

CHAPTER I

RACISM AND  
ETHNIC MYTHS

Racial beliefs and practices harm large segments of our population. Yet few of us see society's current state as unnatural or unjust; most deny that race or other structural forces limit the life chances of individuals and groups. We do not believe that our attitudes or actions are based on racial considerations. Instead, race has become commonsense: accepted but barely noticed, there though not important, an established fact that we lack the responsibility, let alone the power, to change. The color line has come to seem a fiction, so little do we apprehend its daily mayhem.

Ian F. Haney López, *Racism on Trial*

The United States has a fabled history of immigration, culturally signified in the sonnet by Emma Lazarus, who implores foreign nations to send “your tired, your poor, / your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. / Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, / I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” in a “world-wide welcome” to them all.<sup>1</sup> The sonnet is inscribed on the interior of the pedestal of the “Mother of Exiles” (as the verse names the Statue of Liberty). This iconic sonnet encapsulates the mythos that the United States is a nation built on the labor of immigrants and still welcomes immigrants from around the world. Histories that look at the travails of nonwhites since the inception of the first Thirteen Colonies and on until today could testify that the reality has never quite lived up to the words that Lazarus issued from the Statue of Liberty’s “silent lips.” Those histories,

instead, read as a complex contest for resources, one that was from the beginning contextualized in a language that demarked the deserving from the undeserving, arranging the humans involved into unequal ethnic groups.

The American polity is legendarily characterized as a “melting pot,” a nation brought together under Lady Liberty’s torch of enlightenment and crown of seven spires (representing the seven continents and seven seas),<sup>2</sup> welcoming the world’s “tired” and “poor” who are willing to work or “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.”<sup>3</sup> Although people from all over the world have come and still come to “America” (read “the United States”) to restructure their lives, they are not all seen as equally endowed with the ability to fit in or become American. For example, the American Protestant Association (APA1) was formed in fearful response to the spread of Catholicism, which they believed was “subversive of civil and religious liberty,” in 1842 in Philadelphia, the “City of Brotherly Love.” The American Protective Association (APA2, formed in 1887 with an identical agenda) never saw any of its favored legislation passed but claimed two million members in 1895. Members of APA1 were encouraged to swear that they would denounce the Catholic Church, never join a workers’ strike with a Catholic, and never knowingly allow a Catholic to join the association; APA2 sought to ban Catholics from elected office, remove Catholic teachers from schools, and make speaking English a prerequisite for citizenship.<sup>4</sup> These sentiments about who made appropriate compatriots were far from isolated. At around the same time, the U.S. government instituted the first of many laws declaring populations inappropriate for immigration, naming the Chinese as the first ethnic/national-origin group to be so deemed. Still, Catholics kept coming, as did the Chinese and other previously undesirable migrants, even though they received unequal welcomes and were not equally considered real “Americans.”

But that does not mean that each group would prefer and eagerly adopt the unhyphenated version of the term “(ethnic)-American” in lieu of their other ethnic options, for many are quite fond of and embrace their separate ethnic identities. Well, that is true to a point. We have known for some time that people will change ethnic identifiers as they pick and choose among possible ancestries in order to portray themselves in the most positive light. Mary Waters (1990), in her book *Ethnic Options*, explains how people decide which ethnicities to choose, preferring, for example, to say they are “part-French” but failing to acknowledge that they’re also part-Polish.

How do some ethnicities become more desirable and others less so? How were all these ethnic groups incorporated into the American polity and how do we develop legend and lore about who is better than whom? Despite the inequality that persists among ethnic groups in the United States, ethnic conflict is minimal compared to many other parts of the world. How has incorporation occurred with so little ethnic conflict? And what does the process of ethnic group inclusion and the differential outcomes tell us about how our society is organized? Is there a way to explain differences in outcomes that can be reasonably applied to several cases?

