

PART ONE

REFLEXIVITY

THERE ARE TWO LEVELS OF REFLEXIVITY. THE FIRST HAS TO DO WITH OUR position in society. This level of reflexivity pushes us to consider ourselves not as free-floating individuals for whom the playing field is equal but as people shaped, privileged, and disadvantaged by a society in which racial domination is rampant. You may very well be an intelligent, creative, and driven individual, but social scientists have amassed enough evidence to fill libraries to show how your intelligence, creativity, and work ethic cannot fully account for your personal successes and failures. Society matters. So, in order fully to understand where we have been and where we stand today, we must acknowledge how we benefit and suffer from racial domination, as well as the ways in which we are shaped by intersecting systems of oppression based on class, gender, sexuality, and religion.

The second level of reflexivity has to do with our education. In this case, education encompasses a broad array of activities, both formal (high school, religious schooling) and informal (parents, friends, media). We must scrutinize our educational experiences and determine how whiteness has informed those experiences. Did our high school or college education teach us much about Asian American history? If our friends and lovers are primarily the same race as we are, then with what kinds of life experiences might we be unfamiliar? It is only by asking ourselves such questions that we will be able to cast light on the unquestioned assumptions lurking in the shadows of our thinking, assumptions that tend to impede critical thought.

Along with these two levels of self-analysis, we add another dimension: all reflexivity must be historical. Our thinking is in no way produced strictly by present-day events and conversations. Quite the contrary: Our thinking—and especially our taken-for-granted, habitual thinking—is the product of hundreds of years of thought. Our thinking about race is conditioned by what the Spanish and English thought when they were colonizing the “New World,” by what

slaves and slave masters were thinking during the early years of America, and by what all Americans were thinking during the Indian Wars or during the era of Jim Crow. Since much of our thinking is internalized and forgotten history, through repeated acts of reflexivity we must strive to historicize our thinking. The most fundamental aspect of such an exercise is the historicization of the meaning of race itself.

Reflexivity should not be confused with relativity. The too-often-repeated mantra, "it's all relative," strikes us as a shortcut to thinking. Relativity implies that reality somehow only exists in your mind. We reject this notion, as do the millions and millions of people suffering from the inflictions of racial domination, injustice, and poverty, people who know that social realities are far too real. Reflexivity does not reduce reality to your own point of view; rather, it suggests that your point of view must be studied, questioned, and picked apart for you truly to know the realness of reality. A thorough understanding of ourselves is a prerequisite to a thorough understanding of the world in which we live. Nor is the point of rigorous reflexivity to discover if you are a "racist" or a "nonracist," for such a limited choice harkens back to the individualistic fallacy. The point, rather, is to uncover unconscious assumptions and inaccurate perceptions that produce blind spots in our thinking about race. And, like it or not, we all have blind spots.

The Invention of Race

Recovering Our Inheritance

You do not come into this world African or European or Asian; rather, this world comes into you. You are not born with a race in the same way you are born with fingers and eyes and hair. Fingers and eyes and hair are natural creations, whereas race, as we learned in the previous chapter, is a social fabrication, a symbolic category misrecognized as natural. And if it is misrecognized as such so frequently, it is because we fail to examine race as a historical product, one that, in the larger scheme of things, is quite new.

White, African, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian—it wasn't always this way. Before the sixteenth century, race, as we know it today, did not exist. Does this mean that antiquity and the Middle Ages were periods of peace and harmony? Certainly not. Prejudices were formed and wars were waged against “other” people. But those “other” people were not categorized or understood as people of other races. Instead of the color line, the primary social division in those times was that between the “civilized” and the “uncivilized.” Since religion greatly influenced this division, at least in the Middle Ages, we might say that the world at that time was divided between “sophisticated Christians” and “barbarous heathens.”¹ The racial categories so familiar to us began to calcify only around the beginning of the nineteenth century, a mere two hundred years ago. In fact, the word “race” has a very recent origin; it obtained its modern meaning only in the late 1700s.

But racial domination survives by covering its tracks, by erasing its own history.² It encourages us to think of the mystic boundaries separating, say, West from East, white from black, black from Asian, or Asian from Hispanic, as timeless separations—divisions that have always been and will always be. This is a distortion of the truth. Struggling against racial domination requires us to struggle against the temptation to rid race of its history. As reflexive thinkers,

we must examine race as a historical invention. And we must do so, if for no other reason, than because the project of exploring the history of race is, at the same time, one of uncovering the reasons behind our everyday actions. We cannot stand outside history and watch far-off lands and peoples of old with detached bemusement. Far-off lands, peoples of old—we have inherited them; they are inside us.

This chapter, then, aims to uncover the methods by which our current racial taxonomies came to be. We must start from the beginning, traveling backward in time some six hundred years to a world without race. This world would soon find itself turned inside out. A “New World” would be discovered and, in it, a “new people.” At the same time, a new economic system—capitalism—would emerge, as would a new political arrangement: nations. Science and “rationality,” too, would flourish. Amid such revolutionary transformations, race would emerge as a new way of viewing and ordering the world. This chapter explains how that happened. How, it asks, was race socially and historically constructed? It surveys six centuries of history—from Columbus’s voyage to the twentieth century—focusing on the invention of race in the Americas.

Modernity Rising

More than any others, two European countries, two political and economic powerhouses of the early modern world, would give birth to the system of racial classification we know today: England and Spain. Before the European discovery of the Americas, England, like all of Northern Europe, was virtually shut off from the rest of the world.³ There was, however, one piece of land the English coveted since the middle of the twelfth century: Ireland. Over and over, England invaded Ireland, labeling the Irish “rude, beastly, ignorant, cruel and unruly infidels.”⁴ In a phrase popularized in the fourteenth century: “it was no more a sin to kill an Irishman than a dog or any other brute.” The Irish were regarded as nothing short of “savages” in the English mind, and this mindset—that the Irish were wild, evil, polluted, and in need of correction (if not enslavement)—would greatly influence how the English would come to view America’s indigenous peoples. In fact, the cruel saying that circulated in North America during the nineteenth century—“The only good Indian is a dead Indian”—first circulated in England as “The only good Irishman is a dead Irishman.”⁵

While England was fighting for control of Ireland, Spain, a kingdom loyal to the Catholic Church, was contemplating what to do about the Jews and Muslims who populated the Iberian Peninsula—a stretch of land that Spain had wrested from the Moors (Muslims who inhabited the region). Under Moorish control, the peninsula had developed into a pluralistic society, one marked by a fair amount of religious and cultural tolerance and frequent intermarriage.⁶ But

Spain would have none of that. Ferdinand and Isabella, the king and queen, sought homogeneity—their subjects had to be of one mind, one religion, and one culture. The crown offered Jews and Muslims three choices: leave, convert, or die. Many, especially the economically privileged, converted to Catholicism to escape persecution. The newly converted, or *conversos*, soon began gaining economic standing, and some even began acquiring influence in the church. But this did not last long, as church leaders began to question the sincerity of the *conversos*, asking, “Were these people Christians by day but Jews by night?” Thus, in 1478, the Spanish Inquisition began in earnest. Family ancestries were interrogated for “religious contamination,” and many Spaniards began to purchase certificates of ancestral purity, issued by the Catholic Church, to affirm their religious wholesomeness. Soon enough, interest in religious purity morphed into an obsession with blood purity.⁷

In fifteenth-century Spain, then, we can witness, in embryonic form, what we now call *nationalism*. A brand new identity was being fashioned, one based not on religion, family, or trade but on national affiliation. Newly formed nations were beginning to create a “people,” an “imagined community,” bound together inside artificially created political borders.⁸ Political leaders initiated new ways to tie together the population they governed. Spain did so through religious repression; other nations would do so through racial repression. In fact, race soon would come to guide the emergence and development of many modern states, and these states would, in turn, serve as key actors in the development and maturation of modern systems of racial classification.⁹

As Europe’s political landscape was undergoing massive reorganization, so, too, was its economic system. *Capitalism* was on the march. The medieval workshop was transformed into the capitalist factory. Products were manufactured ever more quickly and cheaply. And products began to be developed, not to meet needs but to make profits. Economic markets began to swell; money gained in importance; an elite class, one that accumulated wealth, property, and factory ownership, began to form; an entrepreneurial spirit captured ambitious hearts. Even more importantly, a new tide swept across the rural landscape. Social relations in the countryside became transformed into relations based on the exploitation of agricultural labor for the sake of profits. And capitalism also increasingly drove the extraction of materials from beneath the earth’s surface: ores, minerals, and, especially, precious metals such as silver and gold.

Since new trading routes and economic partnerships were being sought to satisfy Europe’s growing capitalist enterprise, expeditions began to set off for new corners of the globe (“new” by European standards, of course). The so-called **Age of Discovery** commenced as Spanish and Portuguese explorers traveled south to Africa and east to Indochina. (A more accurate label might be the “Age of Colonialism” or, from the standpoint of the indigenous peoples of Africa and

the Americas, the “Age of Terrorism.”) Travelers’ accounts began to trickle back to Europe, narratives in the tradition of *The Travels of Marco Polo*, composed in the thirteenth century. These narratives preferred fantasy to fact, legend to observation. One German text of the period asserted: “In Libya many are born without heads and have a mouth and eyes. . . . In the land of Ethiopia many people walk bent down like cattle, and many live four hundred years.”¹⁰ Such tall tales gave rise to fantasies about non-Europeans in general, and people of the Orient in particular. As a result, Europe, a region once divided by internal strife and warfare, a landmass with no obvious geographic claim to the status of “continent,” began to congeal around a shared identity. A new and powerful division entered the world, one separating “the West” from “the Rest.”¹¹

At the same time, people began to reject superstition and myth. They began to explain the world, not in terms of magical or religious forces but in terms of rational forms of thought. (Sociologists call this the *disenchantment of the world*.) This was the age of great intellectual revolutions in science, economics, political theory, philosophy, religion, and art. In 1492, Leonardo da Vinci, the Italian artist/inventor/mathematician, was forty and enjoying widespread fame; Niccolò Machiavelli, the influential Italian philosopher and author of *The Prince*, was twenty-three; and Thomas More, the English cleric and humanist scholar who coined the term “utopia,” was twenty-nine. Copernicus, who would forever change the face of science with his finding that the Earth rotated around the sun, not vice versa, was concluding his adolescent years, while the monk who would spark the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, was a child of eight.¹²

Christopher Columbus was forty-one. A ruddy, red-headed sailor, Columbus, with the support of Queen Isabella of Spain, set sail in August in search of a western trade route to the riches of China and the East Indies. Approximately one month later, he stumbled on an island in what are now the Bahamas. Columbus named the island San Salvador, but the island’s original inhabitants called it Guanahan. He then sailed to the second-largest island in the Antilles, an island that today is shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The island’s indigenous people, the Taíno, called their homeland Haití and Quizqueia, among other things; Columbus would christen it La Española, or Hispaniola, meaning “the Spanish island.” Columbus sailed back to Spain with several kidnapped Taínos, captives whom he would present to the Spanish royal court and, afterward, train as translators.¹³ Although figures vary widely, it is estimated that, at that time, the Americas were populated by 50 to 100 million indigenous people.¹⁴

The old world was passing away, and to replace it, a new modernity was rising. **Modernity** refers to the historical era marked by the rise of nations and nationalism, the development of capitalism, global expansion and the European discovery of “the New World,” the disenchantment of the world, and rapid growth of scientific knowledge. The world was changing. A new worldview

would be needed for a world itself quite new. And race would soon emerge as an important element in that worldview.

Colonization of the Americas

Contrary to popular belief, Columbus was not the first European to have encountered the Americas (that title usually is reserved for Leif Ericson, a Norse explorer who is said to have set foot in modern-day Newfoundland as early as 1001 C.E.). But Columbus's voyage was the most influential. News of it spread across Europe, sparking a rush of expeditions to the Americas. In short order, much of the "New World" would come under Spanish colonial rule, followed by English colonization of parts of North America. (The French and Dutch colonized still other parts of North America. We focus on Spain and England here because we are attempting not to provide a comprehensive history of European colonization, but to tell the story of the emergence of the U.S. racial classification system, a story for which the histories of Spanish and English colonization are most relevant.)

Colonialism occurs when a foreign power invades a territory and establishes enduring systems of exploitation and domination over that territory's indigenous populations. Through violent and mighty military acts, supported by technological superiority, as well as through organized deception and malevolence, the foreign power appropriates the resources and lands of the conquered territories for its own enrichment. In doing so, it destroys indigenous ways of life (social organization, tribal sovereignty, cultural and religious beliefs, family structures) and obliterates indigenous economies. Colonizers justify their oppression through belief systems that humiliate indigenous peoples, robbing them of their honor and humanity.¹⁵

The Spanish Conquest

The Spaniards were the first to colonize the Americas. Hungry for gold and silver, eager to claim the land for the Spanish Crown, and compelled to convert unbelievers to Catholicism, Spanish explorers descended on modern-day Cuba, Hispaniola, and the east coast of Mexico.¹⁶ (They would also move into South America.) One of the most famous explorers was Hernán Cortés. In 1519, Cortés led a band of *conquistadores*, mercenary soldiers licensed by the Spanish Crown to capture the lands and riches of the New World, as well as the souls of its inhabitants. In search of a city that, rumor had it, was overflowing with wealth, Cortés resolutely marched inland. He and the *conquistadores* soon arrived at the capital of what today we call the Aztec empire (its inhabitants most likely referred to themselves with several different names)—a city called Tenochtitlán (present-day Mexico City)—a sight beyond their wildest imaginations.

