“I was never racist until I came to this country,” I was told by John, an Irish immigrant newcomer to Yonkers, New York, in the early spring of 1996. This nineteen-square-mile city of 200,000, which shares southern and eastern borders with the Bronx in New York City, gained national notoriety in the 1980s when its home-owning white ethnic majority resisted the desegregation of public schools and housing. Shortly thereafter, young and largely undocumented Irish immigrants began arriving in this racially tense locale in increasing numbers. The parallel movement of Irish bars onto McLean Avenue in southeast Yonkers met resistance from the neighborhood's homeowners, who claimed that an increased bar presence, like the presence of public housing, would cause property values to plummet. Though they lost their bitter battle against federally integrated neighborhoods, longtime residents were successful in their fight against bars, as the city council ratified a moratorium on future bar construction in 1996. A noticeably heightened police presence was dispatched to quell potential bar-related trouble. Conflicts between Yonkers police officers and Irish bar patrons ensued, prompting allegations of police brutality, which in one case resulted in a federal indictment against two police officers for violating the civil rights of
three Irish immigrants in their custody. During the trial, defense attorneys called attention to the common Irish ancestry of both parties to dispel allegations made in the Irish American press that the incident was motivated by ethnic bias.¹

At the time of the Yonkers bar moratorium, I was a master’s student, and this local Irish bar conflict provided the basis for research on social movements in the United States. Over the course of that spring, I interviewed an array of people associated with this controversy, including homeowners, police officers, local politicians, and Irish immigrant bar owners, as well as their patrons. When I interviewed John, we initially discussed the harassment of Irish immigrant bar patrons by the Yonkers police, but our conversation turned to other topics, including the challenges posed by undocumented immigrant life in the United States. When I asked John to reflect on the most striking difference between living in the Republic of Ireland and the United States, he cited not wages, food, or weather but his newfound distain for “niggers,” a word, he assured me, that he never used before coming to America. One bar proprietor angered by the increased Yonkers police presence also mentioned race when discussing this local controversy. He defended his right to operate a bar by declaring, “We don’t collect welfare; the Irish built this country.” His reference to welfare recipients (publicly imagined as nonwhite) stressed Irish racial fitness, but to no avail. While my research focused on the parallels between this conflict and the city’s desegregation controversy a decade earlier, I was intrigued by these references to race. Only later did I begin to locate these race-conscious sentiments within a larger sociohistorical process within the United States.

This book examines how Irish immigrants have been, and continue to be, socialized around race and become race-conscious subjects in the United States. While I am not the first to consider the relationship between race and immigrant incorporation within the larger U.S. collective, this study traces how Irish race consciousness evolved over the nineteenth century and how this historical transformation resonates in contemporary American life. The sentiments of these immigrants suggest that disparaging people of color is a crucial component of this race consciousness, but it is by no means the sole element. In the context of nineteenth-century British colonialism and U.S. racial slavery,
racial boundaries were determined by respectable households organized around a specific race, class, and gender order. In other words, they were racially homogeneous, middle-class households anchored in heterosexual marriages between hardworking male wage earners and family-rearing wives. Furthermore, these households espoused the Protestant faith. Households organized in this particular manner demonstrated racial competence but also loyalty to the white race.

The working-class, Catholic Irish (as well as many others) fell short of these standards, or what I call “racial expectations.” Caricatures of the apelike, drunk, dirty, lazy, and potentially violent “Paddy,” both in Great Britain and in the United States, epitomized the racialization of the Irish as a separate, inferior race. The challenges posed by a heterogeneous population within the United States, however, permitted the Irish to respond to this “racial hazing” over time, by claiming adherence to the same standards of order, hard work, family, faith, and loyalty that been used to assess their own racial fitness: they affixed white racial expectations to being “Irish.” Learning to stress their racial aptitude in this particular manner is how the Irish became race-conscious subjects in the United States. Some might use “stereotyping” to describe how dominant groups mark and marginalize those who are different, but this term evokes an imposed outcome and fails to communicate how groups like the Irish responded to their racialization. Instead, I prefer “racial hazing,” as this phrase better conveys the concept of race as an uneven process.