Two interrelated histories can provide answers to these questions. The first is a demographic record of the lands that comprise the United States of America, one that involves encounters with people who were living their lives when they were “discovered” by Europeans who chose conquest over community along with voluntary and forced migrations. A chronicle of the inclusion or incorporation of these disparate peoples, the circumstances that brought them here, and what happened to them afterward is helpful in interpreting the commonalities and differences among groups of various ethnicities. The second history explains how these people from the Americas and lands farther away were drawn together into an economically and socially stratified American society. These joint histories frame the ways various groups were differentially integrated into American society. But if incorporation has happened for nearly all groups in U.S. history, why is ethnicity still relevant? My answer is that these histories describe the racial and economic interactions that have kept ethnic, racial, gender, and class divisions alive, allowing them to persist even beyond the births and deaths of generations of now-homegrown “Americans” who remain ethnicized.

We have mostly folkloric histories about who got here and when, and why some succeed and others do not, all retold as if people used only their will and wits to make a living and create a legacy. In these histories we find that some ethnic groups have been able to achieve a kind of racial uplift and have the rest of society think of them with a much-improved racial status. Perhaps the catchy title of Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish Became White* makes Irish American history the best-known example of racial uplift for persons who were first considered black-equivalents but have since become whitened, but there are other relevant histories (e.g., those of the Chinese and Mexicans). Some achieve true or pseudo-whiteness, and some do not. For example, the Chinese were once so hated that

we started closing our borders against them using our first immigration laws; now, Americans of means seek out Chinese children to adopt and love them as their own. Many who we now think of as racially worthy (the Irish, Greeks, Japanese, Chinese, etc.) have started at the racial hierarchy's "bottom" and moved "up" over time. What accounts for the success of those who become our ethnic heroes by reaching status positions higher than the positions they had when first incorporated, while others remain in low status positions and become our ethnic villains? Which groups rise so high as to reach the hierarchy's very top category and become white, and how did they accomplish it? Which ones have not, and why? Physical difference/similarity alone cannot be responsible, because former nonwhite groups (like the Irish and Polish) were also once believed to be wholly racially different in appearance from "white," and some (perhaps the Chinese) seem unable to achieve total whiteness but have achieved mobility nonetheless. What explains this?

#### ETHNIC PROJECTS

In specific historical moments various outsider groups undertook concerted social action (namely, an "ethnic project") to foster a perception of themselves as "different" from the bottom and "similar" to the top of that racial hierarchy. Ethnic groups are variously successful at this enterprise. Ethnic projects succeed to the degree that the dominant population accepts that the new group is culturally or racially different enough from the hierarchical bottom to merit a recognizable "ethnicity," which itself references the dominant society's use of different racial overtones. If one's project is successful, it provides group members some relief from the pejorative labels, damning prejudices, and exclusionary practices that had originally plagued the group.

Although many ethnic groups have made attempts to achieve "racial uplift" in this way, only a few have been successful. The theory of the ethnic project can be summarized as follows. An ethnic group begins as a collection of a significant number of "outsiders" who poorly fit into the racial frame that is operative at the time of their insertion into their geographic communities. As "strangers," members of the group are first identified as equivalent to the "bottom of the barrel," racially speaking. The European colonizers of North America are the exception: they created the system of racial domination and

put themselves at the top; they neither experienced incorporation, nor can they be considered a minority group; and only racial subordinates require incorporation as minority groups.<sup>5</sup> Most ethnic groups incorporated into the United States since the colonial era are looked down upon at the time of incorporation and given very low racial status—this we call “racialization.”<sup>6</sup> For example, those nations that occupied the North American landmass before European conquest (variously grouped as a single ethnicity called “Native Americans” or “First Nations”) were branded as savages, albeit sometimes “noble” ones. The savage ideation remained, even after some groups (namely the Cherokee and the Choctaw, among others) adapted the ways of transplanted Europeans, giving up their indigenous lifestyles in a futile attempt to preserve their existence and save their own lives. The Europeans who proselytized about the ways of “civilization,” and who promised to spare cultural adapters, instead betrayed them. They did the same to those Native American nations who were less culturally malleable. In not so different fashion, albeit with different outcomes, Greek and Polish immigrants were seen as the worst kinds of brutes, uneducable but useful because of their ability to labor at “what would kill a white man.”<sup>7</sup>

