. Some of my mom's children felt she was too hard on us and allowed their children to do nothing, and that's exactly what they are doing. As a whole, our community seems to be regressing sometimes instead of progressing. There are not enough positive changes in the minds of people. They are not registering to vote, and that is the key to success in any community.

Scott linked the erosion of discipline in child-rearing practices in the African American communities of the Delta to other aspects of community decline—to an apathy toward voting, education, and self-improvement. Especially, she mourned the loss of the all-black segregated schools as a critical binding force in her community's life. The desegregation of the Delta's public schools, she believed, was a disaster for the African American community and for its young people:

To me, integration was one of the worst things that happened to black people, when they went to school. They lost all of their identity. They lost all of their dignity. They just lost it, and now they are fat in the minds and they don't have no direction. [The all-black school] was very much important for those kids, very much important. We've got people over there [in the schools] who don't care what they do. And then our young parents don't care what they do. So that's when you lost the togetherness from the church, and the home, and the school, and when you lose that communication, you lose that child. You lose your community, and that's what has happened. Those three institutions are torn down: the house, the home, and the school. And that has caused our problem, I feel.

Scott was appalled by the dependence of the black poor on public entitlements such as welfare, which she saw as another manifestation of consumer culture. This materialism, when not tied to a strong work ethic and social discipline, made black communities less safe and healthy places than the neighborhoods of the past. Juanita Scott's mother, Mattie Scott Pace, had told her children, "If you don't work, you're going to steal." Scott likewise considered the widespread acceptance of public subsidies to be a form of stealing: "I would see all of these people on the corner, I say they're not working. I know they're stealing something. Even they're stealing from the government if they're getting a check. That's stealing, stealing from the government if you're not working."[11]

Like Scott, civil rights activist Cora Fleming was one of the founders of the local Head Start program in Sunflower County in 1965. Believing that War on Poverty funds would arrive to fund the early childhood education program for poor communities in the Delta, civil rights activists Fleming, Scott, and their peers recruited children, fed and clothed many of them, and eventually received funding from the federal agencies. Although Fleming's organization, the Associated Communities of Sunflower County, was later subsumed under the middle-class–led Community Action Programs, the early organizing experience was a pivotal turning point for many of the women who worked in the early centers. Through their employment in Head Start, many "improved" themselves through educational requirements that included high school equivalence degrees and college course work. They also saw substantial improvements in the lives of their young students, many of whom came from the most deprived families in the Delta. But at sixty-one years of age during her 1995 interview, Fleming expressed despair at the condition of the young people she saw in her community, stating, "They've lost the will to try to survive without getting in trouble." She traced this development to a lack of adequate discipline, instigated in part by laws that prohibited child abuse: "They tried to stop people from whipping their children and chastise them and discipline them like they should. I told them [black parents] back then, 'They're getting ready to put all of you in jail now. You'd better take a look at what's going on around

you, because if you can't whip your child, he's going to get in trouble then.' It's your right to chastise them. . . . Now, they say everything you do is child abuse. It's child abuse, all right, so they can put them in jail later on. The jails are full right now."[12]

Like Fleming and Scott, Kermit Stanton of Shelby, Mississippi, attributed many of the social ills of his community to a lack of proper parenting and a lack of discipline among younger generations. Born in 1925, Stanton dropped out of high school to work on his family's farm in Deeson, Mississippi. Using the GI Bill after his navy service in World War II, Stanton became an auto mechanic for the largest car dealership in Shelby. In the 1960s, Stanton became involved with parents who demanded changes in the administration of Shelby's black public schools. This involvement and his welcoming of the young activists from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) led to leadership positions in the county's civil rights movement. In 1968, he was elected to the Bolivar County Board of Supervisors, the body that controlled the county's finances. As the first black county supervisor in Mississippi since Reconstruction, Stanton received death threats from the Ku Klux Klan, and nightriders shot into his house in Shelby shortly after his election.

Kermit Stanton served a number of terms on the Board of Supervisors and saw positive and negative changes in the African American communities of Bolivar County: "When I was elected supervisor, I said to myself, well, twenty years from now, you know, I predicted that things would be so much better in every standard as far as education and everything else. . . . [But] it didn't change. We have the same things now that we had forty, thirty years ago." He admitted that educational standards in local schools were not "what they should be," but continued: "It seems as if you've got to force education on young black people, because they have the opportunity and they won't accept it. They start dropping out of school, using crack, selling crack cocaine. It seems like they're getting more ignorant every day than they were thirty years ago. And they have educational opportunities and they won't accept it."

Stanton decried the number of poor families who lived in public housing and received welfare checks each month and

other public subsidies if they had disabled children, but who also "use[d] these funds to buy crack with." He blamed this cycle of idleness and crime on the welfare system: "Seems that the federal government has got a mechanism out here to control the black people." He continued, "The welfare system is the worst system you ever saw. Now, all of this money that's being spent in our community is welfare system. We opened up some new apartments right up the street here a couple months ago, and a guy got killed up there Sunday before last, dealing with crack. And until the government changes the system, the way these things are here, I don't think it's going to get any better. It's going to get worse."

Stanton believed that improvidence and materialism were rampant among younger generations, leading even employed people to live beyond their means and to forgo savings for transitory pleasures. Young workers were "further in debt than they were thirty years ago. They're living better and everything but they don't own anything." Federal subsidies, he believed, had crippled the motivation of the African American poor:

> The values are all screwed up, you know. You can go up there [to downtown Shelby] and find fifteen on the street, and you ask them do they want to work, and, no, they won't work. They're going to wait till they get that check on that unemployment. They're not going to work. They won't work. I don't know what the trouble is. I think the federal government did this on purpose to people . . . by giving them too much. They get free housing, they get free food, they get a check every month. What you want to work for? You don't have to work. You're getting the same thing you're going to get if you work, for free.[13]

Mayor Robert Gray of Shelby voiced similar feelings of despair from his vantage point in city office. Born in Montgomery County, Tennessee, in 1941, Gray moved to Shelby as a schoolteacher in the 1960s. With Stanton, he had been instrumental in establishing the first Head Start centers in the plantation town. He was elected to Shelby's City Council in 1968, and in 1996 he revived a dormant auto-parts firm as part of his larger mission of bringing new economic activity to Shelby. Although a civil

rights leader in Shelby who had benefited from the political changes—the increased black vote in the county—Gray judged desegregation to have been a disaster for the black community. He believed that "there's been a breakdown in family structure, and a lot of it is because of integration." He explained:

> We [African Americans] had a way of disciplining our children that worked, and white people had their way—that our people can't relate to—but we had to take on their way because of [school] integration, rather than the way that we were doing it, which was successful. You know, Mama was gone, Mama next door looked after her children. Now, that don't take place in the white community. The only thing Johnny, who is black, relates to is a spanking from time to time. White people can discipline their children, "I'm not going to carry you to London this summer. I'm not going to carry you to Egypt. I'm not going to carry you to the coast over Easter break." That's the discipline in the white community, but we had to take on that, because, you know, it has never been a true integration. When you talk about integrate, you meet.

