Introduction

On October 22, 1934, a young couple, Rafael Lopez de Onate and Eleanor (Ellen) Wilson McAdoo, appeared at the Riverside County Clerk’s Office in California to apply for a marriage license. They did not actually get married that day, as California law required prospective partners to file a three-day “notice of intention to marry,” so their visit to the clerk’s office was the first step in a multipart process.¹ The couple’s decision to file their application in Riverside was curious, as both De Onate and Wilson McAdoo resided in West Hollywood, California, about seventy miles away. The pair likely wanted to proceed with their marriage plans away from the media spotlight of Los Angeles because De Onate was Filipino and Wilson McAdoo was white. The prospective bridegroom was a light-skinned mestizo and might have escaped scrutiny had he not listed the Philippines as his place of birth on the application. This piece of information, however, raised a red flag with Riverside County Clerk D. G. Clayton, who reminded the couple of the state’s antimiscegenation statute that proscribed intermarriage between whites and “Malays.” De Onate and Wilson McAdoo would certainly have been aware that Los Angeles had been the site of a prolonged legal struggle around the issue of whether the state’s prohibition on interracial wedlock applied to Filipinos. In 1933, just a year before De Onate and Wilson McAdoo applied for their marriage license, the California State Supreme Court had ruled in the highly publicized _Roldan v. Los Angeles County_ case that Filipinos, unlike Chinese and Japanese, were eligible to intermarry with whites based on a technical issue related to their racial classification as “Malays.” This state of affairs was short-lived, as the legislature amended the state’s antimiscegenation statute a few weeks later, adding Filipinos to the list of the groups legally barred from intermarrying with whites, and thus settled legal questions surrounding the issue (see chapter 3).

The pair’s attempt to circumvent the state’s bar on intermarriage might have gone unnoticed if it were not for the distinguished lineage and social standing of De Onate’s fiancée. Ellen Wilson McAdoo was the granddaugh-
ter of former president Woodrow Wilson and the daughter of William Gibbs McAdoo, a powerful U.S. senator from California. If the couple believed that they could avoid scrutiny by traveling to Riverside, they were wrong. News of the pair’s impending nuptials caused a media frenzy, generating sensational headlines across the country. Scrutiny of relationships between Filipino men and white women was not new in California, and in fact, anxieties about such pairings had provoked a series of violent race riots and vigilante campaigns on the West Coast during the late 1920s and early 1930s.

The romance between De Onate and Wilson McAdoo struck many observers as a novelty because it flouted conventional thinking about the character of interracial intimacy. Why, after all, would an attractive white woman such as Ellen Wilson McAdoo, just nineteen years old, want to marry a Filipino man, knowing that such a union violated both legal and social conventions? Her upper-class background and patrician pedigree flew in the face of popular explanations of interracial attraction, which held that only lower-class or morally debased women were attracted to Filipino men (see chapter 4). News accounts described the bride-to-be as a “statuesque blonde” who lived on a ten-thousand-dollar-a-year allowance provided by her wealthy parents. The thirty-eight-year-old De Onate, on the other hand, was a struggling Hollywood actor eking out a modest living through part-time work in Spanish-language films.

Media coverage of the case centered on two main themes: the vocal opposition to the marriage raised by the Wilson McAdoo family and the contested racial status of Rafael De Onate, who claimed to be of Spanish rather than Filipino descent. When news of the impending nuptials reached Senator McAdoo in Washington, DC, he immediately asked his friend and law partner in California, Colonel William H. Neblett, to intercede. Neblett served as the family spokesman during the affair, marshaling the Wilson McAdoo clan’s political resources to prevent the marriage from taking place. The family applied personal pressure on Ellen, asking her to rethink her “wild plans” to marry De Onate. Senator McAdoo claimed that his vehement opposition was due in part to the fact that he had never met the prospective bridegroom, yet there was clearly more to the story.

The family issued a public threat to “disown” and “disinherit” Ellen if she were to follow through with her marriage plans, and her car was seized by Colonel Neblett to prevent her from meeting with her fiancé. The bride-to-be, according to media accounts, was a well-heeled “debutante,” accustomed to a life of bourgeois privilege and excess. This stood in stark contrast to the social milieu of her potential husband, who labored on the
margins of the Hollywood film industry. An investigation of Rafael De Onate's finances conducted by Neblett discovered that De Onate's annual income for the previous five years had averaged less than one thousand dollars per year. Observers wondered if the threat of disinheritance would convince the couple to alter their plans knowing the potential financial consequences. Would Ellen McAdoo come to her senses when her lavish lifestyle was jeopardized? In light of the media scrutiny of their relationship and pressure from the Wilson McAdoo family, the couple decided to postpone their betrothal. There were conflicting accounts, however, of what the delay meant. The spokesman for the McAdoo Wilson family claimed that the wedding plans had been called off permanently. Rafael and Ellen, however, insisted that they still intended to get married once the media attention died down, and it soon became clear to all involved that the pair were moving forward with their matrimonial plans despite threats of familial and financial alienation.