Ethnic project theory argues that many racialized groups (some immigrant, some native-born) launch similar campaigns for “racial uplift,” but specific factors account for a group’s success or failure in these efforts. A group’s success is predicated on its ability to benefit from the marginalization initially designed to segregate the group and deny its members access to the socioeconomic opportunities and rewards that those at the top of the racial hierarchy are routinely granted.<sup>8</sup> That is, groups that succeed take the racial structure as a given and primarily work to change only their place in it.

Ethnoracial groups hopeful for ethnic project success undertook some subset of activities intended to foster relationships separate from and possibly superior to ethnic nonwhite others. In some cases groups used their workplace and neighborhood relationships with African Americans to show those deemed to be “white” that they were not themselves also “black.” They proved themselves to be nonblack by ostracizing and in some cases brutalizing their black neighbors, friends, spouses, children, and coworkers. They separated themselves from supposed racial inferiors by self-segregating their residences, workplaces, and sites of leisure. Many took the added step of forbidding intermarriage between themselves and (only) racial inferiors. They

chose to protect and maintain their racial superiority by enforcing a racial labeling that was intended to make the aforementioned racialized/racializing segregation commonsensical. Occupations, neighborhoods, and activities were labeled according to the racial hierarchy—as “white,” “civilized,” or “cultured” as opposed to “black,” “savage,” “heathen,” or “street.” Chinese immigrants in the Mississippi Delta, Mexicans in Texas, and the Irish in the Northeastern United States all had lived among and intermarried with African Americans, yet to achieve racial uplift they decided to segregate themselves residentially, occupationally, and romantically from the “blacks” with whom they had been formerly conjoined and compared.

In their quest for increased racial status, ethnic groups with successful strategies did not threaten to bring down the racial status quo. Successful groups only sought to raise their own status within the hierarchy and did not question the legitimacy of racialized thinking or human hierarchies. For example, Mississippi’s Chinese chose to open retail stores and become economic middlemen, refusing to sharecrop any longer alongside African Americans. But neither did they argue against the existence of the sharecropping system, the unfair advantage whites took, or the maltreatment of blacks who were left with sharecropping as their only employment alternative. In similar fashion, the Irish said that they would no longer work with blacks because Irishmen now “did white men’s work.” In sum, racial status-seekers appeal to the hierarchy’s racial superiors regarding their group’s racial worth, and they often offer justifications regarding the worthlessness of racial inferiors. Even ethnic groups who have attained “whiteness” and wished to secure their position regularly reassert their superiority. Only Native Americans and African Americans made appeals to the equality of men and women of all races, yet in choosing this (failing) universal human rights strategy to combat racial enmity, they were certainly unrewarded.

Of course, not everyone in a group automatically agreed to compliance. Thus, ethnicized seekers of higher status would commonly institute mechanisms of punishment for those within their own group who would ignore the incipient or ongoing ethnic project and instead trespass over hierarchically lower color lines—through varied attempts to inappropriately fraternize or cooperate with racial “others.” For example, Mississippi Delta Chinese would ostracize those in their group who would not break off romantic liaisons with African American mates, spouses, or co-parents. Similar actions took place

among Mexican and Irish intermarried groupings. White women who refused to leave the Native American families they joined often were labeled kidnap victims, bringing to their new families violence from white families of origin who wanted their kin “back home.”

Unsuccessful ethnic projects, though they may have done many or all of these same things, are characterized by the fact that they have not, to date, gained high racial status for their group. The reason some have not triumphed is that their ethnic project efforts actually threaten the racial status quo. In their endeavors to raise their status, groups who pose a threat to the racial hierarchy itself must fail if those who dominate the racial system are to retain their power.