In desegregated public schools, black teachers could not administer corporal punishment to white children and so declined to administer it to African American children. Additionally, the new consolidated, desegregated public schools, although heavily black in student population, seemed remote and intimidating to many African American parents who had felt a degree of personal and community involvement with the smaller all-black schools. This rift between parents, schools, and traditional methods of child rearing and discipline was compounded by the disappearance of black businesses—another result of desegregation, according to Gray. "We lost all our businesses," he said. "We lost the schools, you know, control of the schools. . . . So while it might appear from the surface that we made progress, when you add up all the intangibles into the situation, we retrogressed."[14]

Gray, Stanton, Fleming, and Scott all saw several causes of the ills of their communities: lax parenting, school desegregation, with an accompanying decline in student discipline and learning, and the enervating and ambition-sapping effects of the welfare system and other public benefits that came with federal

intervention since the 1960s. Behind all of the policies, however, lurked local white elites and faceless state and national governments that seemed to be intent on further ruining the characters and life chances of poor African Americans. Thus these stories of decline were shadowed by the narrators' suspicions of white elite conspiracies to diminish black communities through policies that weakened the ambition and will of the lower class.

Lives and Social Change

Part of the background of this disillusionment is the magnitude of social changes that the Delta leaders had experienced over their lives. Gray, Stanton, Scott, and Fleming grew up within an almost preindustrial agricultural system that was based on the family economy as a primary unit of income production among tenant farmers and small independent farmers in the "Black Belt" South. While much of the rest of the country had thoroughly modernized agricultural practices, the Mississippi Delta still depended on an exploitative sharecropping system to plant, cultivate, and pick its cotton crops through much of the 1960s. Farmers plowed their rows in the rich Delta soil with mules. All-black segregated rural and small-town schools often ran "split shifts" that regulated schooling around the demands of cotton chopping and picking. Most of the state's black public schools were underfunded and poor, and many black Deltans received only two to four years of plantation schooling, sometimes under teachers whose only training was in similar black schools.[15]

The sharecropping system itself was based on planter control and gross economic exploitation. Federal government interventions during the Great Depression of the 1930s—innovations such as cultivation restriction and price supports for the cotton crop—provided funds primarily to the planters and large farmers. Pressed themselves by the agricultural disasters of the 1930s, these men had few qualms about dismissing their unneeded labor force, swelling the flow of dispossessed farmers and agricultural people to Northern and Western states during the decade.

Families who stayed on the land were those who survived the numerous stresses of agricultural labor, economic exploitation,

and political oppression, as well as outbursts of white terrorism and violence from state authorities, organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, or less formalized vigilante groups of local whites. Such families survived by a stringent thrift, collective labor, and a sometimes harsh social discipline. The family economy was based on a principle of "cooperate and survive," values that were instilled quite early in the families of Fleming, Scott, Stanton, and Gray. At midlife and late life, these leaders expressed a pride in their own industry and achievement, which were, in turn, part of larger stories of family motivation and progress.

How can concepts from life-course study help to make sense of the discrepancies between the narrators' personal, family, and social histories and those of other Americans who inhabited a parallel, but very different, historical time and setting? And how can life-course concepts help us to unpack the sources of the rage and disappointment that tinge their narratives with a sense of loss and collective victimization? Several concepts from life-course research help to untangle the relationships between social suffering, collective hope, and collective grief and despair that haunt many Delta narratives. Prominent life-course scholars suggest ways in which the Delta narrators' sense of a chaotic transformation of social and personal time is a product of very real differences between their experiences and those of a majority of Americans of the twentieth century.

African American women and men born to rural farm families in the first half of the twentieth century faced the coming of the twenty-first century with values and belief systems rooted in a preindustrial family culture and social system. The difficulties of collective survival forced family members to internalize an often harsh regime of discipline and work. The black Delta communities they inherited in the late twentieth century resembled in many ways postindustrial Third World landscapes. All four counties were majority African American in the late 1990s and were blighted by enormous social problems produced by a chronically impoverished infrastructure. Many depressed Delta communities had the abandoned look of industrial ghost towns, except that the region had been neither disciplined nor blessed by the ultimately beneficial process of industrialization and social modernization.[16]

Life-Course Studies

Life-course theory and studies have been developed since the 1960s and 1970s by a number of sociologists and demographers, and some historians. Among the most prolific scholars in the fields of life-course studies, aging, and human development are Glen H. Elder Jr., John Modell, Matilda White Riley, Gunhild O. Hagestad, Tamara Hareven, Jill Quadrango, and Peter Laslett.[17] The studies loosely grouped within the categories of human development and the life course have included investigations into the lifelong effects of the 1930s Depression on two groups of California children, changes in the timing of life events over the course of the twentieth century, and short-term and long-term effects of disruption and stress on the lives of specific populations. Many such studies have been made possible through technological developments that have fostered the ability of historical demographers to make significant advances in what we can know about individuals of past centuries through the examination and computer analysis of aggregate records of births, deaths, taxes, voting patterns, migration, and economic activities.

According to sociologist Martin Kohli, life-course theory developed as a response to an awareness that the demographic conditions of life had altered tremendously over the past three centuries of modernization in western Europe and the United States, areas that experienced industrialization, urbanization, and substantial growth in state bureaucracies and capacities for social control. With economies based increasingly on large-scale industrial production, states needed to regulate public social norms to conform to the changing demands of factory work requirements.[18]

Premodern—or at least preindustrial—European and American life had been based on a family economy as the primary "unit of production." In the agricultural family economy, work and family life were largely undifferentiated. Mortality rates were very high for infants, but death could—and did—strike at any time during one's life. For instance, historian Philip Greven found that in colonial Andover, Massachusetts, one-fifth of the inhabitants did not live to age twenty. Furthermore D. E. Stannard concluded that "with average birth rates on the order of

8 or 9, colonial families could expect that 2 or 3 of their children would die before reaching age 10."[19]

In developing industrial communities in western Europe and the United States, rural migrants to factory towns adapted the family economy to the demands of frequently dangerous and low-wage industrial work. The ethos of this family was "cooperate and survive," and all family members were expected— and sometimes even forced—to contribute to the family's income. High mortality rates among Americans and Europeans throughout the nineteenth century meant that death was a common experience, and families often memorialized their losses with funeral photographs of dead infants, children, and adults.

Although death remained a familiar presence for late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century families, the long-term impact of industrialization included an increasing life expectancy over the nineteenth century. According to Victor W. Marshall, "In most European countries, life expectancy at birth increased from 40 years in 1840 to 50 years in 1900."[20] Although families continued to suffer high mortality rates due to infant deaths, work injuries, and illness, life expectancy in American urban areas also reached fifty years of age at the turn of the century. By the 1990s, life expectancy had exceeded seventy years of age for Americans, and the "old old"—those over age eighty-five—constituted a growing percentage of the swelling numbers of the elderly. While only 5.4 percent of Americans were over sixty years of age in the 1880s, by the 1980s and 1990s, 15.9 percent of the American population was sixty years and older, leading demographer Peter Laslett to note that the increasing longevity and declining mortality rates of advanced countries have created a "novel . . . situation. . . . Average individual lifetimes last for very much longer than they ever have before anywhere or at any time, and these populations have among them quite unprecedented numbers of elderly people."[21]