Scholars typically understand race and ethnicity as socially constructed categories, yet most people see ethnic and racial membership in terms of inherited traits. Sociologist Mary C. Waters, however, has argued that whites have greater freedom than people of color to choose their ethnic identity. In this study, when I refer to race, I do so through the lens of my subjects, whereby membership in a white race endows certain biological and superior traits. At the same time, I understand Irish ethnicity as largely a chosen identity. When I discuss race as a process, I signify how the Irish began to define and defend their membership in a supposedly advanced, white race, but in ethnic terms. In other words, when they chose to publicly define and defend themselves as Irish, they did so with racial traits that were understood specifically as white, and exceptional. Therefore, in this study, when I discuss Irishness
and whiteness, I understand these representations of ethnicity and race as interconnected and inseparable social categories.

Irish adaptation of white racial expectations was not merely a reactionary measure but also a benchmark for Irish American identity. As a result of this transformation, the Irish in the United States were then expected to be orderly—that is middle-class, married heterosexuals with families and distant from those perceived as racially inept. They were supposed to be hardworking and loyal as well as religious devotees, typically of the Catholic faith. Indeed, many are well acquainted with these supposedly Irish traits. Irishness and the Catholic faith often are understood as one and the same identity, and popular representations of the “fighting Irish” speak to Irish loyalty, often by way of military service to the United States. It is precisely because these traits are so thoroughly associated with the Irish in popular discourse that I am interested particularly in other, less contemplated components, such as race, class, and gender. I also wish to stress how these purportedly Irish traits are neither random nor inevitable, but together correspond specifically to Irish encounters with race and empire in the nineteenth century, both how they were seen and how they came to see themselves over time.

That the Irish continue to stress their racial fitness in the United States by way of these traits is how I have come to understand Irishness as a race-based tradition. “Good Paddies” uphold this tradition, while “bad Paddies” undermine it. Some may object to my use of the term “Paddy,” as in my delineation between good Paddies and bad Paddies, as I distinguish between those who do or do not meet the racial expectations for being Irish. The Irish Paddy racial caricature was used to marginalize the Irish both in nineteenth-century U.S. society and under British colonial rule well until the twentieth century. As a result, many are offended by any invocation of Paddy, particularly Irish Americans around St. Patrick’s Day. But the experience of racialization epitomized by the Irish Paddy resonates in contemporary Irish American life in many interesting and unexpected ways. Therefore, the term is quite useful in my analysis. At the same time, I do not want to suggest that bad Paddies who challenge Irishness as a race-based tradition are somehow more genuine or legitimate than good Paddies who uphold this convention. Instead, I use these terms to underscore how Irish marginalization
under both British and U.S. regimes fostered a social identity that historically marginalized, and continues to marginalize, other people, even seemingly Irish ones.

The city of Yonkers, New York, is an ideal setting in which to explore the complexities of Irishness as a race-based tradition because different cohorts of Irish Americans reside here. “Irish American,” however, is a rather broad term that could refer to anyone in the United States of Irish ancestry. So as to better grasp the textures among the Yonkers Irish, I think of them as belonging to distinct groups: *assimilated Irish ethnics*, those whose ancestors arrived in Yonkers in the middle to late nineteenth century; *Irish white flighters*, those who left Ireland during the 1950s and early 1960s and made the “white flight” from the Bronx and Upper Manhattan to Yonkers in the 1970s; and *Irish newcomers*, the “new” Irish who left Ireland in the 1980s and made their way to Yonkers beginning in the early 1990s, and the “newer” Irish who continued to arrive from Ireland, migrating directly to Yonkers albeit in smaller numbers. This latest generation of Irish immigrants has settled largely in southeast Yonkers; as a result, this section of the city has been called “Little Ireland.”

