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Book Review: Mara Tieken (2025). Educated Out: How Rural Students Navigate Elite Colleges—And What it Costs Them. The University of Chicago Press.

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Those who have read Mara Casey Tieken's book (2014) *Why Rural Schools Matter*, a superb account of schooling in the rural south of the United States, can be certain to be treated to another insightful analysis of the lives of rural young people. This time she turns her astute scholarly eye and elegant prose to unearth the experiences of rural young people attending an elite liberal college in the Northeast of the country. Tieken is interested in the process of "*studying up*" for an "*invisible minority*". While much of the research around rural youth post-secondary school pathways focuses on the aspirations, or supposed lack of, and the barriers to continue with higher education studies (Fuqua, 2019; Trahar et al., 2020; Xu & Montgomery, 2021), she focuses on a relatively unexplored topic: the college experiences of rural students. The book draws on her qualitative longitudinal research following nine rural students, all first-generation, for more than four years in their transition into, through and out of college. She uses a qualitative method of portraiture to examine and make sense of these young people's experiences away from home. Further, she also interviews students' parents to gain a more holistic picture of these individuals' lives, motivations and expectations in their educational and life journeys. Tieken offers four "*portraits*" of these young people's college experiences. Each represents a different period (i.e. applying, entering, persisting and leaving) of their time at Hilltop (the fictional name she gives to the elite liberal arts college). Overall, Tieken is motivated by an important question: "*How does place matter to rural students' college access and experiences?*" (p. 13).

From the outset, Tieken offers a contextual account of the relationship between culture, geography, economics, and politics in the opportunities for rural youth to attend wealthy educational institutions. She persuasively argues in the Introduction that place and economic and cultural capital matter in structuring who can access a college education. She challenges stereotypes of the rural idyll or rusticity (see Creed & Ching, 1997; Howley et al., 2014) and of rural people and places needing "*fixing*" (see Cuervo, 2016); she examines the manufacturing of "*rural disadvantage*" and confirms the impact of rural economies in the provision of opportunities for students to make a rural life (see Biddle & Azano, 2016; Guenther et al., 2023); ponders on issues of spatial injustice (see Massey, 2005; Soja, 2010); and sheds light on the link between higher education and individuals' future life chances, and of rural people and places in enhancing or hindering the current political environment in the country (see Cramer, 2016).

In the introductory chapter, Tieken introduces the young people: seven men and two women, five of whom identify as White, one as Latina and one as biracial Asian and White. In one paragraph she offers a beautiful and eloquent description of the campus which works to place the reader inside it (see p. 15). She makes time also to explain the construction of the intimate relationship between participant and researcher in qualitative longitudinal studies (see Cook & Cuervo, 2020; McLeod & Thomson, 2009). More importantly, in my view, in this chapter Tieken

muses about some of the big debates in education which have taken place in the past few decades: *What is education for? How strong is the nexus between education and work in the twenty-first century? Why are elite educational institutions hard to access for underprivileged students? What happens to students from an "invisible minority" when they access institutions that are populated and dominated by privileged and wealthy social groups*?

The first of the "*portraits*" in the book touches upon common themes emerging from research literature on university and college pathway for rural students (see McNamee & Ganss, 2023; Sowl & Crain, 2021; Stone et al., 2022). Chapter 2 focuses on how aspirations and motivations to apply to an elite liberal arts college develop in participants' lives. We read that parents, schools' career counsellors, and the communities were each key actors in influencing these students' goals. Their aspirations, however, were ultimately cemented by the views of parents and youth of "*a weak economy*" in their rural areas and "*the pull of opportunity*" of a college education for their "*economic security and job satisfaction*" (pp. 29, 47). Tieken does well to pull together the threads of each personal story, including parents' voices, and blend them with a more general picture that tells us of the transformation, and often decline, of rural industries that once provided a livelihood for their community members (see Carr & Kefalas, 2009). She does this without falling into discourses of rural deficit or "*rusticity*". Nevertheless, there is no glossing over the contemporary challenges encountered by rural communities and people. I found it interesting and valuable that the book connects the dots between aspirations and motivations to a college education with what is happening in the ground in rural communities. Later in this chapter Tieken painstakingly explains and describes the resources from which students draw to access an institution that was initially not within their reach.

From this first portrait, I was intrigued by two aspects of the application process. First, that students and their parents felt that Hilltop was a "*welcoming*" campus, was "*accepting*", and had a "*community feeling*" (pp. 31-35). Second, that Hilltop offered "*good financial aid*", a "*financial generosity*" that made "*enrolment possible for these students*" (p. 32). In my read of the research literature, students like these are often portrayed as "*scholarship kids*", outsiders to elite institutions who are often "*othered*" because of their social class (Cuervo et al., 2023; Reay et al., 2009). While in much of Chapter 2 Tieken presents this pre-college scenario as full of possibility– students confident they belong to this institution, and Hilltop as the place to be– towards the end she lets us know that some students are also ambivalent regarding their future. They know they are heading to an elite place, full of "*preppy people*" who are different to them (p. 50). Here Tieken becomes critical of Hilltop and other elite colleges' "*generosity*" and reveals their underlying "*exclusionary*" ethos (pp. 50-51).

