Introduction

In August 1996, a bipartisan coalition of politicians in Congress voted to “end welfare as we know it.” Their handiwork, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), replaced income support to needy families—guaranteed since the New Deal by some version of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)—with “transitional” public assistance in exchange for work. Two years later, the antiwelfare commentator Heather MacDonald invoked a familiar trope to raise the alarm against “the future downfall of welfare reform.” In a piece published online in *City Journal*, the organ of the Manhattan Institute (a conservative public policy think tank), she introduced readers to an eighteen-year-old unwed mother named “Tamiesha,” who had apparently deposited her two-year-old child in a “lavish high school day-care center on Manhattan’s Upper West Side.” MacDonald reported that as the toddler flung his bowl of cereal “over his head,” his mother played with her gold chain and “impassively” watched day care workers clean up her child. According to the article, Tamiesha was habitually unpunctual and “emphatically” opposed to marriage: “My aunts ‘n’ stuff tell me what’s going on, and it’s, like, a hassle.” So how were New Yorkers to solve a problem like Tamiesha? How to guard the “front door, where the next two generations of dependents are forming right now”? MacDonald proposed, among other measures, an end to state-funded day care and parenting classes, in order to prevent the likes of Tamiesha from having “illegitimate” children. To underscore the futility of public reform enterprises aimed at unfit mothers, she conjured an encounter with a persistently abusive parent of five—a “large-boned broad woman with few teeth and wild dreadlocks . . . on her second tour through the parenting curriculum,” at a Bedford-Stuyvesant social services agency.1

Welfare “as we know it” may be dead, but the racially charged “welfare queen” of conservative imagination is alive and well. MacDonald’s Tamiesha represents a latter-day incarnation of the infamous Chicago
cheat whose parable the late President Ronald Reagan mustered in order to advance his campaign to dismantle America’s modest welfare state in the 1980s. Reagan’s welfare queen took on a life of her own. Before long, she evoked for many the enduring specter of a dissolute urban single mother who adopted numerous aliases to bilk hard-working taxpayers. Many indignant voters assumed that she was black and judged her conduct un-American. The radical overhaul of AFDC in 1996 was guided in part by the widespread belief that welfare—and the behavior it apparently encouraged—breached fundamental American values of individual autonomy, hard work, and the heterosexual nuclear family.

The language of what we understand as “welfare” has long served as a way of both policing and contesting the meaning and boundaries of American identity. The Tamiesha trope tapped into a particular meta-narrative of race and nation, freedom and dependence, and republicanism and relief, all of which anointed the American Union at birth. Constituting the ideological bedrock of structures of power and constructs of identity, this storyline establishes a vital historical context for understanding why, in popular parlance, the notion of welfare—with all its derogatory connotations in the U.S. context—is associated not with middle-class entitlements like Social Security and Medicare, but rather with programs targeted at the poor like AFDC, which were wrongly assumed to primarily benefit urban African Americans. The welfare queen epitomizes a tapestry of remarkably resilient themes that in the nineteenth-century governed policy discussions about destitute European immigrants, especially the Irish: the alliance of the city with wickedness; the association of (frequently female) sexual promiscuity with “pauperism”; the transmission of ostensibly aberrant matriarchal “cultures of poverty” across generations; and the conviction that poor people owed their condition to inherent character failings such as indiscipline, idleness, and profligacy, all of which public relief served to promote rather than cure. An overarching conception of American nationalism that linked citizenship with race constructs, however, interacted with and subsumed all these themes. It endowed “free white” males—however impoverished—with the right to vote and dictated that they be assimilated into a white republican imaginary buttressed by Victorian gender norms. In that queen of all cities—New York—this version of American nationalism spawned quasi-public relief and reform regimes that aimed to acculturate peoples of European descent to American society; at the same time, these programs sought to colonize, segregate, or exclude black New Yorkers altogether. In the process, these regimes
complemented other structures in American society that cemented the transition of African Americans from slavery to poverty. Welfare—a term that historians of the nineteenth century have interpreted to encompass private benevolence as well as public relief (for reasons I explain later in this chapter)—developed its color-conscious character over a century before the New Deal formally inaugurated America’s welfare state in the 1930s.

The story of black people, whiteness, and welfare recounts more, however, than simply the dynamics of this process from the perspective of politicians, reformers, and social workers. It also weaves together the everyday survival tales of working poor New Yorkers—predominantly black, but also white. These women and men—whether native-born or immigrant, in their multiple roles as patients and clients, workers and consumers, parents and children, Protestants and Catholics, and, above all, as aspiring citizens—drew on the language and institutions of benevolence (rhetorically, symbolically, and especially materially) to challenge stereotypes and offer alternative visions of community. Out of the dialectic that they helped generate within the politics of poverty in Victorian and Progressive New York, there emerged a raucous, pluralistic interpretation of national identity that vastly complicated the linear narrative of America as a ruggedly individualistic “white republic.”

This is a book that explores connections among race, reform, and narratives of the nation by studying welfare discourse as a site for the creation and negotiation of individual, communal, and national identities by Victorian Americans from all walks of life. It offers intimate portraits of a range of charitable and reform institutions that constituted New York’s interlocking network of private benevolence and municipal relief from the 1840s through about 1918. They included the Alms House Department, the city’s main agency of municipal relief; the Colored Home (CH), run by conservative, elite, white female reformers and commissioned by the city to receive all public charges of color; the New York House of Refuge (NYHR), the first juvenile reformatory in the country, established by wealthy New York merchants and philanthropists; the Hopper Home, a halfway house for female ex-convicts, operated privately by the more progressive Women’s Prison Association of New York (WPA); and the Howard Orphanage and Industrial School (HOIS), which evolved from a black-run haven for the children of freed women in postbellum New York into a Tuskegee-style, Northern industrial school under predominantly white management after 1913.
The brick walls of these institutions harbor multilayered human stories that raise salient questions about the dynamics of relief in a contentious era of national self-definition: in what ways did constructions of race and nation, and relations of class and gender, shape public discourse on “pauperism,” crime, and reform in New York from the antebellum through the Progressive eras? How did different groups of historical actors use the forum of benevolent reform to invent or subvert identities? Under what conditions and in what ways did working poor African Americans enter into relationships with Victorian and Progressive New York’s benevolent institutions? How did the experiences and self-representations of these African Americans compare with those of white immigrant and native-born relief-seekers? To what extent were the varieties of plebeian agency contingent on the theory and practice of benevolence constructed by elite or middle-class reformers. In what ways did the dynamic that ensued—at the intersection of race and religion, class and gender—complicate or even fracture the abstract symbolism of a unified white civic identity?