Legal obstacles proved to be a more serious roadblock to the couple’s plans than family pressure was. State officials in California had made it clear from the very beginning of the process that they had no intention of granting a marriage license to the pair until questions surrounding Mr. De Onate's racial background were settled. Senator McAdoo and Colonel Neblett contacted Riverside officials, expressing their opinion that the bridegroom was subject to the state's antimiscegenation statute. D. G. Clayton of the Riverside County Clerk's Office was adamant that no license would be issued to the couple until De Onate provided evidence that he had “no Filipino or Malay blood in his veins.” When asked by reporters if a copy of the bridegroom's birth certificate would be sufficient verification of his ancestry, Clayton tersely replied, “No it would not. . . . I want proof of the racial blood of his parents.” The Wilson McAdoo family applied political pressure to officials outside of California as well, issuing a public appeal to government authorities in the neighboring states of Arizona and Nevada warning them of De Onate's Filipino heritage, in order to thwart the couple’s rumored elopement plans to other jurisdictions.

William McAdoo’s apprehension about the racial status of his potential son-in-law was not surprising, given that the senator had grown up in the American South with strong family ties to the Confederacy. Interracial marriage was quite rare in the 1930s, and the practice was held in disrepute among the nation’s white population. The senator was no stranger to the nation’s contentious racial politics, having been a central player in the infamous Democratic “Klanbake” Convention in New York in 1924.
Filipino men and white women was a particularly sensitive topic in California, where nativist forces had seized on anxieties about interracial sex and labor competition to advance a national campaign aimed at forestalling immigration from the Philippines (see chapter 5).

Throughout the controversy, Rafael De Onate maintained that he was of “pure Spanish blood” and therefore not subject to the state’s prohibition on intermarriage. His embrace of the European part of his heritage is not surprising, considering the obvious material advantages that redounded to the white population as a result of its privileged position in the social order. The taint of Filipino blood, moreover, brought with it a social stigma that De Onate almost certainly wanted to avoid in the nativist climate of 1930s California. He condemned media speculation about his suspect ancestry, calling questions about racial background “ridiculous.” De Onate proclaimed, “I am Spanish—most certainly I am not Filipino. I cannot understand why such a fuss is being made, just because Ellen and I are in love.” His public statements about his background did little to clarify matters, offering vague and sometimes contradictory claims about his personal history. In interviews he claimed that he had been “educated” in the United States, but according to authorities, he had migrated to the country as an adult. He also told reporters that he “considered himself” an American citizen, but he offered no explanation about how he circumvented U.S. nationality law that debarred Filipinos from naturalized citizenship. The notoriety surrounding the case prompted federal authorities to look into the issue. An inspector from the Los Angeles branch of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) questioned the actor at the Fox Film Studios lot in Los Angeles about his background and citizenship status but found nothing to contradict his public accounts of his family history.

Official documentation from the Philippines did little to clarify matters since public records offered conflicting evidence about the De Onate family’s Spanish bloodlines. The lack of uniform standards or criteria for determining racial boundaries added another layer of confusion to the story. The various parties involved in the case frequently conflated color and nationality in their efforts to prove or disprove the family’s racial pedigree. Rafael De Onate repeatedly declared that both his parents were natives of “Basque Country” who had migrated to the Philippines during the Spanish colonial period. Rafael’s sister, Mercedes Lopez De Onate West, offered a slightly different version of the family’s history, claiming that their father was from Barcelona and that their mother, Isabel Novarro, was a full-blooded Spanish subject born in the Philippines. Philippine officials provided documentation that
seemed to back up these claims, verifying that both parents were recognized as nationals of Spain. Indicia of the family’s Spanish nationality, however, did not resolve questions about the bridegroom’s racial bona fides after it was established that Rafael’s mother, Isabel Novarro, had indeed been born in the Philippines. This piece of information raised immediate suspicions about the “purity” of her bloodlines, since racial admixture was commonplace under the Spanish colonial regime. Phillip Whitaker, Rafael and Mercedes’s stepfather, added fuel to this speculation, claiming that the late Ms. Novarro was in fact of mestiza extraction. Whitaker told reporters in Manila that prior to her passing, Isabel Novarro-Whitaker had confided to him that she was of “1/4 or 1/8 Filipino blood.” This assertion raised the possibility that Rafael De Onate was of one-eighth or one-sixteenth Filipino ancestry, though Phillip Whitaker’s claims about his late wife’s miscegenous bloodlines could not be verified.

The story took an unexpected turn just two weeks later, when the Wilson McAdoo family abruptly dropped its opposition to the couple’s marital plans. The reason for the family’s change of heart is unclear, but Senator McAdoo did eventually meet his daughter’s fiancé, giving him the opportunity to question De Onate about his background. With the family’s blessing, Rafael Lopez De Onate and Ellen Wilson McAdoo refilled a declaration of intention to be married, this time at the Los Angeles County Clerk’s office on November 8, 1934. To their dismay, they discovered that Rosamond Rice, chief of the Los Angeles Marriage License Bureau (and ardent opponent of interracial marriage), had no intention of issuing the couple a license until De Onate could “produce proof he is of the Caucasian race.” Though it was not readily clear what constituted “proof” of membership in the Caucasian race, Rice suggested that she wanted documentary evidence of the applicant’s unalloyed whiteness before she would sign off on the couple’s nuptials. It was unlikely that Rafael De Onate could meet the Los Angeles Marriage Bureau’s purity threshold even though he was likely seven-eighths or fifteen-sixteenths white and probably passed as a white man in his everyday interactions. Whether Rosamond Rice’s narrow interpretation of the state’s proscription on interracial marriage would hold up under scrutiny from the courts was an open question. California’s antimiscegenation law was vague on the blood quantum required to qualify an individual as a white person, and the application of the statute often differed by jurisdiction.