Tenochtitlán was an engineering marvel, a beautiful city constructed in the middle of a lake, accessible only through a complex system of causeways. (The lake—and its causeways—are no longer.) And the city was enormous, booming with a population of 250,000 inhabitants. (At that time, London was but a city of 50,000 and Seville, the largest city in Spain, was home to only 40,000.¹⁷) Bernal Díaz del Castillo, a *conquistador* alongside Cortés, describes the stunning city: “With such wonderful sights to gaze on we did not know what to say, or if this was real that we saw before our eyes. On the land side there were great cities, and on the lake many more. The lake was crowded with canoes. . . . We saw *cues* and shrines in these cities that looked like gleaming white towers and castles: a marvelous sight. . . . Some of our soldiers who had been in many parts of the world, in Constantinople, in Rome, and all over Italy, said that they had never seen a market so well laid out, so large, so orderly, and so full of people.”¹⁸

The ruler of the Aztec empire, Motecuhzoma (also known as Xocoyotzin or, in its anglicized form, Montezuma), welcomed Cortés and his men, hosting them in Tenochtitlán. The friendship was short-lived, however, for Cortés and his followers soon laid siege to Tenochtitlán, killing Motecuhzoma and thousands of Aztecs.¹⁹ To the Spaniards went the spoils of war: Aztec land was given the *conquistadores* by the Spanish Crown in the form of large agricultural estates; the *conquistadores* captured gold, silver, gems, animals, textiles, and artwork; and Aztec women were baptized and presented by Cortés to his captains as wives. Indeed, *miscegenation*, or intermarriage and intercourse between people with different skin tones, was prevalent in the Spanish colonies. Spaniards, indigenous men and women, and Africans (who were brought *en masse* to the Caribbean and Latin America through the Atlantic slave trade) married each other and raised children. (The Spanish crown even encouraged intermarriage between *conquistadores* and indigenous women, a practice they thought would help stabilize the region.²⁰) The territories soon were populated by children of mixed heritage. Systems of racial classification began to take shape, but miscegenation resulted in the categories becoming blurry and numerous. Indeed, dozens of racial categories began to develop, categories still employed today throughout Latin America.²¹

After the fall of the Aztec empire, the Spaniards quickly colonized the lands it had encompassed, ushering in an era of brutality and exploitation. Aztecs and other indigenous people of the region were forced to work as farmers, miners, builders, and servants on land that was once theirs.²² But the Spanish oppression of indigenous peoples did not go without reproach. Bartolomé de Las Casas, a Spanish bishop, tirelessly spoke out against his kingdom’s abuses. “From the very beginning,” he once wrote, “Spanish policy towards the New World has been characterized by blindness of the most pernicious kind: even while the various ordinances and decrees governing the treatment of the

native peoples have continued to maintain that conversion and the saving of souls has first priority, this is belied by what has actually been happening on the ground.”²³

Along with other clergymen, Las Casas would rally the church to protect native populations and to outlaw indigenous slavery (which took place under a different guise, a system of trusteeship and forced labor known as the *encomienda* system). Finally, in 1542, Spain handed down a set of reforms known as *Leyes Nuevas*, or “The New Laws,” which were designed to curb the exploitation of indigenous peoples and outlaw their enslavement. The New Laws, however, never took hold, as Spanish colonizers refused to loosen their grip on the indigenous people. Their disdain for the reforms was so pronounced, in fact, that messengers who delivered the New Laws to the colonies were shunned, beaten, and, in the case of modern-day Peru, even killed.

However, the New Laws said nothing about the abolition of African slavery in the Spanish colonies. In fact, Las Casas and other “protectors of the Indians” often “called for the sparing of Indian lives, especially in the mines, by importing many more African slaves.” The result was the “slow but almost universal replacement of Indian slaves with black Africans.” As would occur in North America, slavery would transform from a multiracial institution, which placed in bondage a wide variety of racialized groups, to one that reserved the shackle primarily for Africans.²⁴

The English Conquest

Although the English began colonizing North America a full century after the Spaniards—the first permanent British colony was founded in Jamestown in 1607—the English influence on American racial classification is felt powerfully today. Unlike the Spaniards, the English were not keen on intermarrying with Native Americans. In fact, English settlers erected firm boundaries between themselves and indigenous populations, upheld by segregation statutes, and frowned on sexual relations between Native Americans and the English.²⁵ Nor were the English very interested in “converting the lost.” What mattered to them were not the natives’ souls so much as their resources and their land.

When settling the eastern coast of North America, the English created something that had never before existed in that part of the world: “the Indian.” This was accomplished in two major steps. First, all the indigenous people—who practiced different systems of government, employed different economies, spoke different languages, observed different religious traditions, and participated in different styles of life—were lumped together under a single rubric: Indian. Tribes that had fought one another for decades and even centuries, tribes different in every conceivable way, were suddenly the same thing through English eyes. And what was that thing? It was the “savage,” the mirror opposite of the

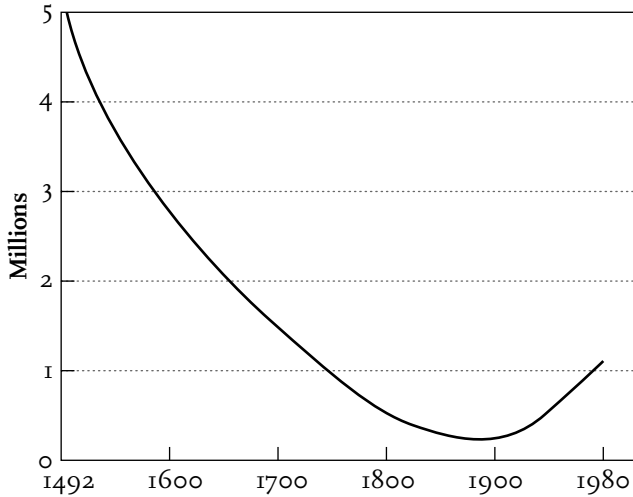
civilized Englishman. It was the barbarous Other, a description the English had once reserved for the Irish and were now employing for the Native American.²⁶

Whereas the first step entailed broad-sweeping *homogenization*, the second step involved a process of *polarization*. The category “Indian” was split into two: the good and the bad. On the one hand, the Indian was seen as unadulterated humanity, as simple, innocent, and peaceful. Here is the “noble savage”—child-like yet pure, primitive yet one with nature. (Fundamental to this image of the Indian was the misconception that indigenous populations lived without organized government, the marker of “civilization” to the European. Such a picture could hardly have been more distorted; in fact, it was from the Iroquois that some of America’s core democratic values, such as a devotion to individual rights, federalism, and participatory politics, were adopted by our Founding Fathers.²⁷) On the other hand, the Indian was depicted as a beast, a brute, a bloodthirsty monster. Here, then, is the “ignoble savage”—wicked and fearsome.²⁸ In these two contradictory guises, the “Indian” thus came into this world, a European invention.

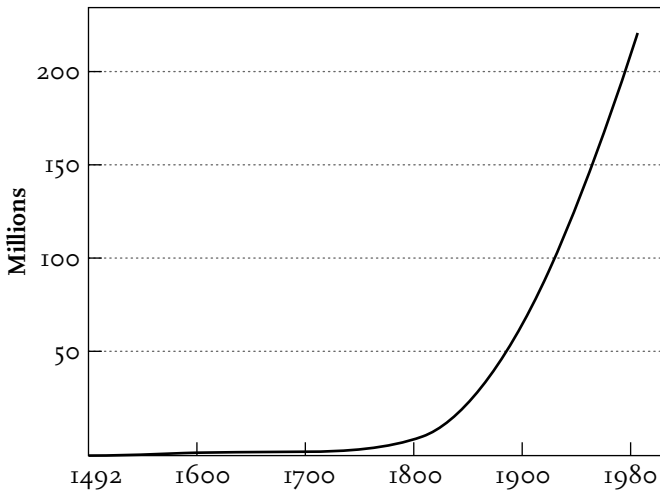
As the English began to thrive in North America, the land’s indigenous populations began to die off at alarming rates. The Europeans had brought to the “New World” Old World diseases—such as smallpox, measles, the bubonic plague, cholera, typhoid, diphtheria, and malaria—to which Native Americans had little immunity.²⁹ Death swept across the native population, rendering some tribes extinct. Just in the English-colonized regions alone, between 1630 and 1730, European-introduced diseases killed off nearly 80% of the indigenous population of New England and 98% of the Western Abenaki, who inhabited the lands that are now New Hampshire and Vermont. In five deadly years, between 1615 and 1620, 90% of the indigenous population of Massachusetts died of the plague.³⁰ Millions of Native Americans perished, resulting in “the greatest human catastrophe in history, far exceeding even the disaster of the Black Death in medieval Europe.”³¹

These deadly diseases spread so quickly across the Native American population, not only because indigenous populations had little to no inborn resistance to such biological threats but also because of large-scale changes brought about by English colonization. The English introduced domesticated animals, which spread disease. The relocation and concentration of indigenous communities made it more likely that infected individuals would come into contact with other members of the population. Many Native Americans’ diets were flipped upside-down, as their normal means of sustenance, such as traditional crops and the buffalo, were eradicated.³² More heinously, historians have documented a handful of cases in which British soldiers intentionally infected Native Americans with diseases. In 1763, the commander-in-chief of the British army, Sir Jeffrey Amherst, facing an indigenous uprising, sought ways to introduce smallpox to

American Indian Population Decline and Recovery in the United States Area, 1492–1980



Non-Indian Population Growth in the United States Area, 1492–1980



the dissonant rebels. One of his officers came up with the plan: “I will try to inoculate the bastards with some blankets that may fall into their hands, and take care not to get the disease myself.” Pleased with the plan, Amherst penned the following reply: “You will do well to inoculate the Indians by means of blankets, as well as every other method that can serve to extirpate this execrable

race.” That year, a smallpox epidemic broke loose, spreading rapidly through the Ohio Valley.³³

Many Native Americans who escaped disease would succumb instead to warfare. Colonialism is always, everywhere, and above all, violent. The first major outbreak of organized violence against Native Americans occurred in 1622. After English settlers murdered a respected leader, natives attacked Chesapeake Colony, leaving nearly 350 settlers dead. The English retaliated with vengeance, killing entire tribes and enslaving others. Their methods were vicious and, at times, deceitful. On one occasion, the English lured some 250 Native Americans to a meeting where a peace treaty would be signed. During the signing ceremony, English settlers poisoned their guests’ share of the liquor, used in a ceremonial toast, killing 200. The remaining 50 were butchered by hand.

The events of 1622 unleashed a flood of violence against North America’s indigenous population, a flood that only added to the military atrocities already being carried out by Spaniards. Historians call this violence the **Indian Wars**. They usually point to the 1540 Spanish subjugation of the Zuni and Pueblo (who occupied lands in modern-day Arizona and New Mexico) as the starting point of the Wars. The end would not come until 350 years later, at a massacre called Wounded Knee, which we shall discuss later.

America’s indigenous population eventually was brought under the heel of European colonization. Native Americans were killed by disease and by the sword; they were starved, relocated, and enslaved. As a result, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the entire indigenous population of Canada, the United States, and Greenland combined numbered only 375,000.³⁴ From 1600 to 1900, 90% to 99% of America’s indigenous peoples died as a direct result of European colonization. Never before has our world witnessed such massive loss of human life in such a short period of time. Noting this, historian Francis Jennings wrote, “The American land was more like a widow than a virgin. Europeans did not find a wilderness here; rather, however involuntarily, they made one.”³⁵

The Invention of Whiteness and Blackness

Encouraged by the swiftly advancing global capitalist economy, powerful English settlers sought to exploit the land and riches of the “New World” and grow wealthy. But they could not do it alone. An “exploitable people” was needed to exploit the resources of America, to cultivate the tobacco and corn fields, to mine for precious stones, to trap animals whose pelts could be shipped back to Europe. To meet this need, **indentured servants**—laborers who were bound to an employer for a fixed amount of time, after which they were freed—began pouring into North America by the shiploads.

Where did these people come from? Many were individuals who had bartered their passage to America in exchange for years of labor; others were ex-prisoners who had been released from English jails; still others were impoverished English men, women, and children, kidnapped from the streets of London and Liverpool; some were Native Americans, stolen from their tribal homelands; some were Africans brought to America by the slave trade, which began in the mid-fifteenth century; and hundreds were the “savage Irish,” conquered in war and sold through the “Irish slave trade” into bondage.³⁶ By the 1620s, a **plantation system**, comprising dozens of large settlements organized around agricultural production for profit and reliant on coerced labor, had been set up. In such settlements, servants lived in separate and substandard housing and were often whipped or maimed if they disobeyed orders or failed to please their masters.³⁷

As colonization pushed forward—as more land was captured, more resources discovered, and more settlements erected—the demand for servants increased and the conditions under which servants toiled grew ever harsher. Indentured servants were stripped naked and sold at auctions, and many were worked to the bone, dying long before they were able to earn their freedom. *Indentured servitude* in America steadily evolved into *slavery*. Workers became bound to their masters, not for a set period of time but for life.³⁸ Suffering through abysmal working conditions, some servants openly rebelled against the system. In 1676, an uprising called Bacon’s Rebellion broke out in Jameson. Bonded laborers of African, English, and Irish descent rose up against wealthy plantation owners (also called planters), as well as against the colonial government that supported worker exploitation. The rebellion was no small matter: It was supported by most settlers, the majority of whom were poor, and it threatened the very existence of the system of involuntary servitude on which the planters relied. The rebellion was finally put down by armed soldiers from England, but it greatly disturbed the planters.

Soon, however, white servants would refuse to reach across the color line when struggling against labor exploitation. What changed? Nothing short of the fundamental way the mass of poor whites understood their lot in life. If enslaved whites struggled hand in hand with enslaved blacks during Bacon’s Rebellion, it was because they *imagined themselves as slaves*. But in the decades following the Rebellion, the majority of free Americans began to view white servants as people who could be assimilated into American citizenry and black servants as slaves for life. In the years leading up to the American Revolution, “freedom” took on a whole new meaning for poor whites. The American military offered freedom to white indentured servants in exchange for their service, and the latter, starved of liberty and therefore hungry for it, took up arms by the droves. As the War of Independence unfolded, they began to see themselves as slaves no longer: They were “freemen”; that is, they were nonslaves, nonblack.³⁹

As poor whites gained their freedom, enslaved blacks descended into a state of permanent **chattel slavery**: Africans were treated as any other piece of property, bought and sold at owners' discretion. While the Constitution secured whites' freedom, granting them access to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," it legalized black slavery. Revolutionary thinkers, even the most radical of the bunch, such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine, understood black slavery to be a "necessary evil," a compromise that would secure (white) American freedom.⁴⁰ Stunned at this hypocrisy, David Cooper, a leading writer of the revolutionary period, observed that "our rulers have appointed days for humiliation, and offering up of prayer to our common Father to deliver us from *our* oppressors, when sights and groans are piercing his holy ears from oppressions which we commit a thousandfold more grievous."⁴¹ Indeed, freedom came into the world on the scarred backs of slaves. As one sociologist has argued, "Before slavery people simply could not have conceived of the thing we call freedom."⁴²

What is more, black slavery provided wealthy planters a new and powerful system of labor exploitation, one that was permanent and durable.⁴³ But why weren't Native Americans permanently enslaved? For one thing, their numbers already were decreasing rapidly; soon, they would not be able to meet the needs of plantation capitalism. Second, Native Americans, who were familiar with the land, could easily escape their captors and find refuge in surrounding tribes. And third, Native Americans were relied on as guides and trappers in the fur trade, a lucrative business that lasted through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴⁴ What about the "savage Irish"—could they be permanently enslaved? Not likely. Primarily pastoralists—who tended to animals on open pastures—the Irish knew little about farming and agriculture. And, upon escaping, an Irish slave could blend in with the English population.⁴⁵ The enslaved African, in contrast, could not blend in with the white population, nor was she or he accustomed to the American landscape, as was the Native American. Kidnapped and transported to a strange land, isolated, alienated, and shackled Africans had no refuge other than those provided them by their masters. They were also immune to Old World diseases and were used to a tropical climate similar to the one found in the American South. Finally, many were farmers, who knew how to rear a crop. Africans soon came to be seen as "the perfect slaves"—but note that it was *not* strictly because of their blackness that they were viewed as such.

Thus, as white servants were winning their freedom, not only from their old masters but also from the British, blacks were losing theirs. And so, whiteness and blackness, unformed and unsure of themselves, entered the world. Twins birthed from the same womb, that of slavery, whiteness and blackness were new creations whose very essences were defined by and through one another. The white race began to be formed "out of a heterogeneous and motley

collection of Europeans *who had never before perceived that they had anything in common.*"⁴⁶ Blacks, too, who beforehand had belonged to hundreds of different tribal and ethnic groups, were at once brought together under a single racial category and brought low, into bondage, through the might of European domination. America, and all the world with it, awoke to a new era, not one separating Christian from heathen, nor gentleman from barbarian (though these recalcitrant rifts never fully vanished), but a world separating people of different "races."