#### HOW AN ETHNIC GROUP COMES TO BE RECOGNIZED AS SUCH

The basis for all these projects is ethnoracial mythmaking, which creates an ethnic group and racial lore to characterize the group. For such mythmaking to succeed, there needs to be a demographically significant subpopulation that is large and sociologically significant enough to require the group to be identified by a name, a creation story that explains how they got here, and a justification for their place in the society into which they are incorporated. This process of mythmaking has several steps that can be identified for the purposes of making it recognizable. Not all steps are required, nor is there a singular sequence to them.

First, societal recognition is available only to those groups that are socially significant enough to count. The history of the United States is in large part a history of the *demography* that recounts how the population of this nation became the admixture it is today. This population includes three categories: (1) persons present on this land well before the current nation was even a thought, for whom the land offered food to eat and a place to call home; (2) persons who arrived voluntarily to labor and find their way in a new land; and (3) persons forced to migrate here, whether pushed from their own lands by violence and hardship or forced by contract or enslavement to provide labor on this land in exchange for survival. Chronicling the demography of a nation is not a mere counting exercise. We must know who someone is in order to count them, tally their characteristics and historical events, and tell their story. This in turn requires decision making about which of their characteristics are salient. Which

characteristics and events “count,” and how do we weigh them to decide what makes up a group and what facts are relevant to their history?

Another step is *naming*. We believe ethnicity to be created by a group’s own process of cultural production, but the truth is that not all groups get to name themselves. Think of American “Indians,” or immigrant “West Indians,” so named because of Columbus’s geography errors. Neither group named themselves, nor do they have the power to erase the mistakes. This is why I describe this ethnic creation process as one that takes place in the context of *racialization*. Ethnic projects are not merely about the creation of an ethnic identity, for many of these groups are not actually embracing the ethnicity they have chosen but rather one that was imposed on them. Think of the ways we create amalgamations of many so-called American Indian nations, or of West Indian/black Caribbean persons from islands so multitudinous and varied that they speak different languages and emerged from different colonial histories. Persons in dominant races who never cared what those people called themselves long ago snatched from them their original names and applied names that fit the dominant way of thinking.

A third step: *characterization*. This is where one might recognize such myths as those meant to convince that upward mobility may be achieved by hard work and moral righteousness (a.k.a. the “bootstrap” or “model minority” myths) or that some groups are more prone to drunkenness or criminal activity. It is characterizations of this kind (lodged against “savages” and “heathens”) that created races in North America.<sup>9</sup>

Counting, naming, and characterizing groups are all steps in the process that sociologists call *incorporation*. Are groups welcomed, embraced, accepted, included, integrated, blended, or assimilated? Tolerated or ignored? Marginalized, segregated, rejected, “rehabilitated,” ostracized, or annihilated? By whom are they embraced, tolerated, or rejected? What power does the dominant element have to disseminate and popularize their assessments? How much control, agency, and responsive power does the subordinate group have? Thus, two histories are relevant and conjoined: the history of the lives of those in the group; and the history of their absorption, offering perhaps related, perhaps different stories of the systematic ways generations of “these people” are incorporated into a social order.

Together in the United States, these demographic and social incorporation histories describe a register of interactions that have created and kept alive



ethnic and racial (and related gender and class) divisions among us, allowing them to persist through the births, lives, and deaths of generations of home-grown but still ethnicized and racialized “Americans.” Even as we presume to blend subsequent waves of offspring and foreign-born newcomers into this nation, we continually recreate an economically and socially stratified society of subgroups—some of which we create out of whole cloth when no such group “existed” before. Why are people in the United States the “Americans” when the Americas cover two continents? Why do only some of those in the United States actually get to embrace the “American” moniker? There were people who lived on land in Arizona and Texas even before Arizona and Texas existed, and now that these states exist, why do we call the people who have never moved “Mexicans” instead of “United Statesians”? What are “Indians”? What are “Afro-Americans”? How did such stratifications come to be?

