Introduction

More than a century-and-a-half ago, a series of events occurred that resulted in the formation of Mexican Americans as a racial group in the United States. For complex reasons that I explore in this book, Mexican Americans often have been portrayed (and sometimes have portrayed themselves) as an ethnic group that eventually will assimilate into American society, just as European immigrant groups once did. I will argue that given the early history of Mexicans in the United States, it is more accurate to treat Mexican Americans as a racial group.

Two common misconceptions lie at the root of what most people take for granted about Mexicans in the United States. The first is that Mexican Americans are not a racial group at all, but instead merely an ethnic group. Race in the United States has historically been viewed as a matter of black/white relations and, more specifically, as about white subordination of African Americans. Despite the fact that the United States has always been a racially diverse society, non-white groups other than blacks often have been overlooked. Although Indian tribes were recognized as constituting independent nations (who could, for instance, freely enter nation-to-nation treaties with the United States until 1871), Indians were just as surely recognized as a racial group and as racially inferior to Euro-Americans. The arrival of more than 400,000 Chinese immigrants in the first century of the nation’s existence added to America’s racial diversity. The United States has always been a multiracial nation, even though it has become popular only in the past twenty-five years to talk in those terms.

The second misconception is that Mexican Americans are a “new” group that consists primarily of recent immigrants and their children. Mexican Americans have been a significant part of American society since 1848, when more than 115,000 Mexicans became U.S. citizens. It was well into the twentieth century before the U.S. government seriously regulated Mexican immigration to the United States. For 160 years, the Mexican
American population has been continuously replenished with new immigration from Mexico, with the pace especially strong since 1965. Consider that in 1970 less than 20 percent of Mexicans in the United States were born in Mexico—in other words, more than 80 percent of Mexican Americans were American-born. Today, just over half of Mexicans in the United States were born in Mexico and just under half of them were born in the United States. While the Mexican American group continues to grow due to ongoing immigration from Mexico, it includes a large proportion of people whose American roots go back many generations.

The status of Mexican Americans as a racial group is rooted in their long history in this nation. In making this argument, I draw heavily on the experiences of the first Mexican Americans, those who joined American society involuntarily, not as immigrants, but as a people conquered in war. As Mexican Americans sometimes say, “We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us.” Moreover, Mexicans joined American society at that time as citizens, albeit, as second-class citizens in many respects. Manifest Destinies excavates the history of Mexican Americans as an American racial group that was uniquely situated as “off-white.” It analyzes the larger American racial order as it evolved in the late nineteenth century and the social process of racialization—or how groups come to be identified and to identify themselves in racial terms and learn their place as deserving or undeserving in the racial hierarchy.

Race and ethnicity overlap in important ways—and, in fact, race as it operates in the United States generally subsumes ethnicity. For example, black Americans are a racial group composed of a variety of ethnic groups, including African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, and African immigrants from various countries. Of course, race and ethnicity are used in varied ways across many disciplines. I employ them here in a conventional way to emphasize the quality of assignment associated with race—racial group membership is assigned by others, and particularly by members of the dominant group—and the quality of assertion associated with ethnicity—ethnic group membership is chosen by members of the ethnic group. Used in this way, race involves a harder, less voluntary group membership (though, as we shall see, not as inflexible as is typically assumed). By using race rather than ethnicity to describe the Mexican American experience, I intend to invoke what sociologists Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann have called the legacy of race as “the most powerful and persistent group boundary in American history, distinguishing, to varying degrees, the experiences of those classified as non-white from those clas-
sified as white, with often devastating consequences.” While ethnicity has been and continues to be an important marker of difference and inequality, especially outside the United States, it pales in comparison to the role race has played and continues to play in American society in shaping both group relations and individual life chances.