Africans Enslaved

The transition from multicultural indentured servitude to permanent black slavery did not happen overnight. Black slavery would become **institutionalized** (meaning it would be incorporated into American society as a formalized and normalized establishment) through a series of social and legal changes that took place between 1660 and 1860. Rights began to be stripped from Africans, specifically, and nonwhites, in general. When Virginia introduced laws in the early 1660s that defined Africans as lifelong servants, it became the first colony to legalize chattel slavery.

The Atlantic Slave Trade

Africans were brought to America through the **Atlantic slave trade**, an economic system that relied on transporting kidnapped Africans from their homeland to the Americas. The Atlantic slave trade had been in operation since the mid-fifteenth century, and several countries, including Portugal, Spain, England, France, the Netherlands, and America, participated in the trade. Africans participated in the slave trade as well, kidnapping men, women, and children from various tribes and selling them into bondage for European goods, such as cloth, guns and gunpowder, tobacco, and liquor. Kidnapped slaves were shackled together and marched, under the sting of the whip and the barrel of the gun, to the African west coast, where they were imprisoned until being sold to European captains and loaded onto ships.⁴⁷

Why did Africans sell fellow Africans into slavery? This popular question assumes there was such a thing as "Africa" and "Africans" during the slave trade, whereas, in fact, the notion of "Africa" as a continent inhabited by people, who, to varying degrees, understand one another as "Africans," came about only in modern times. Before the slave trade, many African communities were disconnected from one another. What bound the people of Africa together were not national or regional affiliations—and especially not racial markers—but kinship ties.

It is inaccurate to suggest that Europeans and Africans somehow were equal players in the Atlantic slave trade. The trade was driven by Europeans' desire to colonize and develop the Americas. Moreover, Europeans wielded great influence on the African Coast, erecting slave forts and prisons and organizing raiding parties, whereas Africans had no influence in Europe. Nevertheless, Africans did play an active role in the slave trade, and they did so for the same reasons as Europeans: to get rich. Many African societies that participated in the slave trade did get rich, at least for a short while. In the long run, however, the slave trade "underdeveloped" Africa as a whole, depleting its population (especially of young men), directing its attention away from other potentially more productive economic activities, and, perhaps most destructively, constructing Africans as an inferior people, and Africa as an exploitable land, in the minds of Europeans.⁴⁸

The voyage from the west coast of Africa to America, across the broad waters of the Atlantic, was called the Middle Passage. It lasted two to three months, although, depending on the characteristics of the vessel and the weather, it could take several times as long. Conditions upon the slave ships were horrific. Africans were packed into the bowels of ships by the hundreds, sometimes after being stripped naked. Men and women were separated, to be shelved, like cargo, next to one another in spaces seldom larger than a coffin. One historian notes that British and French traders "would hold their captives in a space five feet, three inches high by four feet, four inches wide."⁴⁹ In some cases, slaves were packed into every crevice of the ship, including under the captain's bed. A first-hand description of the conditions of a slave ship from the late seventeenth century reads as follows: "If anyone wanted to sleep, they lay on top of each other. To satisfy their natural needs, they had bilge places over the edge of the sea but, as many feared to lose their place, they relieved themselves where they were, above all the men cruelly pushed together, in such a way that their heat and the smell became intolerable."⁵⁰

As massive overcrowding left little room for food and water, many slaves died of malnutrition and dehydration. Others perished from diseases, such as dysentery and smallpox, which flourished under such putrid conditions. While some captains attempted to preserve the lives of as many slaves as possible, others were tyrannical, abusing and raping slaves throughout the voyage. Many slaves died at the hands of the ship's crew. And still others died, it seems, from sheer depression: naked and captive, surrounded by cruelty and disease, some slaves committed suicide by starving themselves to death. Eager to preserve their "shipment," some shipmen force-fed slaves, breaking their teeth and forcing their mouths open if necessary. Shipmen even took to carrying a special device designed explicitly for this purpose. A scissor-like instrument would be forced into the lips of the recalcitrant slave, and his or her jaws would then be forced open by the turn of a thumbscrew.⁵¹

It was not uncommon for slaves to rise up against their captors; in fact, it has been suggested that one out of eight to ten voyages experienced an insurrection.⁵² Few rebellions were successful, however, as mutinying slaves, unorganized, starved, and powerless, were put down with brutality. After a slave revolt was squelched on a Danish ship sailing in 1709, the insurrection leader's right hand was chopped off and displayed to every slave on the ship. The following day, his left hand was severed and exhibited in a similar fashion. The day after that, the rebel's head was cut off and his torso was hoisted onto the mainsail, where it hung for two days. Those who participated in the rebellion were flogged, and their wounds were rubbed with salt, ashes, and pepper.⁵³

Fifteen to thirty percent of slaves died aboard slave ships—and the longer the journey, the higher the death rate. In 1717, only 98 slaves out of 594 survived the voyage on a ship named *George*. In 1805, the citizens of Charleston refused to eat any fish, since so many dead bodies were tossed, like trash, into the harbor from the decks of slave ships.⁵⁴ Despite such massive loss of life, the slave trade flourished. A profit still could be made even if 45% of the slaves died during the voyage.⁵⁵

The enormity of the Atlantic slave trade has been called “immeasurable” and is a matter of historical debate.⁵⁶ Most historians estimate that, from 1450 to 1850, 10 to 15 million Africans were transported to the Americas. Other historians, however, remind us that this figure is but a fraction of total lives lost, since it does not include those who died on slave ships, on forced marches in Africa, in villages in defiance of would-be captors, or in cages on the west coast. According to one study, of 100 people captured in Africa, 64 would arrive at the coast alive, 57 would live through coastal imprisonment to be packed onto ships, 48 would survive the journey to be placed on the auction block, and only 28 of the original 100 would survive the first few years of slave labor. In other words, for each enslaved African bent over in the plantation fields, there were three others who perished en route.⁵⁷

The Rise of the Cotton Kingdom

From 1640 to 1700, slaves made up 61% of all transatlantic migrants who arrived in the Americas; in the following fifty years, that percentage increased to 75%.⁵⁸ The Atlantic slave trade gained momentum during the eighteenth century, but most slaves were transported to the British West Indies and Cuba to work in the booming sugar plantations. Relative to the slave labor force of the Caribbean, that of North America grew slowly during this time period; in fact, in 1700, Africans in the British Caribbean outnumbered those in the North American colonies by a ratio of six to one. The majority of slaves in North America worked in the areas of small-scale farming, domestic service, and craft manufacturing, though, by mid-century, tobacco, indigo, and rice began to be produced in the Southern plantations, a shift that increased the demand for slave labor.⁵⁹

However, it was only at the start of the nineteenth century, a few years after Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin (1793), that the dynamics of slavery in North America transformed dramatically. The cotton gin—a simple enough contraption made of a wooden box, a set of hooks that pulled cotton through a wire mesh, and a crank—deseeded cotton with speed and efficiency. By hand, one could clean a pound of cotton in a day; using the gin, one could clean fifty pounds of cotton in a day. Suddenly, the production of cotton was made simple, the price of cotton fell, and cotton plantations emerged. Cotton quickly surpassed tobacco as America's leading cash crop. In 1790, America produced 140 thousand pounds of cotton; by 1800, it would be producing 35 million pounds. Cotton became king—with black slaves doing its bidding. As the demand for cotton increased in Europe, North American slavery was reinvigorated.

By 1865, it is estimated that there were close to 4 million slaves in America.⁶⁰ Plantation owners oversaw them with sharpened eyes, implementing strict disciplinary regimens to govern their labor. Maximization of productivity was the overarching goal, and the planters had this down to a science. Every slave was utilized, including pregnant women who were forced to work in the fields until the final week before giving birth—and then forced to return only two weeks thereafter. On average, slaves worked “sunup to sundown,” as the old spiritual goes, for six days (or approximately sixty hours) a week. The cotton flowed, making plantation owners, on the eve of the Civil War, some of the richest men in the world.⁶¹

But we would do well to remember that most whites during this period were not plantation owners. In fact, most whites were poor—too poor to purchase large pieces of land, let alone slaves. Of the 2 million slaveholders living in the South in the mid-nineteenth century, the vast majority owned a very small number of slaves, while an elite group of planters owned slave armies. At the height of slavery, there were over 5 million whites in the South who did not own slaves.⁶² Poor whites, especially unskilled laborers, fared poorly during slavery, since free labor naturally pulled down the price of all labor.

In relation to the rich white planter and the enslaved black, poor whites were more like the latter; however, they identified only with the former. They were white, after all. They were poor, but they were free—and in their mind they could someday, by a stroke of luck perhaps, come to own slaves themselves. They worked as the planters' overseers, patrolled the planters' fields with their “cats of nine tails” (that is, whipping devices made of thongs of braided cord), and served as the planters' police force, chasing down runaway slaves. To quote a keen observation made by W. E. B. Du Bois, “It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and **psychological wage**. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with

all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. . . . Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them.”⁶³

Yes, poor whites lived in squalor; they went hungry; they labored for low pay-ment; but, at the end of the day, their skin was the same color as that of the planters. To create a cheap labor force, white landowners worked to convince poor whites to ignore how they, too, were exploited by the slave economy and, instead, to take pride in their whiteness. As Pem Davidson Buck puts it in *Worked to the Bone*, to thwart the formation of interracial coalitions between poor whites and enslaved blacks, white elites had to “teach Whites the value of whiteness.”⁶⁴

The Horrors of Slavery

During slavery, blacks in bondage soon came to be regulated under a set of laws called **slave codes**. The codes denied blacks citizenship and governed even the most intimate spheres of their lives. Slaves were not allowed to own or carry arms, trade goods, possess land, leave their master’s property without permis-sion, or venture out at night. They were forbidden to socialize with free blacks, and a marriage between two slaves went unrecognized as an official union. Since slaves could not marry, slave families did not exist in the eyes of the law. Chil-dren were snatched from the arms of their mothers; wives were torn from the embrace of their husbands; families were scattered: a sister sent to Mississippi, a brother sold to a man in Kentucky.

It was illegal for a slave to testify in court against a white person, and a slave who argued with or struck a white person was punished severely. In Washington, D.C., for instance, slaves who hit white persons would be mutilated, their ears cut off. In some states, even free blacks could not lay a hand on whites, not even in self-defense. In Virginia, free blacks who defended themselves against the assaults of whites received thirty lashes. During this time, the rights of free blacks were eroded alongside those of enslaved blacks. By 1723, the right to vote was withheld from all blacks residing in the Southern colonies, free or not.⁶⁵

Laws also were put in place that broadened the scope of slavery to include children of mixed heritage, thereby expanding the very definition of blackness. Sexual unions between free white men and enslaved black women, many of which were rapes, produced biracial children. Were they to be considered slave or free? “Slave,” answered the codes. In 1662, Virginia legally defined the chil-dren of a slave mother, regardless of the status of the father, as slaves: “Whereas some doubts have arisen whether children got by any Englishmen upon a Negro shall be slave or Free, Be it therefore enacted and declared by this present Grand assembly, that all children born in this country shall be held bond or free only According to the condition of the mother.”⁶⁶

This law foreshadows a peculiar trend in the career of blackness as it was (and, for the most part, continues to be) defined in the American context. Since its inception, blackness always has been defined through the **one-drop rule**, which renders “black” anyone with any amount, no matter how miniscule, of African blood. More than a social convention, this “rule” was given legal existence through several statutes enacted during and after the time of slavery. For instance, in 1896 the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, a case to which we will return later, ruled that Homer Plessy, a light-skinned man who was one-eighth black, was “black” and therefore not entitled to rights reserved for whites. (And recall that, in the previous chapter, we saw how the legacy of the one-drop rule continued through the late twentieth century in the case of Susie Guillory Phipps, the fair-skinned woman who was classified as black by the state of Louisiana.) Blackness, then, was regarded as a mark, a blemish, whereas whiteness, by implication, was constructed as the essence of racial purity. In its ideal form, whiteness was unpolluted by Africa.⁶⁷

Not only did the slave codes rid blacks of rights, but they also attempted to wrench from blacks their honor, dignity, and humanity. Slaves were denied access even to the most basic education. Some states made it illegal to teach a slave to read or write. Others forbade slaves from practicing religious worship and expression. Slaves were denied access to their African roots. They were forbidden to speak in their native tongue and were forced to dress in the style of their captors. Their names were changed, sometimes to insulting nicknames, such as Monkey or Villain. These nicknames were similar to those of livestock. Slaves were given “marks of servitude.” Their ears were cropped, and they were tattooed and branded (sometimes with the same iron used to brand an owner’s cattle) on the breast or forehead. Runaways were marked with clear identifiers, such as the letter “R” branded on their cheek.⁶⁸

Runaways were not the only slaves punished. Slave codes secured slave masters’ absolute power. Under the codes, white masters lived in a world typified by the absence of restraints. The whip was the master’s favorite weapon of correction. In the Southern colonies, thirty-nine lashes often were given to offending slaves, the same prescription stipulated in Roman law. Though it was illegal for masters to murder a slave, they committed no crime if they “accidentally” killed a slave while punishing him or her.⁶⁹ Elizabeth Keckley, a slave separated from her parents at a young age, recalls a time when she was flogged, for no apparent reason, at the age of eighteen. Keckley tells us she was stripped naked and bound; she continues: “Then he picked up a rawhide, and began to ply it freely over my shoulders. With steady hand and practiced eye he would raise the instrument of torture, nerve himself for a blow, and with fearful force the rawhide descended upon the quivering flesh. It cut the skin, raised welts, and the warm blood trickled down my back. Oh God! I can feel the torture now—the terrible,

excruciating agony of those moments.”⁷⁰ Much thought and creativity was devoted to the question of how best to torture slaves. Slaves thought to be indolent were placed in stocks and pillars and displayed in the town square; slaves thought to be high-spirited were mutilated or castrated; slaves thought to be ill-mannered were forced to wear iron masks and collars.⁷¹

Sexual Exploitation and Dehumanization

Both men and women slaves lived in fear of such abuse, but women slaves disproportionately lived in fear of another sort of violation: that of sexual exploitation. Slavery “is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women,” wrote Harriet Jacobs.⁷² Since slave children increased a master’s wealth, slave women were forced to copulate with whomsoever the master chose. Black women’s wombs, their sexual freedom and their reproductive rights, were at the mercy of their masters, white men who often prided themselves on owning a good “breeding woman.” In large part, slavery rested on the control of black women’s bodies.⁷³ “Here,” writes Dorothy Roberts, “lies one of slavery’s most odious features: it forced its victims to perpetuate the very institution that subjugated them by bearing children who were born the property of their masters.”⁷⁴

Slave women also lived in constant fear of rape. In her slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published in 1861, Harriet Jacobs describes her “trials of girlhood”: “But I now entered my fifteenth year—a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. . . . Soon she [the slave girl] will learn to tremble when she hears her master’s footfall. She will be compelled to realize that she is no longer a child. If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. . . . I cannot tell you how much I suffered in the presence of these wrongs, nor how I am still pained by the retrospect. My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him.”⁷⁵

