# CHAPTER 5

# ETHNICITY

**ETHNIC RACISM:** A powerful collection of racist policies that lead to inequity between racialized ethnic groups and are substantiated by racist ideas about racialized ethnic groups.

**ETHNIC ANTIRACISM:** A powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to equity between racialized ethnic groups and are substantiated by antiracist ideas about racialized ethnic groups.

WE DISSED SPEEDO because he was so uptight. We rode camel jokes on another boy for the divot on the top of his head. We pointed mercilessly at one girl's skyscrapers for legs. "You expecting?" we kept asking the obese boy. "We know you expecting," we kept saying to the obese girl. They renamed me Bonk, after the video-game character whose only weapon was his insanely large head, which made a rhythmic "Bonk. Bonk. Bonk" as he attacked his enemies.

I dished out as many jokes as anyone—the eight-year-old third-grade dissident had turned into a popular teenager with a penchant for cruel jokes. Maybe my empathetic sensibilities would have been rekindled if I'd gotten on the bus and Million Man–marched in Washington, D.C., that fall of 1995. But my father, caring for his ailing sibling, did not take us.

None of us attended that fall's other big event, either: the O. J. Simpson trial in Los Angeles. Two weeks before the Million Man March, I sat in my eighth-grade classroom, waiting patiently with my Black classmates, listening to the radio. When "not guilty" sliced the silence like a cleaver, we leapt from behind our

desks, shouting, hugging each other, wanting to call our friends and parents to celebrate. (Too bad we didn't have cellphones.)

Over in Manhattan, my father assembled with his accounting co-workers in a stuffed, stiff, and silent conference room to watch the verdict on television. After the not-guilty verdict was read, my father and his Black co-workers migrated out of the room with grins under their frowns, leaving their baffled White co-workers behind.

Back in my classroom, amid the hugging happiness, I glanced over at my White eighth-grade teacher. Her red face shook as she held back tears, maybe feeling that same overwhelming sensation of hopelessness and discouragement that Black people feel all too many times. I smiled at her—I didn't really care. I wanted O.J. to run free. I had been listening to what the Black adults around me had been lecturing about for months in 1995. They did not think O.J. was innocent of murder any more than they thought he was innocent of selling out his people. But they knew the criminal-justice system was guilty, too. Guilty for freeing the White cops who beat Rodney King in 1991 and the Korean storekeeper who killed fifteen-year-old Latasha Harlins that same year after falsely accusing her of stealing orange juice. But the O.J. verdict didn't stop justice from miscarrying when it came to Black bodies—all kinds of Black bodies. New Yorkers saw it two years later, when NYPD officers inside a Brooklyn police station rammed a wooden stick up the rectum of a thirty-year-old Haitian immigrant named Abner Louima, after viciously beating him on the ride to the station. And two years after that, the justice system freed another group of NYPD officers who'd blasted forty-one bullets at the body of Amadou Diallo, an unarmed twenty-three-year-old immigrant from Guinea. It did not matter if Black people breathed first in the United States or abroad. In the end, racist violence did not differentiate.

But back in my eighth-grade class, my fellow African Americans did differentiate. Kwame probably bore the nastiest beating of jokes. He was popular, funny, good-looking, athletic, and cool—yet his Ghanaian ethnicity trumped all. We relentlessly

joked on Kwame like he was Akeem, from the kingdom of Zamunda, and we were Darryl, Lisa's obnoxious boyfriend, in the 1988 romantic comedy *Coming to America*. After all, we lived in Queens, where Akeem came in search of a wife and fell for Lisa in the movie.

In *Coming to America*, Darryl, Lisa, Akeem, and Patrice (Lisa's sister) are sitting in the stands, watching a basketball game. "Wearing clothes must be a new experience for you," Darryl quips with a glance at Akeem. An annoyed Lisa, sitting between the two men, changes the subject. Darryl brings it back. "What kind of games do y'all play in Africa? Chase the monkey?" Darryl grins. African Americans in the audience were expected to grin with Darryl and laugh at Akeem. Back in our classrooms, we paraphrased Darryl's jokes about barbaric and animalistic Africans to the Kwames in our midst.