Racial categories and racial difference are socially constructed; rather than having inherent significance, race is historically contingent and given meaning by persons, institutions, and social processes. In recent years, a growing body of scholarship has explored how specific groups have become white, as well as the larger significance of white racial identity. As historian Matthew Jacobson has put it: “[R]aces are invented categories. . . . Caucasians are made not born. White privilege in various forms has been a constant in American political culture since colonial times, but whiteness itself has been subject to all kinds of contests and has gone through a series of historical vicissitudes.” Yet the literature has implied that the process of becoming white is relatively straightforward—once a group is on the path to becoming white, whiteness becomes inevitable and occurs within a matter of decades. For Mexican Americans, as historian Neil Foley has explained in a study of Mexicans, blacks, and poor whites at “the fringe of whiteness,” the process has been more complex and less straightforward. Manifest Destinies illustrates that complexity as a byproduct of Mexican Americans’ relationships with whites, Indians, and blacks, examining these relationships from 1846 to the turn of the century to reveal the dynamic, non-linear nature of Mexican Americans’ off-white status.

Many Americans view the concept of Manifest Destiny positively, as a shorthand reference to a period in history (the 1840s) during which Americans’ unbounded hunger for national growth was satiated by the acquisition of the Oregon Territory, Texas, and the Mexican Cession, including California as its jewel. For many, Manifest Destiny conjures a moment of national triumph before the dark years of conflict over slavery that culminated in the Civil War. This book views Manifest Destiny quite differently—as a cluster of ideas that relied on racism to justify a war of aggression against Mexico. As historian Reginald Horsman has observed,

In the middle of the nineteenth century a sense of racial destiny permeated discussions of American progress and of future American world destiny. . . . By 1850 the emphasis was on the American Anglo-Saxons as a separate, innately superior people who were destined to bring good government, com-
mercial prosperity, and Christianity to the American continents and to the world. This was a superior race, and inferior races were doomed to subordinate status or extinction. 

*Manifest Destinies*, as used in this book’s title, embraces the idea of Manifest Destiny as inexorably entwined with race and racism. At the same time, it refers to how the competing destinies of many groups ultimately produced the Mexican American race and fundamentally changed the American racial order in the half-century following the U.S.–Mexico War.

Three themes drive this book. The first is that colonialism was central to the origin of Mexican Americans. Manifest Destiny fueled American imperialism and the expansion west and south into Mexico. Acquisition of northern Mexico, and especially of Alta California, now the state of California, was essential to several goals: securing massive amounts of mineral and other natural resources; acquiring land to expand the public domain and to construct a transcontinental railroad for transporting goods and people; and accessing Asian economic markets by way of the Pacific Ocean. If Manifest Destiny was the ideology that justified the American colonization of Mexico, its material consequences were the American occupation of New Mexico, California, and Mexico City by ground and naval forces and the ratification of a peace treaty in 1848 under which Mexico ceded more than half its territory to the United States—approximately 1.3 million square miles, an area 50 percent larger than the Louisiana Purchase of 1804. This additional territory more than tripled the size of the young nation, adding what is today all or parts of the states of Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming.

This book’s second theme is the central role that law played in the creation of Mexican Americans as a racial group. *Manifest Destinies* illustrates the larger process of the social construction of race, focusing specifically on how law fundamentally created and expressed race, racial categories, and racial dynamics as they affected Mexican Americans. The central paradox was the legal construction of Mexicans as racially “white” alongside the social construction of Mexicans as non-white and as racially inferior. The book explores how these contradictory legal and social definitions co-existed and how the legal definition of Mexicans as white affected other non-white racial groups, eventually helping to entrench white supremacy in the United States. Following the U.S.–Mexico War, Euro-American elites actively contested and negotiated racial categories among themselves and with Mexican elites, who in turn accommodated, contested, and nego-
tiated their position in the new American racial order, often navigating legal institutions to do so. Ultimately Mexican Americans in New Mexico became a wedge racial group, between Euro-Americans above them and Pueblo Indians below them in the racial hierarchy.

The third theme of *Manifest Destinies* is that the construction of Mexicans as an American racial group proved central to the larger process of restructuring the American racial order in a key period stretching from the war to the turn of the twentieth century. Ironically, the emphasis on white-over-black relations during this period (due to the Civil War and Reconstruction) has obscured the significant role played by Manifest Destiny and the colonization of northern Mexico in the racial subordination of black Americans. The absorption of the Mexican Cession brought to a head the question of whether slavery would be allowed to expand beyond the South. In the infamous *Dred Scott* case, the Supreme Court answered this question in a way that made the Civil War all but inevitable. After the Civil War, black slaves were emancipated and, through the Reconstruction amendments to the Constitution, African American men were endowed with political rights. During this period, the majority of Mexican American men, who had received *federal* citizenship under the peace treaty of 1848, held a kind of second-class citizenship in which their rights were limited because Congress refused to admit New Mexico as a state due to its majority Mexican and Indian population.