The rape of a slave woman was not recognized as a crime. The black female body was not a body to be protected but one to be abused and molested. White masters used rape as a technique of terror, one that degraded both black women and men, since the latter could not keep their sisters, mothers, and wives safe from violation. If a child grew in the womb of a slave woman as a consequence of a white man’s rape, that child would bear the “condition of the mother,” becoming not the white man’s son or daughter but a slave—one who increased the value of the master’s estate.⁷⁶

As a result of this rampant sexual exploitation, black women’s bodies came to be constructed as objects to be treated with indignity, abused with cruelty, and raped with impunity. Nor were their children theirs to own and cherish; rather, the children belonged to, and were controlled by, the slaveholder. What is more,



“Soon she will learn to tremble when she hears her master’s footfall.” —Harriet Jacobs

since the dominant image of femininity, at least in well-to-do white culture, was based on leisure and luxury, black women, who knew neither leisure nor luxury, were understood to lack femininity. Thus, in the words of one historian, whites understood black women “as a sort of female hybrid, capable of being exploited like women but otherwise treated like a man.”⁷⁷

At the same time, whites were creating a distorted image of black masculinity, one that hinged on two widespread themes. On the one hand, the black male slave was a non-man, emasculated and infantilized since he lacked that supreme value on which masculine honor rests: unchained independence. He could not provide for or protect his loved ones (only the master could do that); in most cases, he could not even defend his own body from the scourges of whites. As such, he could lay no claims to manhood. On the other hand, in the white imagination the black slave embodied the most primordial essence of manhood; he was thought to be a lascivious creature, quick to give in to base and carnal

urges. While black female slaves were understood to be asexual, their libido nonexistent, black male slaves—indeed, all black men—were stereotyped as hypersexual. Whites came to think of black men as sexual predators, who longed to have their way with white women. Thus, while white men, who often raped black women, were regarded as “Southern gentlemen,” black men, who rarely molested white women, often were deemed rapists.⁷⁸

Slavery also encouraged the creation of debasing stereotypes and degrading images targeting Africans. The Sambo character—an ignorant, silly, dishonest, and childlike plantation slave, completely dependent on his master—emerged as the dominant stereotype of the enslaved African. This cruel caricature was so widespread that one historian observed that, for most Southerners in the nineteenth century, “it went without saying not only that Sambo was real—but also that his characteristics were the clear product of racial inheritance.”⁷⁹ Daily, the black slave was debased in popular language, in commonplace phrases, songs, children’s games, and nursery rhymes: *Eeny, meany, miney, mo; Catch a nigger by the toe; If he hollers, let him go.*

Gradually, then, enslaved Africans were reduced to “socially dead persons,” and blackness became associated with inferiority in relation to whiteness.⁸⁰ Out of slaves’ social death grew American prosperity. While blacks lost their freedom, honor, and lives, the United States’ economy grew exponentially, becoming what it is today: the most powerful economic force in the world. One sometimes hears commentators remark that American prosperity is due to the special “ingenuity and hard work of Americans” or that this nation is uniquely “blessed.” In truth, the foundation of our nation’s wealth rests on two hundred fifty years of free labor.

Resistance, Large and Small

Slaves fought back. Sometimes their methods of resistance were quiet and subtle. In public, slaves seemingly accepted the terms of their domination; in private, however, they criticized white supremacy, often in clandestine and creative ways. They sang of the fall of slavery, as well as of an afterlife in which there would be no more tears; jokes were made at whites’ expense; poems were penned that rejoiced in the deaths of masters. Slaves learned to live a double life, one that required them to sling their heads low under the master’s gaze but to raise them high and wink once the master’s back was turned.⁸¹ In addition, if whites thought of blacks as unintelligent and lazy, some blacks often acted as such to affront their masters. Tools were left out in the rain; plows were mishandled; shovels and hoes were sabotaged; livestock “escaped.” Slaves worked lethargically and clumsily. They misunderstood instructions; got lost on the way to town; oversalted the dinner; made the coffee scalding hot. Everyday forms of resistance, whispered “nos” amidst the roar of racial domination, demonstrate that slaves

did not believe of themselves what the whites told them to believe. They found ways to retain their honor.⁸²

Sometimes, slaves' resistance was not so subtle. Dozens of **slave rebellions** took place over the course of American slavery. Slaves took up arms against their masters, burning buildings and crop fields and engaging whites in bloody warfare. When news of the Haitian Revolution—an enormously successful slave revolt that overthrew French colonialism and emancipated the entire Haitian slave population—reached America at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it inspired many American slaves to risk their lives to break the chains of tyranny. One of the most significant revolts occurred in 1831, when a man by the name of Nat Turner, a slave and fiery preacher, led some sixty slaves in open revolution. Turner and his followers marched defiantly from farm to farm throughout Virginia, fighting and killing whites and recruiting other slaves. The rebellion eventually would be put down, and Turner hanged, but not until after it had left almost sixty whites dead in its path.⁸³ Admiring the courage of slave revolutionaries, American historian Herbert Aptheker would observe, “They were firebells in the night; cries from the heart; expressions of human need and aspiration in the face of the deepest testing. They manifest that victimization does not simply make victims; it also produces heroes.”⁸⁴

Flight was yet another form of resistance. Slaves could run north to freedom, and to help them do so, there was a network of secret routes on land and water, safe-holds, and allies to fugitive slaves—collectively known as the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad helped thousands reach freedom in large part because of its brave and brilliant leaders. There was William Still, a black man called “the father of the Underground Railroad,” who hid some sixty fugitive slaves in his home. There was Harriet Tubman, too, an ex-slave who would return to the South time and again to guide hundreds of slaves to freedom without losing a single one along the way. Tubman was so effective that whites offered a \$10,000 reward for her capture. And there was William Garrett, a white Quaker, who, though arrested and fined to such a degree that he nearly met financial ruin, thought that freeing slaves was one's Christian duty.⁸⁵

Whites and blacks worked side by side in the Underground Railroad, and, indeed, since the beginning days of American slavery, whites and blacks, together, called for its abolition, thus earning the name **abolitionists**. The abolitionist movement was strong in the North, which is in part why all the Northern states had abolished slavery by 1804. In the years leading up to the Civil War, the abolitionist movement gained steam, and slavery was decried from all corners of the country. From Massachusetts, it was criticized by William Lloyd Garrison, a white journalist and founder of the first abolitionist newspaper called *The Liberator*, who would write, “I accuse the land of my nativity of insulting the majesty of Heaven with the grossest mockery that was ever exhibited to man.” From Kansas, it was

challenged by John Brown, a white man who organized several armed insurrections in the name of black liberation and who eventually was found guilty of treason against (white) America and executed. From South Carolina, it would be called “despotic,” “sinful,” and a “violation of the natural order of things” by Sarah and Angelina Grimké, sisters ostracized by their white family for arguing that “the white man should take his foot off the Negro’s neck.”⁸⁶

And, perhaps most powerfully, slavery was condemned from the mouths of former slaves. Frederick Douglass was one of them. Douglass taught himself to read and write while a child in bondage. He later escaped slavery at the age of nineteen and went on to become one of the most influential African Americans of his day. A skilled writer and an orator of the highest caliber, Douglass launched many pointed assaults on the institution of slavery, including a famous address given on July 5, 1852 in Rochester, New York. Addressing an audience of influential white politicians, Douglass boomed: “This Fourth [of] July is *yours*, not *mine*. You may rejoice, I must mourn. . . . Fellow citizens; above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail of millions! whose chains, heavy and grievous yesterday, are, today, rendered more intolerable by the jubilee shouts that reach them. . . . What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.”⁸⁷

Whereas Douglass’s voice was commanding and elegant, that of another black abolitionist spoke with weather-worn wisdom and without sentiment. Sojourner Truth has been described as “an unsmiling sibyl, weighted with the woe of the world.”⁸⁸ This tall, slender grandmother cast a powerful shadow over both the abolitionist and women’s rights movements (at this time, women, most of them white, were fighting for the right to vote). Disappointed with the suffrage movement for overlooking the plight of black women, and highlighting the intimate ties between racial and masculine domination, Truth once addressed the white audience gathered for a Women’s Rights convention with these stirring words: “Dat man ober dar say dat woman needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place eberywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober mud-puddles, or gives me any best place. And ar’n’t I a woman? Look at me, look at my arm! I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ar’n’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well—and ar’n’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen chillen, and seen ‘em mos’ all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard—and ar’n’t I a woman?”⁸⁹

From Emancipation to Jim Crow

Sojourner Truth gave this address in 1851. Ten years later, on a still April morning, fifty confederate cannons opened fire on Fort Sumter, marking the beginning

of the Civil War. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, an executive order that manumitted all slaves in the Confederacy (that is, released them from bondage). In 1865, the Confederate Army would be defeated by the Union, and more slaves would be freed. At the end of that year, the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified, permanently abolishing slavery in the United States. As the cannon smoke cleared, all black men and women stood legally free upon American soil.

But, in reality, what leg did they have to stand on? Here stood millions of blacks who, for two hundred fifty years, had endured kidnapping, torture, and rape, who had been denied education, property, and wealth, who, surrounded by powerful whites who ground their teeth at emancipation, had no place to turn, least of all to their families, who had been scattered throughout the country. Recognizing the slaves' poverty, and eager to punish the rebellious South, William Sherman, a general in the Union Army, issued a decree (Special Fields Orders, Number 15) in January 1865 that allotted forty acres of land to recently freed heads of households as well as to slaves who had fought in the Union Army. This policy came to be known as **Forty Acres and a Mule** (the beast would be used to pull a plow) and was the nation's first and only attempt at offering reparations for slavery.⁹⁰

It is estimated that some 40,000 freed slaves saw Sherman's policy fulfilled. However, later that year, President Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's successor, overturned Sherman's order, returning the property to former Confederates who swore an oath to the Union. Having worked their land for only one season—digging in *their* soil with hands unshackled!—blacks were dispossessed of it. The promise of Forty Acres and a Mule was never fulfilled, leaving the freed slave in a state of utter destitution. Du Bois's words ring true here: "To emancipate four million laborers whose labor had been owned, and separate them from the land upon which they had worked for nearly two and a half centuries, was an operation such as no modern country had for a moment attempted or contemplated. The German and English and French serf, the Italian and Russian serf, were, on emancipation, given definite rights in the land. Only the American Negro slave was emancipated without such rights and in the end this spelled for him the continuation of slavery."⁹¹

The period from 1863 to 1877 is known as **Reconstruction**, a time when the nation put itself back together, reincorporating the Southern states and reinventing American citizenry, white and black alike. Immediately after the fall of slavery, Southern states began implementing "black codes," variants of the slave codes that restricted the rights of newly freed blacks. Many blacks would be forced back onto the plantation fields, as black codes severely limited other employment opportunities. At the national level, however, freed blacks were winning rights. The ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment came in 1868

and extended citizenship rights to blacks. The ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment came two years later and gave black men (but not other non-whites or women) the right to vote. Some black men went to the polls, and some were even elected to public office. But white supremacy would not yield so easily. By and large, blacks were neither treated as American citizens nor respected as voters, for violence was the true law of the land. After the Civil War, whites lashed out at freed blacks, first through sporadic, unorganized hostility, then through organized terror, especially through the founding of the Ku Klux Klan in 1865.⁹²

Dressed as ghosts of dead Confederate soldiers, the Klan terrorized not only blacks but all nonwhite persons, as well as Jews and Catholics. Barbarism and lawlessness reigned, as Klansmen whipped, tarred, raped, and murdered their victims. Their violence was an explicit attempt to uphold white supremacy and to bar blacks from any political or economic advancement. If a black man voted, he risked his life in doing so. Some ballot boxes even were patrolled by armed white men. And behind everything—behind the Constitution and all its new Amendments, behind black “freedom,” behind all the changes of Reconstruction—lurked the threat of the lynch mob. Thousands of blacks were lynched during Reconstruction and on up through the mid-twentieth century. Far from being erratic acts of mob aggression, lynchings were preplanned events, bloody rituals that drew large crowds of onlookers of all ages. Often the victim would be tortured, his limbs severed, his flesh impaled with hot irons, and his body strung up a tree or burnt alive. Many victims accused of raping white women—indeed, the “rape complex” was the warrant most often marshaled for lynching—would be castrated. The victim would be mutilated after his death, parts of his body sold to spectators as macabre souvenirs. Often, whites would dance and sing around the corpse, carrying on in a festive spirit.⁹³ It was of lynchings that jazz great Billie Holiday sang in her famous 1939 recording of “Strange Fruit”: “Southern trees bear a strange fruit/Blood on the leaves and blood at the root/Black body swinging in the Southern breeze/Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.”⁹⁴

As Reconstruction came to a close, the era of **Jim Crow** segregation began in earnest. The name derives from a song called “Jump Jim Crow” (1828), by Thomas “Daddy” Rice, a white man who popularized minstrel shows. (Minstrelsy was a form of popular entertainment in which performers using makeup known as blackface invoked racist stereotypes and caricatures to portray black people in a degrading light.) By the late 1830s, the term “Jim Crow” had become associated with strict racial segregation reinforced under the terms of law. Nearly all aspects of everyday life were governed by Jim Crow laws, as whites and blacks were forced to use separate water fountains, parks, and bathrooms. It was illegal for blacks to attend white schools, to sit in railroad cars designated for white

patrons, or to use white libraries. These laws were supported with the full weight of the Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the case mentioned earlier, which ruled that racial segregation was constitutional, since black and white facilities were “separate but equal.” Of course, they were anything but, as facilities designated for blacks usually were in far worse shape than those allotted to whites. Jim Crow would command American life—in the South through formal law, in the North through custom, equally efficient—from the late nineteenth century up until the 1960s.⁹⁵

If we have devoted a considerable amount of attention to slavery and its aftermath, it is because, more than any other institution, slavery has dictated the career of American racial domination. American slavery emerged to meet the needs of colonial exploitation and capitalist expansion. Before slavery, what we now know to be whiteness and blackness did not exist. After slavery, whiteness and blackness were understood as durable and everlasting features of nature. Capitalist colonization encouraged the rise of slavery, and slavery shaped the very contours of racism.⁹⁶

Manifest Destiny

Conquering Mexico and the Invention of the Mexican American

Let’s back up and cast our gaze further southward. While the U.S. cotton kingdom reigned supreme during the beginnings of the nineteenth century, wars were raging throughout the lands colonized by the Spaniards. Inspired by the successful American Revolution, many people oppressed by Spanish colonization (some of whom even fought with Washington’s rebels) were fighting for their independence. America, thought the Latin American patriots, can identify with our struggle; it fought and won its freedom from European monarchs, and it will support us. The patriots, however, were wrong. The United States, eager to expand westward, thought of Latin America as land that could later be exploited, not as a country bravely wrestling for democracy. In fact, President James Monroe, when signing the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819, a treaty that Spain gave the U.S. lands that are now Florida, promised the Spanish Crown that he would withhold support from Latin American rebels. More importantly, to support Latin American independence was to support rebel armies that enlisted and emancipated slaves. Latin Americans were fighting for their independence from Spain *and* for freedom from bondage. A wave of emancipation was sweeping the Spanish colonies, and American slaveholders trembled at the thought of that wave crashing over northern borders and washing across the cotton kingdom. Accordingly, America watched from a high perch, but did not extend its hand, as Latin American rebels fought for independence.⁹⁷

And fight they did. The Mexican War of Independence began in September 1810, when a parish priest, Padre Miguel Hidalgo, sounded the church bells and led an insurrection of indigenous peasants and miners against Spanish colonialism. The bloody conflict lasted eleven years, claiming over 600,000 lives—over 10% of the country's population. (By contrast, only 25,000 died fighting for American independence.) In 1821, Mexico rested, having established itself as an independent nation whose borders included modern-day Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, California, Nevada, Utah, and Colorado.⁹⁸

A year later, President Monroe seemed to have a change of heart. Having held nothing but contempt for Latin American independence, he recognized Mexican independence, becoming the first world leader to do so, and announced that the Americas were “henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers.” Monroe's declaration, which later became known as the Monroe Doctrine, was praised by Mexican leaders. “America for the Americans!” became the slogan that emerged from the Monroe Doctrine. That Latin America should not belong to Europe, few Americans disputed. However, many began asking, “Should Latin America belong to the Latin Americans?” Many North Americans answered: “No, it should belong to us!” Thus, the Monroe Doctrine simultaneously outlawed the European conquest of Latin America and invited the American conquest of that land. A new slogan emerged: “**Manifest Destiny!**” In other words: “The western frontier, all of North America and the lands of Mexico—yes, this is God's will—is ours for the taking!”