The demographic transition of the last century has altered the age at death, as Kohli says, "from a pattern of randomness to a pattern of a predictable life-span." While death routinely ended the lives of infants, children, and adults in previous centuries, it has come to be concentrated "in the upper age brackets" in recent decades. This development has rendered the death of

infants and young people as "unnatural" events in the families of late-twentieth-century Westerners. The greatly expanded life expectancy, Kohli continues, has also led to an increasingly state-regulated cycle of "normative life events" over the life span. States have actively promoted a widespread acceptance of a "normal biography" based on a predictable sequence of life experiences: preparation and training for work, followed by a lengthy period of work or employment activity, followed by a lengthening period of retirement. Since the late nineteenth century, states have stratified the timing of these life events through the mechanisms of compulsory education with age-graded standards for achievement and promotion, age-specific rights and public obligations and duties—such as military service, social security contributions, and driving—and specific ages at which workers can expect to receive pensions, social security payments, and entitlements to such benefits as Medicare. The industrial and postindustrial cultures that have mandated this normative life span and its predictable sequence of careers, Kohli says, have made this life plan "a primary source of identity" for contemporary Americans and Europeans. The predictable timing of life events, coupled with an increasing cultural emphasis on psychology and on the individual as the basic unit of social life, have engendered a "developmental conception" of the self that has flourished in nineteenth- and twentieth-century autobiographies. Among such writers, developmental trajectories mirror the wider culture's conceptions of progressive improvement. According to Kohli, "the individualized life course emerged as the basic code for constructing one's experiences and perspectives." While numerous social and economic changes have produced this predictable temporally and progressive construction of the self, it is the welfare state, he writes, that is most "responsible for the increasing age grading of life."[22]

Taking their cue from both aggregate population data and qualitative research methods, life-course scholars created a body of concepts and methods to study change in the lives of contemporary and vanished populations. These concepts attempt to place individual and collective human agency within the constraints imposed by time, place, social system, and relational context. This reflects life-course scholars' recognition that

human life and decision making are constrained by history, economy, and interactively created perceptions of possibility. Some of the most creative works have included Laslett's study of seventeenth-century England, Greven's work on colonial Massachusetts, Modell's research into the changing age expectations and timing of life events among American youth of the twentieth century, and Hareven's work on nineteenth-century industrial labor and family life.

One of the most important scholars in this field is sociologist Glen Elder, whose pioneering *Children of the Great Depression*, first published in 1974, focused on longitudinal research on two cohorts of young people from Depression-era families in Oakland and Berkeley, California. A prominent researcher and theorist of the concept since his early work, Elder described the life course as "a sequence of socially defined, age-graded events and roles that the individual enacts over time." The timing and structuring of these roles has a great deal to do with the "social meanings of age" within the community the individual inhabits.[23] One example cited by life-course scholars is that the social meanings of age and work differ between working-class, middle-class, and professional men. Working-class men see an earlier end to their work lives than do men who are in the administrative and professional classes. For the former, their work is indeed often "written on the body" and produces physical injuries and stressors to an extent that white-collar work does not. Not surprisingly, men who choose to continue working past a retirement age of sixty-five are most often those in the executive or administrative/professional ranks.

Important aspects of life-course theories include the concepts of cohort, trajectories, transitions, and careers. These constructs interactively link individuals and their social roles to historical change. Life-course theorists prefer to see operative age units within populations in terms of cohorts rather than generations. Generations are understood to have genealogical or familial derivation, but cohorts are composed of individuals born within a generally limited number of years, say, intervals of five to ten years. Placement within a specific birth cohort determines one's experience of historical change. In *Children of the Great Depression*, Elder shows that the timing of Depression hardship upon

families in Oakland and Berkeley, California, had varying effects on children of different birth cohorts, who were thus at different ages when economic loss struck the family. The younger the age of the children when severe economic loss occurred, the more severe were their psychological and social problems. This was especially true of young male children.[24]

Life-course theory also locates cohorts in specific developmental trajectories, which, according to Elder, encompass "social or psychological states over a substantial part of the life span." Within these long-term life patterns or trajectories, individuals experience and frequently choose life-changing experiences called transitions. The latter are changes of shorter duration and often refer to an alteration of "state or states, such as when children leave home or a mood changes from depressed feelings to happiness." According to Elder, since these short-term changes in relational life, roles, and feelings are "always elements of trajectories, a substantial change in direction during a transition may represent a *turning point* as well." Writes Elder: "Trajectories and transitions are elements of established pathways, individual life courses, and developmental patterns. Among individuals, social roles evolve over an extended span of time, as in trajectories of work or family; and they change over a short time span. . . . Each transition, combining a role exit and entry, is embedded in a trajectory that gives it specific form and meaning. Thus, work transitions are core elements of a work life trajectory; and births are key markers along a parental trajectory."[25]

Social roles within trajectories may cohere in individuals' lives as careers and career sets. Limited in duration over the life span, careers include individual roles within the domains of work, family, and social life. Indeed, an individual's career set may include multiple careers: spouse, parent, worker, church member, and political activist. The duration of careers and the transitions between roles and the careers in which they are embedded are given meaning by the timing of these changes in an individual's life. For individuals who inhabit multiple careers over their lives, the balancing and coordination of the various roles associated with work, parenthood, marriage(s), friendships, religion, and community life, necessitate, claims Elder (emphasis in original), "*strategies of coordination or synchronization.*"[26]

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The sequence of roles that individuals occupy, the timing of these roles within the life course, and the institutional pathways, developmental trajectories, and transitions that define their life constructions, Elder says, are constrained by the perceived opportunities available in particular historical times and places. The individual's agency and her or his choices about work, the timing of transitions, and the meanings that he or she creates from these events are further filtered through relationships with parents, family members, friends, and coworkers. These individuals form networks or "convoys" of social supports and, indeed, collectively construct the meaning of individual and group experiences. Such convoys help individuals to interpret reality, and they function as the *"linked lives"* that both enable and constrain individual choices.[27]

Undergirding life-course theory and studies is a notion of human development across the life span, a process that results in a continuing interactive cocreation of an individual's personal biography, collective experience, and interpretation of history itself.[28] According to researchers Robert L. Kahn and Toni C. Antonucci, the life-course approach "emphasizes the importance of past experiences in explaining current behavior and predicting responses to future situations." Convoys of social support can provide needed assistance and affirmation to their members in times of personal stress. Such networks also help to shape individual perceptions of opportunities and dangers in particular historical and geographic environments.[29] Shared relational perceptions—what we could call collective definitions of reality—can prompt individuals to make life choices that are likely to result in cumulative advantage or disadvantage over a lifetime.[30]

Particularly important is the impact of social stress upon individuals and their convoys of relationships. The importance and effect of various stressors—from childhood abuse and poverty to war and natural disasters—differs with the age at which such crises are experienced and the individual's previous experience within his or her relational convoys. Elder has found that World War II service and the economic dislocations of the 1930s Great Depression and the 1980s agricultural crisis in northern Iowa farming communities served to reinforce and heighten individuals' habitual and temperamental responses to chal-

lenges. Confronted with the strains of joblessness and economic hard times, resourceful parents and children became even more resourceful, while individuals with explosive or violent temperaments became even more aggressive.[31]

According to Elder and others, the individual effects of various life transitions also vary according to the nature of the transition, which in turn promotes differing selection and transition effects. Selection effects occur after individuals have chosen a particular role and set of behavioral norms as a result of a transition, and individuals are then affected themselves by their transition to the new environment. An example that Elder has cited are risk takers in the military who are assigned to combat units.[32] Another example, drawn from my own work in African American communities, suggests that the most ambitious and leadership-oriented young people in segregated African American communities were those most frequently drawn into the often dangerous civil rights activism of the 1960s.[33] For both the young men who entered combat units as risk takers and the young people who joined movement efforts, the collective influence of the selection choice was sometimes a profound resocialization into the norms of the collectivity. According to Elder, "Transitions of this kind generally accentuate the behavioral effect of the selected dispositions, producing greater individual differences and heterogeneity between groups."[34]

An example of the cumulative effect of life transitions that tend to resocialize and at the same time reinforce individual beliefs and attitudes can again be drawn from the World War II veterans and 1960s civil rights activists. The experiences of wartime service and postwar educational achievements through the GI Bill gave millions of American veterans significant opportunities for social mobility during the postwar boom. These positive experiences infused them with the assurance that the war had been a "good" war, and that governmental policies during the Cold War were correct and prudent. Consequently, many veterans were baffled and angered by 1960s opposition to the Vietnam War, a response they often saw as an affront to their wartime sacrifices and political convictions. Similarly, African American Mississippians came to the civil rights movement with a profound distrust toward their state's government and white elites

in general. Activists who experienced movement-born disillusionment with the federal government's promises of protection and assistance accordingly voiced an increasing skepticism and distrust of the intended effect of federal policies between the 1970s and 1990s. Their suspicions were reinforced by continuing recalcitrance on the part of local and state white conservative leaders and from the burgeoning strength of the Republican right in the 1980s and 1990s.