The California attorney general’s office soon weighed in on the case, acknowledging that state law lacked an operative definition of legal whiteness. Nonetheless James Howie, deputy attorney general of California, advo-
cated a narrow metric for determining the boundaries of whiteness: “if a person has at least one-quarter Malay blood, he is not white.” According to the attorney general’s office, a person of three-quarters white blood and one-quarter Malay blood would be legally classed as a member of the Filipino race and therefore barred by state law from marrying a Caucasian person. This interpretation did not settle the issue of Rafael De Onate’s eligibility, since he was only one-eighth or one-sixteenth Filipino. Howie floated the possibility that the “one-drop rule” might apply to the state’s intermarriage ban, suggesting that a “person with any Malay blood whatever” might be prevented from marrying a Caucasian in California. Deliberations among state officials about De Onate’s “true” racial identity underscore the fluid nature of social classification and highlight some of the difficulties in maintaining categorical distinctions between population groups. It also reminds us that race is not a fixed or settled category, but rather a social construct that has been wielded by dominant-group members to valorize ascriptive boundaries and monopolize access to material resources and civic status.

Lingering (and likely embarrassing) questions about Rafael De Onate’s racial legitimacy finally convinced the couple to look for friendlier environs in moving forward with their nuptials. On November 10, 1934, the pair flew to New Mexico and were married in Albuquerque at the home of local attorney William Keleher, a former associate of William Gibbs McAdoo. Married at long last, the bride and groom expressed relief that their vexing ordeal was over. Rather than dwell on the imbroglio that had surrounded their relationship, Ellen Lopez De Onate preferred instead to focus on her impending honeymoon. Senator McAdoo also seemed reconciled to the couple’s actions, telling reporters, “love laughs at locksmiths, . . . and that is all there is to it.” He told reporters that he gave the pair his blessing after meeting with De Onate and determining that he was indeed of “Spanish parentage.” He had little to say about his previous objections to their relationship and said that he knew nothing of the couple’s future plans. McAdoo’s statements of support later came under scrutiny when the pair went through a contentious divorce a few years later, in 1937.

In Ellen Lopez De Onate’s filing for dissolution of the marriage, she cited a lack of spousal support as precipitating the couple’s estrangement. She stated that her husband had failed to provide financially for her and the couple’s young son, Ricardo, even though he had the means to do so. Rafael De Onate told reporters he was surprised by the divorce suit and claimed that his financial difficulties were a result of the Wilson McAdoo family’s interference. During the contentious divorce proceedings, he told the court that
Senator McAdoo paid the couple to leave the country after their wedding to “avoid unfavorable publicity” due to his racial heritage. Moreover, the senator footed the bill for the pair to stay in Europe for two years after their nuptials to evade further media scrutiny of their controversial relationship. The couple’s two-year “honeymoon” in Europe, it seemed, was less romantic adventure than a voluntary exile carried out to protect the Wilson McAdoo family’s public image.

Upon returning to the United States, Rafael De Onate found it difficult to secure film work in Hollywood, and he blamed this situation on his two-year exile from the movie industry. Senator McAdoo and his ex-wife, Eleanor Wilson, both testified at the divorce proceedings and denied that they had meddled in the couple’s marriage or that he had ever opposed the coupling on racial grounds. Ellen McAdoo was granted an interlocutory divorce on April 2, 1937, as well as sole custody of Ricardo. She was remarried a year later, in 1938, to musician William Hinshaw. Though Ellen held legal custody of Ricardo after her divorce, the boy actually lived with Senator McAdoo and his wife in Santa Barbara, California. In May 1940, the case reappeared in the news as the McAdoos filed court papers to formally adopt their four-year-old grandson, Ricardo Lopez De Onate. Rafael De Onate appeared unexpectedly at the adoption proceedings to seek custody of his son and to challenge the revocation of his paternal rights. Judge Atwell Westwick dismissed De Onate’s custodial claims to his son and granted a decree approving the adoption. The McAdoos immediately rechristened their “son” with a new Anglo name, Richard Floyd McAdoo, expunging outward evidence of the boy’s suspicious racial pedigree.

