



William Lewis Moore staging a lone protest against racial segregation.

Chattanooga, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi. Playing up his identity as a letter carrier, Moore sought to “deliver a letter” arguing for integration to Governor Barrett. Wearing two placards on his back and chest—one reading “Equal Rights for All: Mississippi or Bust,” the other, in reference to segregated diners, reading, “Black and White: Eat at Joe’s”—Moore began his march on April 21, 1963.⁷⁴

He was murdered three days later. Found dead and abandoned next to a northern Alabama highway, Moore had been shot twice in the head and once in the neck at point-blank range. He was thirty-three and a father of three. Likewise, Charles Sumner paid dearly for threatening white supremacy. In 1856, two days after delivering a speech that criticized proslavery groups in Kansas, Sumner was beaten unconscious by Preston Brooks, a congressman from South Carolina. Brooks approached Sumner as he worked at his desk in the nearly empty Senate chamber and smashed his thick wooden cane over Sumner’s head. Brooks continued to assault Sumner until his cane broke. Sumner suffered massive head trauma and would not return to the Senate for three years.

The sacrifices made by Sumner and Moore should not overshadow the sacrifices borne by hundreds of nonwhite women and men who fought against slavery, segregation, and other racist structures. For every white person beaten or killed for fighting against racism, there are hundreds of people of color who suffered equally. We speak here of the passion of Charles Sumner and Bill Moore only to illustrate that throughout the history of the United States, white people have aligned with people of color to struggle against racial domination.

RACE IS A SOCIAL REALITY

James Baldwin, the great American novelist, poet, and social critic, once observed, “Color is not a human or personal reality; it is a political reality.”⁷⁵ Baldwin was correct: race, as we have just seen, is not a biological reality. It is a political reality, or what we might call a social construction. *Race is a symbolic category, based on phenotype or ancestry and constructed according to specific social and historical contexts, that is misrecognized as a natural category.* This definition deserves to be unpacked.

Symbolic Category

A symbolic category belongs to the realm of ideas, meaning-making, and language, as opposed to the realm of nature and biology. It is something that is actively

created and re-created by human beings rather than pre-given. (By mean something that objectively exists and has simply to be assigned bolic categories mark differences between grouped people or things they actually bring those people or things into existence.⁷⁶ (Emphatic not mean that refusing to recognize racial groups created in the cours of oppression, colonialism, and scientific manipulation will somehow races—and racial inequality—magically to disappear.)

For example, the term “Native American” is a symbolic category passes all peoples indigenous to America. But the term “Native American” exist before non-Native Americans, Europeans, came to the Americas. Crow, Iroquois, Hopi, Dakotas, Yakimas, Utes, and dozens of belonging to indigenous tribes existed. “Native American” is a c subsumes all these tribes under one *homogenizing heading*. (“Ho means “combining different things under the same category.”) Th “Native American” flattens out the immensely different historie traditional beliefs, and rich cultural practices of various indigenou term transforms the multitude of indigenous people into one sin of people. Similarly, people have traveled from one geographical ter next since the beginning of humanity; however, it was not until nati were erected and strictly enforced that such people became known symbolic categories of “immigrants” or “refugees.”

The same is true of other racial categories. In naming different race egories create different races. In the United States, the current racial t race-based classification system, delineates five major groups: Native A Alaskan Natives, Asians and Pacific Islanders, Africans Americans Hispanics (or Latinos), and Caucasians (or whites). This taxonomy is nearly all the institutions in the United States—from political institut U.S. Bureau of the Census, which asks citizens to check one or more to racial categories, to educational institutions like universities, which surveys to obtain the racial composition of their schools.

The racial taxonomies that powerful institutions impose sometin with other racial taxonomies, including those embraced by people in th lives.⁷⁷ An institution, such as the university, might assign you a raci label that may not align with the racial or ethnic label you have ass self.⁷⁸ This certainly happens to multiracial people, for whom “check box” simply does not accurately reflect their full sense of who they are. Census, biracial citizens who checked white as well as another, nonwh were categorized as belonging only to the nonwhite group, an outcome th conflicted with their own self-identity.⁷⁹

Now, if racial categories create different races, then would eradic categories—refusing to recognize racial groups that were created thro ries of oppression, colonialism, political discourse, and scientific mani result in those races (and racial inequality) magically disappearing? Of The process of racial misrecognition is found at both the structural ar ul levels and, most important, is a historical process. It follows, the practice of refusing to recognize the misrecognition, as with France’s

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created and re-created by human beings rather than pre-given. (By "pre-given," we mean something that objectively exists and has simply to be assigned a name.) Symbolic categories mark differences between grouped people or things. In so doing, they actually bring those people or things into existence.⁷⁶ (Emphatically, this does not mean that refusing to recognize racial groups created in the course of centuries of oppression, colonialism, and scientific manipulation will somehow lead those races—and racial inequality—magically to disappear.)