These were racist jokes whose point of origin—the slave trade—was no laughing matter. When Black people make jokes that dehumanize other branches of the African diaspora, we allow that horror story to live again in our laughs. Ethnic racism is the resurrected script of the slave trader.

The origins of ethnic racism can be found in the slave trade's supply-and-demand market for human products. Different enslavers preferred different ethnic groups in Africa, believing they made better slaves. And the better slaves were considered the better Africans. Some French planters thought of the Congolese as "magnificent blacks" since they were "born to serve." Other French planters joined with Spanish planters and considered captives from Senegambia "the best slaves." But most planters in the Americas considered the ethnic groups from the Gold Coast—modern-day Ghana—to be "the best and most faithful of our slaves," as relayed by one of Antigua's wealthiest planters and governors, Christopher Codrington.

Planters and slave traders least valued Angolans, considering them the worst slaves, the lowest step on the ladder of ethnic racism, just above animals. In the 1740s, captives from the Gold Coast were sold for nearly twice as much as captives from Angola.

Maybe Angolans' low value was based on their oversupply: Angolans were traded more than any other African ethnic group. The twenty or so captives hauled into Jamestown, Virginia, in August 1619, beginning African American history, were Angolan.

Planters had no problem devising explanations for their ethnic racism. "The Negroes from the Gold Coast, Popa, and Whydah," wrote one Frenchman, "are born in a part of Africa which is very barren." As a result, "they are obliged to go and cultivate the land for their subsistence" and "have become used to hard labor from their infancy," he wrote. "On the other hand . . . Angola Negroes are brought from those parts of Africa . . . where everything grows almost spontaneously." And so "the men never work but live an indolent life and are in general of a lazy disposition and tender constitution."

My friends and I may have been following an old script when it came to ethnic racism, but our motivations weren't the same as those old planters'. Under our laughs at Kwame and Akeem was probably some anger at continental Africans. "African chiefs were the ones waging war on each other and capturing their own people and selling them," President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda told a 1998 crowd that included President Bill Clinton, taking a page out of African American memory of the slave trade. I still remember an argument I had with some friends in college years later—they told me to leave them alone with my "Africa shit." Those "African motherfuckers sold us down the river," they said. They sold their "own people."

The idea that "African chiefs" sold their "own people" is an anachronistic memory, overlaying our present ideas about race onto an ethnic past. When European intellectuals created race between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, lumping diverse ethnic groups into monolithic races, it didn't necessarily change the way the people saw themselves. Africa's residents in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries didn't look at the various ethnic groups around them and suddenly see them all as one people, as the same race, as African or Black. Africans involved in the slave trade did not believe they were selling their own people—

they were usually selling people as different to them as the Europeans waiting on the coast. Ordinary people in West Africa—like ordinary people in Western Europe—identified themselves in ethnic terms during the life of the slave trade. It took a long time, perhaps until the twentieth century, for race making to cast its pall over the entire globe.

THROUGHOUT THE 1990S, the number of immigrants of color in the United States grew, due to the combined effects of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the Refugee Act of 1980, and the Immigration Act of 1990. Taken together, these bills encouraged family reunification, immigration from conflict areas, and a diversity visa program that spiked immigration from countries outside Europe. Between 1980 and 2000, the Latinx immigrant population ballooned from 4.2 million to 14.1 million. As of 2015, Black immigrants accounted for 8.7 percent of the nation's Black population, nearly triple their share in 1980. As an early-eighties baby, I witnessed this upsurge of immigrants of color firsthand.

While some African Americans were wary of this immigrant influx from the Black world, my parents were not. A Haitian couple with three boys lived across the street from us, and I befriended the youngest boy, Gil, and his cousin Cliff. I spent many days over there eating rice and peas, fried plantains, and chicken dishes with names I couldn't pronounce. I learned a little Haitian Creole. Gil's father pastored a Haitian church in Flatbush, Brooklyn, the heart of New York's West Indian community. I often joined them for church, taking in large helpings of Haitian American culture along with the day's sermon.

Gil and Cliff held me close, but Gil's parents did not. They were nice and accommodating, but there was always a distance between us. I never felt part of the family, despite how many times I ate at their dinner table. Maybe they kept me at arm's length because I was African American, at a time when Haitian immigrants were feeling the sting of African American bigotry.

