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Introduction

Cultural Narratives and American Identities

In *Notes of a Native Son*, James Baldwin writes, “I think that the past is all that makes the present coherent, and further, that the past will remain horrible for exactly as long as we refuse to assess it honestly.”¹ Part of what makes the period after World War II so fascinating is that the oppressive and the rosy seem to have existed simultaneously and consistently in balance for so many years. When I began this project years ago and would mention that I was examining narratives about ethnicity in the 1950s, the response from colleagues and friends was often the same, a joking bewilderment: “There was *ethnicity* in the fifties?” While only anecdotal evidence, the frequency of this response hints at the ways in which the forces of mass culture have elided ethnicity from much of popular memory, and the irony of the remark also belies a cynical awareness of the forces that have resulted in such an elision.

We scholars of the period need to do more than simply point out how and why whiteness has been privileged and where ethnic citizens were denigrated or ignored within the popular imagination, of course. By reinserting the perspectives that seemingly have been denied spaces in the creation of this popular imagination, I demonstrate some of their implicit roles within its very construction. In other words, we cannot simply write off invisibilities as symptomatic of cultural chauvinism; we must investigate further the media through which such invisibility was brought into very real existence.

Moreover, we must find the spaces where ethnic subjects knowingly engage that invisibility in meaningful—sometimes challenging—ways, while also engaging the meanings at work within national discourses.

This study builds on previous studies of literary and mass culture narratives of the period through a detailed study of ethnicity. I examine how novels specifically frame the consumer and gender imperatives within popular configurations of American identity, calling into question the ways in which the privileging of these enactments of citizenship also inherently privilege whiteness. In doing so, these “ethnic novels” participate dialogically with mass culture to offer additional voices in the construction of ethnicity and American identities. I focus on five novels written by American ethnic minorities, immigrants, and the children of immigrants that engage the image-laden commercial culture surrounding them. Chin Yang Lee’s *Flower Drum Song*, Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, Gwendolyn Brooks’s *Maud Martha*, William S. Stryker’s *Rock Wagram*, and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* constitute a critical engagement with and critique of ethnic invisibility, and they converse with various forms of visual mass culture narrative. The novels discussed here are limited to those by ethnic minority and immigrant writers that offer some sort of negotiation of racial or ethnic subjectivity and that also specifically and directly engage mass culture within the narratives. In this, they work well together not because of thematic cohesion but in the variety of ways they perform the same kind of cultural gesture and offer a set of “case studies” in the potential cultural work of the ethnic novel at midcentury. The mass culture narratives I have chosen for this study also hold no claim on representing all of midcentury mass culture. Some of the texts discussed here were best sellers or box office smashes—canonical texts revisited—but others were quietly shelved in libraries and have only received new critical attention within the past two decades. All are worth revisiting and reexamining in light of the potential re-readings of mass culture narratives the novels themselves invite. Cultural texts constantly work together in a variety of ways; “any one text is necessarily read in relationship to others and . . . a range of textual knowledges is brought to bear upon it.” John Fiske argues that the “space *between* texts” is as important as the texts themselves.² That in-between space should be imagined here as the kind of understanding of history that comes into being not from traditional empirical evidence but from the meanings found when cultural texts are read in reference to one another.

Reading ethnic representations in such narratives must also go beyond an assessment of how progressive or stereotypical a portrayal of a racialized or ethnic subject seems. Michele Wallace rightly asserts that the positive/

negative binary is one that has tended to dominate cultural criticism, but it is an ultimately limiting mode of analysis because it oversimplifies our considerations of the complex nuances that go into the production and reception of these representations and the generic differences within them.³ In placing mass media and literary texts into comparative readings, I attempt to move beyond such binaries to show how they work both against and with each other toward a more complicated, sometimes inconsistent, set of identity discourses and constructions in the national public arena.

All sorts of narratives permeating midcentury American culture converged in an overarching interpretation of what it meant to be American, and participating in national culture became an important enactment of citizenship. The concept of citizenship held power not only as a legal identifier or patriotic title, but also in more abstract forms that implicated certain types of expected behavior for participation in a mainstream national culture. The visual mass media served as major avenues through which the forms of cultural participation were imagined and projected, from overtly anti-Communist detective films to Betty Crocker lay-outs on the importance of convenient but nutritious meals. The everyday political that occurred tangentially with foreign policy and legislative debates visibly manifested itself in the promotion of personal behaviors that would contribute to national ideals of unity, namely, through active participation in the consumer economy and strengthening the American family.

Commercialized mass culture presented an undeniably engaging vision of American success and national belonging, but, at the same time, minority writers and artists, too, were in the process of engaging that vision and implicitly participating in its construction. While the Cold War was a significant influence in how cultural production and consumption worked, as Evan Brier rightly notes, it was not *the* influence in regard to the midcentury narrative.⁴ The expansion of consumer culture and the entrenchment of gender roles (into what might now be understood as a romanticized throwback to Victorian ideals of the public and domestic spheres) are the two major elements that continually appear in all of the narratives under examination in this book. Like the Cold War atmosphere, these elements not only function as tropes through which to understand the period's cultural narratives but also serve as bridges between various narratives and the public and private understandings and articulations of identity. In visual mass culture, where the white, middle-class nuclear family became symbolic of American identity on the whole, the privileging and construction of a "dominant culture" is obvious—but not uncomplicated.