For example, the term "Native American" is a symbolic category that encompasses all peoples indigenous to America. But the term "Native American" did not exist before non-Native Americans, Europeans, came to the Americas. Choctaws, Crows, Iroquois, Hopis, Dakotas, Yakimas, Utes, and dozens of other people belonging to indigenous tribes existed. "Native American" is a category that subsumes all these tribes under one *homogenizing heading*. ("Homogenizing" means "combining different things under the same category.") Thus, the term "Native American" flattens out the immensely different histories, languages, traditional beliefs, and rich cultural practices of various indigenous tribes. The term transforms the multitude of indigenous people into one single category of people. Similarly, people have traveled from one geographical territory to the next since the beginning of humanity; however, it was not until national borders were erected and strictly enforced that such people became known through the symbolic categories of "immigrants" or "refugees."

The same is true of other racial categories. In naming different races, racial categories create different races. In the United States, the current racial taxonomy, or race-based classification system, delineates five major groups: Native American and Alaskan Natives, Asians and Pacific Islanders, Africans Americans (or blacks), Hispanics (or Latinos), and Caucasians (or whites). This taxonomy is imposed by nearly all the institutions in the United States—from political institutions like the U.S. Bureau of the Census, which asks citizens to check one or more boxes next to racial categories, to educational institutions like universities, which carry out surveys to obtain the racial composition of their schools.

The racial taxonomies that powerful institutions impose sometimes conflict with other racial taxonomies, including those embraced by people in their everyday lives.⁷⁷ An institution, such as the university, might assign you a racial or ethnic label that may not align with the racial or ethnic label you have assigned yourself.⁷⁸ This certainly happens to multiracial people, for whom "checking a single box" simply does not accurately reflect their full sense of who they are. In the 2000 Census, biracial citizens who checked white as well as another, nonwhite category were categorized as belonging only to the nonwhite group, an outcome that certainly conflicted with their own self-identity.⁷⁹

Now, if racial categories create different races, then would eradicating those categories—refusing to recognize racial groups that were created through centuries of oppression, colonialism, political discourse, and scientific manipulation—result in those races (and racial inequality) magically disappearing? Of course not. The process of racial misrecognition is found at both the structural and individual levels and, most important, is a historical process. It follows, then, that the practice of refusing to recognize the misrecognition, as with France's aversion to

acknowledging racial categories or the prematurely celebratory declaration of a “color-blind” or “race free” America, is an ineffective and wrongheaded response to a world itself not color-blind. In many cases, the refusal to recognize race, social construction though it is, only exacerbates racial inequalities by rendering anti-racist programs impossible.

Phenotype or Ancestry

Race, then, is a symbolic category. It is also based on phenotype or ancestry. A person’s phenotype is her or his physical appearance and constitution, including skeletal structure, height, hair texture, eye color, and skin tone. A person’s ancestry is her or his family lineage, which often includes tribal, regional, or national affiliations. The symbolic category of race organizes people into bounded groupings based on their phenotype, ancestry, or both. It is difficult to say which matters more, phenotype or ancestry, in determining racial membership in the United States. In some settings, ancestry trumps phenotype; in others, the opposite is the case.

Recent immigrants often are pigeonholed into one of the dominant racial categories because of their phenotype; however, many resist this classification based on their ancestry. Upon arriving in the United States, many first-generation West Indian immigrants, quite familiar with racism against African Americans, actively resist the label “black.” Despite their efforts, many are considered African American because of their dark skin (that is, they “look” black to the American eye). The children of West African immigrants, many of whom are disconnected from their parents’ ancestries, more readily accept the label “black.”⁸⁰ Moreover, many individuals with mixed heritage often are treated as though they belong to only one “race.” For instance, many people think superstar golfer Tiger Woods is African American because of his darker skin tone. Woods, however, does not identify as African American, since he is part white, part black, part American Indian, part Thai, and part Chinese. In fact, as a child, Woods called himself a “Cabalinasian,” a term he invented to reflect his multiracial roots.⁸¹

Tiger Woods constructs his racial identity through his ancestry, regardless of the assumptions people make about him based on his phenotype. Some people, however, rely on their phenotype to form a racial identity, though they often are grouped in another racial category based on their ancestry. Susie Guillory Phipps, a blond-haired, blue-eyed woman who always considered herself “white,” discovered, upon glancing at her birth certificate while applying for a passport, that her native state, Louisiana, considered her “black.” How could this be? The reason was that Louisiana grouped people into racial categories according to the “one thirty-second rule,” a rule that stated that anyone who was one thirty-second black—regardless of what he or she looked like—was legally “black.” In 1982, Susie Guillory Phipps sued Louisiana for the right to be white. She lost. The state genealogist discovered that Phipps was the great-great-great-great-grandchild of a white Alabama plantation owner and his black mistress and, therefore (although all of Phipps’s other ancestors were white), “black.” (This outlandish law finally was erased from the books in 1983.) In this case, Phipps’s ancestry was more important in determining her race, as identified by the state, than was her phenotype.⁸²

Social and Historical Contexts

Race is such a fundamental part of American cultural boundary, one that has existed in the United States and in all other societies. But this is not true. Race is a social and historical context.