Maybe not. Maybe I am making something out of nothing. But that same feeling recurred in other encounters. West Indian immigrants tend to categorize African Americans as "lazy, unambitious, uneducated, unfriendly, welfare-dependent, and lacking in family values," Mary C. Waters found in her 1999 interview-rich study of West Indian attitudes. African Americans tended to categorize West Indians as "selfish, lacking in race awareness, being lackeys of whites, and [having] a sense of inflated superiority."

I grew up with different kinds of Black people all around me—I never knew anything else. But being surrounded by Black immigrants was new for my parents' and grandparents' generations.

The loosening immigration laws of the 1960s through 1990s were designed to undo a previous generation of immigration laws that limited non-White immigration to the United States. The 1882 Chinese Restriction Act was extended to an even broader act, encompassing a larger "Asiatic Barred Zone," in 1917. The 1921 Emergency Quota Act and the Immigration Act of 1924 severely restricted the immigration of people from Africa and Eastern and Southern Europe and practically banned the immigration of Asians until 1965. "America must be kept American," President Calvin Coolidge said when he signed the 1924 law. Of course, by then "American" included millions of Negro, Asian, Native, Middle Eastern, and Latinx peoples (who would, at least in the case of Mexican Americans, be forcibly repatriated to Mexico by the hundreds of thousands). But Coolidge and congressional supporters determined that only immigrants from northeastern Europe—Scandinavia, the British Isles, Germany—could keep America American, meaning White. The United States "was a mighty land settled by northern Europeans from the United Kingdom, the Norsemen, and the Saxon," proclaimed Maine representative Ira Hersey, to applause, during debate over the Immigration Act of 1924.

Nearly a century later, U.S. senator Jeff Sessions lamented the growth of the non-native-born population. "When the numbers reached about this high in 1924, the president and Congress

changed the policy. And it slowed down significantly," he told Breitbart's Steve Bannon in 2015. "We then assimilated through to 1965 and created really the solid middle class of America with assimilated immigrants. And it was good for America." A year later, as attorney general, Sessions began carrying out the Trump administration's anti-Latinx, anti-Arab, and anti-Black immigrant policies geared toward making America White again. "We should have more people from places like Norway," Trump told lawmakers in 2018. There were already enough people of color like me, apparently.

THE CURRENT ADMINISTRATION'S throwback to early-twentieth-century immigration policies—built on racist ideas of what constitutes an American—were meant to roll back the years of immigration that saw America dramatically diversify, including a new diversity within its Black population, which now included Africans and West Indians in addition to the descendants of American slaves. But regardless of where they came from, they were all racialized as Black.

The fact is, all ethnic groups, once they fall under the gaze and power of race makers, become racialized. I am a descendant of American slaves. My ethnic group is African American. My race, as an African American, is Black. Kenyans are racialized as a Black ethnic group, while Italians are White, Japanese are Asian, Syrians are Middle Eastern, Puerto Ricans are Latinx, and Choctaws are Native American. The racializing serves the core mandate of race: to create hierarchies of value.

Across history, racist power has produced racist ideas about the racialized ethnic groups in its colonial sphere and ranked them—across the globe and within their own nations. The history of the United States offers a parade of intra-racial ethnic power relationships: Anglo-Saxons discriminating against Irish Catholics and Jews; Cuban immigrants being privileged over Mexican immigrants; the model-minority construction that includes East Asians and excludes Muslims from South Asia. It's a history that began

with early European colonizers referring to the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole as the "Five Civilized Tribes" of Native Americans, as compared to other "wild" tribes. This ranking of racialized ethnic groups within the ranking of the races creates a racial-ethnic hierarchy, a ladder of ethnic racism within the larger schema of racism.

We practice ethnic racism when we express a racist idea about an ethnic group or support a racist policy toward an ethnic group. Ethnic racism, like racism itself, points to group behavior, instead of policies, as the cause of disparities between groups. When Ghanaian immigrants to the United States join with White Americans and say African Americans are lazy, they are recycling the racist ideas of White Americans about African Americans. This is ethnic racism.

The face of ethnic racism bares itself in the form of a persistent question:

"Where are you from?"