Though the curious chronicle of Rafael Lopez De Onate and Ellen Wilson McAdoo was a major scandal at the time, it is likely unfamiliar to most Americans today. It is not difficult to see why the couple’s unlikely romance received so much media attention at the time, since it featured high-profile social actors (Senator William McAdoo, Ellen Wilson) and controversial themes (interracial romance, crossing of class lines, family interference). More important than the human drama surrounding the events are the social and political themes that it brings to light. Rafael Lopez De Onate is hardly a well-known figure in Filipino American history, and considering his public statements at the time, he would probably express ambivalence about being included as part of that historical narrative. His story is instructive, nonetheless, in that it highlights the contentious politics surrounding Filipinos’ immigration to the United States and the ways in which their arrival confounded authorities charged with enforcing racial and national boundaries.
Although it might seem odd to begin a book about Filipino Americans with a story involving a man who publicly denied that he was Filipino, I believe that Rafael De Onate and the events that unfolded around him provide a useful point of entry to analyze themes of race, immigration, and American empire. Take, for instance, the issue of De Onate’s racial identification, which was so central to the marriage controversy. Race, we are often reminded, is a social construction, a human contrivance that has been used to frame and rationalize hierarchical divisions between population groups in the modern world. In racially stratified societies, people are assigned into discrete, hierarchically organized social categories, which subsequently become the basis for collective identification and action. This begs the question, who is doing the assigning, and to what end? In the case at hand, the primary racializers included a gauntlet of local and state officials tasked with policing the color line in matters of interracial association and family relations.

Private citizens (family members, media observers) also played an important role in policing ascriptive hierarchies, recognizing that the monopoly on power and privilege held by whites in American society was contingent and required vigilant adherence to norms of racial propriety. This task was easier said than done, since group boundaries were often fluid and contested, held together by a disjointed system of public and private sanctions. Rafael De Onate’s identification was particularly vexing, since the tall, light-skinned actor likely passed as white in most of his social interactions and might have done so again in Riverside had he not listed his place of birth as the Philippines on the marriage application. Other social actors also weighed in on the issue, especially when the high-powered Wilson McAdoo’s family expressed objections to Ellen’s suitor. The case received an elevated level of scrutiny from local authorities, who were wary of letting a “colored” infiltrator circumvent the race line in such a high-profile case. The operative assumption of public officials and media observers was that De Onate was Filipino, unless he could offer “proof” that he was of pure Spanish blood. Simple resolution of the case, however, proved problematic in this situation because California state law was ambiguous on the issue of blood quantum as it pertained to the eligibility of mixed-race individuals. Adding to the drama was the fact the Rafael De Onate emphatically rejected his assignment into the Malay race category and claimed, instead, to be white.

The contentious debate surrounding the disposition of the De Onate case recalls the observations of sociologist Herbert Blumer regarding the labyrinthine character of the American racial hierarchy. Blumer astutely noted that the color line in the United States is best represented not as a “single,
sharply drawn line” but rather “as a series of ramparts,” tenuously held together through a patchwork system of legal barriers, cultural routines, and social conventions.\textsuperscript{18} The absence of clear-cut, consistent definitions about racial classification gave local bureaucrats and state officials wide latitude in determining the boundaries of exclusion, since they were free to interpret statutory meanings in line with prevailing community prejudices. Fluid definitions of race also opened up the potential opportunities to challenge the criteria of exclusion. Countless individuals, De Onate included, tested the system and, in doing so, highlighted cracks in the racial order. The structure of white domination, however, proved remarkably resilient despite its contradictions and inconsistencies, due in no small part to the vigilance of public and private gatekeepers who held the line against rival claimants.

The scandal surrounding the case also serves as a springboard into other key themes taken up in this book, namely, the entanglement of immigration, empire, and citizenship. Recall that INS officials intervened in the case, interrogating De Onate about his personal history and legal status in the United States. Why was such an intervention necessary? Why did officials not simply look up his immigration records to ascertain when he entered the country? The answer to these questions lies in the unique historical relationship between the United States and the Philippines, a political attachment that dates back to 1898, when the United States seized the islands in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War. As a result, Filipinos became U.S. “nationals,” an anomalous political designation that placed them in a political twilight zone between citizenship and alienage. Their unique sociolegal status accorded them certain rights, including the freedom to move across and within the borders of the United States. Since Filipinos were not classified as aliens, they were not subject to U.S. immigration laws and were essentially treated the same as citizens when it came to entering or exiting the country. Consequently, American immigration authorities kept no official records on arrivals from the Philippines and did little to track their movements once they arrived. When an inspector from the INS interrogated Rafael De Onate about his history in the United States, it was likely a perfunctory exercise, since the INS held no authority over his standing as a legal resident.\textsuperscript{19}

Filipinos’ special status did not extend into the arena of naturalization law. Like other Asian immigrant groups, they were racially ineligible for naturalized U.S. citizenship (except for a small group of men who had served in the U.S. armed forces during World War I). This makes Rafael De Onate’s claim that he was an American citizen suspect. He told the \textit{San Francisco Chronicle} that when he reached a certain age, he was “given the choice” of becoming
an American or a Spanish subject and chose the former. The assertion that he “considered himself” an American citizen leaves open the question of whether he really held officially recognized national membership or whether he was referring to his own self-definition. It is possible that he convinced a naturalization examiner in the United States that he was Spanish, which would have made him eligible for citizenship as a “white person,” but public accounts offer no evidence of a naturalization certificate. De Onate’s status, like that of many other Filipinos, confounded authorities tasked with managing the nation’s internal and external border controls, since the newcomers did not fit neatly into the extant classificatory system. The De Onate affair, and the notoriety that surrounded it, offers a brief glimpse into the complex and contentious history of Filipino America. I now want to lay out the aims of the book to put the case into perspective.