The racial categories that exist in America are not universal. In South Africa, racial groups are categorized: white, black, and “coloured.” The apartheid—South Africa’s system of legal racial segregation—include all “mixed-race” people. In Brazil, the official census: *blanco* (white), *pardo* (brown), and *indígena* (indigenous). However, in everyday life, people identify themselves and one another through several different types of brown, *moreno claro* (light brown) and *claro* (light)—which have much more to do with one’s ancestry. Before racial language was used, Chinese racial taxonomies were based first on hair, then odor, then brain mass, then facial features. The word “Chinese,” according to the taxonomy, was divided into “pure Chinese” identified by “pure yellow” (and “pure black”). Burakamin are considered “unclean” and are not allowed to marry, although it is impossible to distinguish so clearly between them and the rest of the Japanese population.⁸³

Cross-national comparisons, then, reveal that race varies greatly from one country to the next. (The concept of natural classification.) Racial categories, however, are shaped by certain geographical and social contexts.

Racial categories also are *time-specific*, changing over different periods. Historians have found that in times of social upheaval, such as the Middle Ages, the main social division for people of different skin color, or even between different ethnicities, the key social division was between masters and slaves. In antiquity would look nearly identical, sharing the same language and build; however, to the Greeks and Romans of antiquity, they were different species.⁸⁴ And although most Americans would be considered white, their admittance to the United States certain only 100 years ago, when ethnic distinctions were made between groups—Poles, Germans, Italians, Russian Jews—consequential than they are today.⁸⁵ That is why we must grapple with “the historical specificity of race” in order to gain an accurate understanding of racial categories.

Misrecognized as Natural

The last part of the definition we have been discussing is the concept of naturalization. This word signifies a metaphor created by humans is mistaken as something that is natural.

Social and Historical Contexts

Race is such a fundamental part of American life that we tend to think of it as a natural boundary, one that has existed in the same form throughout history and across all other societies. But this is not true. Racial taxonomies are bound to their specific social and historical contexts.

The racial categories that exist in America are nonexistent in other parts of the globe. In South Africa, racial groups are organized around three dominant categories: white, black, and “coloured.” The coloured category was designed during apartheid—South Africa’s system of legalized segregation, now abolished—to include all “mixed-race” people. In Brazil, five racial categories are employed in the official census: *branco* (white), *pardo* (brown), *preto* (black), *amarelo* (Asian), and *indígena* (indigenous). However, in everyday usage, many Brazilians identify themselves and one another through several other racial terms—including *moreno* (another type of brown), *moreno claro* (light brown), *negro* (another type of black), and *claro* (light)—which have much more to do with the tint of one’s skin than with one’s ancestry. Before racial language was outlawed by the Communist regime, Chinese racial taxonomies were based first and foremost on blood purity, then on hair, then odor, then brain mass, then finally, and of least importance, skin color, which, according to the taxonomy, was divided into no fewer than ten shades (“pure Chinese” identified by “pure yellow”). And in Japan, members of a group called the Burakamin are considered “unclean” and are thought to constitute a separate race, although it is impossible to distinguish someone with Burakamin ancestry from the rest of the Japanese population.⁸³

Cross-national comparisons, then, reveal that systems of racial classification vary greatly from one country to the next. (The same cannot be said of systems of natural classification.) Racial categories, therefore, are *place-specific*, bound to certain geographical and social contexts.

Racial categories also are *time-specific*, changing between different historical time periods. Historians have found that in times of antiquity, the historical period before the Middle Ages, the main social division for Greeks and Romans was not between people of different skin color, or even between men and women. During that time, the key social division was between masters and slaves. To us, a master and slave of antiquity would look nearly identical, sharing similar skin color, hair color, and body build; however, to the Greeks and Romans of those days, masters and slaves almost were different species.⁸⁴ And although most Americans of European ancestry today would be considered white, their admittance into the “white race” was much less certain only 100 years ago, when ethnic distinctions among European immigrant groups—Poles, Germans, Italians, Russian Jews—were much more pronounced and consequential than they are today.⁸⁵ That is why many social scientists have asserted that we must grapple with “the historical specificity of race in the modern world” in order to gain an accurate understanding of racial phenomena.⁸⁶

Misrecognized as Natural

The last part of the definition we have been unpacking has to do with a process of naturalization. This word signifies a metamorphosis of sorts, where something created by humans is mistaken as something dictated by nature. Racial categories

are naturalized when these symbolic groupings, the products of specific historical contexts, are wrongly conceived of as natural and unchangeable. We misrecognize race as natural when we begin to think that racial cleavages and inequalities can be explained by pointing to attributes somehow inherent in the race itself (as if they were biological) instead of understanding how social powers, economic forces, political institutions, and cultural practices have resulted in these divisions.