Without the same access to legal residency, well-paying unionized work, and homeownership, class sets largely undocumented Irish newcomers apart from their predecessors and shapes how they encounter Irishness as a race-based tradition in the United States. Because of their precarious legal status, they are not and cannot be as invested in good Paddy values of hard work, loyalty, and family espoused by assimilated Irish ethnics and Irish white flighters. Instead, they tend to engage in behaviors such as hard drinking, work absenteeism, and casual sexual encounters. There are, however, consequences to these bad Paddy digressions. Once a thriving industrial city, Yonkers witnessed not only the loss of major manufacturing and middle-class residents in the decades following World War II but also the deliberate segregation of African American and Latino residents in public housing constructed solely on the city’s southwest side. The city’s long history of contentious class and increasingly race politics ensured that the arrival of working-class Irish immigrants would not go unnoticed. Their departure from assimilated Irish ethnics and Irish white flighters, moreover, would be accentuated and managed by neoliberal policies more broadly.
By “neoliberalism” I refer to economic policies at the national and local level that channel public resources away from social services like schools, public housing, and welfare in the name of promoting economic growth and government efficiency. Though neoliberal policies have evolved over several decades, they take shape in cities by way of tax subsidies for private corporations and consumers to promote development in economically depressed and often crime-plagued areas and are usually accompanied by aggressive or “zero tolerance” policing to assure potential developers and consumers that their investments are safe. This study is in line with the growing literature on how neoliberal urban redevelopment models, though shrouded in promises of growth, actually accentuate existing inequality. While widening disparities in wealth, this neoliberal shift also has weakened civic commitment to collective well-being and responsibility. As an example, these policies have clearly sharpened disparities among the Yonkers Irish. They have promoted the racial hazing of undocumented Irish newcomers by their Irish contemporaries, the disparate treatment of good Paddies and bad Paddies under local redevelopment initiatives in the city of Yonkers, and the adoption of a race-conscious and arguably racist lobbying agenda in the national debate over immigration reform. Attention to these different outcomes offers neoliberalism as more than mere policy but as a condition of everyday life, which is all the more punctuated in a setting like Yonkers. Critical examinations of neoliberal urban redevelopment models typically focus on larger cities such as New York or Los Angeles, but attention to a midsize city such as Yonkers allows us to better understand how citizens more acutely bear the consequences of these policies. And while many former industrial cities would like to replicate the purported success of redevelopment strategies in larger cities, they are more likely to consider Yonkers, a city they more likely resemble. Because the costs are heightened and the city’s redevelopment plan is more likely to be replicated elsewhere, a critical examination of Yonkers is all the more pressing.

How, then, does this neoliberal context shape how Irish immigrant newcomers encounter Irishness as a race-based tradition? Because many are not, and cannot be, invested in hard work, family, or loyalty to the United States, do they learn to stress their racial fitness by becoming enthusiastic guardians of America’s racial order? Because
diverse peoples—Native Americans, African slaves, and heterogeneous Europeans—were present at its inception, the United States adapted a more flexible criterion for white racial fitness that could include Irish Catholics. At the same time, white racial homogeneity became all the more closely safeguarded in the United States, resulting in a “bipolar racial order” whereby a “national ideology,” anthropologist Aihwa Ong explains, “projects worthy citizens as inherently white.” Not only the Irish but all newcomers to the United States must navigate this specific construction of racial difference.

The global flows of goods, media images, people, and ideologies, in addition to Ireland’s own troubled history with social difference, would make it difficult to suggest that recent Irish immigrants arrive in the United States unfamiliar with racial difference or racism. In this neoliberal context of heightened policing, staggering wealth disparities, and subsequent downturns in housing, employment, and capital markets, in both the Republic of Ireland and the United States, Irish newcomers learn to disparage racial ineptitude and blackness specifically, in ways they perceive to be novel.

This study also is interested in how the good Paddy Irish model reaches beyond the Yonkers Irish. Neoliberal policies are advanced through an ideology of “color blindness” and promise to erase existing inequality along lines of race and ethnicity. Under neoliberalism’s guise, any consumer who espouses market-oriented values and choices such as efficiency and private investment can accumulate wealth. In reality, these policies keep white structures of power intact, and therein resides their appeal. While purportedly color-blind, the language of neoliberalism is color-coded. In this current climate, demonized “welfare recipients” and “illegal aliens,” for example, serve as a proxy for Black and Latino, while Irishness serves as a stand-in for white racial fitness. Everyday practices, local Yonkers policy, and national immigration agendas perpetuate the good Paddy model for Irishness. In stressing Irish racial fitness, working-class communities of color appear more racially inept and in need of zero tolerance policing as well as the so-called progress promised by unfettered privatization and a dismantled welfare state. The good Paddy Irish model, therefore, serves this larger “racial project.”

