LAND, PROMISE, AND PERIL

In Langston Hughes's "Mother to Son," (1922), written at a time of dramatic disruption in the American economy and continued tyranny in the lives of Black people, urban and rural, the Mother pleads with the child not to give up. She tells the child that she has been "a climbing on, reaching landings and turning corners." Not only did the eight families chronicled in this unique study not give up, while both losing and gaining ground, they also managed to sponsor a generation of children, several of whom reached the middle and upper-middle classes. *Land, Promise, and Peril* chronicles the actions, actors, and events that propelled legal racism and quelled it, showing how leadership and political institutions play a crucial role in shaping the pace and quality of exits from poverty. Despite great odds, some domestics, sharecroppers, tenants, and farmers and their children navigated pathways toward the middle class and beyond.

Mary Coleman is the Senior Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of Economic Mobility Pathways (EMPath), a Boston-based nonprofit that disrupts poverty through direct services, advocacy, research, and a global learning network. As a child and adult, mentor, college professor, administrator, and citizen Mary had wanted to know why and how working poor families exit poverty and sustain their exits across generations. Working in dispossessed lands across four continents, and as a child who attended both segregated and desegregated public schools, she knows firsthand that prospects for a decent world are explicitly linked to opportunities for intergenerational familial and national thriving.

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Land, Promise, and Peril

Race and Stratification in the Rural South

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Preface

In Langston Hughes's "Mother to Son," written in 1922, at a time of dramatic disruption in the American economy and continued tyranny in the lives of blacks, urban and rural, the Mother pleads with the child not to give up. She tells the child that she has been "climbing on, reaching landings and turning corners." Not only did the eight families chronicled here not give up, despite losing some ground and gaining some, they managed to sponsor a generation of children who reached the lower, middle, and upper-middle classes.

Land, Promise, and Peril: Race and Stratification in the Rural South analyzes the pathways that were routes off the lowest rungs, and others that were dead ends, in Sunflower County and Scott County, Mississippi. Sunflower is a majority black county in the Mississippi Delta. Scott is a majority-minority county in the Central Mississippi Hills.

Part I chronicles the actions, actors, and events that propelled legal racism and quelled it, showing how important leadership and political institutions are in shaping the contours of familial trajectories and molding the character of the citizenry and nation. Part II lays out how these eight families coped with the world they entered and the world they made, sometimes stitching together fragments of chance, and sometimes harnessing the force of their imaginations and the scarce resources at hand. What did parents teach their children about economic mobility, and how did intergenerational upward mobility take shape for children of domestics, sharecroppers, tenants, and farmers? Part III examines education and community pathways and plumbs the scholarly literature on poverty over the last century and more.

As did Hughes's poem "Mother to Son," *Land, Promise, and Peril* speaks to interpersonal and intergenerational familial and national coping and striving. It calls us to a renewed egalitarian march, begun centuries ago but

still unfinished. The gospel song "Dis Train Is Bound for Glory" conjures up a train pulling for glory, noting all those who got aboard and all those who chose to remain on the platform. The eight families in *Land, Promise, and Peril* all wanted to board that train here on earth, in rural Mississippi. They wanted their American Dream to be manifested at home in rural Mississippi. They wanted all lands to be lands of promise – lands where intergenerational upward economic mobility pathways radiated their families and households, and high rates of robust equity included their communities.

Acknowledgments

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During the years between 1993 and 2010, I also had multiyear opportunities to build indigenous transnational and civil society capacity in places as varied as Cuba and Palestine; to build greater aptitude for democratic learning in Romania, with my colleagues at the University of Romania in Bucharest; and to do likewise in Harare, at the University of Zimbabwe. As a university professor at Jackson State University for decades, I had opportunities to speak in Baku, Azerbaijan and monitor the nation's first "democratic elections," and to foster cross-cultural university ties between Mississippi Historically Black Colleges – Jackson State University, Tougaloo College, Alcorn State, and Mississippi Valley State University – and Fort Hare in Alice, South Africa, Agostinho Neto University in Luanda, Angola, the University of Namibia in Windhoek, and Indira Gandhi University in southern India. These opportunities were sparked by the entrepreneurial

intelligence and moxie of Ally Mack, a friend, colleague, former professor, and chair of political science at Jackson State University. These experiences broadened and, I hope, deepened my capacity to observe and actively listen and synthesize knowledge about the conditions of the global and diverse rural poor and intergenerationally dispossessed across the globe.

Many colleagues read all or parts of this work or commented on the prospectus and offered ways to strengthen it. I thank a few of them here. For their part, I thank Christine Evans, Al From, Kenya Hudson, Byron D'Andra Orey, Leslie Burl McLemore, Geraldine Brookins, Vickie Madway, Matthew Holden Jr., William Julius Wilson, Nicholas Lemann, Jacqueline Jones, Kiese Laymon, Eve Dunbar, Benjamin Wesley, and several anonymous reviewers. Decades ago, William Julius Wilson was kind enough to accept my invitation to Jackson State University, where a group of scholars from around the nation held a conversation about *The Declining Significance of Race*. I told William Wilson of my interest in examining rural poverty in Mississippi. He was generous enough to write a set of notes outlining his views on a promising approach. I was touched by his kindness. The late historian Michael Katz reviewed a prospectus for this work and for a center related to it, which I proposed at Jackson State University, my alma mater, in the 1990s. I have benefitted immensely from the scholarship of teachers and authors across diverse fields of study; from the lives my family and hundreds of my students and colleagues have generously opened their lives to me; and from the arduous mission of Economic Mobility Pathways – to holistically support families to achieve and sustain their upward mobility trajectory – where I have been privileged to work for seven years. I am especially grateful to William Darity for his belief in me and in this work, and to Cambridge University Press for guiding this work through to completion.

In addition, I thank my parents, Catherine Coleman Myers and the late John H. Coleman, as well as their generation of folks from the "Hill" in Scott County for showing me unconditional love, robust familial resilience, grace, and dignity. During segregation and in its aftermath, I observed the students and staff at E.T. Hawkins and Forest High in Scott County. I saw their humanity on display; I witnessed and was inspired by my fellow classmates' mastery and grace, their talent and care. I benefitted from the care and kindness shown me by adults and children in both middle-class and working-class homes. At Jackson State University and the University of Wisconsin–Madison (UW-Madison), I had wonderful and steady mentors. Though most of my inspirational UW faculty are deceased, I want to thank several of them posthumously, as they were great mentors, teachers, and

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I gratefully acknowledge the unflinching generosity of families and friends who entrusted their stories to me.

For the contents of this book, I, alone, am responsible.

This book is for my beloved family.

For my son, Kiese, for Eve, Cade, Mom, Dad, Momma Rose, Momma Laura, my sisters, Linda and Sue; for Nechole, Amiel, Jean, Johnny, Albert, and Eric. I dedicate this book to my brother, the late Jimmy Alexander.