

Preface

The Promised Land metaphor has a long lineage in narratives about group struggle and hope. Originally a biblical reference to the land of Canaan promised to the descendants of Jacob, the Promised Land represented a new physical space where the old social order would be dissolved and from which opportunity would spring. The Promised Land was geographic, political, and simultaneously corporeal and non-corporeal.

Among black communities, the metaphor of the Promised Land has long signaled a place where the perils of racism were circumscribed and opportunities abounded. For many African-Americans,¹ the Great Migration from the South to the North and Midwest was the pursuit of a dream of a better life for themselves and their children. In 1965, Claude Brown wrote the iconic *Manchild in the Promised Land*, which traced the lives of black youth in New York City who descended from Southern migrants.² In Brown's gripping text we learn that hope that was envisioned seldom panned out in the concrete jungles of the North, leaving broken dreams and lives among the shards of glass that littered the urban landscape. The unfulfilled hopes of the urban North soon gave way to dreams of a better life on the suburban frontier. While a number of scholars have explored the suburban experience of black adults, too little scholarship has examined the worlds co-inhabited by adults and children, in and outside of school, and by blacks and whites. This book helps address that lacuna.

The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, greater economic prosperity, and shifts in social policy allowed the African-American middle class to expand. These "new black middle class," as Bart Landry would call them, benefited from comparatively better housing and occupational and educational opportunities than members of the black poor. Still these relative advantages over the black poor did not mean that the black middle class enjoyed the same freedom as the white middle class. Although

white suburbanization began in middle of the twentieth century following the end of World War II, black suburbanization began considerably later, with a boom occurring in the late 1960s.³ Middle-class black families that relocated to the suburbs often landed in predominantly black suburban enclaves, which featured better amenities than central-city neighborhoods; yet middle-class blacks remain segregated from their white middle-class counterparts.⁴ In addition, for black families that managed to move into predominantly white suburbs, white out-migration meant these suburbs often “browned” over time, changing their demographics, property values, and amenities.⁵ Despite these challenges, many middle-class blacks remained hopeful that suburbia would serve as a buffer for issues of racial discrimination and limited social opportunities. For many families, moving to the suburbs meant starting a better life—particularly when it came to educational and social opportunities for their children. This book explores the outcome of these hopes and the realities faced in a Midwestern suburban school district, which I call Rolling Acres.

Erica Frankenberg identifies six types of suburban school districts: exclusive enclaves, countywide districts, stable mixed-income, inner-ring transitioning, satellite cities, and developing immigration meccas.⁶ In her typology, Rolling Acres would be a stable mixed-income suburb because of its increasing student enrollment yet slow racial demographic change. In Rolling Acres Public Schools (RAPS), between 2000 and 2010, the white student population declined approximately 6.5 percent.⁷ Over this same period, the black student population remained relatively stable at about 15 percent, and the Latino and Asian population increased by 1.5 percent. Rolling Acres is not a suburb that is only recently experiencing racial/ethnic diversity; like many other suburbs, it simply has not found a way to successfully address educational inequalities. Each year, white students passed state standardized exams at a rate of approximately 25 percent higher than that of their black schoolmates. This gap has both narrowed and widened in the past twenty years.

In this book I concentrate on black and white families because they constituted the largest racial/ethnic groups at the time I began my field research in 2006. The study is designed to capture a range of familial residential and socioeconomic statuses. Some families were new to the district when I began my study, while others had intergenerational roots in the city. Although it is often assumed that suburbs are economically homogeneous,

if not simply skewed toward affluence, the families in my study vary greatly along the socioeconomic spectrum. My goal is to give validity to their range of voices, which create a chorus of both advantage and disadvantage.

My goal in this study is to make sense of a suburban educational terrain and illuminate processes and patterns that may prove fruitful for other studies of suburban schools. When I began the study, I was interested in the “peculiar” achievement gap in Rolling Acres Public Schools, but soon learned that most suburban school districts had serious race and social-class-related gaps in educational achievement, and most important (in my opinion), gaps in everyday schooling experiences. Rolling Acres is simply one example in a larger field of suburban education. In this analysis of meaning-making, narratives, and policy, patterns of power and exclusion are brought to the surface that reflect why Rolling Acres, and many districts like it, are still struggling to make education great for all children.

The families of Rolling Acres often shared sensitive information that helped explain their experiences in schools and the city, but did so with the assurance that their privacy would not be compromised. The names of the schools, the district, and the people in this study have been changed, as maintaining a high ethical research standard requires.⁸ For some, this anonymity may be a reason to challenge to the validity of some of my claims. And even I sometimes questioned the decision to anonymize my data as I began the study. However, when I began to present my preliminary research findings around the United States, that concern was quelled. In making presentations to audiences I often received responses like, “That’s just like this city!” or “That’s like where I grew up.” These spontaneous comments reminded me that for decades people have been living with suburban school inequality, but seldom has it been studied or richly captured. There are many assumptions about suburban schools (e.g., they are good, have strong teachers, and are bastions of opportunity), but these assumptions cannot substitute for rigorous research. My hope is that this book creates space for more intersectional and nuanced conversations about race, social class, and educational opportunity in non-high-poverty schools.