Attention to race is particularly pressing given the election of President Barack Obama as evidence of a “color-blind” or “postracial” American society. This racial ideology, as it often is used politically by
the Right, attributes race-based structural inequalities to individual irresponsibility and cultural deficiencies and has been used to dismantle race-based practices such as affirmative action. According to this rhetoric, race is socially and politically divisive in the United States solely because of race-conscious agitation emanating from communities of color. While many “color-blind realists,” as they have been called, wish race simply would go away, my project challenges this larger trend, calling attention instead to the ways many whites inhabit a race-conscious identity on an everyday basis. More important, my study aims to expand how we understand race itself, both its articulation and its range, by illustrating how the Yonkers Irish grapple with race in an uneven and differentiated fashion.

At the same time, my work intervenes in scholarly debates about the Irish in the United States. Scholars traditionally understand the Irish, and European immigrants more generally, within the context of nineteenth-century migration from Europe and rely primarily on “ethnici-
zation,” a model tracing the restructuring of ethnic symbols, boundaries, and affiliations over time, whereby renegotiated ethnic boundaries are incorporated into equally dynamic shifts in what it means to be American. Labor historians David Roediger and Noel Ignatiev radically challenged this paradigm in their consideration of race and the incorporation of European immigrants in the United States. Specifically, Ignatiev has examined how the Irish “became white,” that is, how apelike caricatures of the Irish and comparisons with African Americans in popular culture dissipated by the turn of the century; Roediger has traced how working-class Irish men increasingly articulated a specifically white identity as they engaged in progressively racist behavior. By looking to immigrants specifically, these studies underscored the social construction of race, how racial ideologies are not innate but learned, and how racial identities and associations are not fixed but instead change over time. While these approaches to race were particularly insightful, inspiring a new field of inquiry that increasingly has been called “whiteness studies,” they also raised important questions. Favorable treatment of the Irish under U.S. immigration law prompted some to ask whether the Irish were ever seen really as “nonwhite,” and the approach of European immigration scholars more generally prompts uncertainty about the ethnic identity of the men in Roediger’s
and Ignatiev’s studies. Did “Irish” play a supporting role to their newfound “white” identity? Or did their newfound racial identity supplant and replace their Irish identity? And while their work adds new depth to our understanding of working-class Irish men in the nineteenth century, what about their female counterparts? How did they encounter race and articulate a race-conscious identity in the United States?

Developments in postcolonial studies, and the work of feminist scholars in particular, can begin to answer these questions. Ann Laura Stoler and Anne McClintock have shown how full white racial membership, as it was defined within the larger context of nineteenth-century nationbuilding, was determined by domestic standards, or “respectable” households. When we locate racial boundaries here, in the race-, class-, and gender-coded values of order, family, hard work, faith, and loyalty to the United States, we can begin to understand how the working-class Catholic Irish, though treated favorably under U.S. immigration law, also were subject to racial hazing by way of apelike caricatures. Though they had the skin color necessary for naturalization, they were lacking in other racial standards, namely, class and religion. When we think of racial boundaries in terms of domesticity, rather than solely in terms of skin color, or access to race-based structures of power, we can better consider the malleability of race and how the Irish could utilize these standards to articulate their ethnic identity in the United States. In other words, these domestic standards allow us to better consider the ways in which racial and ethnic identities converge, how ethnicity is informed by larger racial meanings, and how race consciousness involves more than racist sentiment and behavior. At the same time, the very domestic nature of these standards brings Irish women, who typically toiled in respectable American homes, into the scope of analysis. These domestic racial standards, which address the shortcomings in previous whiteness scholarship, also present their own challenges in regard to the Irish.

While the domestic standards that governed racial boundaries were imagined specifically in terms of “black” and “white,” I am quite hesitant to use “blackness” or “quasi-black” or “nonwhite” to describe how the Irish fell short of white racial expectations. These terms are confusing, given the typically fair complexion of the Irish, but they are equally troublesome, as they have the potential to obscure the treatment accorded those with darker skin under empire. Referring to the
Irish in these terms flattens distinctions between the Irish and African experiences, for example, under both British and American regimes. Discussing racial boundaries solely within a white/black binary also hides the complexities of racial exchanges, how the “others” created by these standards also were quite literally schooled in and attempted to adapt these same racial standards imagined specifically as white. Racial others, after all, needed racial potential to be incorporated within larger imperial agendas. As a result of these concerns, I discuss racial boundaries with terms such as “racial aptitude” and “racial incompetence.”