The racialization of dependence—long in use as a way of regulating national belonging—was forged in experiences that predated the emergence of the American republic. African slavery imprinted on blackness its particular meaning and fateful visibility in early New York no less than in the plantation realms farther south. It also helped shape white identity as a pivotal relation of difference from blackness. According to historian Thelma Foote, after English warships coasted into Nyack Bay to wrest the fledgling port town of New Amsterdam from Dutch control in 1664, imperial authorities in the colony (renamed New York) used black slavery and antiblack racism as a “disciplinary mechanism” to win the allegiance of a volatile settler population divided by nationality, religion, language, and economic status but bound by its shared sense of entitlement to the “English rights” of freedom. Liberty was now cast as the prerogative of “white” men.

It was on the foundation of this paradox of black bondage and white freedom that there arose out of the Revolutionary ferment of the eighteenth century a “white republic” in which the capacity for self-government was thought to rest on economic self-sufficiency, which guaranteed freedom from the political will of others. “Republican citizenship” not only excluded enslaved African Americans from its purview but also fused American nationality with the ostensibly immutable attribute of race. A 1790 law restricted the right of naturalization to “free white persons”—presumably male, judging by the statute’s prescription that “he shall have
resided for the term of one year at least.” The institution of what historians have described as “herrenvolk democracy” (democracy for a dominant “race”) in the aftermath of the American Revolution drew on the premise of a unified “white manhood” that, in the words of Dana Nelson, “worked symbolically and legally to bring men together in an abstract but increasingly functional community.” This imagined white fraternity was designed to override gathering conflicts rooted in ethnic, religious, and political differences, in sectional and state affiliations, and, most importantly, in the competitive individualism of an emerging market economy. With the inauguration of universal white male suffrage in the nineteenth century, the idealization of democracy as an American norm unfolded in tandem with the construct of the color white as normative—all the more powerful for its “structured invisibility,” defined against the aberration of slavery and its all-too-visible, equally aberrational, marker, blackness. The ostensibly race-neutral label “American” came to be loaded with the meaning of whiteness in the politics and culture of the new republic.5

Herrenvolk democracy also racialized the operation of public relief in New York—both the largest slave state north of the so-called Mason-Dixon Line and a magnet for impoverished European immigrants. How it did so—in other words, the ways in which race making, relief, and the right to citizenship intersected in antebellum New York—becomes clear when we compare the fate of a nineteenth-century immigrant slave-turned-pauper named Peter Bense with that of the bulk of Irish newcomers to Victorian New York.

Bense was no ordinary member of what the reformer Charles Loring Brace called the “dangerous classes.” He reportedly regaled the custodians of the Colored Home, a refuge for needy black New Yorkers, where he spent his last days, with astonishing tales of cosmopolitan adventures in distant lands. A collection of inmate biographies published by the CH recorded that Bense, nicknamed “Peter Polite” on account of his refined manner, was born in bondage in the Anglophone West Indies sometime in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. He was taken to England while still a boy. At the age of twenty he accompanied his master, a British “public functionary” of uncertain identity, to the Court of St. Petersburg as his valet. The members of the Russian royal court saw Bense as “a curiosity” because of his complexion but treated him “with marked kindness and favor.” He was said to speak of “the Empress Catharine with strong expressions of respect and esteem, and even of affection, on account of her great kindness and attention to him.” The former bondsman recalled
that on one occasion, during his master’s absence from St. Petersburg, he served the palace royal as valet and coiffeur. During his days in Russia, he married a Russian woman and had two sons. Soon thereafter (about 1810), his master was recalled to England. Bense sailed back with his owner, heartbroken at having to leave his family behind but determined to reunite with them in the future. On the way back to England, master and slave were waylaid by a French cruiser off the coast of France, carried to Brest, and imprisoned in Paris. During his Parisian days, Bense claimed to have waited on distinguished European personages, including Napoleon himself. He returned to England only after France’s vanquished emperor had been dispatched to Elba, at which point he plunged into a whirlwind of service in aristocratic circles: “He was in London at the visit of the Emperor of Russia and the King of Prussia to the Prince Regent, and appeared familiar with all the gay scenes of that period. He saw the Prince Regent on horseback ride around Hyde Park.”6 We are told that through all his adventures among Europe’s rich and powerful, Bense never forgot his wife and children. When his persistent investigations into his family’s whereabouts revealed that they had moved to New York, he obtained his master’s permission to join them there. He proceeded to America, presumably in the 1830s, “full of hope and anticipated happiness of clasping to his bosom the wife of his youth, and his children.”

It is difficult to verify the authenticity of Peter Polite’s account of his life in Europe. The women who published his story for fund-raising purposes no doubt recognized that its themes of black respectability, familial spirit, and service to a white peerage would carry an intrinsic appeal for wealthy Whig patrons. What can be verified is that Peter Bense—whatever the details of his early history—ended up in New York. As such, he was one of over three and a half million immigrants who helped transform the city into the Western Hemisphere’s most populous and dynamic metropolis between 1820 and 1860.7 Yet Bense must have discovered quickly upon his arrival that his complexion, which had rendered him a “curiosity” in Russia, marked him out for New World experiences rather different from those that awaited white newcomers. Unfortunately, this Afro-Caribbean wayfarer, who apparently came of age in aristocratic Europe, left no record of his first impressions of the great American city that would be his last home. We can only imagine that upon disembarking from an emigrant ship, as he wended his way past the “forest of masts” silhouetting the harbor and into the teeming island beyond, he must have noted New York’s significant black presence. Amid the city’s “hum and buzz, the
clinking of capstans, the ringing of bells, the barking of dogs, [and] the clattering of wheels,” African American men of a myriad hues and diverse origins handled freight along the waterfront, hauled mortar and bricks at construction sites, tended to curbside oyster stands in the Bowery, armed with horse and cart collected street garbage, and drove coaches down the graceful promenade that was Broadway. Black women peddled buttermilk, fruit, and corn on the cob along narrow alleys and throbbing thoroughfares. Youthful chimney sweeps paraded the streets laden with blanket and scraper, uttering plaintive cries of “Sweep-ho!” Black children mingled with their white peers as they played on the docks, scavenging for rags, sugar, iron, wood, blackened boots, and huckstered food and knickknacks in public spaces. Long after the sun went down, the strains of “Negro” fiddles and the beat of tap dances filled the infamous, enticing haunts of Five Points dance halls, salons, and brothels (the reputation of these establishments for wanton self-indulgence and interracial sex filling the city’s nascent bourgeoisie with dread).8