Her ambivalent tone continues in Chapter 3 – the portrait of "*Entering*" and transitioning through college. Early in the chapter, and making good use of the power of qualitative longitudinal research, Tieken tells the story of Hunter, who at first glance seems to be settling in just fine. After further scrutiny and interviewing the parents, experiences of "*homesickness*" and "*stress*" emerge during Hunter's first year in college. One would expect these experiences of missing home and finding challenges when an individual settles in a new environment, and Tieken identifies the structures and resources that help students feel they belong in their new "*home*". For example, those involved in athletics at Hilltop find a routine to follow and teammates and peers to work with and rely on. As students John and Hunter put it, they quickly feel like "*Hilltop Huskies*" (p. 58). Other students find other structures of support, such as extracurricular activities. For me, what matters here is the identification by Tieken that community matters. It is true, that community can entail conforming to norms and values that homogenise social experiences which are perhaps not core to an individual's identity or background (see Cuervo, 2014; Jackson, 2014, Young, 1990), but Tieken finds that "*for underrepresented students, finding community is essential to a successful first year*" (pp. 58-59). In my view, here at play is a struggle for recognition for these rural young people. There is a struggle to answer the question *What am*

I, or to locate the *I in the We* (Honneth, 2012). John, for example, through his involvement in the football team, quickly finds an answer as '*I am a Hilltop Husky*'. He finds "*his little group*", "*some structure*", and a "*lot of support*" (p. 57).

This struggle for recognition, belonging and identity does not make the author lose sight of the relevance of home or "*place*" in her narrative. While place and their social background is implicitly or explicitly part of these young people's college experience, Tieken also astutely returns to the "*rural*"—to students' homes and families. Here I found interesting the ways students navigate the often-described phenomenon of liminality that can be felt when they leave their home to live in a new place (Cuervo et al., 2023; McNamee & Ganss, 2023). It seems students bridge this space using a range of different strategies: by continuing with their high-school romantic relationships; by finding an academic community of peers at college which was perhaps missing at school; by connecting with friends from home whose similar college experiences help normalise their post-secondary school transitions. Implicit for me here are the many challenges and hoops rural youth need to go through to become part of a norm that attends higher education institutions in urban elite places.

In this second portrait Tieken gets "*below the surface*" and finds in students' stories "*doubt*", "*stress*", and "*isolation*". As their first year progresses, I detect an affective lexicon of social class and to some extent place (see Reay, 2005). Up to this point in the story, students in this study do not explicitly mention class but rather refer to it by its proxies "*wealth*" and "*privilege*". (Tieken also mentions students do not explicitly talk about race, "*Whiteness*", or place, "*rurality*" p. 78.) Students talk about roommates and friends for whom money does not matter, who have access to their parents' credit cards, or of peer pressure to party and drink without thinking about the consequences, as perhaps wealthy students or people do. While the participants do not explicit mention social class or being excluded or disrespected, there is in the air of their college life description a feeling that they feel "*othered*" (p. 78).

As the first year in college progresses, not only do college friendships thin out and grades drop, but at the core of these rural youth narratives is an "*overwhelming*" "*pressure to succeed*". As the author eloquently puts it: "*Back in their small rural hometowns, everyone knows that they're the kid who got into the "good school." They can't not finish*" (p. 63). Here Tieken observes that her participants might be underplaying the structural challenges that rural students face in elite colleges like Hilltop. One is reminded of Furlong and Cartmel's (2007) sociological observation of the epistemological fallacy: in late modernity young people make societal structural barriers and problems the responsibility solely of the individual. Any failure to overcome these challenges are the responsibility of the individual. Tieken echoes this by stating that the "*fierce desire for success might blind them to some of the costs of the transition*" (p. 63).

Chapter 4 presents the third portrait, *Persisting*. The chapter begins with a focus on the 2016 election of Trump. What is interesting to me is that as students persist in their studies surrounded by wealthy and uber-urban peers, they come to feel more "*marginal*" (p. 85). Their feelings are exacerbated by the low mood which Hillary Clinton's defeat brings to campus. Tieken returns to notions of rural-as-rustic when students describe feeling that in inner metropolitan, wealthy areas like Hilltop and its close by small city (Millstown), rural people are made scapegoats for Trump's victory. Similarly, when they are othered by wealth: as Ethan says: "Hilltop isn't that fun when you're living paycheck to paycheck" (p. 83). More importantly, Trump's victory enhances Hilltop's liberal political position and underscores that this college can be "*pretty intolerant*" (p. 86).