Moreover it was dual, if nearly opposite, ideologies of race that helped enshrine the twentieth-century racial hierarchy that placed African Americans at the bottom with Mexican Americans above them so that, in the national racial hierarchy, Mexican Americans became a wedge racial group between whites and blacks. While Mexican Americans were relegated to second-class citizenship in virtually all areas, they had access to legal whiteness under a kind of reverse one-drop rule: one drop of Spanish blood allowed them to claim whiteness under certain circumstances. The separate racial ideologies that developed with respect to Mexican Americans and African Americans highlight the complexity and contradictions within white supremacy. Whereas the racial ideology that we most commonly associate with this period of American history resulted in the hardening of categories that governed African Americans (under the one-drop rule), with respect to Mexican Americans a racial ideology emerged that depended on those boundaries being flexible and inclusive. Both ideologies reproduced the racial subordination of blacks and Mexicans, but they did so in very different ways. Without understanding how they worked—
and how they worked in tandem—we cannot fully understand American racial dynamics in the twentieth century and beyond.

I intend this book to be an antidote to historical amnesia about the key nineteenth-century events that produced the first Mexican Americans—the U.S.–Mexico War, the Mexican Cession, and the peace treaty that extended American citizenship to Mexican citizens living in what is today the American Southwest. Placing Mexican Americans at the center of the analysis reveals how their entrance into the United States shaped the larger racial order. Mexican Americans interacted with and impacted the destinies of American Indians, African Americans, and Euro-Americans, and these interactions, in turn, shaped the destiny of Mexican Americans. Excavating the nineteenth-century history of Mexican Americans as a racial group erases their racial invisibility and thereby reveals the complex, sometimes contradictory evolution of nineteenth-century racial dynamics as involving both multiple racial groups and competing racial ideologies.

The Mexican Cession consisted of Tejas, Alta California, and Nuevo México. A year before the start of the war, in 1845, Texas had joined the Union as a slave state. California joined the Union as a free state in 1850, soon after gold had been discovered there. This book principally focuses on the remainder of the newly annexed territory, New Mexico, which at the time was much larger than Texas and California combined, including all of present-day New Mexico as well as all or part of eight other U.S. states. New Mexico’s Mexican population was also far larger than those of California and Texas combined, with nearly two-thirds of Mexicans in the Mexican Cession living there. Although Congress would eventually divide New Mexico into smaller components, the vast majority of the non-Indian population living in this vast region in 1848 resided in what is today north central New Mexico.

To speak of the nation’s first Mexican Americans, then, is to speak substantially about Mexicans living in New Mexico. It was not, however, raw numbers alone that made New Mexico’s Mexican population significant—it was numbers coupled with the proportion of Mexicans to Euro-Americans and to Indians, especially Pueblo Indians. At the outset of the war with Mexico, fewer than a thousand Euro-Americans lived in New Mexico. In contrast, Euro-Americans outnumbered Mexicans in Texas as early as 1830, due to Mexico’s liberal immigration policies (that is, liberal relative to the restrictive policies of Spain prior to 1820). And, due largely to the discovery of gold in California in 1848, Euro-Americans outnumbered
Mexicans there by 1850. The small number of Euro-Americans in New Mexico allowed Mexican Americans to remain demographically dominant well into the period of American rule, and led the American colonizers to devise ways to incorporate and co-opt them.

Another key aspect of New Mexico’s demographics was the size and diversity of its Indian population at the time it was annexed to the United States. Comparatively, the rest of the Mexican Cession had fewer and less diverse Indian tribes. New Mexico’s population included 15,000 Pueblo Indians and perhaps 60,000 other Indians. Mexicans and Pueblo Indians had much in common culturally and geographically, even though they shared a long history of conflict in New Mexico. When Euro-American colonizers arrived in New Mexico, one of their goals was to cement the divide between Mexicans and Pueblo Indians. One way to do this was to allow Mexican Americans to designate themselves as legally white while preventing Pueblo Indians from doing so.