Naturalized categories are powerful, for they are the categories through which we understand the world around us. Such categories divide the world along otherwise arbitrary lines and make us believe there is nothing at all arbitrary about such a division. They convince us that otherwise illegitimate boundaries erected between groups of people actually are legitimate. What is more, when categories become naturalized, alternative ways of viewing the world begin to appear more and more impossible. Why, we might ask, should we have only five main racial groups? Why don't we have ninety-five? Why should we divide people according to their skin color? Why is ancestry so important? Why not base our racial categories on regions—north, south, east, and west? You might find these suggestive questions silly, and, indeed, they are. But they are no sillier than the idea that people should be sorted into different racial groups according to skin color or blood composition. To twist French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's phrase, we might say, "When it comes to race, one never doubts enough."⁸⁷

The system of racial classification at work in America today is not the only system imaginable, nor is it the only system that has existed in the life of the United States. Race is far from fixed; rather, its forms have shifted and fluctuated over time, depending on the social, economic, political, and cultural pressures of the day.⁸⁸ Indeed, a multiracial movement today is challenging America's dominant racial categories (which remained relatively stable during the latter half of the twentieth century), as people of mixed-race heritage refuse to accept as given the state's racial classification system.⁸⁹

Research by sociologists Aliya Saperstein of Stanford University and Andrew Penner of the University of California at Irvine shows just how fluid a person's race can be—even over the span of his or her lifetime. In a series of papers, Saperstein and Penner draw on longitudinal survey data that followed 12,000 Americans since they were teenagers.⁹⁰ Each time they interviewed somebody, the survey interviewers had to identify the race of the person. Over the survey's timespan of nineteen years, one in five persons "changed races"—that is, people were identified by interviewers as having one racial identity at one point in time but years later were categorized differently. What explains these changes? The authors observe that "all else being equal, including how they had been racially classified before, respondents who were unemployed, had children outside of marriage, or lived in the inner city were less likely to be classified as white and more likely to be classified as black. . . . These changes line up in ways that reflect widespread racial stereotypes. Interviewers became likelier to see someone as black the more the respondents' situations fit the stereotype of black people—and vice-versa for white people. The studies we have conducted show that while race shapes our life experiences, our life experiences also shape our race."⁹¹ The researchers even found, after analyzing thousands of death certificates, that people who died of cirrhosis of the liver from excessive

drinking were more likely to be recorded as homicide victims were more even after controlling for how the decease

Race is not natural in the slightest *well-founded fiction*. It is a fiction because well founded since most people in society have come to see the world through its conclusion that we are inherently different the separation of people. In truth, only social through and through.

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ETHNICITY AND NATION

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Race, ethnicity, and nationality are over ence how we see the world around us, ho "us" from "them." The categories are mut upholds, and is informed by the others. Th understood in isolation from one another cally Norwegian, which, for that person, m Norwegian history and folklore, language (such as meatcakes, lamb and cabbage ste that person may also reference a nationalit as a racial group, white, since nearly all peo sified as white by American standards. H (either past or present) and signifies race.

Importantly, ethnicity, at least in the de section, only makes sense in a U.S.-specific it was invented by American social thinker from southern and eastern Europe. How be classified in relation to whites and no the Anglo-Saxon norm to be signified "racially Other" category as blacks or Amer the concept in quite this way, as an answe

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drinking were more likely to be recorded as American Indian on their death certificates and homicide victims were more likely to be recorded as African American, even after controlling for how the deceased had been racially classified while alive.⁹²

Race is not natural in the slightest respect. In fact, we can regard race as a *well-founded fiction*. It is a fiction because it has no natural bearing, but it is well founded since most people in society provide race with a real existence and have come to see the world through its lens. Racial taxonomies often lead us to conclude that we are inherently different from one another, that nature dictates the separation of people. In truth, only society can be blamed for that. Race is social through and through.

This section opened with a quotation from James Baldwin, and it is fitting that it close with one as well: "For the sake of one's children, in order to minimize the bill that they must pay, one must be careful not to take refuge in any delusion—and the value placed on the color of the skin is always and everywhere and forever a delusion. I know that what I am asking is impossible. But in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one can demand—and one is, after all, emboldened by the spectacle of human history in general, and American Negro history in particular, for it testifies to nothing less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible."⁹³

ETHNICITY AND NATIONALITY

The categories of ethnicity and nationality are intrinsically bound up with race. Ethnicity refers to a shared lifestyle informed by cultural, historical, religious, and/or national affiliations. Nationality is equated with citizenship—membership in a specific politically delineated territory controlled by a government.⁹⁴ Like race, both ethnicity and nationality are symbolic categories.

Race, ethnicity, and nationality are overlapping symbolic categories that influence how we see the world around us, how we view ourselves, and how we divide "us" from "them." The categories are mutually reinforcing: each category educates, upholds, and is informed by the others. That is why these three categories cannot be understood in isolation from one another.⁹⁵ For example, if one identifies as ethnically Norwegian, which, for that person, might include a shared lifestyle comprising Norwegian history and folklore, language, cultural rituals and festivals, and food (such as meatcakes, lamb and cabbage stew, potato dumplings, cod, and lutefisk), that person may also reference a nationality, based in the country of Norway, as well as a racial group, white, since nearly all people of Norwegian descent would be classified as white by American standards. Here, ethnicity is informed by nationality (either past or present) and signifies race.

Importantly, ethnicity, at least in the definition provided at the beginning of this section, only makes sense in a U.S.-specific context. In the early twentieth century, it was invented by American social thinkers to make sense of the new immigration from southern and eastern Europe. How were the new European immigrants to be classified in relation to whites and nonwhites? How was their difference from the Anglo-Saxon norm to be signified without lumping them into the same "racially Other" category as blacks or American Indians? No other country deployed the concept in quite this way, as an answer to this precise analytic challenge. To

export the race-ethnicity-nationality complex to other social or historical settings would be deeply U.S.-centric and misleading. But in the American context at least, it often is useful to deploy this complex when studying the intricate dynamics of societal classification.