RACISM BEGETS ETHNIC MYTHS,  
ETHNIC MYTHS BEGET ETHNIC PROJECTS

Sociological theory about ethnicity suggests that group members who share culture and heritage form their own ethnicities and assert their own ethnic identities. By contrast, the theory says, racial groups are formed when outsiders decide what characteristics define each group and who is in it. But the reality of ethnic group formation in North America is that ethnic groups are formed in a racial context, meaning that the group itself does not always have control over how they are read by those in the larger society. The history of the United States of America is full of moments of creating and applying ethnic labels to groups of people who had different characterizations for themselves than the ones the larger society is encouraged to believe, and it is the racially dominant group that controls the ethnoracial landscape.<sup>10</sup> They project ethnic and racial rationales in order to protect their high-status position in the racial status quo. Newcomer ethnicities become salient when a significant number of “outsiders” (persons who don’t fit well into the racial frame operative at the time) join their geographic communities. It is as “strangers” that they are first identified as having a status equivalent to the “bottom of the barrel,” racially speaking. Many ethnic groups we now think of as white have started at the bottom and then moved “up” the racial hierarchy.

Once created, ethnic groups may either embrace their new assignment, effectively creating an identity that they're willing to embrace, or they may actively struggle against the characterization imposed upon them by society's majority. Once they choose a form of (in)action, they have at hand a number of tools to use to invoke new characterizations of their ethnic identity. These actions form the basis of an ethnic project.

All ethnic groups are initially racialized. Perhaps this is why we confuse and conflate race and ethnicity—for in the long view, both race and ethnicity involve identity creation in the context of racialization. But one can at the same time be a racial object and hold one or more ethnic identities. Indeed, one might fail to name an ethnicity for oneself, but no one in the United States is allowed to be without a race.<sup>11</sup> Since racialization cannot be avoided one (or one's group) must engage it. In their responses to ethnoracialization—a process that has most new ethnic groups enter at the bottom of the racial hierarchy—a group likely chooses to recreate their ethnicity in a way that can serve as a counterweight to the severely limiting racial characterizations they are assigned.

I have argued elsewhere (and will restate in the following chapter) that ethnicity can even be read as a type of racial marker, a placeholder in the ordered listing of racial categories that comprise the racial hierarchy of the United States.<sup>12</sup> In the United States today, the inequality among ethnic groups is congruent with the way North Americans structure their *racial* hierarchy. The history of most ethnic groups is truly a tale of their racial inclusion. Newcomers to the United States are labeled so that groups of outsiders can be aware—and also beware. The ethnic lore about these groups is based on a racialized fiction about their origins, prospects, culture, and physical appearance that indicates their status position.

Normally, upon first encounters, new groups find themselves at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. Even those who were successful in their ethnic projects were racially denigrated in the first instance. Indeed, their ethnic label becomes nearly synonymous with the bottom of the racial hierarchy, of late identified as “black,” where the position of privilege is fixed as “white.” However, I argue that while the commonly known and broad racial categories (like “white” and “black”) are fixed, ethnicity itself is far more flexible. Some groups have been able, in certain circumstances, to manipulate this flexibility enough to change the racial connotation of their ethnic label. They do so by controlling their

economic and social position; undertaking ethnic “marketing” campaigns to change the public image their ethnic labels connote; and creating a new ethnic identity for themselves, which also creates distance from the bottom of the racial hierarchy.

While many ethnic groups have made attempts to achieve “racial uplift” in this way, only a few (like the Irish, Chinese, Jews, and Italians) have been successful. Ethnic projects succeed to the degree that the dominant population accepts that the new group is culturally or racially different enough from the hierarchical bottom to merit a recognizable “ethnicity,” which itself references the dominant society’s use of different racial overtones. If one’s project is successful, it provides group members some relief from the pejorative labels, damning prejudices, and exclusionary practices that had originally plagued the group.