Two-thirds of Mexicans in the Mexican Cession lived in New Mexico, making it a target for U.S. military occupation during the war and, later, establishment as an American colony. Although New Mexico became a federal territory in 1850, its status was in many ways different from that of non-contiguous U.S. colonies such as Puerto Rico and the Philippines. One of the chief differences is that Puerto Rico and the Philippines were not seen as colonies in which Euro-American “settler citizens” would eventually predominate, and therefore were not seen as candidates for statehood. In contrast, both New Mexico and Hawaii were seen as places where white settler citizens eventually would outnumber the non-white native population, thereby facilitating statehood. At the same time, the racial complexion of New Mexico and Hawaii caused Congress to delay statehood, keeping these regions in a colonial status for many decades. These political realities contribute to the centrality of New Mexico in this study.

*Manifest Destinies* reflects my efforts to engage three distinct disciplines. In terms of methodology, this book is grounded in history: it draws heavily on data from primary historical documents and from secondary studies of archival materials. Yet I have approached these documents (or studies of them) as types of social facts, within a broader empirical emphasis that stems from my training in sociology. I have attempted to tell a story, using historical documents, that is analytically driven by sociological concepts and understandings of race and racial ideology, politics, and colonialism.
The third disciplinary home of this book is law, defined broadly to include positive law (“laws” themselves, enacted by legislatures or made by courts); legal institutions such as the police, the courts, and trial by jury; and actors in the legal system such as lawyers, prosecutors, judges, and jurors. *Manifest Destinies*, then, is a sociological study of race that focuses on law, legal institutions, and legal actors in a particular historical context.

This book started to take shape in the late 1980s, when I began an archival project on the legal system in nineteenth-century New Mexico. By this time, I had lived away from my home state of New Mexico for almost as many years as I had lived in it. My time away increased my awareness of the region’s peculiar racial dynamics, or what can be described as New Mexico’s exceptionalism within the Chicano experience. As someone who possessed a dual vantage point as both insider and outsider, I thought there was something to the exceptionalism thesis, but I also believed it was flawed. The notion that New Mexico’s Mexican Americans are a breed apart from other Mexican Americans remains robust not only in scholarship from diverse disciplines, but also in popular culture. In a nutshell, the exceptionalism thesis emphasizes New Mexico’s unique status among southwestern states—as having, for example, a long history of Mexican American elected officials at all levels of government, relatively low levels of racial oppression of Mexican Americans (compared to Texas and California), and an intense, long-standing claim to Spanish, rather than Mexican, heritage. The exceptionalism thesis often attributes these facts to New Mexico’s relatively limited Mexican immigration in the twentieth century (compared to California, Texas, and Arizona) and to the related persistence of cultural and other characteristics of the Spanish settlers of the region.

An additional dimension of the exceptionalism thesis has been the marked tendency to view Mexican Americans as regionally distinctive, rather than as a group with one national history. Local social histories in Chicano studies have contributed to the notion that there is not a coherent *national* story to be told about Mexican Americans. To be sure, there is much to be learned from highly localized studies, but it is also important to see the connections between local, regional, national, and even transnational levels of analysis. This study situates New Mexico in a national and hemispheric context.

In short, the claim of New Mexico’s exceptionalism has obscured these larger dynamics. For example, the historical record suggests that New
Mexico was deeply Mexican in the late Spanish period, the twenty-five-year Mexican period (1821–46), and well into the American period. Why have proponents of the exceptionalism thesis—and the historical actors whom they studied—downplayed New Mexico’s Mexican legacy in favor of its Spanish heritage? In addition, in both historic and contemporary contexts, the degree of racial oppression of Mexican Americans by whites and the level of racial conflict between Hispanics and Anglos (as Mexican Americans and Euro-American whites are more commonly referred to today in New Mexico) was and is actually much greater than typically acknowledged. What historic factors and dynamics led and continue to lead us to systematically understate the level of racial conflict in New Mexico?

