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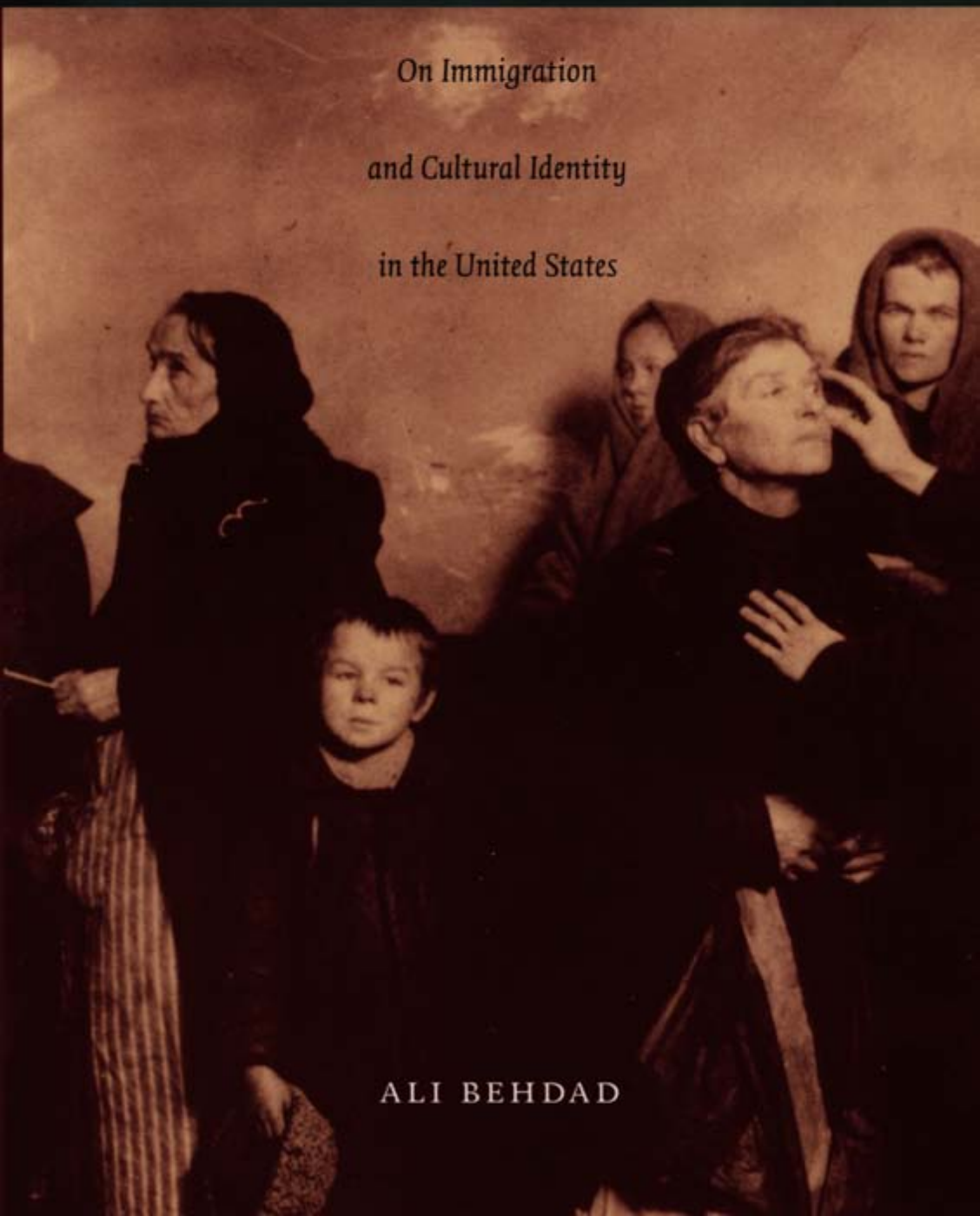
A FORGETFUL NATION

On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States



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A Forgetful Nation

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On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States

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For Hassan and Fatimeh

who gave me the courage to leave home,

And for Juliet, Roxana, and David

who showed me a way home

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Preface

As I was writing this book, those who were familiar with my earlier work on nineteenth-century European travelers in the Middle East sometimes wondered about the disciplinary jump I was taking by writing about immigration and nationalism in the United States. Some were curious about the reason behind what they perceived to be a radical shift in my critical interest. Others expressed reservations about my authority, if not ability, to write about such complex and well-worn issues as immigration and national identity. Still others warned that I was committing academic suicide by moving from a familiar field to an unknown territory, and quite possibly perpetrating the crime of superficiality along the way. Disheartening though these queries were in the beginning, they helped me better understand what motivated my interest in the new topic and its connection with what I had written before.