It was this working poor world of blackness and indeterminate whiteness that Peter Bense entered as he began his quest for his lost, biracial family. In many ways it was a standard plebeian world of the Victorian era where middle-class distinctions between private and public spheres were hard to maintain, where home and marketplace merged, and where women and children worked alongside men in order to keep body and soul together. Yet it was also a vibrant, resilient, but nonetheless troubling testament to New York’s foundation on racial slavery, its complicity in the invention and sustenance of America’s “white republic” where constructs of race determined the distribution of social and political power.9 The decline in Bense’s fortunes illustrated this sad fact. He found no trace of his family in the New World. Disappointed, he secured a position as a waiter with the hope of saving enough money to return to St. Petersburg. But alas, that was not to be either: he drifted into destitution instead. Quite likely a tenant in an insanitary cellar, separated from friends and family and excluded from most trades by his blackness, Bense suffered from periodic bouts of unemployment. But even if he had—against all odds—achieved the economic self-sufficiency that American political philosophers and practical reformers associated with republican citizenship, he would have been ineligible for naturalized national belonging. As noted above, a 1790 law restricted that privilege to “free white persons” unencumbered by the burden of chattel bondage. In any case, Bense’s health broke down. In 1841 he entered the Colored Home, run by a group of
patrician New York women—many of them daughters of former slave-holding families—for the relief of spent servants judged worthy of assistance. The Colored Home received a commission from the city Alms House Department to house all black supplicants for relief after 1844. This arrangement illustrated the hybrid nature of nineteenth-century welfare, which frequently rested on collaboration between private benefactors and state authorities.10

Bense’s days in the segregated poorhouse began against the backdrop of urgent public debates about the meaning of whiteness, generated by the advent of waves of destitute Europeans to metropolises scattered across North America’s Atlantic shore and the Gulf Coast. In this context, public relief became a hydra-headed signifier: simultaneously the resort of those feared to be unsuitable for self-government by virtue of their impoverishment, and an instrument for turning white paupers into independent citizens. Steeped in the imagery of blackness, the alleged pathology of “pauperism” became the target of New York’s quasi-public “benevolent empire.”

Benevolent reformers and poor-relief officials sought not simply to save tax dollars, but also to assimilate (through work and moral training) European relief-seekers—entitled to naturalization and armed with the power to vote—into a racialized construction of American nationalism. Contrast this “naturalization through relief” approach with the ambiguous counterpoint posed by Bense’s Quaker and evangelical custodians at the Colored Home. On the one hand, they embraced a democratic discourse of Christian benevolence that challenged the authority of a unified white civic fraternity by upholding the spiritual equality of men and women, black and white. Yet their egalitarian religious discourse did not translate into a vision of multiracial republicanism founded on civic equality. Rather, pessimistic about the African diaspora’s prospects for incorporation into a color-blind national community, the benevolent women of the Colored Home proposed to proselytize and colonize their “pensioners” outside the United States. Blacks, they wrote, shared with women the “inherent” trait of piety, fitting them best for missionary work in “Other” parts of the world, such as Africa. That Bense personally proved too frail to emigrate does not alter the fact of his caregivers’ complicity in the exclusionary rhetoric and practices of the white republic even as they defied some of its gendered premises.11

Slavery in the Empire State ended in 1827, but as Peter Bense’s experience suggests, African American independence in post-emancipation
New York was tenuous at best and could yield suddenly and quickly to “pauperism” and long terms in the Alms House. It is true that antebellum America’s market revolution subjected all manner of Euro-American workers to whimsical business cycles and new modes of production, driving many to the brink of dependence. Yet various circumstances flowing from the legacy of racial slavery rendered black New Yorkers even more vulnerable than their white counterparts to the ravages of riots, disease, unemployment, and the loss of not only family, but of freedom itself, leaving them in urgent need of relief.\(^\text{12}\)

Nineteenth-century observers often noted African Americans’ reluctance to seek public assistance. For instance, the \textit{New York World}, a Democratic newspaper not renowned for its affection for blacks, suggested (in a surprisingly astute survey of African American life in New York City during Reconstruction) that the black tradition of mutual aid rendered “Negroes” less prone than their white immigrant counterparts to live off public charity. Historians in our own time have confirmed the prevalence of a venerable heritage of self-help that, embodied in a plethora of voluntary associations, saw African Americans through difficult times. The historian Robert Cray has drawn on censuses, compiled by the New York City Alms House preacher John Stanford from 1816 to 1826, to argue that the ratio of black inmates to whites declined during the era of slavery’s demise, equaling “but two-thirds the proportion of blacks to whites in the city.” Cray concluded that emancipation left blacks faced with the threat of economic dependence with the freedom to choose modes of relief that did not interfere with their newfound sense of autonomy. The Alms House—with its racially segregated quarters and suggestion of closely monitored regimen—smacked of the restraints of slavery. Thus poor blacks rejected the institutionalization it offered in favor of more sanguinary alternatives such as outdoor relief (assistance in the form of money or fuel in their own homes). Between April 1813 and April 1814, 887 black families and 1,975 white families received home relief in the shape of coal or cash. In other words, blacks made up nearly 31 percent of the population receiving outdoor assistance—a share considerably in excess of the black proportion of New York’s population.\(^\text{13}\)

The present work finds that this pattern of African American relationship with public welfare underwent an important shift by the middle of the nineteenth century, about the same time that the arrival of multitudes of destitute Europeans spawned a critical new language of race, relief, and their implications for the future of the republic. The black fraction of
outdoor relief declined precipitously in relation to that of whites—whether native-born or immigrant. At the same time, the number of New Yorkers of African descent institutionalized in the Alms House and juvenile reformatories grew exponentially in proportion to their ratio in the general population. For instance, while African Americans made up only 4 percent of the city Alms House population in 1824, in 1855 they accounted for close to 22 percent of all inmates, white and black, admitted to the Alms House and its quasi-public contractor, the Colored Home, even as their numbers dwindled to less than 2 percent of the city’s population. It seems clear that the most vulnerable sections of the urban black population supplemented the relief work of their benevolent, often middle class, “race” brethren by incorporating public (or semipublic) resources like alms houses, orphanages, prisons, and juvenile reformatories into their subsistence strategies. They sought public assistance not simply to shore up family wage economies and seek medical care and education, but also to secure refuge against slavery and mediate a range of family conflicts and personal crises. In the process, they forged an oppositional subaltern identity that intersected in many places with the self-representations of poor whites who used reform institutions in similar ways. Subaltern identity centered around the working poor’s adoption of symbolic, rhetorical, and material devices of empowerment shaped by, and embedded partly in, discourses of relief and reform mounted by their benevolent patrons. Subaltern devices aimed to make Gotham’s quasi-public benevolent empire serve goals that the working poor themselves helped define, but always in dialogical interaction with reformers. It also rested on what I call the relief-seekers’ “proto-structural” conceptualization of pauperism and its relationship with crime—a formulation that challenged bourgeois diagnoses of the problem of the “dangerous classes” and undermined the distinctions embraced by Victorian reformers between the “worthy” and “unworthy” poor. I argue that interracial “client” identity embedded in subaltern agency—defined as the working poor’s will to use the idiom of reform in their negotiations with those more powerful—at once belied and complicated the racialized character of welfare discourse in the demographic kaleidoscope that was Victorian New York.14