By contrast, some groups have a more uneven record of achieving racial uplift, while others altogether fail. A group’s failure to achieve uplift may be traced to several factors. Foremost among these are efforts to dismantle the racial status quo, the launch of campaigns to appeal to the wrongheadedness of human hierarchies, and the failure to use the tools of racial denigration against ethnic others in order to look superior by contrast and in this way increase one’s own group status. Ironically, what I am suggesting is that even something as “radical” as the public embrace of our common humanity apparently is a tool far too weak to dismantle the racial order—at least that is what the test of history has found. There seems to be no way out of this conundrum: one may become a racializer, even a racist, and be rewarded for it; but a group that both embraces human difference and equally values all human beings will likely be punished for such progressive and enlightened thinking—particularly if they broadcast these ideas while holding a position at the racial nadir.

Racialized societies are inherently hierarchical—the *purpose of race* is to assign differential value to human lives. Human differences exist without race, but race or racial thinking is surely required in order to put a worth on human differences. Where hierarchies exist (racial or otherwise) the higher strata are the most desirable. Groups in hierarchical societies naturally would seek to ascend the hierarchy and attain more desirable positions to improve their social, economic, and political positions, while those already at the top work to maintain their positions. Relatively powerless newcomers to hierarchical systems like these are incorporated into the lower strata, at least until they figure out how

the system works and form their own responses to their incorporation. Then they too vie for increased status, jostling for higher positions against others already ranked in the hierarchy. This is the crux of a group's ethnic project.

Ethnicity and race are not wholly distinct, but neither are they interchangeable. While the differences between these systems are elaborated upon in the next chapters, it is useful to make one important distinction here: race is an *ascribed* set of character traits with which individuals and groups are *labeled* by others. Thus ethnicity is understood to be most often *asserted*, or *claimed*, by the individual or group in question. Racial assignment in the United States is pro forma. Confirming this is the frequently posed but rather insensitive question, "What are you?" or worse, "No, but where are you *really* from?" These questions are lodged repeatedly at only a few people who are expected to assist the inquirer in assigning the racially ambiguous or "foreign-looking" respondent to the appropriate box. The sociological realm has treated racialization as a top-down process that almost seems to be some amorphous entity (called "society" by many who otherwise grasp for a better term). But society is comprised of real persons, and the ones racialized are just as real. One theoretical group racializes, the others receive and perhaps resist racialization. But racialization is neither silently nor inconsequentially imposed.

Ethnic group responses to being racialized stand on two presumptions: first, *racialization* by definition requires downgrading the status of some in order to uplift others; and, second, the response to being the target of downgraded racialization is to seek higher status. Those painted with a racial brush do not just stand there and silently allow it to occur—they act, and such actions may be mapped on a sociohistorical timeline. Perhaps we give so much credit to the overwhelming power of race that—except for large-scale movements like the abolitionist movement, or the civil rights movement—we downplay the less successful actions undertaken by groups who resist racialization. Perhaps because we have had little public recognition of alternative theories, we have put far too much store in social myths like "assimilation," "pulling oneself up by the bootstraps," and other ethnicity-focused folkloric variants of Horatio Alger tales. Horatio Alger was a late-nineteenth-century novelist who actually wrote about those who were down-and-out and then rescued by wealthy patrons. Yet he was largely redrawn as a figure who penned tales about heroes that overcame obstacles, corrected their impulses, and, by the end of his stories,

are on the road to success because of their moral righteousness. The message, then, is that whatever the obstacles, the individual can triumph by living an exemplary life. Alger's stories appeared at the peak of European immigration, and the immigrant represented the historical enactment of an Alger story. Social scientists projected the Alger viewpoint, which became a precursor for scientific tales about how assimilation occurs. Thus ethnic groups have been deemed either ethnic heroes or ethnic villains.<sup>13</sup>