Because of the social and political pressures typical of depictions of the Cold War United States, we have tended to think of cultural resistance and real cultural diversity as near impossibilities. The 1997 collection of essays *The Other Fifties* was one of the earliest midcentury studies to challenge the wholly nostalgic, conformist image of the era, and editor Joel Foreman argued that progressive cultural texts of the period were actually a launching site for the progressive movements of the 1960s. He argues that many artists of the period managed a subtle, “pragmatic balance of subversion and accommodation.” More recently, studies like those collected in *American Literature and Culture in an Age of Cold War* and *Invisible Suburbs* challenge the tendency to frame midcentury analysis in ways that perpetuate binary thinking about the era, that texts represent either cultural “containment” or “emergence.” Editor Joshua Lukin writes, “Emergence risks a parallel excess to that of Containment: it can fall in the everything-is-subversive school of cultural studies and ignore oppressive ideological forces, or at least overestimate the freedom fifties Americans had to move outside them.” Ultimately, there are “risks inherent in any historical generalizations: the farther its claims stray from analysis of specific experiences and movements, the more likely they are to make errors of rhetoric, emphasis, or characterization.”⁵ The period following World War II possesses the ambivalences of any historical period in a nation so varied and large.

Leerom Medovoi cautions, too, that we should not read resistance narratives as separate from, or simply in opposition to, the conformist elements of the culture:

Tacitly, this approach presupposes that postwar radicalism was extrinsic to Cold War culture because it expressed a psychopolitical refusal to be “contained.” If we approach the Cold War as producing something other than just a “containment culture,” however, we can begin to understand the emergence of identity discourse, not as an extrinsic response to Cold War culture based on the ontological truth of identity, but rather the production of identity itself as the dialectical antithesis of containment within a cultural matrix of the Cold War world. If “containment” offered a rhetoric of repression, identity countered with a rhetoric of “liberation.”

Thus, Medovoi argues that through the new explorations of the concept of “identity” during this period, we can understand the paradoxical coexistence of both a conformist culture and a culture that resists conformity in various

forms of narrative, since both cultures are engaged in examining articulations of national and individual identities, respectively.⁶

All of the aforementioned studies have ventured into examinations of race and ethnicity (primarily African American and Jewish); likewise, various studies in ethnic literature contain explorations of the 1950s. There is certainly more work to be done with these questions of identity in relation to race and ethnicity at midcentury, however, and this book attempts to offer a sustained joining of ethnic studies and midcentury studies in order to deeply explore the constructions of ethnicity within a period that has informed American cultural identities in significant ways. Ethnicity itself was being thought about in new ways during this period. With the arrival of newly displaced Jews from the European war and the beginnings of the civil rights movement, this was a period when “ethnic” or “immigrant” writers were being “elevated to a position of prominence as definitively *American* writers.”⁷

What the following chapters explore is a grouping of voices from the period’s definitively American ethnic margins. While the novels negotiate their cultural context in diverse ways, from apparent accommodationism to metaphorical critique, they add to the conversation on identity that Medo-voi invokes. Jinqi Ling, drawing on the work of Gayatri Spivak, argues for an understanding of hegemonic processes in a way that provides the “crucial middle term” of an “oppositional cultural politics,” “an account of the production of ideology as an emancipatory process of identifying and unpacking historically produced conditions of *fundamental power imbalance*” (original emphasis).⁸ This is the stance that “ethnicity” offers here, part of the important cultural work that these “ethnic novels” do. Simply writing as—and creating—an ethnic identity inflects the configurations of national identity circulating within the larger culture.

These chapters examine the ways in which novels engage aspects of mass culture and then analyze the ways in which novels and nonnovelistic texts are simultaneously and dialectically in the process of articulating notions of American identity or “cultural citizenship.” Though my use of this term does not derive directly from Toby Miller’s work on citizenship, my focus falls within the larger scope of his definition: “[A] public is formed and governed via a technology of the cultural subject known as the cultural citizen, the virtuous political participant who is taught how to scrutinize and improve her or his conduct through the work of cultural policy.”⁹ The chapters consider the specific “technology” of cultural narratives, from mass culture and book culture, that serve as vehicles through which to examine identities within the postwar United States. These narratives may not always read as overtly

“protest” or political in tone, but in my readings of them I try to highlight ways in which they specifically respond to cultural “policies” from ethnic perspectives.