For then, as now, welfare discourse served as a shorthand for definitions of race and nation. U.S. national narratives celebrated the country’s unique commitment to the ideals of “liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism and laissez-faire” as hallmarks of its identity.15 Yet those conjoined twins, American slavery and American freedom, made for a
nation not unlike empires conceived in relations of group difference. Accordingly, white (masculine) civic identity—whether vested in the icons of the “common man,” “citizen-soldier,” or “partyman”\textsuperscript{16}—assumed the qualities of self-control, independence, and manly honor and virtue defined in opposition to white imaginings of the sometimes-noble savagery of the American Indian, the childlike dependence of the African American, and the irrationality of women. In the age of capitalist transformation, the racialized and masculinized political models of self-determination came to be associated with a bourgeois ethic of competitive individualism. Rugged and self-made, the idealized Euro-American male was a free agent who made rational decisions guided by enlightened self-interest. He strode through the pages of Victorian dime novels and, later, Horatio Alger fiction, overcoming an adverse environment no matter what form it assumed—whether the Indian-infested wilderness of the West or the grimy sweatshop of the metropolitan East—to ascend from rags to riches in America’s dynamic, fluid, expansive society. Incidentally, this construction of rugged individualism was fully compatible with the projects of entrepreneurial reformers to fashion a disciplined working class imbued with enough virtue and industry to believe in America’s success ethic. The black male was the ideal American’s reverse mirror image—the contented, infantile “Sambo” of the slaveholders’ imagination; the prancing, singing, undisciplined Jim Crow conceived in minstrelsy; the pretentious but bumbling “coon” of media construction.

The white republic accorded married white women—whose civic identity was subsumed within that of their husbands under the doctrine of \textit{femme covert} inherited from English common law—an indirect (and subordinate) role in the body politic as mothers and nurturers of potential male citizens. “Republican motherhood” accorded well with the ideal of a middle-class world divided into two gendered spheres, forged in the infancy of Victorian America’s market revolution. As market society evolved, the home took on a new importance as an organic refuge of affection from the competitive world of commerce beyond, under the moral guardianship of the “true woman,” the mother of worthy republican citizens. Defined by the virtues of piety, domesticity, purity, and deference to white men, this feminine ideal did have its detractors. Nevertheless, it paved the way for benevolent women to enter the public domain of reform and guided the efforts of many to mold immigrant women into good mothers and diligent workers. The domestic ideal was at variance, however, with stereotypes of black “Jezebels” held in bondage. Moreover, mothers of the
white republic were expected to safeguard the racial purity of their political family—an expectation that translated into severe social (and in some states, legal) sanctions against interracial unions. Thus the female icons of the “republican mother” and “true woman” were as racialized as their male counterpart of the economically independent “rugged individual.” Fixed notions of the white “self” and the black “Other” became firmly ensconced in the evolving perspective of racial nationalism. 17

In his work on white identity creation, Matthew Frye Jacobson has shown that the 1790 naturalization law, which reserved the right of naturalized citizenship to “free white persons,” assumed the “republican convergence” of a unified “white” race and “fitness for self-government.” This conception of unvariegated whiteness broke down in the 1840s as legions of destitute Europeans flooded American shores, muddying the bipolar construction of American society into “whiteness and its Others.” In New York’s poorest quarters, most notably the notorious Five Points, the Irish in particular lived, worked, traded, drank, fought, danced, and made love with African Americans in a world that quite literally assumed the darkened hue of amalgamation. It was small wonder, then, that nativist lore lumped African Americans and the Irish together, essentializing them in similar ways: as savage, simian creatures who shared the “inherent” traits of intemperance, idleness, and, above all, lasciviousness. Impoverished European Catholic newcomers of uncertain “whiteness” appeared to threaten the venerable national institutions of individualism, economic independence, and “true” womanhood—and hence the republic itself. White elites engaged in furious debates over the capacity of different groups of European newcomers for self-government. 18

The present work maintains that New York’s quasi-public benevolent empire entered this controversy over race and nation in complex ways, prompted in part by the dynamics of partisan politics; the political/cultural identities of different groups of reformers; and the workings of subaltern agency from the interlocking locations of race, class, gender, and religious affiliation. Thus, for example, the Commissioners of the Alms House, persuaded in part by the entreaties of benevolent women concerned about the plight of aged African Americans confined in Alms House cellars, contracted to segregate black paupers in the Colored Home. As we have already noted, the historical context of slavery molded the CH’s racialized philosophy of almsgiving. It sought to cater to a constituency constructed, ironically enough, as the ultimate “worthy poor”—pious, elderly ex-slaves who had dedicated their productive lives to the service of their former
masters. For such people, dependence was assumed to be a natural condition and public relief a well-deserved but temporary expedient until they and their descendants could be colonized outside the United States.

The politics of whiteness, however, vested the dependence of immigrant groups such as the Irish with an entirely different meaning. Entitled under the immigration law of 1790 to the privileges of citizenship (eventually), they had to be prepared to exercise those privileges—whether by achieving economic self-sufficiency or by cultivating the virtues of “true womanhood.” Thus New York’s public relief officials—whether Democrats or Whigs—aimed to put white paupers to work, prompted in no small part by the exhortations of evangelical industrialists (belonging to groups like the Whig-Republican Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor) concerned about creating a disciplined and individualistic working class. As wage labor became a permanent condition for working class men and women, this faction of the bourgeoisie adopted a new political language of reform, fashioned by the ideology of free labor. Associated with the pre–Civil War Republican Party, the free labor ideology celebrated the dignity of, and free market for, labor; its harmonious relationship with capital; and the prospect of social mobility that it supposedly offered. The idea of upward mobility was associated with the ascription of personal success or failure to individual abilities—the Protestant ethic of “honesty, frugality, diligence, punctuality and sobriety.” Thus, free labor Republicanism complemented the premise of individual redemption that lay at the heart of Christian benevolence; furthermore, it could be applied to train virtuous domestic servants as well as disciplined factory workers imbued with aspirations to realize the “American dream” of independent property ownership.