In answering these questions, I have continually been drawn back to the early decades of the American colonization of northern Mexico. American colonization was most visceral in New Mexico as measured by the intensity of the Mexican resistance to the Americans and the sheer brutality of the American military and legal responses. Moreover, anti-Mexican racism was most evident in the refusal of Euro-American elites to annex New Mexico as a state precisely because of its majority-minority population. These factors, coupled with the fact that most Mexicans who joined the United States in 1848 lived in New Mexico, suggest that, if New Mexico is in fact exceptional, its exceptionalism works in the other direction. It counsels us to pay more attention to the ways in which Mexicans in New Mexico were typical and to how that shaped, first, the strategies of the American colonizers, and, second, those of the first Mexican Americans. Viewed in this way, we might well see New Mexicans’ continuing claims to “Spanish” heritage as a tactic that evolved from the intense anti-Mexican racism of the 1800s.

*Manifest Destinies* tells the story of how Mexican Americans became an American racial group. The first chapter begins with the American colonization of northern Mexico, focusing on the American invasion of the vast region known as New Mexico. It reveals that ideas about Mexicans’ racial inferiority animated the American war against Mexico and the later efforts to colonize New Mexico under civilian authority. At the same time, the chapter brings to light the unique features of New Mexico that led to the enfranchisement of Mexican men and, thus, the legal construction of the first Mexican Americans as “white” rights-holders. In short, the Americans had no viable alternative to allowing Mexican elites to share in governing
this vast region because the American military presence in New Mexico was too small to sustain martial law and because there were too few Euro-American immigrants to implement a civil government without Mexicans’ participation.

Chapter 2 focuses on how, in the decades following the initial American occupation, the question of where Mexicans fit in the American racial order was negotiated among Euro-American elites. The dominant view, articulated by most congressmen and the national press, was that Mexicans were a racially inferior people, no better than blacks and Indians and, thus, unfit for self-government. Adherents of this position vigorously opposed admission of New Mexico as a state until Euro-Americans outnum-bered Mexicans. What I term the progressive view was developed by some Euro-American elites living in New Mexico as a counter-narrative to the dominant racial story and, specifically, as a strategy to achieve statehood. Proponents of the progressive view posited a notion of race that empha-sized culture over biology and harmony over conflict and sought to reha-bilitate Mexican elites as the descendants of the initial European colonizers of the region. The progressive view fostered an unprecedented level of incorporation of a non-white racial group, but it also served to promote white supremacy.

A central part of the second chapter is its analysis of nineteenth-century New Mexico as the product of a unique process of “double coloniza-tion,” first by the Spanish and later by the Americans. Significantly, both the Spanish and the American colonial enterprises were grounded in rac-ism, though their precise ideologies of white supremacy differed. American colonizers in New Mexico thus did not start with a clean slate, but rather developed a racial order in the looming shadow of the Spanish-Mexican racial order. American sociologists who study race often have cited Latin American contexts as illuminating counter-examples to American racial dynamics, but these studies have overlooked the substantial ways in which American racial dynamics are themselves substantially evolved from Span-ish colonial models of race. The myopic tendency to view American race relations as about white-over-black relations and as centered on a North/South axis has obscured the ways in which Latin American–style race relations have existed historically in the United States and continue to exert a powerful legacy.

The third chapter highlights the actions and motives of Mexican Amer-ican elites, from whose ranks the majority of the elected officials in New Mexico came, making them the co-citizens who governed the region with
Euro-American officials appointed by the American president. With the quiet blessing of Congress, Mexican elites defined themselves as white rights-holders, even as they often were politically subordinate to the Euro-American appointed officials sent by Washington to govern the region. This chapter explores the fragility of Mexican Americans’ legal whiteness, in a context in which both Mexican Americans and Euro-Americans understood that Mexicans occupied a racially inferior niche in American society. I argue that Mexican elites struggled mightily with this tentative off-white status, constantly seeking to shore up their whiteness by distancing themselves from other non-white groups. One result was Mexican elites’ disenfranchisement of Pueblo Indians, despite the many commonalities Mexicans and Pueblo Indians shared and despite their history of alliance against the American colonizers. A second dynamic was Mexican elites’ anti-black and pro-slavery actions, despite their earlier anti-slavery positions. I close the third chapter by looking at Mexican elites’ moves to protect their ideological and material interests in enslaving Indians captured or traded from the various non-Pueblo tribes in the region.