The five novels at the core of this work function as an important space for, in Stuart Hall’s words, “playing with the identifications” presented within mass culture. Much like the texts comprising Jinqi Ling’s study of Asian American writers, the novels I focus on reveal how “these texts’ ideological tendencies and formal characteristics, as well as the specific forms of their social imagination, were shaped not by any single determinant but rather by the complex interplay between authorial design, available social space, and accessible cultural resources—on a social-material terrain that was only partially open, conditionally heterogeneous, and dynamically fluid yet frequently inhospitable to the voices of the emergent.” Ling’s comments are intended to highlight the specificity of the cultural history influencing one set of immigrant groups, but this convergence of the social and imaginative spaces applies across ethnic canons more generally, as well. While continuing to investigate the specificities of ethnic experience in the United States, it is also important to continue exploring the ways in which ethnically marked narratives cross cultural boundaries to partake in articulating different versions of national identities at significant points in American history. As noted earlier, the novels and visual narratives discussed here are not all-inclusive and cannot claim to represent all novels of the 1950s nor the experiences or representations of all ethnic groups during this period. While we should not “homogenize” ethnic experiences, we do need to recognize, in Manning Marable’s words, “the profound divergences *and* the parallels in the social construction of ethnicity.”¹⁰ The cultural work these texts perform together and the questions they inherently ask about ethnicity, identity, and cultural citizenship do highlight the connectedness of many ethnic American experiences and, consequently, contribute to a further understanding of some of the ways in which identities have been configured within American culture writ large.

Because of this project’s evocation of a particular cultural context for reevaluating ethnic novels, my textual choices necessarily exclude some important narratives from the literary canon. For example, I do not discuss in detail midcentury Anglo-American authors who dealt with institutional racism (William Faulkner, Harper Lee, Lillian Smith) or works by ethnic minority authors that do not deal explicitly with ethnic identity (for example, James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* or William Saroyan’s *The Human Comedy*). For the purposes of this project, I focus on the insights provided by novels

that *name* ethnicity as a significant factor within the narrative and do so while engaging commercial, visual narratives. As Fredric Jameson famously contends, we can meaningfully access history through its “textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious.”¹¹ Novels and other major narrative forms are constantly positioning themselves vis-à-vis one another within American cultural life, and reading them in conversation with one another opens new interpretive avenues for contemplating the ethnic “textualizations” of social history. By incorporating various mass-culture narratives in comparative readings with these novels, I further promote the notion that the period is not just a “context” (read backdrop) for the novels, but that these texts are all engaged collaboratively in constructing or revising ethnic American identities at a crucial point in history.

Written and Visual Narratives at Midcentury

Two well-known films of the post-World War II era, *A Face in the Crowd* (1957) and *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), contain scenes that frame television as a potentially troublesome site for the misuses of power and manipulation of the public.¹² Framing screens within screens, they offer sophisticated metacommentaries on the medium in its early years. Within the first film’s narrative, Andy Griffith’s seemingly down-home TV host character, Lonesome Rhodes, is framed and climactically exposed as a demagogue when his vengeful manager pulls up the sound in the studio to block out the show’s exit music, revealing his flippant off-air comments about how easily he can dupe the audience. In a similar vein, *The Manchurian Candidate* contains a behind-the-scenes vision of demagoguery waiting to be exposed: Angela Lansbury’s double-agent character, Mrs. Iselin, skulks conspiratorially in profile next to the television monitor on which her McCarthyesque husband announces the number of suspected Communists in the federal government. Both films rely on these critiques of television to forward messages about the power and malleability of image and rhetoric that threaten the very principles guiding American life. These commentaries seem especially clever in feature films appearing in the aftermath of the television boom, which noticeably challenged the popularity and productivity of the Hollywood movie industry in ways that caused major revisions in movie making and marketing practices.¹³ While the above metaframes question the politics behind representation on television, “film” seems to ignore the fact that it, too, is engaged in these same kinds of politicized activities.

Novels began paralleling the gestures in these two films in prior decades, framing and calling into question the representational practices at work within movies, which were in the process of shifting the cultural position of the novel as the dominant form of entertainment narrative. One of the most famous examples appears in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), as the narrative frames the movie screen flickering before Bigger Thomas's eyes, offering him images of white femininity and desire that he can only temporarily consume but never really possess.¹⁴ These kinds of novelistic framings are not usually inflected with the same tones of conspiracy and paranoia as the above filmic counterparts; however, they do raise the same kinds of questions about the rhetorical power of images within the public and private spheres of American culture. Still, novels are not always consistently acknowledged as "products" themselves. Evan Brier notes the ways in which the growth of mass culture in the postwar era influenced the American novel, both in that it became a subject for novelists and in that it altered the ways in which books functioned as commodities: "As there is no categorical separation between mass culture and other forms of culture, there is no such divide between the marketing of postwar American novels and the novels themselves; marketing went, as it were, all the way down, and novelists were, in effect rather than by design, essential collaborators in the project of producing belief in the novel's cultural value." He aptly demonstrates that novels are "still often treated solely as commentators on the commodification of culture" as opposed to participants within a commodity culture.¹⁵