Americans respected neither Spanish nor Mexican claims to land. From the beginning of the nineteenth century up until the Civil War, Americans would cross into Spanish and Mexican territories, capture a town, and declare independence. These buccaneering antics (called filibusters) usually drew the support of the U.S. military and increased the presence of white Americans in Mexican land. (In the popular American imagination, the brave white cowboy with his covered wagon stabs westward into land unoccupied and unsettled, no-man's land. We would do well to remember that these cowboys were, in fact, *stealing* land, upon which over half a million Mexican rebels fell dead while fighting for independence.) In 1845, the United States forced Mexico to relinquish the lands that are now Texas, the end result of an uprising started by white settlers who had illegally immigrated to Mexico.⁹⁹ With the annexation of Texas, the battle cry “Manifest Destiny!” grew ever louder. Consider one declaration, that of a politician named William Wharton, reflecting the public sentiment of white America: “The justice and benevolence of God will forbid that . . . Texas should again become a howling wilderness trod only by savages, or . . . benighted by the ignorance and superstition, the anarchy and rapine of Mexican misrule. The Anglo-American race are destined to be forever the proprietors of this land of promise and fulfillment. Their laws will govern it, their learning will enlighten it, their

enterprise will improve it. . . . The wilderness of Texas has been redeemed by Anglo-American blood and enterprise.”¹⁰⁰

A year after annexing Texas, the United States declared war on Mexico. The Mexican-American War was fought between 1846 and 1848. Over 100,000 United States troops descended upon Mexican soil. Mexico, a country of only twenty-five years and still exhausted from its devastating war of independence, did not stand a chance, especially considering that most of the fighting done on the borderlands was carried out by untrained civilians. General Ulysses S. Grant, the most important Union general of the Civil War and eighteenth president of the United States, would call the Mexican-American War “one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation.”¹⁰¹ Mexico was defeated in 1848, and, through the **Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo**, the United States acquired the land that today is New Mexico, California, Utah, Nevada, parts of Arizona, and disputed areas of Texas. But why, we must ask, did the United States stop there? Why did this superior military power show restraint instead of claiming all of Mexico? The answer lies in the ways white Americans racially constructed the people of Mexico.¹⁰²

Recall that the Mexicans were a people of mixed heritage, a people birthed from the unions of Spaniards, Africans, and Native Americans. Not surprisingly, white Americans understood Mexicans to be inferior people. Thus, when U.S. troops marched on Mexico City, America’s leaders had a decision to make: Should they lay claim to the entirety of Mexico, and thus absorb millions of “inferior” Mexicans into their borders, or should they capture only a portion of Mexico, the portion populated with the least numbers of Mexicans? So as not to threaten America’s white majority, political leaders chose the latter option.¹⁰³

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo promised citizenship rights to Mexicans in ceded lands; however, that promise was never fulfilled, as the U.S. refused to extend full rights to nonwhites. Mexicans were constructed in American law and policy as belonging to an inferior race, one distinct from Native Americans of the Southwest. Mexican identity was determined by blood quantum. Those with one-half or more of Mexican blood were classified as Mexican. In turn, those classified as Mexican were then brought under the governance of race-based law, which denied them special privileges enjoyed by whites. Mexicans were not allowed to vote. And under the Homestead Act of 1862, many Mexicans were dispossessed of their land, which Congress promised to citizens of the United States or immigrants eligible for naturalization—read: white settlers.¹⁰⁴ As a result, “Mexican Americans of the Southwest became a foreign minority in the land of their birth.”¹⁰⁵ As the United States grew richer off the land, off gold and silver acquired through the Mexican-American War, as well as off the cattle and sheep ranching industries blossoming throughout the Southwest, Mexicans, denied citizenship rights, descended into poverty. With the construction of the political border

separating the United States from Mexico came the construction of a racial border, one separating whites from Mexicans, Mexicans from “Indians,” and Mexicans from Africans. This was also an economic border, separating landowners from landless, and a psychological border, separating “superior” from “inferior.”¹⁰⁶

Citizenship rights finally would be extended to Mexicans born in the United States in 1898. Mexicans who immigrated to the U.S., however, could not apply to become citizens. Until 1940, that right was extended only to “free white immigrants.” If Mexican immigrants wanted to naturalize, they would have to prove they were “white.” Meanwhile, all Mexicans within American borders were subjected to Jim Crow segregation. In the Southwest, Mexican students would attend segregated, rundown schools until legal segregation was outlawed in the middle of the twentieth century.¹⁰⁷

“The Indian Problem”

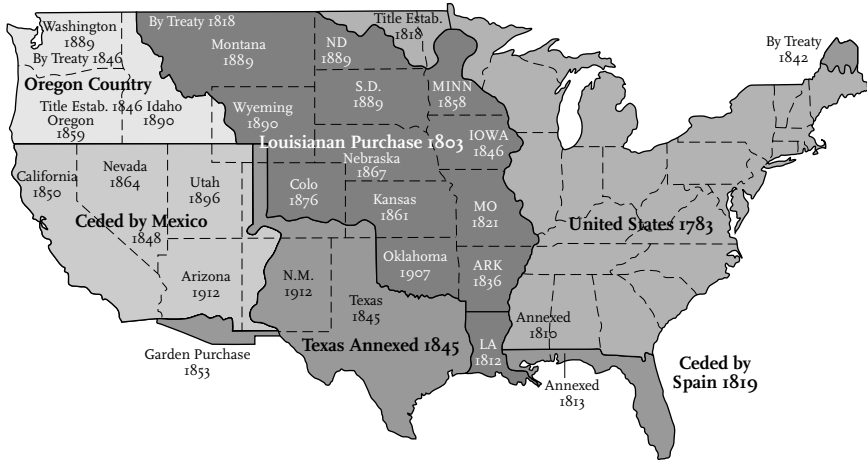
Shouts of “Manifest Destiny” were not only directed at Mexico; they also echoed across Native American land as well. While the United States was supporting filibusters into Spanish and Mexican territories, it also was contemplating new strategies for dealing with its indigenous population. Before the nineteenth century, American business relied on Native American labor to carry the fur trade. By 1800, the fur trade had bottomed out, and what mattered to America’s swelling capitalist economy was not Native Americans’ labor but Native America—the land. The question as to what would be done with tribes and their valuable land came to be known as “the Indian problem.”

Broadly speaking, two strategies for acquiring tribal land, for solving “the Indian problem,” were put forth: assimilation and removal. *Assimilation* required the dashing out of indigenous ways of life. Native Americans would be taught to treat the land the way white people treated it—that is, to parcel up the land into homesteads “owned” by individuals (not by tribal communities), to develop that land for profit (not for sustenance), and to abandon vast hunting grounds. *Removal* simply meant that tribes would be kicked off their land at gunpoint. Although many Americans favored a plan that combined both strategies—a destruction of Native American culture *and* white acquisition of tribal property—assimilation proved costly and time-consuming. Removal, then, would solve “the Indian problem.”¹⁰⁸

A series of harsh laws, passed between 1830 and 1890 and enforced by military action, created what was called **Indian Territory**, or land allotted by the U.S. government for tribal use. The Indian Removal Act of 1830, signed into law by President Andrew Jackson, permitted the forcible removal of Native Americans occupying fertile lands east of the Mississippi River. (The cotton kingdom needed room to grow.) Native Americans were pushed west into “the Great American Desert,” as it was then known, a land thought to be worthless, invaluable, and barren, “which white men would never covet since it was thought fit mainly for

Eurocentric and Native American Views of Expansionism

Eurocentric View



Native American View



Students typically are presented with a view that the United States gained its lands through settlement and from Mexico, Spain, France, and Great Britain. This depiction glosses over the land held by tribal groups.

horned toads and rattlesnakes.”¹⁰⁹ Over the next fourteen years, over 70,000 Native Americans were driven from their homes and marched west of the Mississippi. As many as one third of those removed from their land died before reaching their new “homes.” A particularly violent removal took place in 1838, when the U.S. military rounded up approximately 17,000 Cherokees from Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Alabama. Corralled into camps with only the possessions they could carry, the Cherokees were transported to Oklahoma and the western

edge of Arkansas, a 1,200-mile journey. They traveled by foot, on horse, and by wagon, forever leaving behind the land of their ancestors. Along the way, between 4,000 and 8,000 died, which is why the Cherokees refer to this ordeal as *nunna dual Isunui*: “The Trail where we Cried,” or The Trail of Tears.¹¹⁰ “People feel bad when they leave Old Nation,” observed one Cherokee exile. “Women cry and make sad wails. Children cry and many men cry, and all look sad when friends die, but they say nothing and just put heads down and keep on going towards West.”¹¹¹

Other laws would come crashing down on Native Americans. The Indian Intercourse Act of 1834 further delineated the boundaries of Indian Territory and ordered several tribes to relocate themselves within these boundaries. What was the punishment for refusal? Nothing short of the death sentence. At all costs, nomadic tribes were imprisoned within the confines of land set forth by Congress. By the mid-1800s, the reservation system we know today began to crystallize. And in 1887, the two strategies to solve “the Indian problem,” assimilation and removal, were brought together under the **Indian Allotment Act**. The Act dissolved tribal landholding by allotting certain pieces of land to *individual* Indians residing on reservations: Heads of households were allotted 160 acres, single individuals a smaller parcel. “The General Allotment Act of 1887,” writes one sociologist, “marks the acme of U.S. political control over Native Americans. . . . Indians were to be incorporated *as individuals* into both the economic and political structures of the larger society. It was the ultimate form of control: the end of the tribe itself as a political and social entity.”¹¹²

The Indian Allotment Act was the brainchild of Northern abolitionists who sought to humanize Native Americans by giving them that which, in the white imagination, made one human: land and property. America’s indigenous people would be saved by Anglo-American culture; they would be turned into farmers and incorporated into the American mainstream. But the Act resulted in the opposite outcome. Indigenous farming declined under the Act, since many of the most fertile parcels of tribal land were claimed by whites. Nor did the allotted land remain in Indian hands for long. Between 1887 and 1934, 90 million acres passed into white hands. How did this happen? First, the Allotment Act did not “allot” Native Americans any additional land; rather, it dispossessed tribes of land already in their possession. The allotment of 160 acres per Indian household freed a surplus of tribal land for white settlers. (It was as if you owned a large mansion, then, one day, the government knocked on your door and declared it was giving you a bedroom and bathroom to live in. The rest of your mansion was up for grabs.) Second, a significant amount of Native American land was sold or leased to non-Indians, since Native Americans were accused of failing to develop the land “up to white standards.”

For these reasons, the Allotment Act proved an effective mechanism for dispossessing Indians of more than 60% of their remaining landholdings.¹¹³ Author

Vine Deloria has observed: "Often when discussing treaty rights with whites, Indians find themselves told that 'We gave you the land and you haven't done anything with it.' . . . The truth is that practically the only thing the white men ever gave to the Indian was disease and poverty. . . . Never did the United States give any tribe any land at all. Rather, the Indian tribe gave the United States land in consideration for having Indian title to the remaining land confirmed."¹¹⁴

Such government policies crippled Native American economies and cultures. The policy of Indian removal forced tribes off land that could be developed and placed them on land thought to be worth little to nothing. Tribes that occupied land rich in minerals, such as coal or copper, were dispossessed of these resources by white-owned corporations. The destruction of the buffalo left plains tribes without their most valued economic resource. Theft of grazing grounds left pastoral tribes without a way to feed their herds. The horticultural tribes of the South were dispossessed of their rich soil and placed in land where crops could not grow. Moreover, Native Americans, like all people, had formed a special relationship with their land. This was the land of their childhood and of their fathers and mothers, a land of burial grounds and sacred sites, a land that gave meaning to the tribes that lived upon it. With Indian land loss, therefore, came not only economic strangulation and political powerlessness but also the decay of tribal identity.¹¹⁵

Like enslaved Africans, Native Americans resisted in large numbers. One form of resistance melded anguished cries for help with indigenous spirituality. In 1889, a Paiute spiritual leader named Wovoka claimed to have experienced a powerful vision during a solar eclipse. The walls of heaven were open before him, revealing God and the Paiute, living in paradise. Wovoka urged his people to live in peace with the whites, since their rewards would come in the afterlife. He also developed a dance that would uplift the Paiute, the Ghost Dance. News of the Ghost Dance spread throughout the west, and tribes incorporated it into their traditional belief systems. While Wovoka was, by and large, a pacifist, other tribes interpreted Wovoka's prophecies as foretelling the destruction of the whites. The Lakota, in particular, believed that the Ghost Dance would usher in a new era, one marked by the return of the buffalo and the fall of the whites.

Reservation agents and white settlers soon grew fearful of the Ghost Dance movement. As tensions mounted, U.S. troops were mobilized to suppress the dance. These tensions finally exploded on a cold December morning in 1890. Troops were ordered to disarm the Lakota, and as they did so, a shot was fired, sparking a massive shoot-out that felled 25 troopers and over 150 Lakota, a third of whom were women and children. This bloody event, known as the Wounded Knee Massacre, marked the gruesome finale to the 350-year-old Indian Wars.¹¹⁶

The nineteenth century witnessed the virtual destruction of tribal sovereignty, massive loss of Native American life, and near-total dispossession of tribal land.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, much of the land that now makes up the continental United States had still been in tribal hands. By the end of the century, nearly all that land was controlled by whites. For the American Indian, therefore, white colonialism in the Americas brought a threefold infliction: an infliction of the body, in the form of bullet wounds, beatings, and disease; an infliction of the spirit, in the form of cultural re-education, religious suppression, and Anglo-American assimilation; and an infliction of the land, in the form of environmental devastation and the eradication of tribal property.