Tieken muses here with the idea of a "conditional belonging" (see Wyn et al., 2019; Savage et al., 2004) for these rural young people who increasingly understand their place and what they can take from the college experience. In this chapter we get students' comparisons between the politics of campus and the political stances back home. For me this chapter offers a good critical

analysis of the place of rurality and rural people in the election of Trump–in some ways reminiscent of Cramer's (2016) exploration of a politics of resentment and rural consciousness in Midwest America. In Tieken's case it is through the eyes of young people who have to internally navigate different political positions from their family hometown and their college environment. Interestingly, the outcome of the election also moves the rural identity pendulum for students on campus: from rurality being irrelevant to now becoming "*fraught*" (p. 92). The election, but perhaps also their second and third years at an elite liberal arts college, does not separate them from their home roots. Rather, these factors make political, cultural and economic differences ever starker. The students begin to be more open about class, place and race as social divisions that matter and affect them in their everyday lives. Access and limitations to what Hilltop has to offer becomes clearer. For example, several of these students do not know how to reach out to faculty members or access office hours (pp. 104-105). Again, one feels that while the students still appreciate their time at and what Hilltop has to offer, their place at this college and the impact of social divides begin to crystalise. Later in the chapter Tieken explains how students choose when to "*selectively*" belong, or not, to Hilltop and how they become aware that Hilltop is an elitist institution which exists in a political "*bubble*" (p. 112) which mirrors the life of the wealthiest in the country. Overall, this portrait shows students' maturity in navigating an environment and people foreign to them, but it also reveals how their experiences make them question their place in that world.

"*Leaving*" is the final portrait of the book. In this chapter, Tieken returns explicitly to many of the themes that open the book's first chapter. As college graduation is approaching, students tell the author some of their biggest fears: leaving school with a large debt to repay over many years; returning to their hometown and getting "stuck" there; their lack of connections or social capital which disadvantages them relative to their peers when searching for a job; the lack of job experience when applying for work; and the expectations their local rural communities have of what will they make of their lives after four years living with the urban elite (pp. 123-125). To a great extent, these fears shape what is possible for these rural young people. Through detailed stories of each participant, Tieken uses her sociological imagination to show that students' subjectivation, their possibility of being, is constantly affected by structural issues that are often beyond their individual capacities.

I also feel in this chapter that the intimacy between research participants and the researcher grew even closer, as they reveal their fears about the future to the author. Tieken demonstrates the power of qualitative longitudinal research to paint the picture of our times through less than a dozen personal stories. She strongly emphasises the role of place in shaping futures, and participants' satisfaction and dissatisfaction with where they are going. This feeling of "*getting stuck*" back home is prominent for almost all participants, with some returning for a brief period of time to save money in rent and afford college loans or until they figure out their next move.

A recurring question in the book centres on the usefulness of a liberal arts college degree in the twenty-first century and to making a living in a rural place. Tieken keeps coming back to the big narratives of our time, or "*grand myths*", as she calls them (p. 145) – such as growing social class, race and geographical divides. She questions if education works as a "great equalizer", and if meritocracy is a principle that is socially just. While students' "*faith in the American educational structure is eroding*" (p. 142), as Tieken continues to interview them well after they leave college, students' agency appears strong in moulding what they acknowledge are "*complex and dynamic and nuanced*" pathways to their lives (p. 137).

In Chapters 6 and 7, Tieken digs deeper into her conceptual toolkit to explain that place and geography have the capacity to distribute resources unequally (see Soja, 2010). But she also argues that participants' rurality is a resource, a souce of social capital, and an inner fuel to successfully navigate the place, class and racial context of an alien environment. Hilltop is too urban, too wealthy and too White for these nine rural young people. Yet, they still made it work.

Tieken also writes about "*college as resistance*" for these students. Against a backdrop of popular media's tendency to mock rural people "*as ignorant and uneducated*", with these discourses reiterated by urban peers at Hilltop, and with Trump's first presidency attributed to rural folks, these young people resisted. Towards the end of the book Tieken writes about the "*underrepresented*", about the rural identity of participants, and about the under-theorisation of geography as an injustice. Ultimately, Tieken insightfully describes how these young people attended college not as a binary choice between opportunities for the future or home for its belonging – the trope of 'should I stay or should I go?'– but rather they chose both opportunity *and* home. She argues that they went to college "*for them*", for their parents' hopes, to disprove rural stereotypes, and to refuse "*to participate in rural undereducation and exploitation*" (p. 158).

This book offers a complex and eloquent analysis of the struggles rural youth face to make it work in college and at home. It is about big debates in education and society, about the role of geography and the socially just face of education and America. It demystifies media and popular discourses that devalue rural people and places and provides a thoughtful account of the challenges, costs and opportunities for rural youth to "*study up*" at an elite urban institution. Its power, for me, also relies on the author's astute sociological insights, her sophisticated prose, and in the qualitative longitudinal aspect of the study. Rarely do we see research that follows individuals for an extensive period of time, interviewing them and their significant ones several times, and building a research intimacy that provides space to unearth stories which transcend individuality. Against the objectification of the present, Tieken with her longitudinal and qualitative research, renders visible how rural young people make meaning of everyday life and use resources to build their biographies over time. Ultimately, Tieken paints a nuanced and insightful picture of growing up rural in America, contributing significantly to the rural education and sociological imagination.

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