While this book works to create dialogue between visual and written narratives, the novels are a starting point. The novels provide an impetus for reexamining familiar visual narratives, whose readings are then afforded a disruptive potential that may not have been there without the novel in question. My work on these novels is based on several premises about the functions of literature and other narratives within American culture. Foremost is the assumption that almost all cultural products reveal some kind of narrative, and all narratives produced within the national boundaries of the United States are in some way *about* American identity, as, in the words of Lisa Lowe, "it is through culture that the subject becomes, acts, and speaks itself as 'American.'" Furthermore, Edward Said argues that the connections between imperial expansion and culture are found within narratives, as "nations themselves *are* narrations" (original emphasis).¹⁶ As noted earlier, the psychological and cultural concept of "identity" became a crucial force of inquiry within narratives in the period following World War II. Ralph Ellison once stated that the search for identity is "*the* American theme. The nature of our society is such that we are prevented from knowing who we are. It is still a young

society, and this is an integral part of its development.” Moving beyond the alienation that became the focus of much modernist writing, many postwar works explore the multiple and complex identities operating within what was once seen as “the unified subject.” Joseph Urgo describes the postmodern stance as one that implicitly acknowledges that there is no “original” (or “authentic”) identity from which to be alienated, and narratives work through a process of “self revision and cultural interrogation.”¹⁷ The period immediately following World War II remains integral to further interrogations of these trends within literary history because of the boom in production of, and sheer cultural saturation by, visual narratives that vied for a contributive space within the larger national “search for identity” at the dawn of a new technological age—even as the new media were representing the old and vice versa.

While other literary forms also provided spaces for marginalized writers, I focus on novels because of their significance as the predominant form of print entertainment narrative in the modern age. Until the advent of films, and then television, the novel was the most-consumed narrative across class and gender lines for almost a century. While there is not space to examine the complete institutional history of the novel in this project, it is important to acknowledge its unique cultural position within literary production as other major entertainment narratives entered the scene, all of them in discursive circulation within the postwar American public, and sometimes in collaboration with one another as novelists became increasingly involved in theatrical and film work through adaptation and script writing. Of the novel’s social role, Jonathan Arac notes, “In that age of the novel in the United States, say from about the time of *Moby-Dick* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to that of *Invisible Man* and *Lolita*, the novel had a special relationship to what we now call the national imaginary, and that special relationship has now passed from print, in particular the novel, to other media forms.” It is at midcentury we see the growth of technologies and distribution that move visual media ever more firmly into the private space of the home, right alongside the novels on one’s bookshelf or nightstand, and a shift in the headquarters of the “national imaginary.” This period is fruitful for further exploration of the cultural functions of the novel in a culture in which visual narratives are increasing in number and vying for space within the larger public arena, and also of how these different types of narratives work together toward more multifaceted understandings of that culture.¹⁸

In a sense, the writers of this period perform the same cultural gesture as the previous century’s writers examined by Priscilla Wald in *Constituting Americans*. She describes creative prose as a common medium to which

people have continually returned for working out questions of Americanness. Though the specific rhetorics in question after World War II differ from the early legal documents forming the backdrop of Wald's study, the questions she asks still apply: "What are the limits and boundaries of We the People? What is the role of the writer in the constituting of Americans?"¹⁹ The increasingly significant position of mass media within American culture shifted these issues of democratic theory into different arenas and discourses, but the same impulses found themselves still paradoxically entrenched in postwar culture, in a nation striving toward an idealized all-inclusive, egalitarian society while also promoting individual success at the expense of the whole.

Race, Ethnicity, and Context

The postwar period saw a convergence of related forces that changed American lifestyles for the latter half of the century, including demographic and geographic shifts, changes in thinking about the family and education, shifts in work and class structures, and the rise of leisure culture and mass consumption. So what did it mean to be "ethnic" at midcentury? There were various events and social changes taking place during this period that expanded the possibilities for ethnic minorities to participate fully in cultural citizenship and some others that maintained limits upon them. The social progress that is popularly understood as the labor of the 1960s is now well documented as having been in place before and during the 1950s, with, for example, the legal fights for educational desegregation and early civil rights actions.²⁰

Mainstream mass culture began to change with the insurgence of African American and Chicano music stars and the inclusive casts of characters in youth gang novels and films (though often in stereotypical criminal roles). Even scholastic juvenile literature celebrated the contributions of immigrants to the United States with such titles as *We Came to America* (1954) and *Nine Who Chose America* (1959). At the same time, though, such cultural inclusions were counterbalanced by circumstances like continuing discrimination and violence against African Americans; "Operation Wetback," which deported thousands of *bracero* residents of the Southwest for fear of Communist infiltration; the federal government's undertaking of major expulsions of American Indians from treated lands; and the execution of the Rosenbergs accompanied by a persistent paranoia that associated Communism with intellectuals and Jews. "Ethnic pride" movements were not yet on the national scene.

Ethnicity certainly does not hold a particular, coherent political expression between the calendar dates of 1948 and 1963 (or whatever parameters one uses to define “midcentury”). This book does not attempt to define all “ethnic writing” of the period nor to argue for all ethnic minority writers as embodying progressive political views.²¹ Yet the period after World War II was a pivotal era in new conversations and thinking about ethnicity, in both political and popular arenas. Simultaneously, institutional segregation was still practiced—legally and not. Questions arose then and remain today about how to define race, how to define ethnicity, and to what extent either category matters to American cultural identity.