Free labor capitalism, which animated a great deal of antebellum relief and reform, was interwoven with white identity creation in complex ways. On the most explicit level, Republican cries of “free soil,” “free labor,” and “free men” tied a free West to white laboring men’s chances for independent land ownership through hard work. In practice, for many white Americans both in the Midwest and along the Atlantic seaboard, a free West meant the absence not only of slavery, but of free blacks as well. Moreover, it entailed the expropriation of Indian land through war and treaty in ways that, according to the legal scholar Cheryl Harris, made whiteness a “prerequisite to the exercise of enforceable property rights.” For those with aspirations to own property—whether they realized those aspirations or not—whiteness itself became “a property interest” capable
of being “deployed as a resource” in the pursuit of wealth and happiness.\textsuperscript{21} In this nexus between whiteness and property ownership, free labor Republicanism intersected with the populist white identity politics of the national Democracy. The Democrats sought to weld slave-owning Southerners, slaveless yeomen, and penniless Irish immigrants into a national coalition by invoking their common white lineage. In this context, white identity as property—to which all European immigrants, no matter how poor, were ultimately given access—became a ticket to citizenship.

New York’s interlocking network of municipal relief and private benevolence—for both males and females—drove home these lessons in white privilege by treating and naming European newcomers differently from African Americans. Even as black New Yorkers, disfranchised by property qualifications, faced exclusion or segregation in the city’s relief institutions, the rising political clout of European immigrants within the Democratic Party expanded the white share of outdoor relief. Moreover, the racialization of welfare discourse was manifested in the epistemology of relief promoted by charity and reform organizations. For instance, institutions participated in the symbolic process by which the Irish became “white” by compiling statistical tables of inmate populations that elevated color over national origin as the chief signifier of difference among the needy, even as black Americans were sometimes labeled “African.” As the historian Joan Scott has pointed out, statistical reports constitute “ways of establishing the authority of certain visions of social order, of organizing perceptions of ‘experience.’” Thus, numerical data on dependent populations embodied particular ideas about race that “became naturalized” in the process of the tabulation and dissemination of the data in question. Relief and reform organizations assumed the power to define “reality” by representing that reality in a certain way, so that the Irish—however ambiguous their “racial” identity in the eyes of their detractors—“became white” by being depicted as white in poverty policy documents, at least for the purposes of apportioning the resources of welfare.\textsuperscript{22}

Ironically enough, from the location of privilege that whiteness offered, European immigrants often responded to the more coercive initiatives of acculturative reform by asserting their local identities as white workers entitled to unemployment insurance in the form of public works or even Work House wages; as white Catholics entitled to the constitutional right of religious freedom; and, above all, as white citizens entitled to the civil liberty of habeas corpus in matters of discharge from reform institutions.
Thus, they used the “property” of whiteness to open yawning schisms in the racialized imaginary of a unified republican masculinity.

The Civil War, when it came, conferred citizenship on African Americans, eclipsing colonization as a goal of public relief for black New Yorkers. It did little, however, to check the hegemony of whiteness in defining the American nation after Reconstruction. Indeed white racial nationalism gained momentum toward the close of the nineteenth century with the advent of a deluge of “new immigrants” from southern and eastern Europe at home, the inauguration of America’s imperial adventures abroad, and the rise of de jure Jim Crow in the New South. Yet the salience of whiteness as a mark of American identity did not go unquestioned. As the United States entered an era of unprecedented prosperity amid intense social conflict, the architects and “clients” of many African American voluntary associations used the language of reform to contest the racial assumptions of American exceptionalism. This book concludes with the story of one such organization—the Howard Orphanage and Industrial School—which mounted micro-level challenges to the power of whiteness and offered in its stead a pluralistic reading of the American nation in the early twentieth century.

The issues that concern this book straddle several fields of scholarship—those of African American history, welfare history, “whiteness” studies, and theories of “subaltern” agency. First and foremost, the work incorporates a “bottom-up” approach to the story of black benevolence; it examines African American working poor relationships with not only black voluntarism but with the apparatus of white-run public and semi-public welfare as well. The history of benevolence and social welfare in nineteenth-century America has been written overwhelmingly from the perspective of middle-class reformers who ensured their visibility in the historical record by leaving an impressive trail of documentation in their wake. There are, to be sure, notable exceptions to the “top-down” approach to welfare history. Some scholars have analyzed the case histories of reform institutions to offer invaluable portraits of historically marginalized populations—collective profiles defined by a degree of sophistication impossible to generate through census data alone. Their accounts, however, focus more on whites than on African Americans, especially for the period before the 1890s. This scholarly emphasis understandably mirrors the concern of Victorian charitable institutions with the waves of European immigrants who statistically engulfed the relatively small numbers
of African Americans among the destitute populations of North America’s greatest metropolises.23

Historians of the black experience, on the other hand, have invoked with subtlety and insight the evolution of “inner-city” communities vibrantly sustained amid formidable constraints by a host of black-built institutions—family and church, mutual aid societies and benevolent associations, and civil rights organizations and trade unions.24 Their work has prompted adjustments in the definition and periodization of social welfare history so as to collapse the neat chronological and intellectual boundaries between benevolence (conceived as private/evangelical/nineteenth century) on the one hand, and social welfare (thought to be statist/professionalized/post-1890s) on the other. Historians have noted that dating back to colonial times, black women bereft of government influence established privately funded voluntary associations. These institutions not only provided African Americans with services denied them by whites (such as homes for the aged, the infirm, and unwed mothers; and kindergartens, libraries, and settlement homes), but in the late nineteenth century they also addressed problems such as lynching, rape, and the convict lease system in the South. Moreover, the historian Linda Gordon maintains that because the black vision of welfare differed from that of whites, the inclusion of black perspectives has produced a far more nuanced portrait of American reform than existed before. Much of the scholarship on black benevolence, however, has been written from the standpoint of African American operators of voluntary associations, whose relationship with the black working poor was, after all, mediated by their positions of relative privilege within their own communities. Moreover this impressive body of work tells more about black voluntarism than about the experiences of those African Americans of the “dangerous classes” who were forced to seek public assistance.25

Yet the statistics of Victorian American alms houses and prisons suggest that, driven both by structural upheavals in the economy and virulent racism, African Americans constituted a disproportionate share of the poor and the imprisoned in the nineteenth-century urban North. Moreover, the racialization of welfare discourse—which has, in our own time, planted an impoverished black face on the quintessential beneficiary of public largesse—invites reflection on the nineteenth-century origins of what in popular parlance is labeled the black “underclass” and its relationship with the shifting values and structure of a “white” welfare establishment. My study seeks to address gaps in welfare history not only
by incorporating the most marginalized of African American voices into the story of nineteenth-century American reform, but also by examining how those voices interacted with agencies of public and semi-public relief as much as with those of black voluntarism. Most important, the work assumes that the paradoxical legacy of black slavery and white freedom makes any study of black encounters with Victorian New York’s benevolent empire more meaningful when placed in a comparative context with the experiences of the white poor.