Immigration from Asia and Europe

During the mid-nineteenth century, immigrants flocked to America by the millions. The 1830s witnessed a swell of German immigrants, while the 1830s–1840s saw over 2.5 million Irish move to America, more than a million of them between 1845 and 1849, the years of the Irish Potato Famine. Approximately 200,000 German Jews also immigrated to the United States, and the California gold rush of the late 1840s drew many immigrants from Asia. Between 1850 and 1882, the Chinese population in the United States would grow to 100,000.¹¹⁷ We can now understand why, in 1855, American poet Walt Whitman penned the following words: “Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations.”¹¹⁸

When discussing the motivations of immigrants, we tend to explain migration patterns at the level of the individual. That is, we usually suggest that people were *pushed* out of their home countries by economic decline and *pulled* to America with hopes of making an honest dollar. This kind of interpretation unveils only half the story, however, because it fails to tell us why immigrants’ home countries descended into poverty in the first place. To understand this, we need briefly to study how global capitalism works.

At the end of the nineteenth century, American capitalism was barreling forward at breakneck speeds. California and the Southwest had been “acquired,” so to speak, and with this land came new riches: gold, silver, copper, cattle. And American business was flourishing. This did not happen in isolation, however. American fur traders relied on European and Chinese interests in fur; American miners depended on the worldwide interest in fine jewelry. American producers relied on consumers in other parts of the world, as capitalism developed as a global enterprise.

But what happens when capitalist development advances much more swiftly in one part of the world than in others? Answer: more developed countries drain resources and labor power of less developed countries. As a result, countries such as America overdevelop economically while so-called Third World countries underdevelop. Why is this? Because in the context of European colonization, less developed countries usually did not have complete control of their own economies. Think, for example, of the Atlantic Slave Trade: because

Immigration from South, Central, and Eastern Europe, 1820–1919

<i>Decade</i>	<i>All South, Central,^c and Eastern Europe</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Greece</i>	<i>Eastern European Jews</i>
1820–1829	3,343	430	17	
1830–1839	5,758	2,225	49	
1840–1849	4,275	1,476	17	7,500 ^a
1850–1859	20,063	8,110	25	
1860–1869	26,522	10,238	n.a.	
1870–1879	172,655	46,296	209	40,000
1880–1889	836,265	267,660	1,807	200,000
1890–1899	1,753,916	603,761	12,732	300,000
1900–1909	5,822,355	1,930,475	145,402	
1910–1919	3,937,395	1,229,916	198,108	1,500,000 ^b
1920–1924	1,114,730	460,644	52,144	

SOURCES: Carpenter, 1927, pp. 324–325; Rischin, 1962, p. 20; Willcox, 1929, p. 393.

^aBetween 1800 and 1869.

^bBetween 1900 and 1914.

^cPersons born in Germany are not included.

Europeans controlled the trade, they (and America with them) prospered, while, by and large, Africa suffered.

As less developed countries plummet into poverty while more developed countries grow more powerful, a labor vacuum is created. In other words, as concentrated areas of capitalist growth pull resources from other parts of the world, they also pull workers from less developed countries—workers needed to mine gold, build railroads, and till fields. These workers respond to this pull out of necessity, since their country, underdeveloped by capitalism in America, can offer little. Thus, immigrants flock to areas of concentrated capitalism, and business owners welcome them, since they can be easily exploited. American workers, however, loathe them, for cheap immigrant labor can (like slave labor) drive down the price of all labor.

If tectonic plates shifted, resulting in an enormous opening at the bottom of the ocean—an opening that sucked down surrounding water, plant varieties, and fish—then sea life would be forced to relocate in that opening. They would migrate there because the new opening fundamentally altered the composition of their old ecosystems, draining from them food and nutrients. The same pattern occurs within social ecologies where certain structural conditions (like slavery) foster economic openings that drain resources and workers from other parts of the world. Because, like ecosystems, societies are intimately connected, abundance in one area usually causes paucity, a lack of abundance, in others. There is, therefore, a complex relationship between the wealthy country that receives immigrants and the

underdeveloped country that sends them. We should bear this in mind when discussing American immigration, including and especially Asian immigration.¹¹⁹

The Invention of the Asian American

Until this point, we have said nothing about Asian Americans. This is because Asians did not begin to migrate to the United States in large numbers until the end of the nineteenth century. Asians, however, were already well “known” in the West. Recall that, during the so-called Age of Discovery, Europeans were defining themselves as a collective group against the “strange” peoples of the East, peoples described in travelers’ tales as fearsome and otherworldly. Overlaid upon the dichotomy of Christian West and non-Christian East were several other oppositions giving charged meaning to, and increasing the distance between, West and East. As Edward Said has said, “On the one hand there are Westerners, and on the other there are Arab-Orientals; the former are (in no particular order) rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion; the latter are none of these things.”¹²⁰ Thus, people from China, Japan, and other Asian countries, as well as those from the Middle East, came to the United States already “othered.” (We will have more to say about Arab Americans in a later chapter.) The West was “us,” the East was “them”—and when “they” attempted to join “us,” “they” encountered firm resistance.

Of course, **the term “Asian”** is a European invention, a kind of racial shorthand that subsumes under a single homogenizing category the peoples of China, Japan, Korea, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Burma, Hawaii, the Pacific Islands, and all of Southeast Asia, including the Philippines, Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, Laos, Malaysia, and Singapore—peoples with immensely different and sometimes conflicting cultures, languages, and histories. These peoples of Asia had intermingled and traded with Europeans practically since the beginning of humanity; some even manned slave ships, while others came to the North American colonies as indentured servants. European contact with native Hawaiians is thought to have begun when Captain James Cook, a British sailor, landed on the islands in 1778. Because of its fertile climate, Hawaii soon was overrun by American and European planters, eager to develop sugar plantations on the islands. Like the indigenous peoples of America, many Hawaiians died from warfare and disease as a result of European contact. It has been estimated that Hawaii’s population numbered between 200,000 and 800,000 when James Cook “discovered” the islands; only one hundred years later, the population had plummeted to less than 48,000. Hawaii lost most of its native population as well as its sovereignty, which was chipped away throughout the nineteenth century and dissolved in 1893, when the American military overthrew the Hawaiian monarchy and annexed the islands.¹²¹

Chinese laborers were imported to work the sugar fields of Hawaii. Around the same time, gold was discovered in California, and Chinese laborers flocked

to the West coast, selling their labor on the cheap to mining companies. The influx of Chinese laborers sparked a powerful anti-Chinese movement. Starting in 1850, all foreign miners in California were forced to pay an extra tax, one that fell most heavily on Chinese workers. Chinese were also prevented from testifying against white people in court, and, since Jim Crow segregation was enforced, Chinese children were also forced to attend separate schools.¹²²

Chinese people were distorted in the popular press as parasitic, soulless, and criminal. A newspaper announcing an “Anti-Chinese Meeting” in 1877 read: “Whereas, the Chinese as a class are a detriment and a curse to our country . . . they have supplanted white labor and taken the bread out of the mouths of the white men and their families, and Whereas, it is a well known fact that the Chinese as a class are notorious thieves and sluice robbers, and have within the last few months robbed the industrious miners and others in this vicinity, of anything and everything within their reach; therefore be it Resolved, That we, the citizens of Gold Run, do hereby declare the presence of Chinese in our midst a great nuisance. . . . Resolved, That as we are citizens and workingmen, and have the interests of our common country at heart, we do not approve of the destruction of property or violence to the Chinese, but pledge ourselves to use our united endeavors to free our country from Chinese labor without violence, if possible.”¹²³

The nonviolent option, it seems, was not always “possible.” Many Chinese laborers were the victims of mob violence. In 1871, a white mob lynched, shot, and torched twenty-one Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles; in 1880, Denver’s Chinatown was burnt to the ground, a laundryman beaten to death; in 1885, white workers killed twenty-eight Chinese men employed by the Union Pacific Railroad. Just as many poor whites during black slavery and Reconstruction blamed their poverty on African Americans, white workers during the nineteenth century saw Chinese immigrants as thieves who took “the bread out of the mouths of the white men and their families.” The real culprit—an economic system that flourished by keeping labor cheap and pitting white worker against nonwhite worker—went without reproach.¹²⁴

At the same time that American capitalism was encouraging the immigration of an expendable labor force from China and other parts of Asia, America was regulating Asian immigration and denying Asian immigrants the right to naturalize. In 1875, the Page Law, intended to bar Chinese prostitutes from the U.S., had the effect of barring virtually all Chinese women from American shores. Chinese men were needed to dig for gold and hammer railroad spikes, but Chinese women could bear children who, under the Fourteenth Amendment, would become American citizens. A permanent Asian community, populated with voting citizens, could not be tolerated, even if American business was growing rich on the labor of Chinese men. It was not long (1882) before *all* Chinese immigrants, men and women, were forbidden entry into the United States.

Peoples of West, South, and Southeast Asia suffered the same fate under the Immigration Act of 1917, as did nearly all Asian groups under the Immigration Act of 1924.¹²⁵ And, of course, the task of defining citizenship eligibility led courts to construct Asians as a nonwhite group. From 1878 to 1941, Chinese, Hawaiians, Burmese, Japanese, Filipino, and Korean immigrants were deemed “not white,” while the whiteness of Indian Americans, as we learned in the last chapter, was a matter of great debate and legal uncertainty.¹²⁶

Immigrants from the Old World

America at the end of the nineteenth century was shaped, not only by immigrants from Asia, but also (and especially) by immigrants from European countries. Focusing upon these new arrivals, Ellwood Cubberley, a social scientist, observed in 1909, “About 1882, the character of our immigration changed in a very remarkable manner. Immigration from Northern Europe dropped off rather abruptly, and in its place immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe set in and soon developed into a great stream.”¹²⁷ Between 1886 and 1935, some 13 million immigrants from countries such as Austria, Hungary, Italy, and Russia flocked to America, 70% of them between 1901 and 1915. How were these “**new immigrants**,” as they were called, accepted? Professor Cubberley effectively answers our question by echoing a widely shared sentiment of the period: “These southern and eastern Europeans are a very different type from the north European who preceded them. Illiterate, docile, lacking in self-reliance and initiative and not possessing Anglo-Teutonic conceptions of law, order and government, their coming has served to dilute tremendously our national stock, and to corrupt our civic life.”¹²⁸

Jews, Poles, Slavs, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Armenians, Greeks, Italians, and Irish immigrants generally were not welcomed by native-born white Americans. In some circles, new immigrants were framed as members of “inferior races,” “lesser breeds,” “scoundrels,” and “thieves,” who had contributed considerably less to civilization than the upstanding people of the “English race.”¹²⁹ Some even considered new immigrants “not white.”

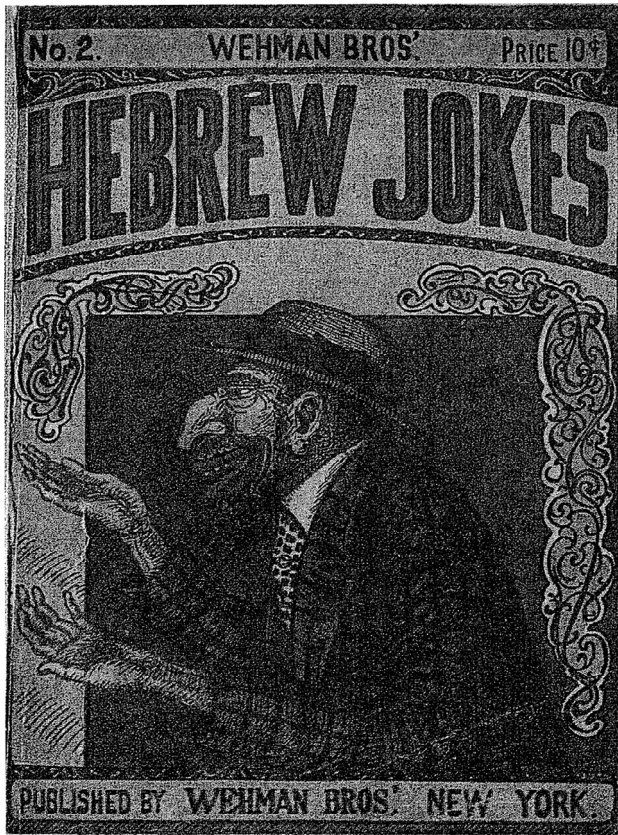
For the most part, new immigrants did not face the extreme levels of racial hatred and brutality that blacks, Asians, and Mexicans had to endure; but neither were they fully accepted into the (white) American mainstream. On the one hand, they enjoyed a fair amount of white privilege. For example, full citizenship rights were granted to Irish immigrants after they naturalized; and the causes of Irish immigrants were championed by two of America’s most powerful institutions: the Catholic Church and the Democratic Party.¹³⁰ On the other hand, new immigrants were not looked on as the racial equals of Northern Europeans or other native-born Anglo-Saxons. The Irish were degraded in the popular press and by America’s elites, and they quickly became among the poorest immigrant groups in the country.

Characteristics of Old and New Immigrant Groups at Time of Arrival, 1910

<i>Origin</i>	<i>Percentage Illiterate</i>	<i>Percentage with Less than \$50</i>
<i>Old</i>		
Dutch and Flemish	2.7	65
English	0.5	49
French	10.8	52
German	5.7	66
Irish	1.4	81
Scandinavian	0.1	86
Scottish	0.4	56
Welsh	0.6	47
<i>New</i>		
Bohemian and Moravian	1.1	82
Croatian and Slovenian	33.5	96
Dalmatian, Bosnian, and Herzegovinian	39.3	93
Greek	24.0	93
Hebrew	28.8	87
Italian (north)	7.2	84
Italian (south)	51.8	92
Lithuanian	50.0	95
Magyar	11.8	90
Polish	35.0	97
Romanian	36.5	94
Russian	38.1	93
Slovak	21.3	94

SOURCE: Lieberman, 1963a, Table 16.