Above all, what compelled me to pursue this project in spite of all the skepticism was something personal, the often disillusioning experiences and traumatic memories of being an Iranian immigrant in America. The topics of nineteenth-century European representations of the Middle East and immigration in the United States may seem unrelated critically, but for me they both raise important questions about identity, alterity, and culture. The writing of this book, like that of my first one, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution*, was a personal journey to make sense of my own experiences of immigration in the United States. While *Belated Travelers* was an attempt to engage the orientalist discourse that had construed me both as an exotic "oriental" and as a decadent "other," this book is an attempt to better grasp the immigrant history that has made me simultaneously a "model minority" and a threatening "alien" in America.

This book is the work of a first-generation immigrant who has survived the trauma of displacement and exile to become a "successful" citizen of the United States, only to realize that as a Middle Eastern subject I continue to be viewed as a threatening other.

In addition, on a theoretical level I began to realize, radical though the shift of my critical interest may have appeared to my skeptical friends and concerned colleagues, that I was actually working on a familiar topic. Immigration *is* an experience of traveling, of moving away from home to a new territory. It is not an accident that the first story of immigration to America, Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, is also a travelogue by a Frenchman. Every immigrant tale is also a narrative of voyage. Immigration, like travel, is the encounter between at least two cultures. Although immigrating, unlike travel, is a permanent move, like traveling it demands an adventurous soul and entails the desire to encounter another reality, another culture, and often another language. And the immigrant, like a traveler who seeks renewal and enrichment by seeing other places and experiencing other cultures, leaves home to improve and enhance his or her situation in and through another place. The connection between traveling and immigration has become even more apparent in the age of globalization, as the immigrant experience is increasingly marked by a lifetime of traveling back and forth between old and new "homes." This book, then, is a continuation of my interest in the issue of travel and the ways the movement across national and cultural boundaries produces new identities and shapes cultures.

While building on the personal, historical, and theoretical findings of my earlier work, the focus of this book shifts from Europe to the United States of America and from orientalism and colonialism to immigration and nationalism. Though this shift demanded that I develop several new areas of research expertise, I chose this more difficult path because I was convinced, and remain so, that this area of inquiry has been unjustifiably neglected by postcolonial critics, and that it offers a much needed exploration of a critical subject too long overlooked. On the one hand, as Donald E. Pease has insightfully observed, in spite of their anamnestic readings of European colonial history by way of rethinking modernity, postcolonial critics have fallen into the ideological trap of American exceptionalism in concluding "that colonialism had little or nothing to do with the formation of the US national identity and that the study of the US culture will not affect

their understanding of postcolonity."[1] Indeed, as Pease points out, not only did early settlers of North America collaborate "in the British Empire's colonial domination of the indigenous population," but also after independence, "the members of the US postcolony continued British colonial practices in their relations with native populations of neighboring territories and with migrants from other European colonies" (209). On the other hand, postcolonial theorists have ironically been forgetful of the neo-imperial context in which their works have been produced and received, evading for the most part the complex and powerful ways in which the United States has displaced European hegemony since the mid-twentieth century.[2] The historical rationale for a critical focus on Europe's cultural and political hegemony has been to produce the colonized's absent gaze and unwritten text, but these readings have rarely theorized the historical junctures that make the colonial encounter relevant to the neo-imperial condition today. Even more ironically, when postcolonial critics have broached such contemporary issues as globalization, transnationalism, and cultural hybridity, they have too often done so in a celebratory manner that views new configurations of power mostly in salutary terms. Disregarding the neo-imperial relations of power that continue to produce unequal developments throughout the world, Arjun Appadurai, for example, has coined the notion of "postnation" to describe the emergence of "strong alternative forms for organization of global traffic in resources, images, and ideas—forms that either contest the nation-state actively or constitute peaceful alternatives for large-scale political loyalties."[3] Similarly, Homi Bhabha, valorizing the redemptive power of postcolonial displacement, has suggested that postcolonial people "displace some of the great metropolitan narratives of progress and law and order and question the authority and authenticity of those narratives."[4]