The book’s “subaltern perspective” demands that it engage some of the theoretical issues in debates over the conceptualization of “underclass” agency and its relationship with dominant discourses, raised most penetratively by two groups of scholars—those of feminism and reform on the one hand, and of the subaltern school of Latin American, South Asian, and African studies on the other. Was such agency “a discursive effect,” as Joan Scott has argued—contingent on the language and institutions constructed by middle-class benevolent men and women—rather than “an attribute or trait inhering in the will of autonomous individual subjects”? Or was it the product of “conflict among the ‘constructions’ of various parties, the subordinate no less than the superordinate,” as the welfare historian Linda Gordon has observed? In her immensely important work on the history of family violence, Gordon argued that client narratives of domestic abuse encouraged social workers to identify new problems, like wife beating. Although the social workers interpreted such problems in light of their own values and mission, “this contested definition and redefinition of problems” paved the way for social change. Some scholars have shown that it is possible to reconcile the insights of Scott and Gordon. In an essay on prospective unwed mothers’ responses to fictional representations of single pregnancy in a mass-circulation confession magazine sponsored by the Children’s Bureau, Regina Kunzel argued persuasively that the “fallen” could function as “both discursive figures and authors.” She found that single pregnant women who wrote to the Bureau drew on the narrative plots and vocabulary of the moralistic “pulp fiction,” approved by social workers, to recount their own experiences. In the process, however, they occasionally transformed the narrative of single pregnancy from one in which “shame was the driving force to one in which their own economic hardship took center stage.”

In this context, I find some of the insights of the subaltern studies school of South Asian and Latin American history about the workings of hegemony and marginal agency particularly helpful in understanding
relations of class, race, and gender in North American welfare history. The Latin Americanist William Roseberry has proposed that “we use the concept [of hegemony] not to understand consent but to understand struggle; the ways in which the words, images, symbols, forms, organizations, institutions, and movements used by subordinate populations to talk about, understand, confront, accommodate themselves to, or resist their domination are shaped by the process of domination itself. What hegemony constructs, then, is not a shared ideology but a common material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about, and acting upon social orders characterized by domination.” Like Latin American peasants or Kunzel’s “problem girls,” black and white clients of welfare frequently fashioned out of the reform idiom employed by their socially superior custodians—idioms that varied from Christian benevolence, gender solidarity, and whiteness discourse, to American exceptionalism—a set of rhetorical, symbolic, and material strategies of empowerment that not simply served their material needs, but also defied their received subaltern identities. It is also important to keep in mind that subordinate persons are, in Florencia Mallon’s words, simultaneously “dominated and dominating” based on the circumstances in which we encounter them. For instance, a working-class pensioner might abuse his wife. Or a middle-class black orphanage superintendent might adopt a supercilious attitude toward the working poor parents of her charges. An Irish inmate of the New York House of Refuge might use his prerogative of whiteness to assert his citizenship right to Catholic worship, thus simultaneously challenging his Protestant superintendent and setting himself apart from his black peers. Thus, in this study, I use the term “subaltern” to mean individuals or groups whose subordination in terms race, ethnicity, class, gender, and religion was relational rather than absolute, and who practiced a brand of subversion that operated at least partially from within the systems that sought to reform them.

Any historian with the temerity to claim insight into subaltern perspectives comes up squarely against the problem of sources. It is easy enough to document the values and objectives of relief officials and benevolent reformers, who left tomes of government records, census data, promotional literature, press clippings, and the annual reports, minutes of meetings, and correspondence of the organizations they ran. It is far harder to reach the mentalité of their often-illiterate clients, visible only fleetingly through the prism of their custodians in a census record here, a journal entry there. Fortunately, a few of the working poor inmates of reform
institutions who appear in the following pages left letters, which offer as
direct an access to their worldview as one can hope to find. In addition,
the records of the African American Howard Orphanage and Industrial
School include cultural “texts,” such as a series of pantomimes produced
by its staff. These pantomimes represent a rich resource for understanding
a black bourgeois world of acculturative reform engaged in a dialectic of
accommodation and resistance with its Progressive white counterpart.

For the most part, however, I, like other historians, have relied mostly
on far more mediated sources in my quest to unearth underclass self-port-
raits and experiences. These include inmate case histories, census data,
and, in one case, a collection of ex-slave “client” biographies published as
a pamphlet. As students of benevolence and social welfare know, many
nineteenth-century institutions recorded fragments of the life stories and
rehabilitation trajectories of their clients—including those of color if they
had any—in case histories designed to both identify the sources of vice
and reform its victims. These documents, supplemented by statistical re-
cords, constitute an invaluable tool in reconstructing the social profile
and survival strategies of the interracial “dangerous classes” who drew
on public resources in their hour of need. Crafted through the lens and
represented in the language of their middle-class, often-Protestant, white
recorders, these case histories, not surprisingly, tell more about the values
and agenda of their authors than about their ostensible subjects.

Yet case records—like other symbols and forms of dominant reform
discourses—could also serve as subaltern instruments to contest estab-
lished narratives about the working poor condition: these documents had
to rely, at least partly, on the word of the inmates whose lives and reform
trajectories they purported to document. Thus, when read in conjunc-
tion with the official pronouncements of the institution concerned, they
frequently reveal the presence of a panoply of racial, class, and gender
identities, with inmate perspectives meshing in dynamic interaction with
those of their “benefactors,” muffled but not mute. By providing intrigu-
ing insights into the self-image, aspirations, and survival tactics of work-
ing poor men, women, and children across a wide spectrum of race and
ethnicity, these case histories afford an entré into the elusive conscious-
ness and lives of working poor New Yorkers. In the context of Roseberry’s
formulation of hegemony as an arena of struggle, case records became
subaltern vehicles to defy establishment constructs of “underclass” deg-
radation—vehicles shaped by “the process of domination,” to be sure, but
subaltern vehicles nonetheless. 28
Finally, this book draws on the work of whiteness studies scholars to place the story of welfare in the context of the nation’s preoccupation with race making in the nineteenth century. Historians of public policy have understandably traced the racialization of welfare to the advent of a national welfare state in the twentieth century. Jill Quadagno, for instance, has argued that the United States enacted national welfare policies later than European countries did, not primarily because of its tradition of liberal individualism, the weakness of its working class, or because it democratized before it industrialized, as other scholars have suggested; rather, the politics of racism impeded the war on poverty. The New Deal’s unemployment, old age, housing, and labor policies that discriminated against blacks set the stage for racial conflict over the New Deal legacy, which in turn spurred the war on poverty in the 1960s. I combine the insights of scholarship on black benevolence and whiteness studies to argue that the “colors of welfare”—to modify Quadagno’s words—developed historically at a time when African Americans constituted a fraction of relief-seekers, well before the emergence of the twentieth-century welfare state.