The Making of Filipino America

_The Third Asiatic Invasion: Empire and Migration in Filipino America_, is a work of historical sociology that examines the interlocking politics of race, immigration, and empire. Its central argument is that the incorporation of Filipinos into American society played an important role in shaping the politics of citizenship and race during an important period in U.S. history. This study places a series of questions at the forefront: (1) How did Filipinos’ status as American colonial subjects affect their standing in the United States? (2) How were racial boundaries organized in American society, what did they mean to different social constituencies, how did they evolve over time, and under what conditions did they intersect or diverge from other sources of social and political action? And (3) How and why did Filipino immigration to the United States come to be defined as a “social problem,” and what public resources were mobilized to remedy the putative problem? To answer these questions we must situate the Filipino experience within the larger political and economic transformations sweeping across the globe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This book employs a composite analysis, which takes place at two levels: internationally, through an audit of the sociolegal architecture of American empire, and domestically, through an examination of the formation of Filipino communities in the United States. I reveal how American practices of racial exclusion repeatedly collided with the imperatives of U.S. overseas expansion.

The triumph of the United States in the Spanish-American War of 1898 (and later the Philippine-American war) inaugurated the nation’s ascen-
dance as global imperial power. The spoils of victory included the acquisition of former Spanish colonies including the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Guam. The United States had acquired millions of new political subjects in these territories (and in the separately annexed territory of Hawaii), subjects whose status vis-à-vis the American polity had to be resolved. Public debate centered on the question of whether inhabitants of colonial possessions were granted U.S. citizenship by virtue of treaty, or if not, whether they were eligible for naturalization under American law. The U.S. Congress, backed by the Supreme Court, declared that the political status of inhabitants of “unincorporated territories” such as the Philippines and Puerto Rico was to be determined by Congress on a case-by-case basis (see chapter 1).

An influential bloc of U.S. congressmen and public figures opposed extending American sovereignty over the Philippines, warning that such an act would automatically confer U.S. citizenship to all residents of the islands. Previous territorial annexations by the United States had included provisions collectively naturalizing inhabitants of those jurisdictions. The prospect that Filipinos might be integrated into the U.S. polity with the same political rights enjoyed by white citizens set off alarm bells, as a broad cross-section of the populace questioned the capacity of the nation’s democratic institutions to absorb millions of newcomers of suspect racial stock. Advocates of annexation, on the other hand, drew on a different vein of Progressive Era racial thinking to bolster their case for extraterritorial expansion. This paternalistic worldview held that the Anglo-Saxons had demonstrated a singular capacity for civilizational development, a talent that might be imparted to premodern peoples inhabiting the dark corners of the globe. According to the imperialists, the United States was duty bound to rescue the Filipinos from their debased condition, a project that would require holding the islands in subjection for an indefinite period of colonial apprenticeship. Spokesmen on both sides of the “Philippine question” agreed that Filipinos were unfit for citizenship and set about fashioning a new national policy that allowed the United States to attach its sovereignty to overseas territories without necessarily incorporating the undesirable inhabitants of those possessions into the American polity (at least not as full members).

The contentious politics surrounding the Philippine issue echoed contemporaneous debates about the changing sociolegal status of blacks and the putative threat posed by unrestricted immigration from Asia and southern and eastern Europe. The acquisition of overseas colonies heightened anxieties about race and nationality in a Progressive Era political culture domi-
nated by a virulent strain of civic protectionism. Debates about immigration and nationality policy became increasingly racialized during this period, as the “science” of eugenics was deployed to explain the inevitability of racial hierarchies and the dangers of amalgamation. The ascendance of the United States as a global power was attributed to superior intellectual and physical traits of the nation’s Anglo-Saxon ruling bloc, whose socio-cultural hegemony was evidenced by the ease with which they conquered the continent and by the country’s decisive victory over Spain and Filipino insurgents at the turn of the century. Many observers, however, cautioned that the very source of America’s rise to power (its Anglo-Saxon cultural base) was being weakened by an influx of undesirables and lesser peoples who were either unable or unwilling to assimilate into the national culture.

The passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first in a series of legislative enactments that evinced both the political will and the administrative capacity of the federal government to manage population flows based on racially selective criteria. Chinese exclusion set an important statutory precedent that explicitly welded together external (national border controls) and internal (racial dividing lines) boundary processes. Restrictionist sentiment gained momentum in subsequent decades as nativists warned of an impending crisis triggered by the unfettered influx of inferior population groups. The increasing presence of Asian and southern and eastern European immigrants in the United States, along with the enhanced mobility of African Americans, was, according to nativist spokesmen, slowly energizing the Anglo-Saxon character of the national culture. Anxieties about unrestricted immigration and the shifting contours of the American racial hierarchy led federal officials to assert greater control over both who could legally enter the physical borders of the United States and who could be admitted within the political boundaries of the national community. As a result, the U.S. Congress passed the Naturalization Act of 1906, which consolidated previously separate immigration and naturalization functions of the government into a single federal agency, the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization.

Growing concerns about the demographic composition of U.S. society reflected a marked shift in how Americans (to borrow a phrase from Benedict Anderson) “imagined” the nation, which by the early decades of the twentieth century was increasingly envisioned as a gated community whose survival depended on the vigilant enforcement of immigration and nationality controls.