I am often asked this question by people who see me through the lens of ethnic racism. Their ethnic racism presumes I—a college professor and published writer—cannot be a so-called lowly, lazy, lackluster African American.

"I am from Queens, New York," I respond.

"No, no, where are you really from?"

"I am really from New York."

Frustrated, the person slightly alters the line of inquiry. "Where are your parents from?" When I say, "My dad's family is from New York, and my ma's family is from Georgia," the questioner freezes up in confusion. When I add, "I am a descendant of enslaved Africans in the United States," the questions cease. They finally have to resign themselves to the fact that I am an African American. Perhaps the next move is for the person to look at me as extraordinary—not like those ordinary inferior African Americans—so they can leave quietly, their ethnic-racist lens intact.

But sometimes they do not leave quietly. Sometimes they take the opportunity to lecture down at my ethnic group, like a bold

Ghanaian student early in my professorial career in upstate New York. He delivered a monologue to a classroom full of African Americans that touched on everything from our laziness to our dependence on welfare. I offered data that disproved his ethnic racism—e.g., the facts that the majority of Americans on welfare are not African American and the majority of African Americans eligible for welfare refuse it. But he held tightly to his ethnic racism and spoke on as the snickering of the African American students slowly turned to anger (while many of the children of Black immigrants remained quiet). To calm my African American students, I recited the ethnically racist ideas African Americans express about West Africans, to show them that the absurdity of ethnic racism is universal. It backfired. They all started nodding their heads to the litany of stereotypes about African immigrants.

To be antiracist is to view national and transnational ethnic groups as equal in all their differences. To be antiracist is to challenge the racist policies that plague racialized ethnic groups across the world. To be antiracist is to view the inequities between all racialized ethnic groups as a problem of policy.

The Ghanaian student confronted me after class as I packed up (and as some of his African American classmates glared sharply at him while leaving the room). When he finished his second monologue to me, I asked if he minded answering some questions. He agreed to. I really just wanted to keep him talking to me for a while longer, in case there were any angry students still waiting for him outside the classroom. Fights—or worse—were occasionally erupting between Black ethnic groups in New York, just as they had a century prior between White ethnic groups.

"What are some of the racist ideas the British say about Ghanaians?" I asked.

He offered a blank stare before blurting out, "I don't know."

"Yes, you do. Tell me some. It's okay."

He was silent for a moment and then started speaking again, now much more slowly and nervously than in his earlier rants, seemingly wondering where this was going. When he finished listing racist ideas, I spoke again.

"Now, are those ideas true?" I asked. "Are the British superior to Ghanaians?"

"No!" he said proudly. I was proud, too, that he had not internalized these racist ideas about his own racialized ethnic group.

"When African Americans repeat British racist ideas about Ghanaians, do you defend your people?"

"Yes. Because they are not true!"

"So these ideas about African Americans: Who did you get these ideas from?"

He thought. "My family, my friends, and my observations," he said.

"Who do you think your fellow Ghanaian Americans got these ideas about African Americans from?"

He thought much longer this time. From the side of his eye he saw another student waiting to speak to me, which seemed to rush his thoughts—he was a polite kid in spite of his urge to lecture. But I did not rush him. The other student was Jamaican and listening intently, maybe thinking about who Jamaicans got their ideas about Haitians from.

"Probably American Whites," he said, looking me straight in the eye for the first time.

His mind seemed open, so I jumped on in. "So if African Americans went to Ghana, consumed British racist ideas about Ghanaians, and started expressing those ideas to Ghanaians, what would Ghanaians think about that? What would you think about that?"

He smiled, surprising me. "I got it," he said, turning to walk out of the classroom.

"Are you sure?" I said, raising my voice over the Jamaican student's head.

He turned back to me. "Yes, sir. Thanks, Prof."