Useful though concepts such as postnation and diaspora may be in locating the cultural implications of globalization, they nevertheless eclipse, if not fully dissimulate, neo-imperial relations of power. Postcolonial critics' inattentiveness to the continuing importance of nation and state is particularly problematic at this historical juncture, given the fortification of national borders in spite of the global flow of people across them, not to mention the forging of new partnerships between powerful states and global corporations. Especially since 9/11, not only has a new and powerful form of patriotism emerged in the United

States, but the tragic terrorist event has also enhanced the power of state apparatuses such as the FBI, the CIA, and the INS, linked and centrally organized now under the rubric of the new Department of Homeland Security. In addition, while national borders may no longer impede international trade and global economic transactions, they *do* nonetheless matter greatly when it comes to human subjects whose movements are now carefully regulated. As I will argue in the last chapter of this book, in the past thirty years an exclusionary and disciplinary form of state sovereignty has been solidified in the United States, as demonstrated, for example, by the expansion of the prison industry and the proliferation of the technologies of control at the border with Mexico. Similarly, the integration of Europe in the form of a union has also meant tougher restrictions on the movement of people to Europe from the Middle East, Africa, and most of Asia.

Arguing against the postnational positions of theorists like Appadurai and Bhabha, in the pages that follow I revisit the well-debated liberal tradition[5] of American nationalism by way of bringing it into a postcolonial problematic of nation and immigration. I argue that historical amnesia toward immigration is of paramount importance in the founding of the United States as a nation. As I use the term, the notion of amnesia is meant to signify a form of disavowal that entails a negative acknowledgment of what is historically and collectively repressed. Reading a broad range of discourses—from founding, and foundational, texts such as *Letters from an American Farmer* and *Democracy in America* to lesser-known works such as the writings of Know-Nothings and of public health officials at Ellis Island—I rely upon the idea of forgetting as a form of historical disavowal to guide my inquiry in several interrelated ways. First, I argue that the forgetful representation by the United States of its immigrant heritage is part of a broader form of historical amnesia about its violent formation. Both the benign discourse of democratic founding and the myth of immigrant America deny that nationhood has been achieved, at least in part, through the violent conquest of Native Americans, the brutal exploitation of enslaved Africans, and the colonialist annexations of French and Mexican territories. Second, I suggest that the myth of immigrant America is itself a forgetful narrative that disavows what I call the "economics of immigration," by which I mean not only issues such as the need for labor and the dynamics of supply and demand but also the political economy of immigration as a socio-legal phenomenon. Third, I use

the notion of amnesia to anchor my claim that the historical disavowals inherent in the nativist discourse of the United States are a crucial component of its national culture. Often treated as an exception to the prevailing myth of immigrant America, nativism has been overlooked as a driving force behind much of the nation's immigration policy, as well as a powerful force in defining citizenship and national identity in ways that are both exclusionary and normalizing.

This book adopts the interdisciplinary approach of *Belated Travelers*, building bridges among a variety of competing, but also complementary, academic domains and discourses: between the social sciences and the humanities; between empirical knowledge and theoretical reflections; and between discourses of nationalism and practices of immigration. The issue of immigration has most often been treated empirically as a matter of politics and public policy in the United States, and it has been studied almost exclusively by sociologists, historians, political scientists, and legal scholars. *A Forgetful Nation*, while attentive to matters of policy, law, and history, formulates a theoretical understanding of immigration in the context of nationalism that goes beyond compartmentalized approaches to these pressing issues by considering the dynamic relation linking theoretical reflections on national identity and immigration with the political and institutional structures that produce them as concrete phenomena. As such, it not only introduces a literary and cultural dimension into the traditionally empirical fields of sociology and political science but also opens up a new field of inquiry in the humanities by treating the question of immigration as a cultural phenomenon. At the same time, this book contributes to cultural studies of nationalism by moving beyond celebratory theories of travel, instead bringing the study of national identity into dialogue with legal discourses and social practices of immigration that are often neglected by theorists of nationalism. And finally, in exploring the complex ways in which immigrants mediate such notions as home, nation, and identity, *A Forgetful Nation* offers useful understandings of the predicaments of racial and cultural differences in the United States.