While the concepts of a normative life course—expressed in terms of particular birth cohorts, with distinctive trajectories, transitions, linked lives, and cumulative advantages and disadvantages—have special significance for the historical and social experiences of a majority of twentieth-century Americans and Europeans, what relevance do these notions have for the enormous transformations that many African American community activists in the Mississippi Delta experienced between the 1920s and the 1990s? What can these constructs tell us about the shaping of their notions of personal agency, survival, and community improvement? And how can these ideas help explain their profound disappointment and anger at the conditions of life within their communities in the 1990s?

The Life Course of African American Mississippians under Segregation

Social movement leaders constitute a small minority in any population, and most of the African American community leaders interviewed by the Delta Oral History Project's researchers recalled family and educational experiences that placed them in a relative elite within their birth cohorts in their home communities. Our narrators told family and personal stories that stressed resourcefulness, resilience in the face of hard times, and a parental determination to educate their children. Our narrators' parents seem to have shared the great hunger for education and betterment frequently expressed by rural black Southerners in the decades after emancipation.[35] This parental generation encouraged and supported their children's schooling, and in some cases, in order to send their children to school, even defied

planters for whom they worked. Their children, in turn, recalled their own readiness to struggle for and utilize all educational advantages that were available to them throughout their lives. Women who became involved with Head Start projects in the 1960s eagerly attended classes and took whatever course work became available through Mississippi colleges and universities to "improve" themselves and to become better educated. They credited their own strength, ambition, and resourcefulness to the examples set by their parents and grandparents, who exercised strict self-discipline and parental discipline to feed and provide for their children. But these families were a minority within African American communities in the Delta. They had enough resources—personal, social, and economic—to withstand pressures exerted by planters, by hard times, and by scarcity to keep their children in the fields during school sessions, when many other black children labored year-round in the cotton fields and on farms.[36]

For example, Kermit Stanton, until he was drafted in 1944, worked on his family's 160-acre farm in Deeson, Mississippi, on land originally purchased for twenty-five cents an acre by his grandfather sometime in the years after Reconstruction (1866–1876). The seventh of nine children, Stanton completed eight years of education in a school held in a church at Deeson before he dropped out to work on the family farm. Remembering the Depression years as "tough," he also recalled, "My parents owning the farm and everything, we were still poor, but we survived, but it was hard. It was a little different from being on a plantation, but it was hard to survive." His memories of farming included a range of food and food production: "We grew all the vegetables and the meats, the corn. And we had a grist mill. We ground and made our own meal. And we also made meals for the people that lived on the plantation [the sharecroppers who worked on the nearby Delta Pine and Land plantation]. That's where I used to work at every Saturday, at the grist mill." The family also raised hogs, chickens, and cows for meat, eggs, and milk, and Stanton added, the boys hunted for "squirrels, rabbit, duck, if you could find the shells to hunt them with." Furthermore, he said, "Money was scarce, really scarce. You could take a nickel or fifteen cents and buy a meal with it. You know

what I mean, but it was hard getting the nickel and fifteen cents."[37] Despite these privations, Stanton's family was fortunate in its independence and resources: only about 4 percent of African American farmers in the Delta owned their own land in the 1920s and 1930s.

Juanita Scott grew up on the Sunflower County sharecropping tracts worked by her mother, who raised and fed ten children after her husband walked out on the family when Juanita was five. Scott remembered Mattie Scott Pace's resourcefulness:

> From that time on, every move was made by my mother. She was the backbone of the family. I remember my mother with eight children, pregnant with the ninth, had to make all the decisions made. She would gather us together like a chicken with her chicks, sit us down, and explain to us what our chores were. We knew what we had to do, and we knew how to do it. We all had a CS and an FST degree at an early age: it was Common Sense and Fire Side Training.
>
> The oldest children were the girls. They had to cut wood, and when I say cut wood, we had to go in the woods, cut down trees the sizes they could handle, drag them outside of the brake, and hope that someone with a wagon would come along and help them get the wood to the house. . . . My job, along with my brother Joe, was to pick up chips in a number-three washtub. We would find the chips in the spots where men had cut down a large tree, which made large chips. After the wood was at home, my sisters would use a cross-cut saw to cut the wood to fit the stove, the heater, the fireplace. This type of work was done on Saturdays only.

On weekdays, the children all attended school or worked in the cotton fields. School was a five-mile walk each way, Scott recalled, "but none of Mama's children, the nine of us, had a chance to ride a school bus ever." On Sundays, the family attended church and the children had time to play in the afternoons. The two eldest girls did the family's housework, which included "cleaning the house, milking the cows, washing the clothes, and cooking dinner." Scott herself "had to cook for the whole family at the age of eight." Everyone in the family labored to produce the cash income from sharecropping. Scott said, "We would pick twenty or more bales of cotton a year, and, at the set-

tlement, Mama would get eight- to nine-hundred dollars at the highest, but she did tell us that sometimes she didn't get anything that year. But when she did get a settlement—that's when she got her money—she would order our winter clothes, which included our shoes, our coats, socks, et cetera, and she would buy ten- to fifteen-cent-per-yard material, and any dress we would pick out of the Sears-Roebuck catalog, she would make it by using a newspaper pattern that she made."

Juanita Scott learned to sew from her mother and made her doll's clothing by copying the dresses her mother made for her daughters. The family lived in several sharecropper cabins on the plantation tracts where they lived. Generally, these were two- or three-room wooden structures, with the house and porch set on brick supports several feet above the ground. The houses lacked outhouses and were without running water or electricity. Scott remembered her childhood as happy, however, "because we were taught that we were very important, we were as good as anyone, and we would accomplish anything we wanted to do in life as long as we didn't steal or lie. [Mama] instilled in us that if you feel you were right, stand up for what you believe. As far as race relations, I was taught I was as good as anyone." Together, the family produced almost all of the food they needed. Mattie Scott Pace's gardens were filled with sweet potatoes, peanuts, corn, and peas, and she had a steer and a hog to butcher once a year, plus chickens for the family's consumption year-round. Scott recalled:

Our beef was canned in jars, and our pork was salted down and put into a wooden box four-feet by four-feet, while the hams and shoulders of the hog were smoked in a cotton house. The fat of the hog was fried out and used for lard. The curing was done after harvesting of the cotton to be used for food in the winter and fall. We had canned vegetables in the winter and fresh vegetables in the spring and summer, which included the greens, beans, soup, okra, corn, beets, tomatoes, carrots, and the fruit consisted of peaches, pears, and blackberries.