I respected him for his willingness to reflect on his own hypocrisy. And I didn't want to overreact when he trashed African Americans, because I knew where he was coming from: I had been there myself. When I learned the history of ethnic racism, of African Americans commonly degrading Africans as "bar-

baric" or routinely calling West Indians in 1920s Harlem "monkey chasers"—or when I remembered my own taunts of Kwame back in eighth grade—I tried not to run away from the hypocrisy, either. How can I get upset at immigrants from Africa and South America for looking down on African Americans when African Americans have historically looked down on immigrants from Africa and South America? How can I critique their ethnic racism and ignore my ethnic racism? That is the central double standard in ethnic racism: loving one's position on the ladder above other ethnic groups and hating one's position below that of other ethnic groups. It is angrily trashing the racist ideas about one's own group but happily consuming the racist ideas about other ethnic groups. It is failing to recognize that racist ideas we consume about others came from the same restaurant and the same cook who used the same ingredients to make different degrading dishes for us all.

WHEN STUDIES STARTED to show that the median family income of African Americans was far lower than that of foreign-born Blacks and that African Americans had higher rates of poverty and unemployment, numerous commentators wondered why Black immigrants do so much better than Blacks born in America. They also answered their own questions: Black immigrants are more motivated, more hardworking, and "more entrepreneurial than native-born blacks," wrote one commentator in *The Economist* in 1996. Their success shows "that racism does not account for all, or even most, of the difficulties encountered by native-born blacks."

Ethnically racist ideas, like all racist ideas, cover up the racist policies wielded against Black natives and immigrants. Whenever Black immigrants compare their economic standing to that of Black natives, whenever they agree that their success stories show that antiracist Americans are overstating racist policies against African Americans, they are tightening the handcuffs of racist policy around their own wrists. Black immigrants' comparisons with

Black natives conceal the racial inequities between Black immigrants and non-Black immigrants.

Despite studies showing Black immigrants are, on average, the most educated group of immigrants in the United States, they earn lower wages than similarly trained non-Black immigrants and have the highest unemployment rate of any immigrant group. An ethnic racist asks, Why are Black immigrants doing better than African Americans? An ethnic antiracist asks, Why are Black immigrants not doing as well as other immigrant groups?

The reason Black immigrants generally have higher educational levels and economic pictures than African Americans is not that their transnational ethnicities are superior. The reason resides in the circumstances of human migration. Not all individuals migrate, but those who do, in what's called "immigrant self-selection," are typically individuals with an exceptional internal drive for material success and/or they possess exceptional external resources. Generally speaking, individual Black and Latinx and Asian and Middle Eastern and European immigrants are uniquely resilient and resourceful—not because they are Nigerian or Cuban or Japanese or Saudi Arabian or German but because they are immigrants. In fact, immigrants and migrants of all races tend to be more resilient and resourceful when compared with the natives of their own countries and the natives of their new countries. Sociologists call this the "migrant advantage." As sociologist Suzanne Model explained in her book on West Indian immigrants, "West Indians are not a black success story but an *immigrant* success story." As such, policies from those of Calvin Coolidge to Donald Trump's limiting immigration to the United States from China or Italy or Senegal or Haiti or Mexico have been self-destructive to the country. With ethnic racism, no one wins, except the racist power at the top. As with all racism, that is the entire point.

THERE WERE NO winners in eighth grade, either. In class, I'd randomly shout, *"Ref!"* A friend would scream, *"Uuuuuu!"* An-

other friend would scream, *"Geeeeee!"* And the whole class of African Americans would burst out laughing as the three of us pointed at Kwame and chanted, *"Ref-u-gee! Ref-u-gee! Ref-u-gee!"* The smirking White teacher would tell us to be quiet. Kwame would break the quietness with defensive jokes. The cycle would repeat, day after day.

Kwame never seemed to let the jokes bother him. In that way, he resembled Akeem in *Coming to America,* a prince so powerful, so sophisticated, so self-assured, that he was able to ignore demeaning jokes like an elite athlete ignoring a hostile crowd. Kwame had a smugness about him that maybe, subconsciously, we were trying to shatter by pulling him down to earth. As scholar Rosemary Traoré found in a study of an urban high school, "African students wondered why their fellow African American brothers and sisters treated them as second-class citizens, while the African Americans wondered why the African students [seemed] to feel or act so superior to them." The tensions created by ethnic racism didn't produce any winners, just confusion and hurt on both sides.

Don't get me wrong, Kwame joked back. Kwame and others never let me forget that I had a big-ass head. I never knew why. My head wasn't that big—maybe a little out of proportion.

But a high school growth spurt was coming.