Extraterritorial expansion complicated efforts to shore up the nation’s external and internal ramparts. Filipinos and other U.S. nationals were
not citizens, yet they were officially recognized as fractional members of the American polity, with certain narrowly defined rights and protections. Boundary lines ran between metropole and colony but at the same time encircled them, a fact that confounded gatekeepers tasked with policing the shifting and uncertain borders of the national community. The most significant privilege accorded Filipinos was immunity from restrictive immigration quotas imposed by the federal government during the early twentieth century. American policymakers were wary of allowing the unfettered entry of Filipinos into the United States but were bound by international convention, which held that imperial subjects be granted free admittance to the “mother country.”

Hawaii sugar planters were the first to recruit labor from the Philippines, beginning in 1906, and by the early 1920s, Filipinos made up the largest segment of the plantation workforce in the islands. The burgeoning canned-salmon industry in Alaska soon followed, enlisting Filipinos in the early 1920s to meet the industry’s growing labor needs, and by the end of the decade Filipinos made up the bulk of the cannery workforce. By the mid-1920s, emigration from the Philippines had gained internal momentum, fueled by a series of factors: the evolution of the transpacific imperial zone as a major political-economic hub, the steady flow of remittances from nationals working abroad, and targeted recruitment by global steamship companies eager to profit from the transpacific traffic of steerage passengers. Filipino migration to the U.S. mainland, which is the primary focus of this book, increased in both scale and velocity during the mid- to late 1920s as western U.S. agricultural interests strained to meet labor needs in an industry experiencing unprecedented growth. Agribusiness leaders expressed consternation about the increasingly restrictive character of the federal immigration apparatus, which obstructed traditional channels of labor and drove up the cost of doing business. Ironically, it was the passage of the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act and the introduction of subsequent legislative proposals seeking to place Mexican immigrants under restrictive quotas that spurred the recruitment of Filipinos, who were excepted from limitative regulation.

The influx of Filipinos to the U.S. mainland during the 1920s riled nativist leaders who viewed the newcomers’ special status as U.S. nationals as an affront to the restrictive spirit of the 1917 and 1924 immigration acts. Although gatekeepers could not control Filipinos’ movement across national borders, they made a concerted effort to delimit Filipinos’ standing within the United States by demanding the newcomers adhere to a staunch observance of extant racial hierarchies in American society. That Filipinos did not
fit neatly into the preexisting classificatory schema generated a good deal of confusion for authorities tasked with enforcing a patchwork structure of racial regulations enacted at the federal, state, and local levels.

One example of this problem was evident in early disputes over whether Filipinos were eligible for citizenship in the United States. Clear resolution of this issue proved elusive because American naturalization law only applied to “aliens” and contained no procedure for naturalizing the newly invented class of persons known as “nationals.” Filipinos, moreover, claimed that their compulsory allegiance to the United States entitled them to civic recognition from their political sovereign. Efforts to bring them under the purview of legal proscriptions regulating citizenship, family rights, employment, and property rights produced a series of conflicting and idiosyncratic rulings that reveal the contingent character of the nation’s ascriptive hierarchy. Filipinos took advantage of the uncertainty surrounding their administrative status to challenge their subordination, exploiting loopholes in statutory language to claim rights and creating headaches for authorities. These issues are important because they highlight tensions between various state actors, most notably between high-level officials in national or state legislatures, who designed exclusionary laws, and intermediary authorities tasked with interpreting and enforcing statutory prohibitions at the local level.

Attempts to keep Filipinos “in their place” proved more difficult than expected because of their anomalous political status and because they frequently circumvented racial checkpoints. Uncertainty about the administrative status of Filipinos in the United States reflected an appreciable tension between prevailing nativist/racist attitudes, on the one hand, and the race-neutral legal tenets enumerated in the U.S. Constitution, on the other. Lawmakers had to make some effort to abide by Fourteenth Amendment protections, which often blunted the effectiveness of discriminatory measures. By the late 1920s, nativist leaders had become increasingly frustrated by what they saw as state officials’ ineffectiveness in containing the Filipino population on the West Coast. A host of actors in civil society also contributed to the problem: employers seeking cheap labor, taxi-dance-hall proprietors, and white women who socialized across the color line. All these individuals allegedly put self-interest ahead of the public good by allowing Filipinos to infiltrate white society. This prompted nativist spokesmen to launch an intensive campaign aimed at raising societal awareness about the dangers posed by Filipino migration and settlement and the need for public interdiction. California had, since the late nineteenth century, served as a political center of the American nativist movement, and its leaders took pride in the
vanguard role that the state played in pressing for federal restrictions barring the entry of Asian immigrants. Movement partisans characterized the influx of Filipinos into the United States as the “third Asiatic invasion,” a rhetorical frame linking the phenomenon to previous waves of Chinese and Japanese immigrants.

Exclusionists, however, faced an uphill battle in their efforts to restrict Filipinos, since national lawmakers were concerned about the diplomatic fallout that would result from barring the nation’s doors to its own political subjects. Enacting such a ban, as Philippine leaders pointed out, would have created a rather dubious international precedent whereby Filipinos were free to travel anywhere in the world under an American passport except to the United States. Nonetheless, nativists and their political allies remained undaunted and mobilized their ample resources to fashion a new societal consensus about the issue. Although nativists were a powerful constituency, the enactment of exclusionary legislation aimed at Filipinos was far from a forgone conclusion. Other powerful sectors of society, including western agribusiness interests, often opposed the passage of new immigration restrictions since their industry relied on transborder labor to bolster profits.