While examinations of the Irish in U.S. immigration history typically focus on ethnicity, rather than race, the same cannot be said of cultural studies. Recent studies of contemporary Irish American identity stress the ways in which Irishness is inseparable from white racialness. Within the interdisciplinary work of Diane Negra, Catherine Eagan, and Lauren Onkey, Irishness is not only transnational but profoundly dynamic, intersecting with other social categories of race, class, and gender. This study, therefore, seeks to reconcile their insights into Irish American identity with historical examinations of Irish immigrant generations in the United States. And in doing so, I heed Eithne Luibheid’s call for scholarship on the Irish that explores the relationship between race and migration across time and space.15

At the same time, my work falls into the “second wave” of whiteness scholarship, a field that has been attentive particularly to how class shapes the powers and privileges associated with white skin. These studies have demonstrated how poor whites have been marginalized historically in U.S. society and American popular culture. More important, scholars such as John Hartigan Jr. have captured the ways in which intragroup relations shape the boundaries of whiteness.16 Related to my hesitation to use terms such as “nonwhite” to describe the Irish, I equally am weary of a trend in this field. Such focused attention to class marginalization is positioned to conflate the experiences of “white trash” and working-class communities of color and suggest that class subordination supplants racial privilege. While class surely limits the racial privilege enjoyed by undocumented Irish newcomers, my study is deliberately attentive to how it does not render it obsolete.

To successfully uncover how the race-conscious good Paddy Irish model evolved historically and how it resonates in contemporary Irish
American life, my study equally is a methodological departure from previous studies of the Irish. This project juxtaposes both historical and ethnographic analysis. Such an approach underscores the long trajectory of racial socialization as a process unbound by the nineteenth century. Because of the long history of Irish migration to the United States, no other group is as uniquely positioned to demonstrate the continuity between race and Americanization over time. Furthermore, an interdisciplinary methodology better reveals the complexity of this process. When they are examined only historically, Irish immigrants move in a linear trajectory, becoming more assimilated and progressively racist over time. Ethnography, however, better conveys the instability of race and how Irish immigrants contemplate and challenge race-conscious identity in the United States. At the same time, my use of qualitative, rather than quantitative, methods to study race is deliberate. While few whites express racist sentiments publicly, in surveys or opinion polls, for example, recent scholarship reveals how their sentiments diverge considerably in private, in everyday stories and interviews, especially among other whites. As a result, in a society that claims to be color-blind and postracial, the “richness of data,” according to sociologist Krysten Myers, “can best be achieved through qualitative methods.”

Therefore, in addition to archival research, this study is supported by more than two years of ethnographic fieldwork, both participant observation in various sites associated with the Yonkers Irish and extended taped interviews. I made regular visits to an array of places associated with the Irish in Yonkers: the Yonkers St. Patrick’s Day parade and dinner; St. Patrick’s Day celebrations in local public schools, Catholic parishes, and Irish bars and restaurants; meetings of various Irish cultural organizations, as well as their sponsored events, including golf outings, picnics, and dinner dances; fund-raisers sponsored by or organized in support of a member of the Yonkers Irish community; other Irish businesses such as delis, butchers, and gift shops; Irish football matches played by adults and children (both male and female); educational programs sponsored by various Irish ethnic organizations, including Irish step-dancing and music classes for children, Irish history, music, and Gaelic classes for adults, homeless outreach, yoga, and special group gatherings targeted at “moms and tots” or senior citizens. Additionally, I attended weekly meetings and events sponsored by the Irish Lobby for
Immigration Reform. My informants were recruited largely from contacts made in these sites. My fieldwork additionally was sustained by reading national Irish American newspapers sold in Yonkers, especially the *Irish Echo* and the *Irish Voice*.