In the United States, ethnicity often carves out distinctions and identities within racial groups. Ten people can be considered Asian American according to our modern racial taxonomy; however, those people might have parents or grandparents who emigrated to the United States from ten different countries, including Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Singapore, China, South Korea, North Korea, Japan, Indonesia, and Laos. They might speak different languages, uphold different traditions, worship different deities, enjoy very different kinds of food, and go through diverse experiences. What is more, many Asian countries have histories of conflict with each other (such as China and Japan, and North and South Korea). As such, we cannot assume that a Chinese American and a Japanese American have similar lifestyles or see the world through a shared vision simply because both are classified as “Asian” under American racial rubrics. Therefore, just as race, ethnicity, and nationality cannot be separated from one another, neither can all three categories be collapsed into one.

Although ethnic affiliations often are informed by national affiliations, ethnicity can also transcend national borders. Jewish ethnic affiliation encompasses a wide array of people who vary in terms of nationality (from those living in the United States and Canada to those living in Israel, Eastern Europe, Argentina, or Mexico), political commitments (from the far Right to the far Left), languages (from English to Hebrew to Polish), and religious beliefs and practices (from Eastern Orthodox to Hasidic to atheist). Despite these differences—which cut across national and religious boundaries—many Jews see themselves as bound together in a group, sharing a common history, culture, and ethnic identity.

Ethnicity is a very fluid, layered, and situational construct. One might feel very American when voting, very Irish when celebrating St. Patrick’s Day, very Catholic when attending Easter mass, very “New Yorker” when riding the subway, and very northern when visiting a relative in South Carolina. Race, too, can be performed to varying degrees.⁹⁶ One might act “very black” when celebrating Kwanzaa with relatives but may repress her blackness while in a business meeting with white colleagues. As we explain in more detail in Chapter 10, race and ethnicity are both marked and made. We may create, reproduce, accept, or actively resist systems of racial classification; we may choose to accentuate our ethnicity or racial identity. But in many cases, our choices, our racial or ethnic performances, will have little impact on how we are labeled by others. A person born to Chinese parents but adopted, at infancy, by a Jamaican-American couple might identify as ethnically Jamaican. She might enjoy Jamaican cuisine, read Jamaican literature, listen to Jamaican music, and study Jamaican history. However, although her adopted parents may be classified as racially black, she would be classified as Asian, her race decided for her.⁹⁷

The degree to which an individual can slip and slide through multiple ethnic identities—this point is crucial—depends on the degree to which those identities are stigmatized. White Americans typically enjoy a high degree of fluidity and

freedom when self-identifying to all aspects of their ethnicity, including others. The same person, a quarter-Swiss, or “Polish of color” do not enjoy the same freedom. American and whose mother is ethnically identifying only

In some instances, non-racial classifications (as when an accent so they might a instances, they might, in ethnic markers (be they li coming victims of discrim prove futile, since those be less ethnic agency than the racial group. (This is why the term “Hispanic” is depl racial, not ethnic, classific categories, such as “Mexic as ethnic markers.”⁹⁸ In f cans tend to focus on eth white race while treating b Americans as if they had no cultural or historical diffe Americans) Haitians, Jamai dians, Angolans, or Nigeri nos) Puerto Ricans, Cuban Dominicans, or between (fo sians, Cambodians, Vietnam people.⁹⁹

One reason why race and ethnicity are decoupled for white Americans is that they are together for nonwhite Americans. The history of the nation’s immigration policy until the late nineteenth century in America was deregulated until the turn of the century, with the exception of Chinese exclusion. In the turn of the century, nativists who blamed immigrants for crime, and class conflict, began to demand more restrictions. Popular and political movements swelled and resulted, in the development of a strict immigration policy during the Johnson-Reed Act. America’s new immigration national quotas and racial r

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freedom when self-identifying ethnically. They can choose to give equal weight to all aspects of their ethnicity or to highlight certain parts while deemphasizing others. The same person could identify as either “half-Italian, quarter-Polish, quarter-Swiss,” or “Polish and Italian,” or just “Italian,” for instance. Many people of color do not enjoy the same degree of choice. Someone whose father is Arab American and whose mother is Dutch American could not so easily get away with ethnically identifying only as “Dutch.”