Scott and her siblings harvested and shelled the corn and thrashed and stored the dried beans and peas. "Through these

processes," she recalled, "we, as children, was taught survivor-
hood." The self-sufficiency and dignity instilled in her children
by Mattie Scott Pace led several of them to become active in
Sunflower County's 1960s civil rights movement. Juanita Scott
registered to vote in the 1960s, and in the rallies, marches, and
meetings in Indianola, the county seat, she met "my idol, Mrs.
Fannie Lou Hamer. She inspired me in so many ways. She was
standing up for what she believed in, and I said, 'This is an-
other Negro woman like me.' Instead of me being like her, she
was like me."

Scott's determination and resourcefulness were evident in
her efforts with the early Head Start program. Before federal
funding arrived, local activists organized the first centers in any
space available to them, including individual homes. Very few of
the black ministers in Indianola would allow Head Start centers
to operate from their churches, so Juanita Scott founded a center
in her house where she kept fifty-three children. She remem-
bered, "We fed each of them by the help of the community do-
nating food, and the adults volunteered and took up money for
milk. I think the milk was about two cents a box at that time. The
children played games. They used newspaper for finger paint-
ing. Paper toys was made by my mother. I still have a bear she
made for the children to play with. . . . There was story-reading,
word games, naps, and outdoor play, but most of all, those chil-
dren was taught pride and dignity."[38]

Pride in family strength and dignity also resonated in Cora
Fleming's narrative of her life. The sixth of ten children, Fleming
grew up in the Mississippi hill country near Starkville, where her
parents owned a small farm before later migrating to Sunflower
County. Her father worked as a farmer and also as a blacksmith,
and her mother, who had been a schoolteacher, worked as a
housewife, taking care of her large family. At age sixteen, Flem-
ing finished elementary school and entered high school. At age
seventeen, however, she married and left school until the 1960s,
when she began working for Head Start. Fleming proudly re-
ferred to her family as "hill people," black Mississippians who
were more outspoken and less fearful than were people who had
lived for generations as sharecroppers on the Delta plantations.
"In the hills, we had to be independent," she explained, "and

down here [in the Delta] they're dependent on people, on the white folks. See, we had to work for our own up there. We had our own land, everything our own." Fleming's family experienced hard times during the Depression years of the 1930s, when the early months of spring were times of deprivation:

> My mother generally raised a garden. We had vegetables, peas, butterbeans, corn, okra, all that kind of stuff. And they raised cows. They raised chickens. They raised hogs. So the hardest time was like in March and April, the worst time in our lives. The winter food was gone. We had come through winter fine, but then in March and April, everything had run out. You had to get other things to grow then, the vegetables to grow in the garden. So that was the worst time of our lives, I think, when I was growing up. We never went hungry, but just a shortage of food.

After her marriage, Cora Fleming and her husband moved north for higher wages and better jobs. She worked in Chicago for years but returned home to Indianola in 1961 to care for her mother, who had suffered a stroke. In the early 1960s, she became involved in the local civil rights movement, as did several of her siblings. She attributed their actions to the attitudes of her own parents. "I guess we came along when things began to change, I reckon, want to be a change in the minds of the elderly people, want to change and see better things for their children. And they had [that desire]. I guess they couldn't act on it, but they had it in their minds, I believe," said Fleming. In 1964, a racially mixed team of young organizers for the COFO came to Indianola. When Fleming and her mother saw the "different races all of them mixed up together coming down the street," they knew that the sight was "unusual around here." When the organizers canvassed the black neighborhood, asking residents to come to a meeting at a church that evening, Fleming recalled, "My mother looked at them, she said, 'You know, I've lived all my life, worked all my life for nothing.' And she said, 'You go to church. When you get sick and get down, they don't know you.' She said, 'It's time now for a change to come about, and it's time for y'all to take an active role in it.' I said, 'You mean that?' She said, 'Yes, I do.'"

Cora Fleming went to the church meeting that night and spoke publicly to the crowd, which included a number of sharecroppers from the plantations that surrounded Indianola. She remembered:

> I said, "You've been working in the fields all your days. Now you're suffering for fifteen dollars a week. I'm working for the same thing. I made a hundred and some dollars a week in Chicago, and now you're making fifteen dollars a week. And what can you do with fifteen dollars? Nothing." Children in bare feet, hungry half the time, but that was the best they could do at that time. And a lot of people who were going to that meeting didn't even realize what was going on, the changes that were taking place. A lot of them was scared, but they went anyway. Lost their jobs. My sister lost her job.

Fleming's resilience was tested during the years of Sunflower County's civil rights struggle. One night, the driver of an eighteen-wheel truck tried to run her car down on one of the Delta's dark two-lane highways, and another night, nightriders shot into her house. Subsequently, she developed a "bad case of nerves" from her years of living in fear. Throughout the 1960s, Sunflower County nurtured a particularly violent white resistance to African American voting rights, freedom schools, and Head Start initiatives. In 1965, the Baptist school, a site of local movement meetings, was firebombed and burned, as was the house of activist Irene McGruder and the store and home of Alice Giles and her husband. Local planters had organized the first chapter of the White Citizens' Council, a virulently segregationist organization, after the *Brown v. Board* decision of 1954, and the county was the home of the notorious racist senator James O. Eastland, whose family owned a large plantation there. White terrorists targeted movement activists such as Fleming, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Kermit Stanton. Threats, drive-by shootings, the terrorizing of leaders' family members became part of the price of movement participation. For Fleming, the terror "took its toll on me in later years. A lot of personal fear, I guess, kind of balled up in me. In the long run, it kind of got the best of me."

The terrorism led Cora Fleming to hate whites "with a passion" for some time, she admitted, "but I learned later on that

everybody wasn't the same. . . . You've got to meet on a common ground somewhere." But Fleming was also deeply disappointed by the takeover of the local Head Start programs pioneered by the grassroots-led Associated Communities of Sunflower County. The federal government's ceding control of statewide Head Start programs to the federally controlled Community Action Programs led her to leave Head Start and to return to work at the local cotton compress. At a local level, the dominance of Community Action Program guidelines meant that War on Poverty programs were to be controlled by boards of white moderates and middle-class African Americans. This leadership effectively replaced more radical grassroots leaders such as Fleming in the decision-making positions in the programs. Fleming appreciated the education she received through Head Start, but she expressed anger at the change in the program's leadership structure: "It was educating all of us because we all began to be trained. We trained through Mary Holmes College and different sources. But the federal government just wasted money when they trained us to do the job. They just threw away money. . . . Wasted a lot of money training a whole lot of people for the power structure and the so-called educated blacks to take over. Why did they use that money to train us for if they weren't going to need us later on, millions of dollars?"[39]

For all of the harshness of her life, Cora Fleming had some advantages when compared with many other black Deltans. Her family had nursed a spirit of independence and resilience, she had attended school through at least the beginning of high school, and she had the comparative advantage of having worked in Chicago for many years before she returned to Sunflower County. She knew that conditions could be different, and better, for the black people of the Delta, and she was not afraid to take a leadership role in pushing and promoting change.