In a bid to rally public support, movement crusaders ratcheted up their rhetoric, employing a “social problem” narrative to frame Filipino immigration and settlement as serious threats to American society. This is a common rhetorical strategy used by social movements seeking to drum up support for their agenda and mobilize public resources to remedy the putative problem. Identifying an issue or phenomenon as a “social problem,” as sociologist Joseph Gusfield has argued, is a “rhetorical device, . . . a claim that some condition, set of events, or group of persons constitutes a troublesome situation that needs to be changed or ameliorated.” He adds that “those who define the problem, do so from a standard which involves them in the role of legitimate spokespersons for the society or public interest. Having defined the condition as a ‘social problem,’ there is then a legitimate basis for bringing public resources to bear on it in the manner defined.”

Nativist leaders cast themselves as defenders of the public interest, animating anxieties about unfettered immigration, interracial intimacy, and downward social mobility to label Filipinos a problem population whose continued presence posed a danger to the white community. Movement partisans were drawn from influential sectors of American society, and the media treated them as legitimate authorities on issues of immigration and race relations. The nativist lobby was led by a powerful network of public figures and powerbrokers, which included Paul Scharrenberg, the de facto head of
the California State Federation of Labor; V. S. McClatchy, media baron and president of the American Coalition of Patriotic Societies; California attorney general Ulysses S. Webb; and Charles M. Goethe, renowned California banker and eugenicist. These activists linked their efforts through several important organizations, including the California Joint Immigration Committee, a kind of nativist supergroup that brought together prominent political officials, social reformers, and leaders of allied organizations such as the American Legion, Native Sons of the Golden West, the Commonwealth Club, and the Grange.

By 1930, nativists were describing the “Filipino problem” in increasingly hyperbolic terms, reasoning that the more acute the problem, the more legitimate their calls for public action. Movement spokespersons claimed that the issue had reached a crisis point on the West Coast and would soon spread to other parts of the country. Nativists and social reformers alike traded in the politics of racial rescue, positioning themselves as the guardians of the social order, out to protect the white community from racial retrogression and moral decline. The negative consequences of Filipino immigration were, they claimed, serious and far-reaching: they stole jobs from native whites, exhibited high rates of criminality, depended on public assistance, practiced substandard hygiene, and were susceptible to diseases that jeopardized the well-being of the larger society. Partisans were particularly outraged by the perceived brazenness with which Filipinos defied conventional codes of racial propriety, especially when it came to matters of interracial sex and marriage. The Filipino population on the West Coast was largely made up of young men recruited to work in agriculture, with a male-to-female ratio of fourteen to one (a rate that was even more disproportionate in some rural communities). That these young men believed it was within their rights to interact socially with whomever they pleased, including white women, provoked a strong negative reaction from the larger society. This issue attracted sensational media attention, which depicted Filipino men as a problem population instinctively drawn into deviant associations with white women that inevitably led to social conflict. The emphasis on the dangers of race mixing was part of a deliberate strategy of western U.S. nativists, who believed the issue would attract the support of southern congressmen, whom they saw as natural allies on public policy relating to breaches of the color line.

Escalating tensions about race mixing and labor competition soon became front-page news on the West Coast, with stories featuring alarmist statements by public officials and moral entrepreneurs. The failure of the federal government to curtail immigration from the Philippines and the
ineffectiveness of formal legal obstacles in containing the Filipino population on the West Coast spurred nativists to assert local sovereignty over the issue. Exclusionists took up the mantle of popular direct action to confront the putative problem, advocating racialized collective action aimed at taking back their country from the unwelcome outsiders. This revanchist campaign took an increasingly volatile character by the late 1920s, marked by extralegal violence and local initiatives to “deport” or expel the unwelcome newcomers from West Coast communities. A series of race riots and vigilante attacks targeting Filipinos swept across the region and attracted nationwide media attention, providing an outsized platform for exclusionists to mobilize public support for their crusade. Though wary not to explicitly endorse extralegal reprisals, nativist leaders exploited the racial discord, blaming the persecuted Filipino community for the turmoil and claiming that they had brought the violence on themselves with their provocative behavior. The white community, according to these claims makers, had been abandoned by the federal government and was, thus, forced to take the law into its own hands to defend the nation against another “Asiatic invasion.”

Movement leaders played a decisive role in shaping how these conflicts were interpreted and represented in the media and in public culture. They cast the riots as regrettable but inevitable responses to shortsighted government policies that allowed an unassimilable racial group to overrun the nation’s borders. Nativist arguments were couched in the aggrieved discourse of white victimhood, a rhetorical strategy that both explained and legitimated racialized collective action. Claims makers appealed to white Americans’ “sense of group position,” suggesting that their hegemonic standing in U.S. society was imperiled by the newcomers, who threatened to upend the social order. Framed in this way, direct-action campaigns targeting Filipinos were forceful expressions of the popular will, which lent an aura of righteousness to the exclusionists’ crusade. Nativists’ ultimate goal was to fix responsibility for the Filipino issue on the federal government, believing that it was best positioned to remedy the problem through its legislative powers.