In some instances, nonwhites may perform ethnicity in order to resist certain racial classifications (as when African migrants teach their children to speak with an accent so they might avoid being identified as African Americans); in other instances, they might, in an opposite way, attempt to cleanse themselves of all ethnic markers (be they linguistic, religious, or cultural in nature) to avoid becoming victims of discrimination or stigmatization. Either way, their efforts may prove futile, since those belonging to dominated racial groups have considerably less ethnic agency than those belonging to the dominant (and hence normalized) racial group. (This is why some scholars have observed that, in its popular usage, the term “Hispanic” is deployed much more often as a racial, not ethnic, classification, while Hispanic subcategories, such as “Mexican” or “Cuban,” are treated as ethnic markers.)⁹⁸ In fact, many (white) Americans tend to focus on ethnic differences within the white race while treating blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans as if they had no ethnicity and minimizing cultural or historical differences between (for black Americans) Haitians, Jamaicans, Ethiopians, Trinidadians, Angolans, or Nigerians, or between (for Latinos) Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Mexicans, Peruvians, or Dominicans, or between (for Asians) Laotians, Indonesians, Cambodians, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Japanese people.⁹⁹

One reason why race and ethnicity are relatively decoupled for white Americans but bound tightly together for nonwhite Americans is found in the history of the nation’s immigration policies and practices. Until the late nineteenth century, immigration to America was deregulated and encouraged (with the exception of Chinese exclusion laws). However, at the turn of the century, native-born white Americans, who blamed immigrants for the rise of urban slums, crime, and class conflict, began calling for immigration restrictions. Popular and political support for restrictions swelled and resulted, after World War I, in the development of a strict immigration policy, culminating in the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924.

America’s new immigration law, complete with national quotas and racial restrictions on citizenship,



America’s Immigration Act of 1921 imposed national quotas and racial restrictions on citizenship.

would fundamentally realign the country's racial taxonomy. "The national origins system classified Europeans as nationalities and assigned quotas in a hierarchy of desirability," writes historian Mae Ngai in *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, "but at the same time the law deemed all Europeans to be part of a white race, distinct from those considered to be not white. Euro-American identities turned both on ethnicity—that is, a nationality-based cultural identity that is defined as capable of transformation and assimilation—and on a racial identity defined by whiteness."¹⁰⁰

Nonwhites, however, either were denied entry into the United States (as was the case for Asian migrants) or were associated with illegal immigration through harsh border-control policies (as was the case for Mexicans). Indeed, the immigration laws of the 1920s applied the newly formed concept of "national origin" only to European nations; those classified as members of the "colored races" were conceived as bereft of a country of origin. The result, Ngai observes, was that "unlike Euro Americans, whose ethnic and racial identities became uncoupled during the 1920s, Asians' and Mexicans' ethnic and racial identities remain conjoined."¹⁰¹

The history of America's immigration policy underscores the intimate connection between race, ethnicity, citizenship, and national origin. Racial categories often are defined and changed by national lawmakers, as citizenship has been extended or retracted depending on one's racial ascription. The U.S. justice system has decided dozens of cases in ways that have solidified certain racial classifications in the law. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, legal cases handed down rulings that officially recognized Japanese, Chinese, Burmese, Filipinos, Koreans, Native Americans, and mixed-race individuals as "not white." In 1897, a Texas federal court ruled that Mexicans were legally "white." And Arabs and Indian Americans (individuals who emigrated from India or who are of Indian descent) have been classified as "white" at some points in time and "not white" at other points.

For instance, Indian Americans were deemed white by law in the case of *U.S. v. Dolla* in 1910. Abdullah Dolla emigrated from Calcutta to New York City. A businessman, he worked in Georgia selling Indian merchandise. While applying for citizenship, Dolla argued that he was white because he was accepted as such by fellow Georgia citizens. He was found to be white and granted citizenship, and this ruling set a precedent, legally classifying Indian Americans as white. However, that ruling was challenged thirteen years later in *U.S. v. Bhagat Singh Thind*. Bhagat Singh Thind was an immigrant from Punjab, India, who paid his way through the University of California—Berkeley by spending his summers working for a lumber mill in Oregon. When World War I broke out, he joined the U.S. Army and was honorably discharged in 1918. Nevertheless, Thind was denied citizenship because the court found him (and therefore other Indian Americans) "not white."

The United States often has been thought of as a country of immigrants, a country that asks for "your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," as inscribed in Emma Lazarus's famous poem, "The New Colossus," and displayed on a plaque at the Statue of Liberty. Yet, for over 150 years, the United States denied citizenship—and all the rights that came with it—to thousands of hopeful immigrants because they were not white. As law professor Ian Haney López has

observed in his book *Immigrants at the Margins*, "Congress in 1790 re-
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observed in his book *White by Law*, “in its first words on the subject of citizenship, Congress in 1790 restricted naturalization to ‘white persons.’ Though the requirements for naturalization changed frequently thereafter, this racial prerequisite to citizenship endured for over a century and a half, remaining in force until 1952. From the earliest years of this country until just a generation ago, being a ‘white person’ was a condition for acquiring citizenship.”¹⁰²

Citizenship is accompanied by many social privileges, such as the right to vote when one is so inclined, the right to own property when one has the means, the right to legal protection when one is victimized, the right to receive medical treatment when one is sick, and the right to receive an education when one is young. Because they could not obtain citizenship, many nonwhites lacked access to these basic privileges.

Blacks were granted the right to naturalize (meaning, in this context, admittance to citizenship) in 1870. However, that right was denied other nonwhites until the 1940s, when Congress began granting it in piecemeal fashion. In 1952, Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act, which reorganized U.S. naturalization law and forbade denying citizenship on the basis of race. While the Immigration and Nationality Act abolished race-based restrictions on citizenship, it did retain a quota system that limited the number of people who could immigrate to America from certain countries.