New European immigrants, then, were caught between violent exclusion and complete inclusion, between racial domination and white privilege. These “in-between people,” to use the label developed by the eminent historian John Higham, struggled to find their place in America, battling poverty, ridicule, and violence along the way.¹³¹ The swelling waves of immigrants from Southern, Eastern, and Central Europe resulted in a kind of fracturing of American whiteness. Ethnic hierarchies were established within the white race, with landowning, native-born Anglo-Saxons occupying the highest positions and impoverished new immigrants demoted to the status of “low-ranking members of the whiteness club.”¹³² The Irish—the “savages” of the Old World (sometimes referred to as “blacks turned inside-out,” while blacks were sometimes called “burnt Irish”¹³³)—were understood as belonging to an “inferior white race,” the so-called “Celtic race.”¹³⁴



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By the 1920s and 1930s, however, white ethnic hierarchies began to fade. How, we may ask, did these despised new immigrants, these “dark whites,” as they were sometimes called, become, simply, white? Social scientists have offered four complementary answers to this question. The first has to do with the development of “ethnicity” as a concept. Around the beginning of the twentieth century, “race” and “ethnicity” were used interchangeably and in a loose fashion; there was no sharp distinction between the two. This began to change as scholars and policy makers began assigning the term “ethnic” to new immigrants from Europe, while “race” was used to differentiate blacks, Mexicans, or Asians from the white population. This implied that the distance between new immigrants and native-born whites was the result of *social and cultural differences*, which could be “solved”

through education and would fade over generations, while the distance separating blacks, Mexicans, and Asians from white Americans was *natural and fixed*. In the words of one commentator writing in 1932, the “white immigrant [is] patently handicapped by foreign language and tradition,” while the “Negro . . . is . . . more of a biological problem.”¹³⁵ New ideas of socially constructed “ethnicity” were advanced by intellectuals belonging to the new immigrant groups. For example, Jewish intellectuals such as Horace Kallen and Isaac Berkson, both philosophers, attempted to lay claim to whiteness by identifying themselves as “white ethnics,” even as they sought to preserve the distinctive cultural, linguistic, and religious heritage that signified their Jewishness.¹³⁶

There was a second way in which new immigrants pulled themselves more fully into the white race. When impoverished newcomers from Ireland, Italy, Hungary, and other European lands arrived in America in search of work, they found themselves in competition with blacks, who had gained emancipation less than half a century earlier. Many new immigrants worked side by side with blacks and lived in the same dilapidated areas as black families. Soon enough, however, the new immigrants began to sense that they could gain an advantage over black workers by tapping into white employers’ racial prejudices. “We deserve the best jobs,” they clamored, “because we are hard-working white people! Hire us over those good-for-nothing blacks!” The rise of unions in the early decades of the twentieth century provided new immigrants with a space to articulate this platform, to mobilize as “whites,” and thereby to exclude blacks, Mexicans, and Asians from their ranks. These nonwhite groups had little opportunity to retaliate, and by asserting their right to employment on the basis of their whiteness (instead of, say, their “Irishness” or “Italianness”), new immigrants avoided a nativist backlash by native-born white Americans.¹³⁷

New immigrants quickly learned to use racial domination to their advantage. Far from wrestling against white supremacy to win honor, rights, and employment, new immigrants colluded with white supremacy, stepping up into whiteness on the backs of blacks, Mexicans, and Asians. Therefore, the third way new immigrants became white was by lashing out against nonwhites, chiefly blacks. New immigrants, especially the Irish, led anti-black propaganda campaigns and terrorized the black community through mob violence.¹³⁸ To transform themselves from “lazy Irish,” “lying Italians,” or “pitiful Greeks” into “entitled whites,” new immigrants learned the ropes of racial contempt. In the elegant words of Toni Morrison, “Whatever the lived experience of immigrants with African Americans—pleasant, beneficial or bruising—the rhetorical experience renders blacks as non-citizens, already discredited outlaws. . . . [T]he 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 American.”¹³⁹

All these transformative changes took place within the framework of Jim Crow segregation, the fourth mechanism by which new immigrants became more fully white. Racial segregation, accompanied by white on nonwhite violence, solidified a culture of whiteness throughout the United States. Because new immigrants by and large were not subjected to the same painful processes of segregation as nonwhites, they could take advantage of the benefits of whiteness, from restaurants and restrooms to neighborhoods and schools.¹⁴⁰

By distinguishing between race and ethnicity, asserting their whiteness to win jobs, participating in acts of racial hatred against nonwhites, and taking advantage of the perks of whiteness legitimated by Jim Crow, new immigrants chipped away at ethnic hierarchies within the ranks of whiteness.¹⁴¹ To escape racial persecution, new immigrants joined the persecutors, thereby broadening the definition of whiteness and further strengthening the might of white supremacy. As James Baldwin has lamented with soft anger, “the Irish became white when they got here and began rising in the world, whereas I became black and began sinking. The Irish, therefore and thereafter . . . had absolutely no choice but to make certain that I could not menace their safety or status or identity: and, if I came too close, they could, with the consent of the governed, kill me. Which means that we can be friendly with each other anywhere in the world, except Boston.”¹⁴²

Racial Discourses of Modernity

If the “Middle Ages regarded skin color with mild curiosity,” as Du Bois has observed, then the modern age defined itself on this very thing.¹⁴³ Between the European discovery of America and the early twentieth century, new **racial discourses**—collections of ideas about race that were developed by secular authorities such as philosophers, writers, and scientists—rose to prominence and helped to form classification systems riveted in white supremacy.¹⁴⁴

Philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Hume, and Kant justified slavery and racism in their writings.¹⁴⁵ “I am apt to suspect the negroes,” wrote Hume, “and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites.”¹⁴⁶ Novelists and poets did their part as well, culminating in the late nineteenth century with Rudyard Kipling, a British poet and supporter of his country’s colonial conquests, whose famous work, “The White Man’s Burden” (1899), began with the lines, “Your new-caught, sullen peoples/Half-devil and half-child.”

However, of all the secular authorities, the group that proved most influential in solidifying racial taxonomies was the natural historians, precursors to modern-day biologists and physical anthropologists. The natural historians were interested in classifying plants, animals, and so-called people groups. It was through their endeavors that, in 1624, the term “race” was first used—by François Bernier, a

French physician—to label and separate human bodies.¹⁴⁷ Others followed suit, including a Swedish botanist named Carolus Linnaeus, who developed one of the first major human taxonomies, dividing humanity into four separate groups:

Americanus: reddish, choleric, and erect; hair—black, straight, thick; wide nostrils, scanty beard; obstinate, merry, free; paints himself with fine red lines; regulated by customs.

Asiaticus: sallow, melancholy, stiff; black hair, dark eyes; severed, haughty, avaricious; covered with loose garments; ruled by opinions.

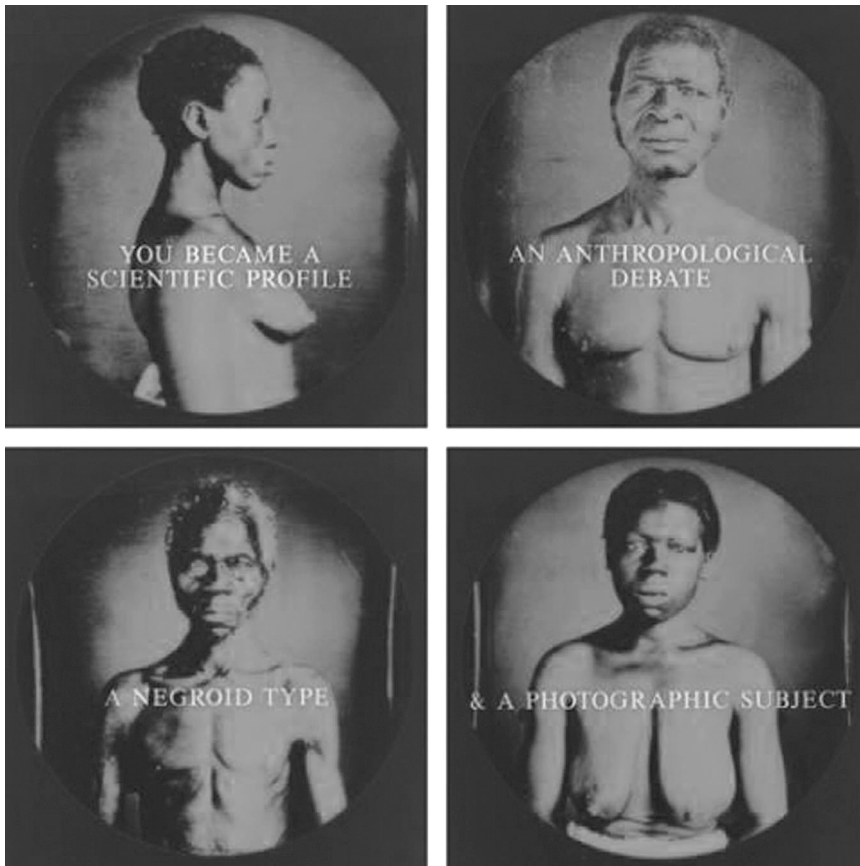
Africanus: black, phlegmatic, relaxed; hair—black, frizzled; skin—silky; nose—flat; lips—tumid; women without shame, they lactate profusely; crafty, indolent, negligent; anoints himself with grease; governed by caprice.

Europeaeus: white, sanguine, muscular; hair—long, flowing; eyes—blue; gentle, acute, inventive; covers himself with close vestments; governed by laws.¹⁴⁸

Note that this list, published in 1735, attributes different personality traits, and even fashion senses, to each race. Forty years later, another typology of humanity was put forth by a German medical researcher named Johann Blumenbach. Blumenbach divided humans into five groups that correspond to different geographical areas—Caucasians, Mongolians, Ethiopians, Americans, and Malays—and held that Caucasians exemplified the standards of “pure beauty” in human form.¹⁴⁹ And how did Linnaeus and Blumenbach gather data to support their typologies? They did not travel the world; they, like other European scientists, relied on the accounts of European planters, travelers, missionaries, and soldiers—accounts that, as we have already seen, were highly fallacious.

Typologies such as those proposed by Linnaeus and Blumenbach (and *all* such typologies were developed by European scientists) presented distinct racial groups as fixed and immutable. They also attached behavioral traits to physical characteristics, claiming, for example, as Linnaeus did, that Europeans were naturally ingenious while Africans were naturally lazy. And, perhaps most harmfully, racial classifications justified racial inequality by suggesting that such inequality was natural—a divine ordering of the world.¹⁵⁰

Two other “scientific” disciplines emerged that served the ends of white supremacy—phrenology (the study of skull shape and size) and physiognomy (the study of facial appearance)—each of which has now been discredited as pseudoscience. Both disciplines claimed that one’s internal character could be determined by one’s external features—by the shape of one’s head (phrenology) or the shape of one’s face (physiognomy)—and both attributed negative character traits to those not of European descent. Phrenology and physiognomy gave rise to a kind of scientific stereotyping, expressed most influentially (and, we now know, ludicrously)



Racism did not naturally flow from systems of racial classification; rather, systems of racial classification flowed from racism.

in “criminal anthropology,” an approach that held that lawbreakers were evolutionary throwbacks, that their vice was explained by their natural inferiority and affinity with beasts. Cesare Lombroso, an ambitious Italian doctor, popularized this idea around the late nineteenth century. “Born criminals,” argued Lombroso, could be identified by their physical features. And we should not be surprised to learn that many of Lombroso’s telling features were those of non-European peoples. For example, the inability to blush was associated with vice and dishonesty.¹⁵¹

As Lombroso’s theories gained prominence, Francis Galton, a wealthy cousin of Charles Darwin, was hard at work on a theory that suggested that all human behavior was hereditary. Levels of intelligence and creativity, diligence and determination, moral fortitude and uprightness—they were all linked to heredity. To squeeze the best possible traits out of the human line, Galton suggested that

marriage be regulated and child rearing modulated, according to the genetic giftedness of parents.¹⁵² Eager to set this plan in motion, he coined the term “eugenics” to refer to a program that would ensure genetic purity. To its founder, eugenics was “the science of improving stock, which is by no means confined to questions of judicious mating but which, especially in the case of man, takes cognizance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give to the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had.”¹⁵³ From this definition, we notice that Galton imagined a world of “superior” and “inferior” races and dreamt of a time when the former would overrun the latter.

With eugenics, science became a program; that is, “solutions” were advanced for the “natural inferiority of the lower races.” One cruel solution was forced sterilization. From the end of the nineteenth century and *up until the 1970s*, thousands of Native Americans and African Americans, as well as people deemed mentally retarded or criminal, underwent surgical procedures against their will, sometimes without their knowing, that resulted in permanent infertility.¹⁵⁴

Scientific theories that supported white supremacy were more likely to be backed by politicians, financed by business elites, and popularized by journalists—all of whom sought to uphold the white power structure—than theories that challenged racial domination. It is important to note that a good number of scientists criticized racist pseudoscience and eugenics. For example, in *Man’s Most Dangerous Myth*, Ashley Montagu would chastise eugenicists, writing, “Our troubles, it must be repeated, emanate not from biological defectives but from social defectives; and social defectives are produced by society, not by genes. Obviously, it is social, not biological, therapy that is indicated.”¹⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the doctrine of eugenics spread throughout the world, as did its “solutions,” such as force sterilization, only to die out within the past forty years.

Science authoritatively legitimated that which had been developing throughout Europe’s colonial conquests and America’s enslavement of Africans: the notion that nonwhite people were naturally inferior in nearly every conceivable way. We should bear in mind that scientific taxonomies of racial groups were not based on biological evidence but were adaptations of social categories developed to help make sense of a world otherwise “opaque, unpredictable, and inchoate.”¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, scientific notions about race joined with other notions advanced by secular authorities, grounding racial differences in nature. From then on, racial differences did not belong to the realm of culture (manifest, say, through different lifestyles); rather, they were understood as part of the biological fabric of life.¹⁵⁷

More pointedly, these social classifications masquerading as scientific “truth” made the horrors done to nonwhite people easier to swallow. Racial categories have never been “equal,” since they were created to divide, dominate, and exploit different people. Racism did not naturally flow from systems of racial classification;

rather, systems of racial classification flowed from racism. Race was not, and never has been, an innocent description of the world. No, race came into this world a murderer, thief, and trickster.

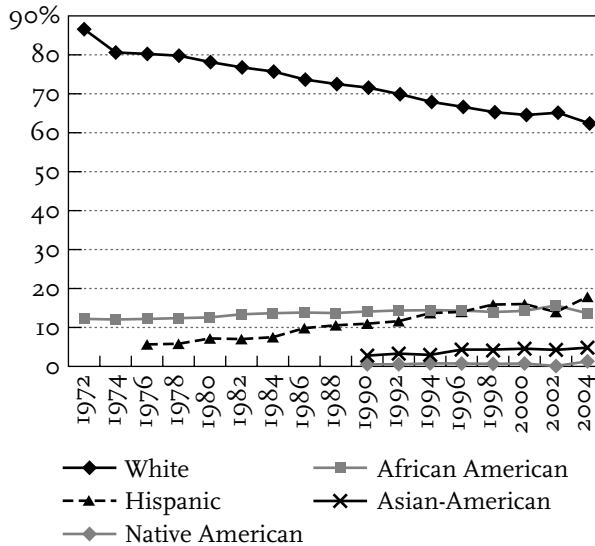
America's Racial Profile Today

We have covered a lot of ground, from the discovery of “the New World” to the early twentieth century. To summarize: race did not always exist. The Indian was invented within the context of European colonization, as indigenous peoples of the Americas were lumped together under one rubric to be killed, uprooted, and exploited. Whiteness and blackness were invented as antipodes within the context of English, and later American, slavery. Blackness became associated with bondage, inferiority, and social death; whiteness with freedom, superiority, and life. The Mexican was invented within the context of the colonization of Mexico. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Asian was invented as a response to immigration from the Far East. Whiteness expanded during the early years of the twentieth century as new immigrants from Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe transformed themselves from “lesser whites” to, simply, “whites.” All the while, white supremacy was legitimated by racial discourses in philosophy, literature, and science. The history of racial struggle in America was a history of domination, exploitation, enslavement, and murder of nonwhites by whites, horrors always accompanied by firm and costly resistance.