Robert Gray's family was also relatively advantaged. The third of six children, he grew up in a rural Tennessee community in which his family had long been landowners and small business people. This background, he said, "gave me some inclination to want to be a business person. [My relatives] never worked for anybody." After finishing high school, he received a basketball scholarship from a black junior college in Natchez,

Mississippi, and completed his degree at Mississippi Valley State University before moving to Shelby as a schoolteacher in the mid-1960s. The sheer numbers of African Americans in Mississippi and the relatively high numbers of black property owners in places such as Bolivar County persuaded Gray that the civil rights movement could create massive political and economic development among black populations in the Delta.[40]

Although these four narrators experienced significant social mobility over their lives, they all remained frustrated and angry over the nature of change in their communities. Cora Fleming had significant health problems at the time of her interview in 1995 and died within the next two years. Kermit Stanton, who lived in a modest home in Shelby and had a secure retirement income, likewise died within two years of our 1996 interview. Juanita Scott had a secure administrative position with Head Start in Cleveland, Mississippi, and continued to live in Indianola with her mother in the small house where she had once held Head Start classes. Robert Gray served as mayor of Shelby and worked to build his parts company, and his wife still worked as a schoolteacher in Shelby. These leaders had achieved modest but significant economic and educational gains since their childhoods. Each had taken part in a major social movement and had experienced tremendous growth and personal development as a result of those experiences. Why, then, were all of them so angry and disappointed? Why the sense of betrayal by the federal government and other white elites and an enraged disappointment at the lack of progress by the African American poor?

For much of its black population, the Delta of the last decade of the twentieth century was indeed an impoverished region. Historian James Cobb cited findings of the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission, created in 1988 by the U.S. Congress, which described "overwhelming evidence of hardcore unemployment, severe educational deficiencies, and the utter absence of local capital or entrepreneurial expertise."[41] Cobb further noted that federal transfer payments supported both rich and poor Deltans but with marked differences in effect: large farmers and planters received generous agricultural subsidies for their production of staple crops, and the white and black

poor received supplemental supports in terms of welfare payments, food stamps, public housing, and programs such as Head Start and school lunches.[42] Statistical surveys and census reports confirm a dismal life for all too many African American Delta residents in the 1990s. More of them were poor and undereducated, experienced health problems and lack of health care, and faced higher infant mortality and, indeed, increased adult mortality rates than the state or national averages.[43] Compounding these problems was the nature of the few jobs available to poorly educated residents. While regional elites and mayors sought to lure manufacturing businesses into their communities with a number of enticements, employment for unskilled workers remained insecure and at low-wage levels. Catfish and poultry processing, which employed thousands of African American women and men in the Delta, were both minimum-wage jobs, and in the 1990s, even a full-time worker was unable to support herself and three children on her wages.

While the enduring poverty of many of the region's African Americans was a source of continuing frustration and anger for many former activists, the numerical indicators that tell a story of poor schools, low educational levels, massive poverty, and poor health care do not reveal the worst fact of all: the numbers recorded in the 1990s represent a significant improvement over the conditions of the past. African American life chances in earlier decades of the twentieth century in Mississippi had been even more dismal.[44] Demographers have estimated that a "baby born in 1900 could expect to live about fifty-one years if white and roughly forty years if black." By 1940, life expectancies for both groups had risen by about ten years—whites "born in the rural South in 1939 could expect to live about sixty-four years if they were male and more than sixty-seven years if they were female," whereas "black males born in 1939 could expect to live an average of fifty-six years, with black females enjoying only two more"—but adult death rates remained high among rural blacks: "Nearly 18 percent of all twenty-year-old blacks (male or female) . . . could expect to die before turning forty-five. The comparable risk of death was substantially lower for southern whites—9 percent for males,

and 7 percent for females."[45] Maternal mortality due to death in childbirth, linked to the widespread absence of affordable prenatal and obstetric care for African Americans, composed a large part of the adult mortality figures for black women.

Higher mortality rates in Mississippi and in the Delta counties, particularly, were a consequence of the poor diet on which many plantation workers subsisted. African American home economics agent Dorothy Dickins researched the diets of black tenant farmers and sharecroppers in 1926 and found evidence of severe deficiencies in terms of calories, protein, calcium, phosphorous, and iron. Tenant families consumed less meat and milk than they needed, which contributed to the high incidence of pellagra in the Delta counties. Blacks' diets were also deficient in essential vitamins, which diminished their resistance to infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis. Vitamin and mineral deficiencies, especially calcium and phosphorous, also made children prone to developing rickets. Dickins found that the nutritional deficiencies, which resulted from a lack of quality and variety of foods, related to the "high death rate[s], the frequent illnesses, and the lack of energy of negroes as compared to whites." Black tenants consumed high amounts of fat and insufficient amounts of protein, vegetables, and fruits. A combination of factors explained the poor diets: lack of incentives (or even opportunities) to grow supplemental gardens on some plantations, lack of education about nutrition and diet, and perhaps most importantly, the "inadequate income" upon which many tenants were forced to survive.[46]

Delta diets were not much improved during the Depression years of the 1930s, when, Howard Odom and other researchers discovered, half of all schoolchildren in the Black Belt counties of the cotton South had poor teeth, and "50 percent of all Southern children in large areas receive inadequate diets for any normal health standard." This situation resulted in the high incidence of tuberculosis, rickets, pellagra, and anemia among Mississippi Delta tenant farming families, among whom 95 percent were African Americans.[47] Similar conditions prevailed into the 1960s, when health and poverty researchers found that many of the children of poor and sharecropping African American families still suffered from rickets, anemia, malnutrition, and infectious

diseases that could have been easily prevented by adequate nutrition and health care.[48]

Like mortality, health, and diet, the educational advancements made by white and black Deltans in the 1990s were significant when compared with the past. Neil R. McMillen listed illiteracy rates of 8.2 percent for whites and 49.1 percent for African Americans in 1900, which unfortunately declined to 2.7 percent and 23.2 percent by 1930. However, the paltry opportunities for high school education for blacks through the 1950s demonstrated the state government's unwillingness to educate its African American citizens. In 1930–1931, for example, 46 percent of whites between fifteen and nineteen years of age were enrolled in grades 9–12; the corresponding figure for black Mississippians was 4 percent. By 1950, the numbers had climbed to 62 percent and 25 percent, but in that year, only 13 percent of black students were enrolled in the twelfth grades of their schools. According to McMillen, in 1950, 75 percent of the African American population of high-school–aged students were not attending high schools.[49] The differentials in educational opportunities had predictable results: in 1960, white Mississippians had a median school completion number of eleven years; the corresponding figure for African Americans was six years.[50]

This history of high mortality rates, poor diet and nutrition, extreme poverty, and scarce educational opportunities were products of the system of racial oppression and exploitation controlled for much of Mississippi's history by the planter elite and the state government. The poverty and powerlessness of many poor blacks were perpetuated by an oppressive legal and social system and by the hovering threat of social violence that was a frequent fact of African American life through the 1960s. Police harassment, high incarceration rates of accused black males, and random violence from white authorities in the forms of lynching and terrorism were experiences that nearly every African American in the Delta could expect to face or to know about. These conditions of social suffering and chronic collective trauma bred a widespread and constant fear among Delta blacks, which according to physician Paul Farmer were manifestations of structural violence, a process through which "large-scale social forces come to be translated into personal distress and disease."[51]

Farmer's analysis of the structural violence of extreme poverty and brutality was based on his work in 1980s and 1990s Haiti, a country ravaged by a brutal military dictatorship that condemned most poor rural Haitians to lives of terrible poverty, ill health, and early death. Ironically, the vital statistics Farmer cites as evidence in Haiti of extreme social suffering due to structural violence and exploitation are similar to those shared by many rural black Mississippians between 1900 and the 1960s. These conditions led many black Deltans to endure what some scholars have referred to as the "violences of everyday life."[52]

Medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman considered the multiple and interlocking forms of oppression that many of the poor in contemporary Third World societies share as conditions of social suffering. Such suffering is the result of the "devastating injuries that social force inflicts on human experience." Results of the "social violence" that governments and political systems inflict upon people are seen in "diseases and premature death" and in forcing many people into a condition in which "everyday life . . . does violence to the body and to moral experience." Although the social consequences of this violence are numerous, Kleinman found a particular example among survivors of Maoist terrorism in China. Among a number of Chinese citizens he interviewed from the 1970s through the 1990s, "the ordinary ethos was fear—pervasive, unappeased, based in terrible realities, yet amplified from a relatively small number of events into an emotion close to terror that was present every day. And terror experienced, not far below the surface of the ordinary, on a daily basis created cowardice, betrayal, and abiding rage." While overt terror and violence punctuated daily life on a sometimes infrequent basis, "in its aftermath, the response of a community, or a neighborhood, or a family to short-term horror is inseparable from that humdrum background of violence as usual."[53] These responses replicate those described by numerous narrators in Delta communities in their memories of childhood, youth, and adult leadership in the civil rights movement. Delta leaders frequently expressed their resentment at compliant and cowardly middle-class African Americans, as well as against overtly hostile whites.