This theory about the importance of ethnic projects in reifying race is not at all meant to downplay the importance of structural forms of racism and unequal opportunity that have aided in generating and sustaining inequality in the United States among racial and ethnic groups. The proportion of blame to be attributed to structural and institutional forces behind perpetuated inequality can hardly be underestimated. But this book argues that what we call "institutional racism" is not the only culprit in perpetuating racial inequality, and we individually and within our social (ethnic) groups contribute to the perpetuation of racial falsehoods. These racial fictions do not persist because we are all members of hate groups. Our racial mythology would have died long ago if regular folk had no role in buying into racial systems and perpetuating them. While I am not saying that racialization is a process completely within the control of an ethnic group, neither would I say that we have no agency in or ability to respond to the way racialization occurs in our society. This theory of the ethnic project, and the empirical investigation supporting it presented here, are meant not to erase the importance of social structure in the human hierarchies we create out of race and ethnicity but only to rebalance the scales by allowing a focus on what we collectively do to reify these systems. That is, every day we perform and remake (or socially construct) our races and ethnicities and act on behalf of our own ethnoracial group or are perceived by others to have done so. Inequality among races and ethnicities is to some degree directly attributable to actors who struggle for higher ethnoracial status.

Sociologists have a role in obscuring the ways ethnic thinking promotes racial hierarchy, and some actively contribute to the racialization process. That is, a problematic ideation exists in much of the work by sociologists on the mobility of groups of individuals that see themselves as ethnically related to one another, especially when sociologists explain ethnic group upward mobility as resulting from the strivers' ethnic culture. Sociologists similarly use cultural

arguments (oftentimes mixed in with references to structural obstacles, but reliant upon culturally based reasoning nonetheless) to explain why ethnic groups who are at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy stay there. The inclination to write this way is iconic in the landmark writings of Nathan Glazer, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Norman Podhoretz, but may also be found in the works of contemporary writers. Followers in this classic tradition include Dinesh D'Souza, Thomas Sowell, William Julius Wilson, Alejandro Portes, and Jennifer Lee. As Toni Morrison explained in her 1973 *Time* magazine article titled "On the Backs of Blacks," "In race talk the move into mainstream America always means buying into the notion of American blacks as the real aliens. Whatever the ethnicity or nationality of the immigrant, his nemesis is understood to be African Americans."<sup>14</sup> She notes that every immigrant group to enter the United States steps on the backs of African Americans in order to rise above them. A study of the ethnohistorical record shows her to be correct—antiblackness appears to be a necessity under the U.S. racial regime. The only way to change this is to change the regime. Surely change is possible, but it requires withdrawing from the game of ethnic "king of the hill"—the contest where groups threaten and withdraw from one another in order to better compete for status superior to the others in the game. Unfortunately, the prognosis found in the histories presented in this book is that for the United States, the game is built into the nation's political and cultural DNA, and it seems ineradicable and therefore unending. The real regime-changer we need—a multiethnic coalition standing up for equal consideration for all humans—seems by contrast to be a progressive's pipe dream.

We make ethnic lore to explain to one another the characteristics of any group of people, be they Irish, or Latina, or Terrorists,<sup>15</sup> but we struggle to describe a group without reference to where they fit in the socioeconomic or political hierarchy. This understanding of how they "fit in" is the key to their racialization. What we know about ethnic groups—all that we've ever known about them—is what we know about them *racially*. In the United States, what we know and report about any given ethnic group has much to do with how we talk about that ethnic group's racialization process—namely, ethnic myths are in large part, if not strictly, racializing myths. We create these myths about ethnic groups themselves but also about who "we" are (as Americans, as a society, as a "norm" against which others are measured). Moreover, ethnic

groups' identities are formed in concert and conversation with the racial views about the group. The ethnic groups themselves read the racial writing about them and rethink who they are by reflecting on the racialization they are currently experiencing and that which they experienced in the past.

Each ethnic group has the power to respond to their racialization. Indeed, the cases presented here will show that ethnic groups do respond, launching repeated and reiterative campaigns to educate and reeducate the racializing masses about who they really are, with the intent to improve their reputations and increase their racial status. We have tended to read these variously as identity movements, but they might also be read as active responses to their racialization. I use these pages to reinterpret ethnic history in light of the racial developments occurring during the time of their incorporation. In sum, ethnic groups are organic—who comprises the group, how group members see themselves, and how others perceive them are all fluid, not fixed, characteristics. Ethnic assertions, choices, and group (not personal) identities, then, might be thought of as small-scale character campaigns. These campaigns are carried out by persons aligned with ethnic groups who openly, publicly proclaim their pride in being part of them.