One certainty is that the definitions of these terms have always been in flux. Scholars such as Michael Roediger and Clara Rodriguez are two of the more recent to explore how definitions have shifted due to changing sociohistorical contexts for how Americans think about race and ethnicity. For example, Rodriguez studies in detail the history of the U.S. Census to examine how these definitions have evolved over time. She documents that the 1950 Census was the first that tried to explain the concept of “race” within the Census form, in language that revealed how little the United States understood its own conceptualizations of race and how definitions still varied from state to state because of historical precedents. Roediger carefully examines how, in the first half of the twentieth century,

[a]lthough World War II was a watershed, . . . [there was a] gradual series of changes in urban race relations, housing, and state policies causing new immigrant communities to want and win a firmly white identity. Ironically, the nadir of new immigrant existence—the racial attacks culminating in restricted immigration in the 1920s—ushered in a period in which the “immigrant problem” seemed relatively settled and assimilation to whiteness could occur; at the same time, the great liberal mobilizations of the New Deal and industrial unionism in the 1930s made space in which new immigrants could mobilize as whites and exclude others. As they lived with race and called on the state for aid, the immigrant house, increasingly defined as the “white” house, became a key site for the making of race. As houses were constructed, so too was the idea—validated by popular campaigns for segregation of neighborhoods in the 1920s and then by the New Deal housing policy—that African Americans were “antineighbors”; and that all Europeans could unify around that realization.

His work shows the various processes by which the idea of “ethnicity” as an aspect of whiteness came into being and was already in place by the war.²²

A study that nicely demonstrates the strength of fluctuating definitions at midcentury in particular is Karen Brodtkin Sacks’ “How Did Jews Become White Folks?” Sacks traces the coincidental circumstances resulting in a situation in which “[s]uddenly the same folks who promoted nativism and xenophobia were eager to believe that Euro-origin people whom they had deported, reviled as members of inferior races, and prevented from immigrating only a few years earlier were now model middle-class white suburban citizens.” These disparate factors were the post–World War II easing of anti-Semitism in the United States, new economic opportunities, federal educational initiatives, and suburbanization. What Brodtkin Sacks documents here, parallel to Roediger’s work, is the process in American culture by which “race” metamorphoses into “ethnicity” for certain groups by means of particular sociohistorical circumstances. Similar scholarly work has been done to trace these processes for other specific groups, as well, such as the Irish and the Italians. Arlene Dávila shows, too, how the shift from racialized to “ethnic” over time is not unidirectional: “Already, even if only categorically, Mexicans were regarded as white prior to the 1930s, as were many Latin Americans in the United States prior to the official 1970s institutionalization of ‘Hispanic’ to include all peoples of Spanish heritage and origin.” Now, the twenty-first century sees the political atmosphere around immigration reracializing Mexicans. Such studies reiterate precisely Ronald Takaki’s point that “race” has been an inherently more powerful category for exclusion than ethnicity has been for inclusion because of the power differential at work. Categories based on physiognomy or phenotype, like “black” or “Asian,” have remained in inferior hierarchical relation to “white” and have historically lent those categories less malleability for cultural redefinition.²³

As such, “race” serves as a public and political category more than as an individual descriptor of identity. “Ethnicity” has come to represent the identity variables at work within a set of geopolitical boundaries, based on cultural practices, language, nations of origin or ancestry, and religion. Using ethnicity in this sense, one might argue that everyone is ethnic, because everyone draws on culture and ancestry for identity. “Yet,” warns Rey Chow, “if everyone is ethnic, no one is,” so we have to think carefully about how we use this term.²⁴

What case studies on the topics of race and ethnicity seem to collectively assert is that *context* has everything to do with how these categories are defined and play out within the real social arena. Where Irish may have

been a distinct “race” in the early American Republic, the abstract processes of acculturation had taken place so thoroughly by the mid twentieth century that “Irish” became a nominal ethnicity. Meanwhile, the federal watchfulness over potential domestic enemies during World War II highlighted as “racial” Americans of Japanese and Italian heritage because the context provided for them to be seen as “alien.” Despite a continuing general suspicion toward foreigners during the Cold War, many refugees from Communist-led countries were welcomed to the United States, and the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 eased the heavy immigration restrictions of previous decades and lifted racial qualifications for citizenship eligibility.²⁵ Even with these legal maneuvers, the categorical influences of “race” did not quickly disappear for new immigrants. These metamorphoses of official identities speak to Ralph Ellison’s apt definition of the American nation as “more of a process than an isolable set of characteristics.” As Rey Chow puts it, “ethnicity is not simply a static space occupied by ethnics who are, somehow, already there but, more important, also a relation of cultural politics that is regularly being enacted by a Westernized, Americanized audience with regard to those who are perceived and labeled as being ethnic.” And from a historical perspective, Roediger argues, “the ambiguities [of definition] spoke to how ethnicity tortuously emerged as a term registering uneven and unpredictable changes in how new immigrant communities and communities of color existed in a changing social structure.”²⁶ While both race and ethnicity serve as important identity-influencing factors within this project, my more frequent use of the term “ethnicity” imparts an interest in the cultural identities that are always in progress within the parameters of—and apart from—the legal racial categories.