Interpretations

Given the extreme poverty and other forms of social violence to which many African Americans in the Delta were subjected in the past, how might we understand the anger and disappointment expressed in oral history interviews by a number of former activists? How might we comprehend their reverence for the strength obtained by enduring and prevailing over past difficulties and their clear sorrow at conditions in the 1990s?

The effects of age, cohort, and life-course trajectory help to piece together some parts of the puzzle. Gray, Fleming, Scott, and Stanton came from a preindustrial family ethos and work environment, motivated by their parents' relentless desire for their betterment. At midlife and late life, they seemed to possess a faith that achievements such as their own would follow hard work, diligence, and social discipline. These values and beliefs are rooted in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America and in the African American ideology of racial uplift that flourished during the first half of the twentieth century. These values found obvious expression in the narrators' descriptions of those in their families who are doing better, moving up, succeeding. Thus the individual hopes of the narrators were realized through intimate examples of industry and progress.

Their beliefs were shared by colleagues from their convoys of movement relationships—by the women and men who worked in voter registration projects, in early Head Start centers, and in public office. Those to whom they were linked through family, friendship, and work shared their values and worldview. They also shared a reverence for parents, grandparents, and communities that had made their progress possible. Convoys of personal relationships and activist networks promoted a redundancy of the values of uplift and of the movement-based optimism about the opportunities for achievement and progress. But if individual hopes had been fulfilled by work, activism, and family ambition, their social or collective hopes were disappointed.

Several scholars of aging and the life course provide some clues to activists' emotional ties to a past of hardship and survival.

Focusing on the role that emotionality plays in the creation of a self and biography, researcher Wilhelm Mader suggested connections between the functions of emotionality and continuity in structuring a life story. He claimed that "patterns of emotional sensitivities" are created at early ages and become "self-maintaining self-referential systems" that seem to solidify with age. As individuals age, a sense of continuity with the values and achievements of the past becomes increasingly important, and people then tend to project a desired future in terms of those early values.[54] Of great importance are those periods in life that can be described as instrumental to the "love and learning process,"[55] that is, to those periods in which the narrator can see and recall great personal growth and development. Moreover, Mader contended, "the older one grows, the more continuity itself becomes a value of its own."[56] The valued past then, becomes the model of a desirable future: dedicated teachers, ambitious and hard-working young people, frugal and self-sacrificing parents. Thus the communities of those childhood and adult years of growth and movement participation become the model of the good cohesive society.

The segregated community and the movement community were, however, exceptional places in a number of ways. First, the cohesion was maintained due to the very real threats from white authorities, landlords, police, and ordinary citizens. Both communities were embattled and had the edgy solidarity developed by citizens who had to survive a prolonged state of siege. And these communities could only nurture and promote a limited number of individuals in this course of development. Families had to have sufficient social and economic capital to be able to keep children in school, and individuals as adults had to be independent enough to be able to risk being fired from employment, or being blacklisted by banks, creditors, and other authorities. Activists also needed the resilience to be able to face the real possibility of terrorism, violence, and harassment from hostile whites and disapproval from more conservative members in their own communities. Not everyone felt that they could take these risks. Many simply could not. So the perspective of activist narrators is one shaped by extraordinary circum-

stances and shared by a rather small cohort of extremely re-silient individuals.[57]

The desired qualities of the good old/bad old days is a cliché in life-history and oral history research. Scholars are beginning to document the reverence with which many middle-class African Americans now regard the segregated black community and the all-black schools. Some have suggested that this nostalgia might function as a critique of the more anonymous and less-connected schools and communities in a desegregated, but by no means egalitarian, American society. And certainly this seems to hold true for Delta narrators. The embattled communities that nurtured them often lavished praise and rewards on ambitious and hard-working young people and expressed an admiration for schooling and knowledge through a veneration of and tremendous respect for schoolteachers and other educated community leaders.[58]

But still another life-course effect could be operative among our oral history narrators. Each of them, while describing the positive aspects of the families and communities of their youth, nevertheless knew the conditions in which the majority of poor farmers and sharecroppers lived. Indeed, the recitation of the family's provision of rural plenty was ritualistic among our Delta narrators and often became a statement of bounteous nurturing and plenty. But I think that the chronicling of meats, vegetables, breads, jellies, fruit, and food had another function. By this listing, narrators were in fact celebrating their relative plenty and privilege in a world in which they knew all too well that many people suffered from malnutrition and disease. The recitation of foods became, in effect, a form of self-nurturing: a statement of the high value they held as family members and children within a dominant society that denigrated African American efforts to achieve.

These differences were brought home to many of our narrators when they worked for Head Start programs and recruited children from the most destitute sharecropping families: children with bulging stomachs and bowed legs, who had never tasted milk or fruit, who had never seen a doctor, who had never visited a dentist, and who were painfully terrified to leave their mothers'

sides. Visits to the homes of these early Head Start registrants shocked many Delta leaders and must have driven home the relative bounty that their own parents and families had provided.[59]

Our narrators, then, speak with the voice of survivors—survivors of structural violence, social suffering, and a collective trauma that still stunts the life chances of many poor African Americans in Delta counties. They all knew that their survival was contingent upon many pieces of good fortune: strong-willed parents, good health, a relative freedom from the worst violence of the segregated system. Their rage at both elites and the poor can be read, I believe, as an angry acknowledgment of the *costs* of their survival, a cost that has been extracted through years of hard work, frustration, and much disappointment. At midlife and in late life, their gratitude to the past has become a gratitude at a number of simple and complicated survivals. And their motto, as with other survivors of human disasters, has become "Never Forget." And yet that memory has generated a corrosive politics of anger, directed at both the young people who do not seem to know the costs of their survival and at the elites whose policies seem to dampen the ambition and agency of the poor. Behind this anger we can find a lingering and costly residue of fear and distrust. Our narrators fear that the young will not learn their lessons of survival and resilience, and they fear that, without this knowledge, such young people will again become victimized by political and economic exploitation by elites. Anger, fear, and distrust are then the consequences of social suffering and collective trauma and are shared by many women and men who created and led the most important American social movement of the twentieth century.

The anger and fear are also expressions of grief and despair. Grief is the narrators' response to the too-real hardships and dangers of the past. Despair is an expression of blasted social hopes. After the hard work and risks of social suffering and activism, the expected regeneration of the community had not occurred. Although more young people become educated, many leave for opportunities elsewhere. And the social problems that had plagued segregated communities appeared to be intractable in the late 1990s. Grief and despair were the consequences of social suffering, the buoyant hopes of a social movement, and a resilient faith in individual and collective progress.

Notes

1. Several examples of this genre include Lasch, *Culture of Narcissism*; Berman, *Twilight of American Culture*; and Schlesinger, *Disuniting of America*.