I was able to access these sites largely because of my personal ties to different cohorts of Yonkers Irish. My parents are Irish white flighters who emigrated from Ireland in the 1960s and moved to Yonkers in the late 1970s. As a child, I visited Ireland regularly and was enrolled both in Irish step-dancing and traditional Irish music lessons for many years. My experience with Irish newcomers began in the 1980s when several of my Irish cousins arrived undocumented in New York. Through these contacts, I socialized in Irish immigrant bars in the Bronx and Yonkers in the 1990s and made friends with many Irish newcomers. My contact with the city’s assimilated Irish ethnics, whose ties to the city of Yonkers reach back to the nineteenth century, stems from bartending for more than a decade in my family’s bar in northwest Yonkers. Through my interactions with these Irish groups, I became aware of the many distinct notions of “Irish” that coexisted within the same city. Despite introducing myself as a graduate student conducting research on the Irish in Yonkers, I was often referred to as “Seamus and Nora’s daughter” or “that bartender from Nugent’s,” or was told by many Irish newcomers that they recognized me from the neighborhood. Because of that familiarity, I believe people were willing to talk about being Irish in Yonkers. To protect the identity of my informants, I have created pseudonyms and composites of both people and events. Given the political momentum at both local and national levels to criminalize undocumented immigrants, I feel it is necessary to protect not only my informants—many of whom are or were undocumented—but also other people, including the assimilated Irish ethnics and Irish white flighters, with whom they may come in contact.

This study begins with the history of Yonkers. Chapter 1 traces the city’s unfettered industrial growth in the nineteenth century and concomitant loss of manufacturing in the decades following World War II. I also examine the ugly desegregation controversy waged during the 1980s, in the name of protecting property value, that nearly emptied the city’s coffers. This chapter considers how Yonkers’s long-standing competition with New York City for new business and investment has been
waged at the cost of accentuating class and race inequality. Chapter 2 examines the histories of assimilated Irish ethnics, Irish white flighters, and Irish newcomers in Yonkers. This chapter is attentive to the conditions in both Ireland and the United States surrounding each generation of migrants and traces the evolution of the good Paddy model for Irishness as well as the bad Paddy detraction from it. Chapter 3 examines the contentious politics that occurred when the equally contentious historical trajectories of the Irish and the city of Yonkers collided. I look specifically to Irish bar politics, to the mass-produced “Guinness” pub and its good Paddy appeal, imagined as part of a larger $3.1 billion agreement to lure new investment in southwest Yonkers, and the policing of bad Paddy Irish immigrant bars in southeast Yonkers beginning in the 1990s. In tracing the separate treatment of Irish bars, and by extension Irish people, this chapter shows how neoliberal policies of aggressive privatization and policing accentuate disparities among the Yonkers Irish.

Everyday interactions between the Yonkers Irish are the focus of chapter 4. This chapter considers how Irish racial expectations get communicated in an array of cultural practices associated with Yonkers’s assimilated Irish ethnics and Irish white flighters. These displays, which reinforce the good Paddy construction of the Irish as orderly, hardworking, family-oriented, and loyal, legitimize neoliberal polices in Yonkers that will displace working-class and working-poor communities of color. At the same time, this chapter considers how the larger neoliberal order that is governed by zero tolerance policing encourages the racial hazie of undocumented Irish newcomers. Chapter 5 then turns to Irish newcomers in Yonkers, both new and newer Irish immigrants and how they interact with the good Paddy Irish model. By underscoring their voices, this chapter illustrates how a precarious legal status encourages indifference to the benchmarks for Irishness in the United States, but also certitude regarding America’s bipolar racial order.

Chapter 6 follows the Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform (ILIR), which organized in December 2005 to “legalize the Irish.” I maintain that calls for a zero tolerance approach to immigration at both the national and the state level encouraged this organization to adopt a race-conscious and racist lobbying agenda, and to work undocumented Irish immigrants into good Paddies. Race politics surrounding immigration both in the United States and in the Republic of Ireland,
14 << introduction

however, stalled efforts to change the legal status of the undocumented Irish. And with severe downturns in both nations’ economies—the former beginning in 2007 and the latter in 2008—their legal status remains ever the more precarious.

Ultimately, my analysis of the Yonkers Irish shows that there is more to being Irish American than the ubiquitous green beer and shamrocks around St. Patrick’s Day. Attention to how one must be a particular kind of Irish person speaks to the conditions required of being “Irish” but also of being “American.” Hard work, loyalty, religious faith, and heterosexual family are the standards by which the racial fitness for all groups is assessed. Since its inception, the United States has imagined itself as a white nation. As a result, communities of color are always suspect and must perform a hyperadherence to these standards. The Irish encounter these standards differently, but they encounter them, nonetheless, and thus this study speaks more broadly to the conditions that establish belonging and alienage in the United States.