The final chapter considers how New Mexico’s racial dynamics fit within the larger picture of American race relations as they evolved in the middle to late nineteenth century. It explores each of the book’s three themes in a national context. First, the centrality of colonization in the Mexican American experience is explored through the lens of land and the transition from a Spanish-Mexican to an Anglo-American property regime. Second, the racialization of Mexican Americans is linked in important ways to the racial subordination of blacks by examining the connections among Manifest Destiny, the infamous Dred Scott case, and the Civil War. The book’s third theme, law’s key role in the social construction of race and racial ideology, is explored by contrasting the legal definition of Mexicans as white under naturalization laws with the consolidation of black subordination in the Supreme Court’s Plessy v. Ferguson opinion of 1897. We explore the co-evolution of opposite “one-drop” rules that governed African Americans and Mexican Americans: for blacks, one drop of African ancestry justified legal disabilities, while for Mexicans, one drop of Spanish ancestry at times conferred legal whiteness.

The book closes with an epilogue in which we travel forward one hundred years from the study’s end at the beginning of the twentieth century to the present. I move from a focus on the macrohistorical context to the question of racial identity, both collective and individual. I consider the legacy of Mexican Americans’ off-white status for understanding Mexi-
American identity today. This includes a discussion of how Mexican Americans compare to other Hispanic subgroups and how the increasing proportion of Mexican immigrants affects Mexican American identity.

In this study, I use the terms “Mexican” and “Mexican American” to describe the people of mixed Spanish, Indian, and African ancestry who lived in the Spanish colony of New Spain known today as the American Southwest. I intend to distinguish Mexicans from Euro-Americans (white Americans of European origin, both citizens and non-citizen immigrants, who were not black, Indian, Asian, or Mexican), African Americans, Indians, and Asians. Although the meaning of these various labels or their application in particular situations was hardly simple and uncontroversial, the adoption of terminology facilitates our discussion.

I eschew the terms Spanish, Spanish American, Hispanic and Hispano to describe the majority of Mexican Americans, who lived in what is today New Mexico, although these terms appear frequently in the literature. I do so for two reasons. First, “Mexican” was the term most consistently used in the historical records of the nineteenth-century, regardless of whether the speaker was Mexican or Euro-American and no matter the forum or the language. Second, it more accurately describes the population’s mestizo—or mixed Indian/Spanish/African—racial heritage. As the chapters to come will show, by the early nineteenth century, very few of these people were born in Spain or had parents or even grandparents who were Spanish, although they spoke the Spanish language, were practicing Roman Catholics, and otherwise conformed to cultural practices consistent with having been colonized by Spain. In terms of ancestry, the vast majority of these people were more indigenous than Spanish, and some of their religious, cultural, and political practices had indigenous origins.

The skeptical reader already may be wondering whether she is about to read a tale of grand conspiracies carried out by myopically racist actors. The story I will tell, however, is not one in which coordinated social action on the part of Euro-Americans led inexorably to the racial subordination of non-white people. Racial dynamics were considerably more complex—just as they are today. Two core beliefs about historical actors have shaped this book. First, race and racism were powerful realities in the social world in which these people lived. When Euro-Americans moved to Mexican Texas in the 1830s, when American volunteers headed off to war against Mexico in the 1840s, and when Euro-American governors followed the
president’s orders to go to New Mexico in the 1850s, ideas about race were deeply embedded in their consciousness and experience. Second, social actors generally behave in self-interested ways. I understand self-interest broadly to include material interests and also people’s interest in how they perceive themselves individually and collectively. Combining these two ideas, it would be natural for social actors to deploy race and racism in a variety of ways, even as that was only a part of the story of their motives and strategies. As in other parts of the United States at other times, material interests and collective and individual self-perceptions came together to shape group interactions in the lands recently taken from Mexico.