Briefly examining how the legal definitions of white and nonwhite have changed over the years demonstrates the unstable and fluid nature of racial categories. It also shows how our legal system helps to construct race. Legal cases that determined people’s race in order to determine their eligibility for U.S. citizenship—what were known as prerequisite cases—had poisonous symbolic consequences. Deemed worthy of citizenship, white people were understood as upstanding, law abiding, moral, and intelligent. Conversely, nonwhite people, from whom citizenship was withheld, were thought of as base, criminal, untrustworthy, and of lesser intelligence. For most of American history, courts determined race, and race determined nationality; thus, nationality can be understood only within the context of U.S. racial and ethnic conflict.¹⁰³

Today, many foreign-born residents still face great barriers when applying for U.S. citizenship. Compare U.S. naturalization rates with those of Canada. Around the time the Immigration and Nationality Act was signed into law, Canadian and U.S. naturalization rates were identical: approximately 80 percent of foreign-born residents were granted citizenship in each country, and both countries opened their doors to immigrants from Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America. However, since that time, U.S. naturalization rates have declined rapidly, while Canadian rates have experienced little change. In 1980, only 50 percent of foreign-born residents were naturalized in the United States, while 70 percent were naturalized in Canada. In 1990, U.S. naturalization rates fell to 40 percent, while Canadian rates remained the same. And in 2000, Canadian rates climbed to 75 percent, while U.S. rates remained around 40 percent. Over the past three decades, Canada has awarded most of its foreign-born population citizenship, while the United States has not naturalized the majority of its foreign-born population.¹⁰⁴

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 disease and bullet wounds; an infliction of the spirit, in the form of cultural reeducation, religious suppression, and Anglo-American assimilation; and an infliction of the land, in the form of 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 and 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 100,000.¹⁴ 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."¹⁵

The Invention of the Asian American

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. Thus, people from China, Japan, and other Asian countries, as well as those from the Middle East, came to the United States already "othered."¹⁶

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 Philippians, 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. 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 100 years later, the population had plummeted to less than 48,000. Hawaii's sovereignty, chipped away throughout the nineteenth century, finally was dissolved in 1893 when the American military overthrew the Hawaiian monarchy and annexed the islands.¹⁷

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

Coast to work for 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 also were prevented from testifying against white people in court, and, since Jim Crow segregation was enforced, Chinese children also were forced to attend separate schools.¹¹⁸

Chinese people were distorted in the popular press as parasitic, soulless, and criminal. A newspaper announcing an “Anti-Chinese Meeting” in 1877 declared that “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.”¹¹⁹ Chinese laborers, furthermore, 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—often escaped reproach.¹²⁰

At the same time that American capitalists were encouraging the migration of an expendable labor force from Asia, American lawmakers were regulating Asian immigration and denying Asian immigrants the right to naturalize. In 1875, the Page Law, intended to bar Chinese prostitutes from the United States, 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. It was not long



Chinese laborers were often victims of mob violence and vandalism.

(the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 were forbidden entry into the United States suffered the same fate under the groups under the Immigration Act citizenship eligibility led courts to o to 1941, Hawaiians and Chinese, Bur were deemed “not white,” while the the last chapter, was a matter of gre

Immigrants from the Old World

America at the end of the nineteenth Asia but also—and especially—by im of our immigration changed in a ver ern Europe dropped off rather abrupt Central, and Eastern Europe set in an 1886 and 1935, some 13 million immi Italy, and Russia flocked to America, were these “new immigrants,” as the accepted? One observer in 1909 ech shared sentiment of the period: “Th and eastern Europeans are a very c from the north European who preced erate, docile, lacking in self-reliance and not possessing Anglo-Teutonic of law, order and government, their served to dilute tremendously our n and to corrupt our civic life.”¹²⁴

Jews, Poles, Slavs, Hungarians, Armenians, Greeks, and Italians ge not welcomed by native-born white In some circles, new immigrants as members of “inferior races,” “le “scoundrels,” and “thieves,” who had considerably less to civilization than ing people of the “English race.”¹²⁵

New immigrants did not face the ex of racial hatred and brutality that bla American Indians, and Mexicans had. But neither were they fully accept (white) American mainstream. On th they enjoyed a fair amount of white On the other, new immigrants were on as the racial equals of northern E native-born Anglo-Saxons. New Euro grants, then, were caught between ex inclusion. These “in-between people,

(the Chinese Exclusion Act of 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 1924.¹²¹ And, of course, the task of defining citizenship eligibility led courts to construct Asians as a nonwhite group. From 1878 to 1941, Hawaiians and Chinese, 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.¹²²

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 Europe. “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, Central, and Eastern Europe set in and soon developed into a great stream.”¹²³ Between 1886 and 1935, some 13 million immigrants from countries such as Austria, Hungary, Italy, and Russia flocked to America, 70 percent of them between 1901 and 1915. How were these “new immigrants,” as they were called, accepted? One observer in 1909 echoed 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.”¹²⁴

Jews, Poles, Slavs, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Armenians, Greeks, and Italians 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.”¹²⁵

New immigrants did not face the extreme levels of racial hatred and brutality that blacks, Asians, American Indians, 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.¹²⁶ On the other, new immigrants were not looked on as the racial equals of northern Europeans or native-born Anglo-Saxons. New European immigrants, then, were caught between exclusion and inclusion. These “in-between people,” to use the



The film *The Godfather, Part II* shows 11-year-old Vito Corleone (Oreste Baldini) gazing at the Statue of Liberty as his boat from Italy pulls into Ellis Island. This scene would be familiar to the thousands of immigrants to America during the mid-nineteenth century.