In a republic founded on the association of freedom with whiteness, and dependence with blackness, the condition of pauperism marked a person as not quite white and, thus, incapable of exercising the responsibilities of citizenship. New York’s relief and reform agencies sought to Americanize poor and imprisoned newcomers by “whitening” them through lessons in self-sufficiency, industry, and virtue, as well as by discriminating between them and their black neighbors. Thus while other scholars have described the conflict over whiteness and the invention of Caucasians within the paradigms of labor movements and law courts, domestic politics and imperial aspirations, the sciences and the arts, consumer culture and popular culture, and European “diasporic imaginations” and nativist tracts, this work focuses on the role of welfare in training Europeans to define their racial identities in relation to that of African Americans.

The themes of the book unfold in the course of case studies of five institutions that spanned New York’s turbulent age of reform, from the 1840s through about 1918. The overarching topic of public welfare’s relationship with ideas about race in antebellum New York frames the three chapters in part 1. Chapter 1 weaves the story of racial formation in the United States with a survey of New York’s poor relief policy toward African Americans from colonial times through the end of black bondage in 1827. Slavery’s demise both coincided with a crucial moment in Jacksonian America’s redefinition of the poverty problem and galvanized movements
for institutional relief and reform. The chapter draws on census materials on black and Irish families inhabiting the city's sixth and eighth wards in 1855 to offer intimate social portraits of the lives that animated the renewed discourse of pauperism. As black New Yorkers in particular adapted their household structures to their migration patterns, age and sex ratios, marriage rates, child care needs, and, most importantly, the political economy of race, they infused new meaning into familiar concepts like the “nuclear family” and “boarding,” which distinguished them in some respects from their white counterparts. Comparative demographic profiles of “underclass” Gotham portrayed in this opening chapter help establish a context for understanding the patterns of welfare use by Victorian New York's most marginalized groups.

Chapter 2 examines the evolution of poor-relief thought amid an emerging racial typology of pauperism that amalgamated various metaphors of nonwhiteness and savagery into sensational specters of sin. The interest of Whig-Republican evangelical entrepreneurs in nurturing a virtuous and industrious working class came to be articulated in growing concerns about the future of the republic. These anxieties added urgency to calls for a shift from indiscriminate almsgiving to what twenty-first-century Americans call “workfare” as a tool for turning paupers into citizens. At the same time, the Democrats' romance with a burgeoning Irish electorate accentuated the very different treatment that white voters and black nonvoters received at the hands of the municipal authorities in New York, most clearly evident in the reallocation of “outdoor relief.”

The chapter examines the ways in which the evolving political meaning of whiteness was manifested in the reorganization of the city's Alms House Department—the principal vehicle of municipal benevolence—in the 1840s and the 1850s. It also probes the dynamic of white identity creation in the epistemology of public relief. It traces the uses of the labels “white” and “colored” in tabular representations of inmate populations that, by subsuming distinctions of nationality, conveyed a sense of whiteness as homogenous and color as the chief marker of difference among relief-seekers.

The chapter goes on to argue that if the goal of public relief was to integrate European newcomers seamlessly into a unified civic community of self-sufficient white voters, it floundered in the face of inmate agency. The apparently unintended uses to which the predominantly white working poor put the department's facilities on Blackwell's Island—the Alms House, the Lunatic Asylum, the Penitentiary Hospital, and, above all, the
Work House—prompted official laments that the island had become a new “land of promise” for the idle and unworthy poor. Yet from their vantage point as politically empowered whites, inmates defined their recourse to relief and employment under municipal auspices as a right of citizenship rather than charity—a logic that culminated in mass rallies, initially supported by Democratic mayor Fernando Wood, by jobless workers during the financial panic of 1857.

Chapter 3 offers a detailed social portrait of the Colored Home of New York City, run by wealthy white female reformers and commissioned by the city to receive all public charges of color after 1844. It explores the worldviews of the institution’s benevolent architects and their impoverished black charges by analyzing a collective biography of freed people—turned—“clients” that CH published in 1851 as part a fund-raising drive. Entitled Broken Gloom: Sketches of the History, Character, and Dying Testimony of the Beneficiaries of the Colored Home in the City of New York, this pamphlet suggests that constructs of the shared piety of reformers and their charges could potentially serve as a code for subverting hierarchies of race and gender. Broken Gloom described a logic and experience of benevolence that began by implicitly challenging proslavery allegations about the harshness of free labor society toward the weak, and ended by questioning conventional male, materialistic standards for assessing human worth. Yet the ideology of the Colored Home also exposed the ultimate conservatism of antebellum “maternalist” reformers, as it advocated the colonization of African Americans beyond the shores of the land of their birth. Nevertheless, the reformers’ democratic language of Christian benevolence provided the inmates a framework, not available elsewhere in the world of white benevolence, within which to raise their own voices against slavery and race prejudice, in however mediated a fashion. Just as enslaved Southerners used black Christianity to transcend the worst psychological havoc wrought by bondage, elderly black inmates of the Colored Home found in evangelical religion strategies to defy the legitimacy of antiblack racism. Chapter 3 goes on to chart demographic and cultural shifts in the Colored Home’s inmate population after 1844 and compares black relief experiences with those of their white counterparts. It closes by noting the ways in which Civil War landmarks—from the New York City draft riots to the Fourteenth Amendment—highlighted the obsolescence of the Colored Home’s maternalist brand of racial comity, powered by an appeal to religious sameness but constrained by its embrace of colonization.
Part 2 consists of two chapters that deal with the benevolent empire’s mission to secure the future of the white republic by reforming “fallen” women and children across the span of the nineteenth century. Chapter 4 focuses on the variegated tapestry of interracial subaltern engagement with the nation’s first juvenile reformatory, the New York House of Refuge, established by local merchants and philanthropists in 1824. Such engagement contradicted the premise of absolute racial difference inherent in the institution’s practices of segregating and labeling African American children as belonging to a race apart from their immigrant and native-born white peers. On the other hand, the institution’s policies of indefinite commitments and contract labor, applied equally to all inmates, clouded the boundary between freedom and coercion, which distinguished white privilege from black subordination. As the city entered a Gilded Age defined by deepening class antagonisms, Irish inmates reacted to the NYHR’s mixed signals about race by erupting in violent acts of confrontation with their custodians. The public investigations that followed offered white inmates an occasion to assert the racialized prerogatives of citizenship that they had learned not only from the larger society, but also from the NYHR’s own segregationist attitudes. Insurgent Irish inmates affirmed their rights to fair wages, habeas corpus, and the freedom of religious worship. By contrast, African Americans, deprived of political capital, mounted more private, local, and informal modes of negotiation with authority figures within the structure of the NYHR, which questioned dominant conceptions of subaltern identity. In the process, they underscored, no less than the Irish rebels, the nature of hegemony as a ground of struggle rather than consensus.