Worth considering, however, is the attention some theorists pay to the ways in which the concept of race has been glossed over because of a privileging of “ethnicity” as an all-encompassing term. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, for example, caution that people too easily view race as a “variety of ethnicity,” which draws attention away from the very real power differentials at work within a culture that functions with a “ubiquitous racial logic.” It is a concept that has become increasingly difficult to define, they continue, but “how one is categorized is far from a merely academic or even personal matter” because of the real-world ramifications race has within public and private sectors. Similarly, anthropologist Roger Sanjek contends that in scholarship seeking to further our understanding of global racial formations “it clarifies nothing to euphemize race with ‘color caste,’ ‘ethnicity,’ ‘plural society,’ ‘duality,’ or similar evasions.” While this is true, it is also important to examine the ways in which all the social concepts and formations Sanjek

lists do interact variously on personal and social levels. We must not overlook the significance of race within world history, and we must also not allow it to become an overly deterministic or reductive consideration. Chow reaffirms this in her contention that the “frequent conflation of [these terms] is not the result of mental sloppiness on the part of scholars but rather a symptom of the theoretical fuzziness of the terms themselves, and fuzziness that, moreover, must be accommodated precisely because of the overdetermined nature of the issues involved.”²⁷

Turning to economic concepts as a means of understanding how race and ethnicity have been artificially constructed within the modern era, like Chow and Roediger, theorists Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein explore these definitions in relation to labor and class. Wallerstein positions “race” and “ethnicity” primarily in relation to the division of labor within the “economic machinery” of the modern nation-state. Balibar adds that ethnicity is a “fictive” set of categories devised for the purposes of producing a sense of “natural” and “transcendent” belonging to a community. Similarly, Werner Sollors asserts, “The forces of modern life embodied in such terms as ‘ethnicity,’ ‘nationalism,’ or ‘race’ can indeed be meaningfully discussed as ‘inventions.’” Seeing less manipulative hegemony at work than Balibar and Wallerstein, he still implies the constructedness of such concepts, describing them as “widely shared though intensely debated, collective fictions that are continually reinvented.”²⁸ The work of these three theorists is useful in demonstrating the arbitrary nature of categories devised as a means of assessing “identity,” but these definitions are also somewhat narrow and overly deterministic for encompassing the social implications of such structures.

To claim that ethnic identities are, at base, artificial constructs is to imply that ethnicity does not *really* exist. As slippery, arbitrary, and temporal as its definition might be, the idea of ethnicity has long held—and continues to hold—power in the material world. Of course, to argue the polar opposite, that these identifiers are not “fictive” or “invented,” is to inherently fall into the trap of defining ethnicity and race according to nonsocial structures, to look for the problematically “natural” origins of identity. Essentialist definitions of identity leave little influence to historical and cultural environment and can, at worst, perpetuate stereotypes and assumptions about identity-related predilections. Sollors admits that, while understanding the constructedness of these identity categories, “it must be possible to acknowledge and describe concrete ethnic differences without necessarily reifying the concept of ethnicity.” And while it may be useful to parse out and challenge these loaded terms in various ways, a terminology is still necessary for tagging a

set of lived experiences. “Ethnicity” is indeed an apt term here, for in Chow’s words, it “voids replicating the residual biologism that is inerasably embedded in the term ‘race,’ situates the problems at hand within culture and representation, [and] marks the discrimination entrenched in dominant ways of thinking and talking about so-called minorities.”²⁹ In contrast, I occasionally use the term “racialized” in my discussion to indicate the very purposeful, institutional categorization of an ethnic subject based on physiognomy.

Snapshots of an Era: Mass Culture and National Cultural Shifts

“[S]eeing is absolutely central to the meaning of the 1950s.”

—Karal Ann Marling

The emphasis on mass culture within this book is not meant to serve simply as a social context. Instead, we should see it as a kind of commercial narrative force circulating within the culture, one that projected, reflected, and evolved with popular thinking on a variety of subjects. Joel Foreman describes mass culture of the era as “a living information system” that, “through the medium of exchange relations, pricing mechanisms, resource allocation, and productive activities organized and maintained itself as a distinct entity.”³⁰ The images of Donna Reed in an apron, hula-hoopers, screaming Elvis fans, Lassie, and teenagers necking in huge convertibles have endured within our culture because they were so engaging and novel, and they conveyed the exuberance with which people wanted to live everyday life after two decades of economic depression and war. They are also largely responsible for a rather homogenous nostalgia about the era because of the facility with which they were mass produced, preserved, and made mainstream; the newer technology that enabled them to stay in circulation has kept them in our collective line of vision, and the fact that the majority of the faces in these images appeared Anglo has kept that collective image as majority white.