2. The Delta Oral History Project produced life-history interviews with more than a hundred community activists and citizens from four contiguous Mississippi Delta counties—Bolivar, Coahoma, Sunflower, and Washington—with funding from a National Endowment for the Humanities collaborative projects grant. Principal interviewers were Owen Brooks of the Delta Ministry, Kim Lacy Rogers of Dickinson College, and Jerry Washington Ward Jr., formerly of Tougaloo College and now on the faculty of Dillard University in Louisiana.

3. See Farmer, "Suffering and Structural Violence," 261; Kleinman, "Violences of Everyday Life."

4. Greenspan, *Healing*, 125.

5. See Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*.

6. Nesse, "Hope and Despair," 470. See also Lazarus, "Hope."

7. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 9–13.

8. See Greenspan, *Healing*; Lazarus, "Hope."

9. Elder, "Life Course and Human Development," 942.

10. See, for example, Rogers, "Trauma Redeemed."

11. Juanita Scott, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, September 15, 1995, transcript, Delta Oral History Project (hereinafter DOHP), Tougaloo College Archives, Tougaloo, MS, and Dickinson College Community Studies Center Archives, Carlisle, PA.

12. Cora Fleming, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, August 16, 1995, transcript, DOHP.

13. Kermit Stanton, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, April 5, 1996, transcript, DOHP.

14. Robert Gray, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, March 28, 1996, transcript, DOHP.

15. See Woodruff, *American Congo*; Cobb, "*Most Southern Place*"; McMillen, *Dark Journey*; Woods, *Development Arrested*; and Tolnay, *Bottom Rung*.

16. See Woodruff, *American Congo*; Cobb, "*Most Southern Place*."

17. See Elder, *Children of the Great Depression*; Elder, *Life Course Dynamics*; Elder, "Time, Human Agency"; Riley and Foner, *Aging and Society*; Riley, "Age Stratification"; Hagestad, "Social Perspectives"; Hareven and Plakans, *Family History*; Hareven, *Aging*; Quadrango, *Color of Welfare*; Laslett, *World We Have Lost*; Greven, *Four Generations*; Modell, *Into One's Own*.

18. Kohli, "World We Forgot."

19. Greven, *Four Generations*, 22; Stannard, "Puritan Child," 18, quoted in Marshall, "Aging and Dying," 132.

20. Marshall, "Aging and Dying," 132.

21. Laslett, "Necessary Knowledge," 3, 13.

22. Kohli, "World We Forgot," 284, 286.

23. Elder, "Life Course and Human Development," 941.

24. See the 1999 enlarged edition of Elder, *Children of the Great Depression*.

25. Elder, "Life Course and Human Development," 955–56.

26. Ibid., 956.

27. Ibid., 960. See also Kahn and Antonucci, "Convoys."

28. See McMahan and Rogers, *Interactive Oral History Interviewing*.

29. Kahn and Antonucci, "Convoys," 384.

30. Elder, "Life Course and Human Development," 964–66.

31. Ibid., 969–75.

32. Ibid., 957–58.

33. Rogers, *Righteous Lives*, 110.

34. Elder, "Life Course and Human Development," 958.

35. See McMillen, *Dark Journey*.

36. See McMillen, *Dark Journey*; Cobb, *"Most Southern Place"*; Curry, *Silver Rights*.

37. Stanton, interview (see note 13).

38. Scott, interview (see note 11).

39. Fleming, interview (see note 12). For events in Sunflower County, see Dittmer, *Local People*; Moye, "Black Freedom Struggle."

40. Gray, interview (see note 14).

41. Cobb, *"Most Southern Place,"* 331.

42. Ibid., 329–33.

43. For example, in the mid-1990s Bolivar County's black population was almost twice its white population, and only a little more than half the county's inhabitants over 25 years old had graduated from high school, with less than 16 percent holding college degrees. In 1993, 40.1 percent of Bolivar's population lived below the poverty line. See U.S. Census Bureau, U.S.A. Counties General Profile 1998: State and County Quick Facts: Bolivar County, Mississippi, http://www.census.gov/statab/USA98/28/011.txt (accessed January 26, 2005). Likewise, a 1989–1990 Bolivar County Consolidated School District survey found 59.93 percent of persons in poverty, compared to 24.52 percent for Mississippi total, and 12.76 percent for the U.S. The problem fell mostly on African Americans, for of all students surveyed, 81.16 percent of whom were enrolled in public schools, 82.63 percent were black. See Bolivar County Consolidated School District profiles in National Center for Education Statistics, Census 1990 School District Demographics Data Files, http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sdds/tablemain90.asp (accessed February 2, 2005). Mississippi's children in poverty outranked the national average by 14 percent in 1990 and 5 percent in 1998. Compared to the national average in 1998, 2 percent more Mississippi children lived in extreme poverty, in families whose income fell 50 percent below the poverty level. See Mississippi profiles at Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count: Census Data Online, http://aecf.org/kidscount/census (accessed January 26, 2005). Furthermore, the Lower Mississippi Delta

Development Commission reported in 1990 that "death rates in the Delta were higher across all age, ethnic, and gender groups, and for all causes of mortality. Death rates for Blacks in the rural areas of the region were higher than those of rural non whites in other parts of the USA from age one to age forty-four." Woods, *Development Arrested*, 249–50.

44. Mississippi infant mortality rates illustrate the trend. In 1990, the state's infant mortality rates were an average of 2.5 percent higher than the national rate. Thirty years earlier, in 1960, 54.4 out of 1,000 black infants born died under one year of age, compared with 26.3 white infants; and 29.6 black infants died before reaching one month, with the corresponding rate for white infants being 20.2. In the Delta, mortality rates for infants under one year were even worse: in Bolivar County, for black infants, 45.2, compared to 26.2 for white infants; in Coahoma County, 62.2, compared to 16.0; in Sunflower County, 55.0, compared to 16.3. Earlier, reports for 1939–1940 indicated Mississippi had infant death rates of 60.9 for blacks and 46.3 for whites, and in 1922, rates of 78.4 for blacks and 50.1 for whites. Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count: Census Data Online, http://aecf.org/kidscount/census (accessed January 26, 2005). Additional statistics from Mississippi State Department of Health, "Births, Fetal Deaths, Deaths under 1 Year and Deaths from Certain Selected Causes, 1960" and "Infant and Maternal Death Rates by Counties, 1939–1940" (Jackson, MS: Bureau of Public Health).

45. Preston and Haines, *Fatal Years*, 70, quoted in Tolnay, *Bottom Rung*, 96. U.S. Bureau of the Census, United States Abridged Life Tables, 1939, Urban and Rural by Regions, Color and Sex (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1943), cited in Tolnay, *Bottom Rung*, 97.

46. Dickins, "Nutrition Investigation."

47. Odom, *Southern Regions*, 51–59.

48. Cobb, *"Most Southern Place,"* 262–64.

49. McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 88–90.

50. Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 6.

51. Farmer, "Suffering and Structural Violence," 261.

52. Kleinman, "Violences of Everyday Life."

53. Ibid., 226, 234, 239.

54. Mader, "Emotionality and Continuity," 40.

55. Elias, "Human Beings," 105, quoted in Mader, "Emotionality and Continuity," 50.

56. Mader, "Emotionality and Continuity," 51.

57. See Rogers, *Life and Death*.

58. See Shircliffe, "'We Got the Best'"; and Harris, *Deep Souths*, 180–83.

59. See Rogers, "Crisis of Opportunity."