Understanding ethnoracial lore in this way allows me to do a couple of things: to see race where others have not seen it before, even as they may have talked about race but not used the label; and to see the social *agency* (the dynamic power social groups have and use to draw their images on the society's canvas) where others have seen a more passive "identity" politics. External processes are taking shape in places sociologists have understood as more internalized (except when such processes have become so extreme as to cause them to be labeled identity *movements*). The ethnic group identity call and response—again, an iterative process that can be historically traced and compared to the group formation process and identity responses of others—is what I call an "ethnic project." The chapters that follow engage the ethnic histories of Irish, Italian, Jewish, Chinese, Mexican, Afro-Caribbean, Cherokee, Choctaw, Nez Percé, and African American ethnic groups to show how ethnic projects (or campaigns for increased racial status) were waged and how their efforts were variously rewarded as groups were racially reevaluated, or not. In the end, racial uplift does indeed come on the backs of African Americans, who are throughout American history largely denigrated by the other ethnic groups. Reading

the historical record here, one might say that whitening is exactly rooted in behavior that distances from and denigrates African Americans. (Note that here I do not mean “blacks,” but I specifically mean the ethnic group we constantly reinvent using ever-evolving racializing constructs—like the racial segregation of workplaces, occupations, and domiciles—and rules of hypodescent in the face of hundreds of years of admixture.)

We need look no further than at our own actions to understand our continued failure to undermine the rigid racial hierarchy that plagues the United States of America. We reshape and reembrace the fallacy of race because it benefits most of us to do so. Play the ethnoracial game well and your group can rise in status, although it requires publicly denigrating others that the group decides are beneath them. But questioning the rules of the game, or the value and logic of playing it, leads to punishment.

We no longer need to question why this illogical social construction won't just die and go away. For it to die we have to learn to stop using the tools of race as we play ethnic “king of the hill” with our identities, cultures, and origins. We even play the ethnic project with the “Mother of Exiles,” the Statue of Liberty that towers in the Hudson River between New Jersey and New York City. The idea of the statue was first developed in the mind of its true creator, the French scholar and activist Edouard Laboulaye. Laboulaye was chairman of the French Anti-Slavery Society, an organization devoted to celebrating freedom of slaves where they have been liberated, and promoting freedom in the nations where human enslavement still existed. The organization provided food and clothing for freed slaves in the United States, and the women's division of the Anti-Slavery Society (headed by Laboulaye's wife) raised funds and made the clothes donated to the former slaves. It was in 1865, the year the United States ended its reign over the trade in human bodies from the African continent, that Laboulaye thought of and proposed the idea of the gift of this statue to the United States.<sup>16</sup> He hoped to have the project done in the ten years that remained between 1866 and the United States' centennial celebrations, seemingly intending to conjoin black freedom with freedom and independence for the United States. The linking of these ideas is the topic of the political cartoon reprinted at the start of this chapter; its creator, Thomas Worth, posits that the statue is “Frightenin De World,” and notes that in its recognition for black freedom will stand “opposit de United States” [*sic*] in-



stead of within it. That Liberty is a Lady meant to welcome freedom for *black* men, women, and children is a bit of history that is lost to the average tourist who visits the statue's site. Americans are taught that Liberty welcomes the immigrant, the "ethnic" one might say, and not that she welcomes to the fold the free black offspring of former slaves over whose graves she watches.<sup>17</sup> We are not taught that Laboulaye's antislavery ideas led to Lady Liberty's creation; instead the statue's meaning is refashioned to support myths about our love of immigrants of all ethnicities. Did we not construct an ethnic project for her, raising her status by changing the lore about her formerly black origins and meaning, whitening her, too, so that she may welcome those ethnic groups we also see as formerly black and now also whitened?