Because it is for sale, mass culture is presumably “for” everyone. This is an aspect of midcentury mass culture that is so fascinating: while it became ever more widely available, not everyone was directly and visibly included in the invitation to consume, and not everyone had the financial means to do so.³¹ Several studies have noted that much of the economic prosperity we associate with the period was artificial. The period immediately following the war witnessed an understandable slump in production without the war machine. The government instigated production initiatives and new lending

policies that created a general sense of optimistic financial upswing. The reality is that, while the middle class was rapidly expanding, prosperity did not set in fully until midway through the 1950s and experienced some hiccups later in the decade.³² Before the war, there were various avenues that really did cater to all kinds of people. The “race record” industry promoted early jazz and blues performers to mass audiences; immigrant neighborhoods and the movie industry enjoyed a symbiotic link; and, as Richard Polenberg notes, hundreds of foreign-language radio programs existed for immigrants nationwide. Some of these ethnic-targeted marketing strategies were altered by the war or simply slipped away, as was the case of much radio programming, when replaced by emergent technologies. But these avenues for representation were not necessarily replaced with equivalents after the war. In the late 1940s, marketers started to consider ethnic-specific advertising, but it was limited. Elizabeth Cohen notes, “In 1948, when Pepsi-Cola became one of the first mainstream advertisers to ‘discover’ the Negro market and mount an advertising campaign in over fifty black newspapers, it set a precedent that would continue through the 1950s of major companies increasingly pursuing African Americans’ rising spending power, but without substantively reorienting their ‘one-size-fits-all’ mass marketing campaigns.” It was not until the ethnic pride movements of the 1960s that such advertisers stopped running in ethnic media the same ads with white models they ran in mainstream magazines. As the postwar years wore on, the mass media narratives became ever more “white,” middle-class, nuclear family oriented, traditionally gendered, and consumer oriented. This resulted in a series of what Alan Nadel calls patriotic “tropes” that “performed the ideological task of constructing narratives that allowed a significant portion of the population to link its sense of self—the story of its life—to national history”—that is, national history as renarrativized by Anglo-Americans.³³

The term “white middle class” has become a problematically homogenizing descriptor in itself. My use of it is intended not to oversimplify a set of real identities, but in the sense best articulated by Lynn Spigel, as a “set of social identifications encouraged by the media rather than to real individuals whose identities were more fractured and complex. Still, the term has real meaning because it was the particular aim of the mass media—especially television—to level class and other ethnic differences in order to produce a homogenous public for national advertisers.”³⁴

Part of this leveling was due to the major shifts in the cultural geography of the United States, with vast numbers of families moving away from urban centers to the suburbs. An increased need for housing after the war

resulted in the mass production of new neighborhoods in previously rural areas, most of them using the assembly line method devised by William J. Levitt (of Levittown fame) to crank out hundreds of homes each week. The increased availability of housing, along with new lending initiatives developed by the government, resulted in a mass migration of young families and couples away from the urban centers, away from distinctly ethnic neighborhoods and extended family structures. Historians have noted that this is one of the major ways in which a younger generation from Eastern European and Mediterranean immigrant families became absorbed within “whiteness.” Roediger, for example, argues that this shift was set in motion well before the war: “The FHA, [Home Owners Loan Corporation], and VA actually ensured that new immigrants and their descendants would have less and less ability to choose to develop their own urban neighborhoods. New Deal housing policies empowered and advantaged new immigrants, but as whites, not as new immigrants.” Ironically, notes Polenberg, “just when the government and the civil rights movement appeared to be moving the nation toward integration, the flight to the suburbs was pulling it even more strongly in the opposite direction.”³⁵ While these demographic shifts provided some ethnic groups with a sudden social mobility, the zoning regulations and by-laws in many new subdivisions prohibited home sales to some groups, particularly African Americans and Jews. The Veterans Administration and Federal Housing Administration did not inherently combat the exclusionary codes of specific housing developments, as their rules and lending practices discriminated against investment in private ownership of homes in many ethnic minority neighborhoods. Cohen notes, “In theory, veterans who were first-time home buyers of all races were able to get low-interest mortgages guaranteed by the Veterans Administration or the Federal Housing Authority. . . . But to get such a loan, a veteran needed a willing lender and a willing seller—both difficult to find, especially in the South. Loans were limited to single-family homes, not urban apartments or town houses.” In fact, only a tiny percentage of VA loans went to African American veterans. Even for nonveterans, federal and private lending guidelines favored mortgages in white, middle-class, suburban neighborhoods. In the end, “The landscape of mass consumption created a metropolitan society in which people were no longer brought together in central marketplaces and the parks, streets, and public buildings that surrounded them but, rather, were separated by class, gender, and race in differentiated commercial sub-centers.”³⁶

For those who could buy new homes there came a consequent imperative to outfit the home with furniture and modern appliances, to provide vehicles

for transport to the centers of work and commerce. Martyn Lee locates the birth of a “fully fledged regime of accumulation” in the 1950s and 1960s within the earlier twentieth-century phenomenon of “Fordism” (named after the innovator capitalist responsible for the development of modern mass production methods). This force not only changed production and labor practices; it also instigated “the emergence of modern consumer society and a whole raft of corresponding social and cultural changes.” Further, Medovoi argues,

the postwar suburb must be understood, not simply as a geographical phenomenon, nor even as a new mode of mass consumption, but as a primary Cold War ideological apparatus. A “machine for living,” the suburban home . . . hailed its subjects not as a multiracial working class with common laboring interests to defend, nor even as citizen members of a heterogeneous public, but instead as white Americans participating in a national ideal (the much ballyhooed “American Dream”) that itself needed defending against its communist enemies. Moving to the suburbs was tantamount to doing one’s national duty by building the affluence and strength of America’s Fordist order.