This chapter has demonstrated that we cannot hope to understand the history and dynamics of racial domination if we apprehend racial groups as individual cases with semi-autonomous histories and lifestyles. A relational perspective encourages us to study different racial actors in a state of mutual dependence and struggle, instead of focusing narrowing on, say, African-American history, Asian-American history, or European history. As race scholars, the thing we study—the object of our socioanalysis, if you will—should be the space of inter-racial conflict itself, not a single racial group.

By the middle of the twentieth century, the racial categories so familiar to us today were firmly established. Although the second half of the twentieth century would bring great changes in the realm of race, including the rise of the Civil Rights Movement and the fall of Jim Crow, the racial categories that emerged in America over the course of the previous three hundred years remained, for the most part, unchallenged. Americans, white and nonwhite alike, understood themselves as raced and accepted the dominant racial classification system even if they refused to accept the terms of racial inequality. That is why this chapter, one concerned with the genesis and historical development of racial categories, has not ventured too deeply into the mid- and late-twentieth century. We take up this task in the chapters ahead.

Changing Racial and Ethnic Composition of Young People, Ages 18–24, 1972–2004



Before moving on to that task, however, let us take up one final issue. Having examined both the genesis and historical development of racial categories, on the one hand, and the historical transformation of American society itself, on the other, what can we say about what American society looks like today, in terms of the racial categories we have inherited? As of 2005, whites made up 67% of the population, Hispanics made up 15%, and blacks made up 13%. Asians made up 4%, and Native Americans and Native Hawaiians made up the remaining 1%.¹⁵⁸ Many Americans misperceive these percentages and make assumptions about the size of their country's racial groups that are far from accurate. In a recent study, 40% of white and nonwhite Americans significantly underestimated whites' majority status and overestimated the size of nonwhite populations. In other words, they thought that whites were a minority when compared to the Hispanic and black populations combined. Another study found that "the average American thinks that America is 32% black, 21% Hispanic, and 18% Jewish."¹⁵⁹

Why do so many Americans think that whites are outnumbered by nonwhites even though whites outnumber Hispanics and blacks by a rate of nearly 6 to 1 and Asians by a ratio of approximately 17 to 1? The mainstream media's obsession with documenting the growth of immigrant and nonwhite populations is one reason. Dozens of news stories and hundreds of statistical reports have been dedicated to outlining the population of America's immigrants, the percentage of African Americans living in some city, or the growing Hispanic population. Recently, a white

anchor on Fox News concluded a segment that linked the growing nonwhite population to birthrates by saying, “To put it bluntly, we need more babies.”

Another reason people perceive America as a country where whites are not a numerical majority is that they base their judgments on certain areas of the country that have high concentrations of immigrant and nonwhite populations. Certain nonwhite populations are represented in significant numbers in some areas of the country but not in others. Hispanics make up 35% of Californians and Texans but only 8% of all people who live in Washington and 1% of those living in Maine. Likewise, blacks are numerous in the Deep South—constituting roughly one third of the population in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Georgia—but make up less than 1% of the population in Wyoming, Montana, and North Dakota.¹⁶⁰ Sometimes people, white and nonwhite alike, who live in areas with a high percentage of nonwhites believe that the rest of the country resembles their region.¹⁶¹

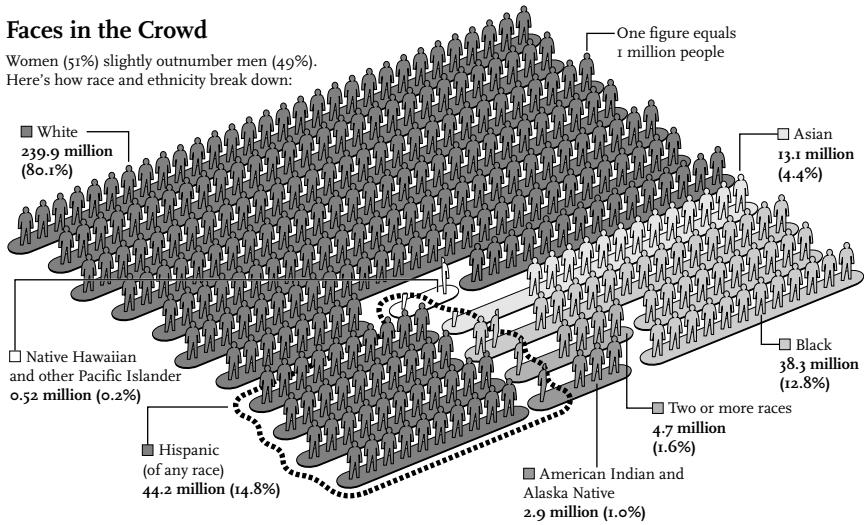
More important, perhaps, is the fact that white Americans who overestimate nonwhite populations are more likely to harbor negative views about immigrants and blacks than are those whose perceptions are more accurate. Compared to whites with accurate perceptions, whites who think they already number in the minority are more likely to believe that immigration will lead to more crime, national disunity, and the loss of American jobs. And those who think that blacks and Hispanics outnumber whites are likely to claim that the former two groups are threatening and violent.¹⁶² These findings support Herbert Blumer’s **theory of social position**, which hypothesizes that interpersonal racism will increase in one group the more it feels threatened by another. As Blumer put it, “A basic understanding of race prejudice must be sought in the process by which racial groups form images of themselves and of others. . . . It is the sense of social position emerging from this collective process of characterization which provides the basis for race prejudice.”¹⁶³ Because people reify races—understanding them as distinct groups that compete for resources—their hostility toward other racial groups increases as does their perception of that group’s size.¹⁶⁴

Even though whites still constitute a considerable majority of America’s population today, it is undeniable that things will look differently in the future. In many metropolitan areas, such as Houston, Los Angeles, New York, and Miami, whites are numerically outnumbered, as they are in some states, such as California, in which the white population dropped from two-thirds to less than half between 1980 and 2000.¹⁶⁵ By 2002, immigrants and their children living in America numbered 66 million, roughly 23% of the country’s population.¹⁶⁶ However, even if the population of America’s fastest growing nonwhite group, Hispanics, were to triple by 2050, they would still constitute but a quarter of the total population—a significant number, yes, but a far cry from a majority.¹⁶⁷

As America grows more diverse, racial markers themselves seem to be growing more porous and fluid. A racial taxonomy comprised of five major groups

Faces in the Crowd

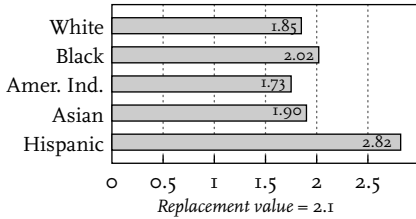
Women (51%) slightly outnumber men (49%). Here's how race and ethnicity break down:



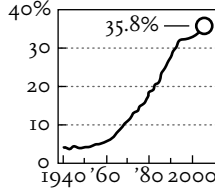
Who's Having Babies

Hispanics are the only group having more than enough children to replace themselves in the population. More unmarried women are giving birth, but births by teenage girls are at their lowest rate.

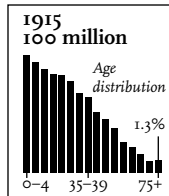
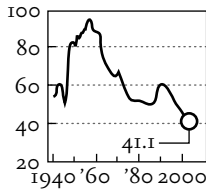
Total fertility rate (births per woman ages 15–44)



Live births to unmarried women as a percentage of all births



Live births per 1,000 women ages 15–19



1918, which saw a flu pandemic, is the only year in U.S. history that the population declined

now seems more inadequate than ever. Today, 1 in 40 people claim **multiracial heritage**—that is, to belong to two or more racial groups—but that ratio jumps to 1 in 20 for people under the age of 18. By some projections, as many as 1 in 5 Americans will identify as multiracial by 2050. After asking multiethnic readers to contribute nicknames that describe their mixed heritage, a California newspaper compiled a list of terms. A half-Canadian, half-Mexican reader referred to himself as “Canexican”; a half-Pakistani, half-Mexican, as “Mexistani”; a half-Scottish, half-Mexican, as “McRiguez.”¹⁶⁸

Who claims multiracial heritage? Asians and Latinos have the highest proportion of people identifying as biracial or multiracial. And because whites far outnumber other groups, most of those who claim multiracial identity report being white plus something else. Blacks have the lowest proportion of people who claim multiracial identity.¹⁶⁹ This is not necessarily because there actually are fewer multiracial people of African ancestry but because, in the eyes of many, blackness remains a totalizing racial category. That is, to many (black and non-black alike) one cannot be “black and Asian” or “black and white”: all such people are simply black. The legacy of the one-drop rule continues to classify citizens with African heritage—be it one-tenth or nine-tenths African—singularly as African American.¹⁷⁰

The rise of American multiracialism is due to several factors, including post-1965 immigration from Latin America and Asia and the recent rise in marriages that traverse the color barrier—both of which we will discuss at length in ensuing chapters. However, by themselves, changes in the population cannot fully account for the rise of multiracial identification. We must also explore symbolic changes to the racial order. After all, recalling the definition of race offered in the opening pages of this book, we know the boundaries surrounding certain racial populations are not natural or unalterable but are fundamentally symbolic in nature. If we look far enough back in our family trees, most of us will discover we are “mixed” ethnically or racially. And if we think about how racial categories have changed over the years, most of us who would not necessarily think of ourselves as multiracial or multiethnic today—Russian Jews or those of Italian and Irish descent, for instance—will realize that, had we been born in a different era, we might well have identified differently.

Thus, if multiracial identification is on the rise, especially among the youth, it is because many people find it necessary to transcend the limits of an overly simple and rigid racial classification system, preferring to locate their sense of self in two, three, or four histories, cultures, and heritages, rather than in one dominant racial label. And the United States government, by allowing for the first time citizens to check multiple racial boxes on the 2000 Census, has encouraged (or at least officially permitted) multiracial identification. If America is becoming more and more the multiracial nation, it is not only because racial

populations have moved across national borders (immigration) but also because racial borders have moved across populations (racial reclassification).¹⁷¹

Before concluding, it is worth pausing a moment to ask: How do you feel about what you have just read? When you learned that several of America's major cities are majority nonwhite, how were you moved? Did such news startle or scare you? Did it excite or uplift you? When you tell your friends what you have just learned, what tone of voice will you use? That of the dispassionate observer, the elated messenger, the bearer of bad news? With these questions, we hope to encourage you to examine your gut reactions to news of America's morphing color lines, reactions that can serve as a barometer of your racial attitudes, your position on the racial hierarchy, and perhaps even your unspoken and unexamined—not to mention unintentional—connection to a culture of whiteness.

We, the Past

Having followed this story of the emergence of race, we citizens of the twenty-first century might now ask, “So what? What does any of this have to do with me?” The answer is: *Everything*. Having finishing this chapter, you should have little doubt about the historical and social nature of race. In the last chapter, we defined race as a symbolic category, one based on phenotype or ancestry, constructed according to specific social and historical contexts, and misrecognized as a natural category. In this chapter, we drew your attention to the specific “social and historical contexts” by which race entered the world. To think of race as a biological entity, as something that never has and never will change, is to forget the history of race. If we think reflexively about race, if we historicize it, we come to the conclusion that race is neither an innocent nor an obvious part of humanity but a European invention, forged in the context of colonization and slavery.

Moreover, a thorough understanding of the past enhances a thorough understanding of ourselves. We do not exist in a vacuum, magically undisturbed by historical and social forces. Rather, we are the products of history. The contours of our society—our current institutions, our schools, our neighborhoods, and our prisons—have been designed by the hands of history, as have our social sufferings and inequalities.

It is striking how much racial progress has been made in the United States since its founding. The changes that have taken place in the last sixty years, in particular, are simply unparalleled in the worldwide history of racial domination.¹⁷² That the majority of Americans today consider wicked practices that were widely accepted a mere century ago—from racial violence and legalized segregation to laws against intermarriage and discourses that claimed the “natural superiority of the white race”—is remarkable. But it is perhaps equally striking how

similar our fears of today are to those of yesterday. At the end of the nineteenth century, white Californians complained, “The Asians are stealing our jobs!” Now that scapegoat has morphed into Mexican form. At the end of the nineteenth century, American faced a severe “immigration problem,” as millions of immigrants from Asia and new parts of Europe flocked to America. Today, politicians continue to worry about whom to let into the country, whom to naturalize, and whom to expel. The stereotypes and prejudices we carry with us, perhaps articulated fully only in the quietude of our living rooms or in our innermost thoughts, are nothing more than the imprints of a historical stamp. “It is history,” wrote Émile Durkheim, “which is the true unconscious.”¹⁷³

When we look each other in the eye, we must look *past* the person standing before us, comprehending her or him not simply as a flesh-and-bones figure but as an individual who has been historically and socially constituted. This individual does not lack in freedom, but she or he is partly conditioned by the actions of those who came before. We inheritors of history should bear this in mind as we turn our attention now to unpacking how race works in society’s different fields of life.

CHAPTER REVIEW

MODERNITY RISING

“Age of Discovery,” modernity

COLONIZATION OF THE AMERICAS

colonialism, the Indian Wars

THE INVENTION OF WHITENESS AND BLACKNESS

indentured servants, plantation system, chattel slavery

AFRICANS ENSLAVED

institutionalization, Atlantic slave trade, psychological wage, slave codes, one-drop rule, slave rebellions, abolitionists, Forty Acres and a Mule, Reconstruction, Jim Crow

MANIFEST DESTINY

Manifest Destiny, Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Indian Territory, Indian Allotment Act

IMMIGRATION FROM ASIA AND EUROPE

the terms “Asian,” “new immigrants”

RACIAL DISCOURSES OF MODERNITY

racial discourses, eugenics

AMERICA'S RACIAL PROFILE TODAY

theory of social position, multiracial heritage

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

1. Identify three ways in which present-day society mirrors seventeenth-, eighteenth-, or nineteenth-century America. Look for parallels in the realm of culture (recycled ideas, stereotypes, fears), politics (similar issues, agendas, practices), and everyday life (job competition, romantic relationships, recurrent social problems).

2. How have the people with whom you identify been systematically privileged or disadvantaged racially over the course of American history? How do you think your own life is privileged or disadvantaged because of this? In other words, how is your own social position shaped by historical forces?

3. History is a battleground. That is, people often fight about what history should be taught and how it should be taught. In light of this, how does the history reviewed in this chapter compare to the history of early America that you learned elsewhere? Meditate on the reasons for such similarities and differences.

4. Of the history reviewed in this chapter, which parts do you feel are often forgotten by the people in your life? Why do you think that is? What do you think would change if this history was remembered?

RECOMMENDED READING

- W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1935).
- Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, and Kenneth Thompson, eds., *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies* (Malden: Blackwell, 1996).
- Orlando Patterson, *The Ordeal of Integration: Progress and Resentment in America's "Racial" Crisis* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1998).
- David Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrations Became White, The Strange Journey from Willis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).
- Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 25th Anniversary Edition (New York: Vintage, 1994 [1978]).
- Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview*, Second Edition (Boulder: Westview, 1999).
- Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little Brown, 1993).