TABLE 2.1 IMMIGRATION FROM SOUTH, CENTRAL, AND EASTERN EUROPE, 1820-1919

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

label developed by the eminent historian John Higham, struggled to find their place in America, battling poverty, ridicule, and sometimes violence along the way.¹²⁷ 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.”¹²⁸

By the 1920s and 1930s, however, white ethnic hierarchies began to fade. How did the new immigrants—“dark whites,” as they sometimes were called—become just “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 policymakers began assigning the term “ethnic” to new immigrants from Europe, while “race” was used to differentiate blacks, Mexicans, American Indians, 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 addressed with enough time and education, while the distance separating blacks, Mexicans, American Indians, 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.”¹²⁹

There was a second way in which new immigrants pulled themselves more fully into the white race. When impoverished newcomers from 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 blacks. Soon enough began to sense that the black workers by tapping prejudices. The rise of the twentieth century an opportunity to many groups had little opportunity asserting their right their whiteness (instead new immigrants and native-born white Americans.

New immigrant America's racial division third way new immigrants was by lashing out blacks. New immigrants da campaigns and terrorism through mob violence themselves from “lying Italians,” “entitled whites,” new ropes of racial contention. Toni Morrison, “What immigrants with African beneficial or bruising renders blacks as non-outlaws. . . . The movement always means buying blacks as the real alien nationality of the immigrant understood to be African.

All these transformations segregation, the fourth white. Racial segregation a culture of whiteness and large were not subwhites, they could take and restrooms to neighboring immigrants joined the and further strengthening.

RACIAL DISCO

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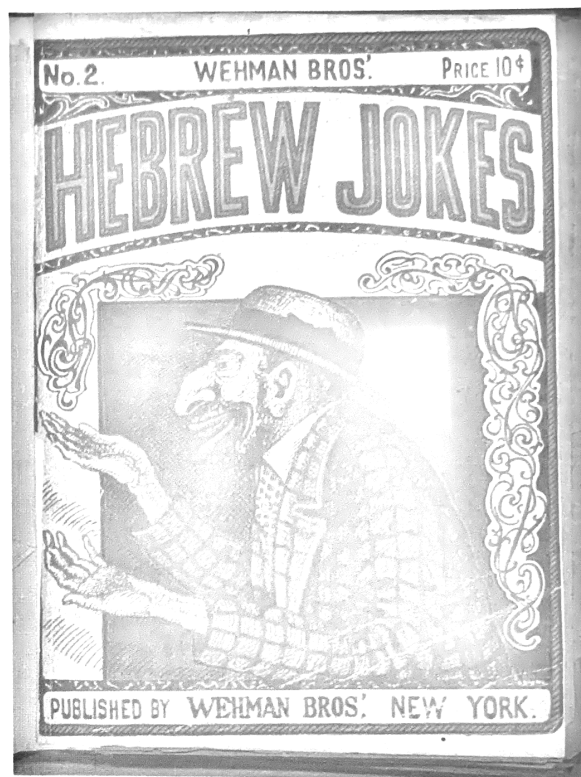
immigrants worked and lived side by side with blacks. Soon enough, however, the new immigrants began to sense that they could gain an advantage over black workers by tapping into white employers' racial prejudices. The rise of unions in the early decades of the twentieth century provided new immigrants an opportunity to mobilize as "whites." Nonwhite groups had little opportunity to retaliate, and by asserting their right to employment on the basis of their whiteness (instead of, say, their "Italianness"), new immigrants avoided a nativist backlash by native-born white Americans.¹³⁰

New immigrants quickly learned to use America's racial divisions to their advantage. A third way new immigrants became white, then, was by lashing out against nonwhites, chiefly blacks. New immigrants led antiblack propa- ganda campaigns and terrorized the black community through mob violence.¹³¹ To transform them- selves from "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. . . . The move into mainstream America always means buying into the notion of American blacks as the real aliens. Whatever the ethnicity or nationality of the immigrant, his nemesis is un- derstood to be African American."¹³²

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 non- whites, they could take advantage of the benefits of whiteness, from restaurants and restrooms to neighborhoods and schools.¹³³ To escape racial persecution, new immigrants joined the persecutors, thereby broadening the definition of whiteness and further strengthening the might of white supremacy.

RACIAL DISCOURSES OF MODERNITY

If the "Middle Ages regarded skin color with mild curiosity," as Du Bois has ob- served, then the modern age defined itself on this very thing.¹³⁴ Between the European discovery of America and the early twentieth century, new *racial*



Ethnic hierarchies were established within the white race, with land- owning, native-born Anglo-Saxons occupying the highest positions and impoverished new immigrants demoted to the status of "low-ranking members of the whiteness club."