The groundwork of these postwar marketing successes, whether rhetorical or commercial, was established in the 1920s and ’30s. An existing consumerist rhetoric, then, along with perceptions of household need in the new suburbs, and new technologies to attract purchasers, came an increased accessorizing of the new majority white-collar lifestyle and its accompanying leisure culture. Thus, conspicuous consumption gradually became part of the fabric of American life for more families, who, practically speaking, could afford more purchases because of the lower cost of cheap goods via mass production.³⁷

Participation in a vital consumer economy was envisioned not only as a personal fantasy, but also as a patriotic duty and national privilege. The rhetorics reveal both a sense of shared excitement about new technologies and the ways in which it might help society progress and an imperative to participate in growing the capitalist economy as a response to Communism. A perfect example of combined patriotic and consumerist rhetoric appears in one television program that ran a dramatization of the hypothetical takeover of an American town by Communists. In the middle of the militaristic dramatization, the host breaks in with a commercial intermission to promote two new shopping centers. He claims that this is a worthy pause because the malls are “concrete expressions of the practical idealism that built America. . . . with



Figure 1. Picturing immigrants: Ethnic Americans as “social problems” in documentary photojournalism. Here, a family of immigrants files paperwork with Alien Registration. New York City, 1951. “Alien Registration.” Photographer Burt Glinn / Magnum Photos.

more than four-score beautiful stores . . . and plenty of parking for all the cars that we capitalists seem to acquire. Who can help but contrast the beautiful, the practical settings of Arcadia Shopping Hub and the Whittier Quad with what you’d find under communism?”³⁸

On television programs, on product packaging, on cookbook covers, the bodies of Americans were primarily envisioned as white and middle-class. Ethnic subjects appeared now and then, of course, as caricatures, logos, entertainers. Issues facing ethnic Americans were broached, but often in the context of “social problems” in film dramas or photo-realist journalism. Some ethnic minority stars did have their own television shows (Molly Goldberg, Nat King Cole), but they were often short-lived programs, as I will discuss in further detail in chapter 4. The visual, institutional, and social messages were convoluted and sometimes self-contradictory. These narratives were circulating as rapidly as prefabricated houses were going up, and they were all vying for attention through a variety of semiotic appeals, on new television sets, at the drive-in movies, in Technicolor, in more and more teen magazines.

While this was the case, there were also some narrow avenues for diversity within the consumer logic. The large number of mass culture products in

constant circulation provided many opportunities to go beyond the stereotypical or status quo. Foreman notes that because of a “spontaneous emergence of desires and demands that cannot be predicted with certainty,” the market and its “millions of constituents preclude central control and provide the enabling conditions for cultural change.” Not only is there space for the production of new, potentially progressive, cultural forms, there is room for interpretation. Stuart Hall maintains that mass culture is not all bad; it “is profoundly mythic. . . . It is where we discover and play with the indentifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences . . . but to ourselves. . . .”³⁹ Through the novel, as well, midcentury ethnic writers were very much engaged in playing with the mythologies set out within mass culture, in engaging the real estate of representation occupied most visibly—but not solely—by mass media, and in offering additional narratives for reimagining the American self.



In this cultural milieu, the chapters that follow offer investigations into how various narratives question and prod these definitions and boundaries of performances of cultural citizenship in the 1950s. These textual case studies begin with the positioning of recent immigrants within postwar American culture in “The Land of Plenty: American Mass Culture and the Literary Immigrant in C. Y. Lee’s *The Flower Drum Song* and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*.” A comparative reading of the novels, published in 1957 and 1955, respectively, this chapter differs from the ones after it in that it focuses on two novels’ engagement of mass culture in general rather than focusing on a novel/nonnovel dialogue (though both novels were eventually adapted to film). In terms of narrative development, language, audience, and ideology of citizenship, these two novels delineate the extremes in representing immigrant subjects. They offer very different takes on cultural self-definition, influenced by the tensions between assimilation and cultural preservation in relation to gendered and ethnicizing identity practices within American culture. My readings of immigrant subjectivities here function as an analytical “hinge,” extending the ideas of the first chapter and providing groundwork for the subsequent ones. First, the readings introduce how a novel can engage mass culture in ways that both affect narrative structure and serve as implicit social commentary; second, they highlight the ways in which ethnic subjects may participate in midcentury cultural citizenship; third, they theorize the role of mass culture forms in accomplishing this kind of cultural participation. In both novels the immigrant is portrayed as facing an obvious set of decisions regarding his relationship to American cultural practices. Because identity is so obviously