Political pressure from nativists and the notoriety of western race riots increased national attention on the issue, but many lawmakers still balked at the idea of barring the nation’s doors to Filipinos while they remained under U.S. dominion. It was not until nativist forces switched tactics and aligned themselves with other key interest groups lobbying for Philippine independence (midwestern agribusiness and Filipino nationalists) that they were able to muster enough support in Congress to advance their political goals.
Nativists believed that relinquishing sovereignty over the islands would, by definition, forestall the entry of Filipinos, since they would be stripped of their status as U.S. nationals and therefore be subject to the restrictive provisions of the 1924 Immigration Act. The domestic independence lobby was led by midwestern agribusiness interests (primarily sugar-beet concerns and dairy producers) anxious about competition from inexpensive, duty-free Philippine imports (cane sugar and coconut oil). Filipino nationalists were also key players in the eclectic alliance of constituencies lobbying for an independence bill, albeit for very different reasons than the other pressure groups they were aligned with. This loose coalition eventually helped secure passage of the Tydings-McDuffie Act in 1934, which granted the Philippines its independence after a ten-year probation period. A key provision of the bill mandated that Filipinos were immediately subject the 1924 Immigration Act and placed the Philippines under the lowest immigration quota for any country in the world (fifty persons per year).

Though exclusionists celebrated the curtailment of further immigration from the islands enacted by Tydings-McDuffie, they quickly recognized that the “Filipino problem” was far from solved, since the new quota restrictions did nothing to address the population already living in the United States. Consequently, movement leaders took up an ancillary campaign aimed at sending resident Filipinos back to the Philippines. In a key section of the book, I track this evolution of nativist objectives beyond the initial goal of exclusion to their subsequent focus on immigrant expulsion. Efforts by the federal government to repatriate Filipinos underscore the continuing hostility they faced in the United States as well as the conviction held by nativist leaders that immigration quotas alone could not solve the problem. The repatriation campaign, which lasted from 1936 to 1940, was ultimately deemed a failure, since very few individuals took part in the program, which was viewed by the Filipino community as a not-so-subtle form of voluntary deportation. Though the campaign did not produce the desired results (mass exodus back to the islands), it highlights once again how the specter of empire continued to shape Philippine-American relations, since the U.S. government was politically averse to carrying out compulsory repatriations against Filipinos, as it did with persons of Mexican ancestry during this same period.

The final section of the book looks at the political transformations ushered in by World War II and the inauguration of Philippine sovereignty. The Tydings-McDuffie Act stipulated that independence be granted only after the successful completion of a ten-year probationary period beginning in 1936.26 The United States had justified its continued presence in the
islands, in part, as a protective measure designed to safeguard the Philippines from foreign intervention as it made the transition to self-rule. But midway through the probation period (December 8, 1941), Japan invaded the islands, routing American defense forces, who retreated and left Filipinos to wage a sustained guerrilla campaign against Japanese occupation forces, while the United States focused its military resources elsewhere. The U.S. government eventually inducted between one hundred thousand and two hundred thousand Filipinos into the U.S. military command in the Pacific. Filipino fighters served under the authority of General Douglas MacArthur, who issued orders remotely from the U.S. base of operations in Australia. Filipino nationals and Filipino Americans both played a significant role in the Allied war effort. My discussion of the World War II era reveals how racial boundaries were recalibrated during this period, when other forms of collective identity, particularly patriotic nationalism, became more salient. The contours of the American racial order shifted in important ways during this period, partly to meet the prerogatives of a wartime state and partly in response to civil rights activists, who pressed the federal government to live up to its rhetoric of inclusiveness and ethnic tolerance. Filipino veterans, emboldened by their war service, demanded a greater stake in America’s democratic institutions, which they had been called on to defend overseas during the war. The liminal political status of Filipinos during the Commonwealth period reveals how the entanglement of race and empire continued to shape Philippine-American relations both during and after the war.

Throughout the book I have tried to remain attentive to the ways in which the Filipino experience has intersected with that of other racialized groups in the United States. Filipinos clearly share much in common with earlier waves of Asian immigration. Anti-imperialist politicians warned that annexing the Philippines would extend American citizenship to Chinese-Filipino “half-breeds,” and West Coast nativists invoked the specter of the Chinese coolie laborer to mobilize support for Filipino exclusion. The Filipino story is also entangled with the history of Puerto Ricans in important ways. Both territories were acquired in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, and U.S. policymakers saw the political fate of the two colonies as closely linked. American officials, though, quickly put the two territories on divergent political paths, due in large part to fears about another influx of Asian laborers and concerns about the racial makeup of the Philippine population. The Filipino saga has also been enmeshed with the experience of Mexicans for much of the twentieth century. The two groups shared a common position
in the agricultural labor market and often found themselves on the same side of political struggles aimed at bettering the working conditions for immigrant laborers. Both populations, moreover, were subject to exclusion and repatriation campaigns in the 1920s and 1930s, a movement that produced mixed results. By highlighting the ways in which the experience of Filipinos paralleled with and diverged from other groups, I hope to shed light on how racial and national boundaries were constructed and reconstructed at different times and for different ends.