Chapter 5 illustrates the themes of class relations and race making embedded in women’s benevolent work. It profiles the history of the Hopper Home, a halfway house overwhelmingly for Irish female prisoners, operated by the Women’s Prison Association of New York (WPA). The racialized underpinnings of the WPA’s agenda were manifested in the association’s tacit exclusion of African American women from its project of salvation on the one hand, and its emphasis on the assimilability of “fallen” Irish sisters to Protestant middle-class norms of womanhood on the other. The ideology and language of gender solidarity, then, mediated female prison reformers’ collusion with the larger benevolent project to make European immigrants into white Americans. At the same time, the rhetoric of sisterhood provided the objects of reform a sympathetic framework within which they could author their own autobiographies of
plebeian hardships. Celtic sisters in dialogic interaction with their Saxon keepers crafted the icon of the “fallen woman.” That icon, as represented by reformers, was a white woman, her race both normative and invisible, even though subaltern Irish perspectives on crime, pauperism, and sexual politics closely paralleled the outlook of their black sisters in institutions like the NYHR. As the century progressed, the inmates’ growing rebellion against acculturation assumed a heightened significance in the strife-torn world of Gilded Age New York. As battalions of culturally alien “new immigrants” arrived to complicate the WPA’s mission, a new generation of prison reformers, imbued with eugenic thinking, launched a movement to establish a state reformatory with indeterminate sentences and a more structured environment for reform. This initiative, designed among other things to staunch the reproduction rates of undesirable aliens, anticipates in interesting ways modern-day concerns about the alleged propensity of (black and immigrant Latina) unwed mothers to take advantage of welfare to propagate disagreeable species of dependent cultures. The WPA’s campaign culminated in the creation of a reformatory at Bedford Hills at the turn of the twentieth century. Unlike the more informal Hopper Home, Bedford Hills incarcerated black women as well as Catholics and Jews from southern and eastern Europe.

Part 3 of this work shifts its gaze to the internal dynamics and external relations of African American voluntarism. Chapter 6 probes black benevolent strategies to pluralize, on the most local and palpable of levels, American identity at the turn of the twentieth century. It explores the ways in which New Yorkers of African descent, in their multiple roles as reformers and “clients,” workers and consumers, surrogate children and guardians, men and women, and as black and American, negotiated the tension between Progressive America’s nationalisms of race and civic equality on a micro plane. The struggles it describes occurred within the institutional framework of the Brooklyn Howard Colored Orphan Asylum, originally established in 1866 as a haven for the children of Southern freedwomen (later reincarnated as the Howard Orphanage and Industrial School [HOIS] of Long Island, New York). The story of Howard’s evolution, from a black-run civic organization into a Northern industrial school under predominantly white management after 1913, is rich with clues to the parallels and differences between elite black and Protestant white interpretations of national identity implicit in their respective views of benevolence management and the goals of welfare. On the one hand, Howard’s black staff joined its mostly white Progressive-era Managers in
turning hallowed American ideals like individualism and equal opportunity into arguments against racial nationalism. On the other hand, the peculiar experiences of race—manifested in a combination of black-client needs, scarce resources, and African American historical experiences—prompted them to craft an alternative community identity within the framework of their benevolent work. Such an identity, grounded in an informal, extended familial, black Christian, participatory democratic style of management, sometimes clashed with the white trustees’ campaign to introduce a spirit of individualism and “efficiency” to Howard’s operation. The chapter goes on to argue that the perspectives of Howard’s interracial custodians provided a complex filter through which the institution’s orphans and students articulated their own senses of self. It draws on the invaluable letters that Howard alumni wrote their former guardians in order to illustrate the myriad ways in which they strove to inject colors other than white into a national narrative premised on whiteness.

Taken together, the snapshots of New York relief and reform institutions captured in this study show that long before the advent of the twentieth-century welfare state, the discourse of welfare functioned as a crucible for negotiating individual and group identities. It provided a language and forum to talk about community, race, nation, what it meant to be “American,” who belonged, and who did not. Moreover, it was a conversation in which working people of all race constructs participated by adapting benevolent institutions to their own material, familial, or political needs, and by offering reformers their own versions of the sources of, and solutions for, dependence. Aged pensioners at the Colored Home found in their patrons’ ideology of Christian benevolence the rhetorical strategies to question antiblack racism. Interracial inmates at the New York House of Refuge turned the institution’s commitment to saving children from criminal lives into a welfare resource in ways that defied the fabrication of poverty as a personal, moral failure. Celtic “sisters” at the Hopper Home used Saxon reformers’ discourse of gender solidarity to help devise a more sympathetic and complex portrait of the “fallen woman” than allowed by bourgeois constructions of “underclass” debasement. Work House inmates on Blackwell’s Island, and Irish insurgents at the juvenile reformatory, tapped implicitly into the dominant discourse of whiteness to assert their prerogatives as workers, citizens, and Catholics. And African American operators and clients at the Howard Orphanage and Industrial School turned to the national narrative of American exceptionalism to challenge their own status as the ultimate Other of whiteness.
Thus, hegemonic institutions of public relief and private benevolence became what William Roseberry called “common material and meaningful” frameworks for negotiation and struggle. They became contested spaces within which all manner of historical actors—situated at the intersection of multiple discourses of power structured around the relations of race, class, gender, age, and religion—inscribed complex, cosmopolitan identities, confounding and straining the national imaginary of a monolithic white fraternity.