Admittedly, my effort to cross discursive and disciplinary boundaries is neither critically comprehensive nor intellectually complete, for it does push certain issues to the background by way of foregrounding others. To afford access and meaning to the central inquiry of this book—the complex dynamics of forgetting in nation building—

the argument relegates other concerns to its textual margins. Among these issues is the predicament of gender. Although at select places in the text I point out the gendered nature of immigration and national discourse, I do not offer a substantial discussion of the role that gender plays in forming national identity, nor do I seriously engage the fact that immigration discourse has always been in part a gendered discourse in the United States. There are now several important studies that have explored the micro-mechanics of the gendering of national discourse, among which I wish to mention in passing Jacqueline Stevens's incisive and imaginative book *Reproducing the State*, in which she demonstrates the complex production of gender and sexual differences through membership practices of political societies, practices ranging from marriage laws that implicitly sanction sexual violence against women to citizenship laws that expatriate women who marry aliens.[6] Works such as Stevens's are a crucial complement to my own, and I hope that some of my insights about the productive role of forgetting may prove fructuous for theorists who seek to further develop our understanding of the interplay of gender, nationalism, and immigration.

Moreover, though I address the racialization of immigrants throughout this book, I provide neither a history nor a theory of race and racial formation in discussing immigrant America. There already exist many important empirical studies by sociologists, and theoretical works by ethnic studies scholars, which have contributed immensely to our understanding of racial formation in the United States and the role of immigration in it. Although *A Forgetful Nation* does not directly or critically engage the work of these scholars, its argument has benefited greatly from their critical insights. Michael Omi's and Howard Winnat's important work *Racial Formation in the United States*, in which they offer a substantial study of racism, racial theory, and the interplay of race, class, gender, and the nation since the civil rights movement, for example, constitutes an important intertext.[7] The problematic of nation and immigrant clearly demands a theoretical understanding of racial formation in the United States. In spite of the trans-historical scope of my argument, which unfortunately risks the impression of conflating not only various phases of immigration but also different types of immigrants, this book does not ignore the specific racial and ethnic markings of immigrants that complicate the story of immigrant America. As I move throughout the book between theoretical invo-

cations of the immigrant and considerations of how particular immigrant groups are figured, I take great pains to include examples that are specified and historicized to demonstrate how new immigrants are racialized by different methods in different historical periods. For instance, in chapter 4 I contrast the rise of the Know-Nothings with the eugenics movement to differentiate the nation's horrendous treatment of Irish and German immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century from the nation's exclusionary and disciplinary processing of Jews and Italians at Ellis Island in the late nineteenth century. Similarly, in chapter 5 I address the particular ways in which negative representations of Latino and Middle Eastern immigrants in recent years have enabled a national politics of exclusion.

Discursively in dialogue with contemporary racial theory and empirical studies of immigration in the United States, this book makes a broader point about how racial and ethnic markings of immigrants complicate the story of immigrant America. The myth of immigrant America, I argue, not only obscures the ideological underpinning of national formation and the political economy of immigration but also disavows the importance of xenophobia in the founding of the United States. My argument concerns more specifically the predicament of racialization rather than the issue of race per se. I suggest that new immigrants are always racialized independently of their race and that the dynamics of racialization vary in different historical periods and contexts. My point parallels the argument made by ethnic scholars such as George Lipsitz that "political and cultural struggles over power have shaped the contours and dimensions of racism differently in different eras" and that the notion of race "tak[es] on different forms and serv[es] different social purposes in each time period."[8] Consider the maligning of the Irish and the Germans in the mid-nineteenth century, of Jews, Chinese, and Italians in the late nineteenth century, of Japanese and Germans during the Second World War, and of Mexican, Latin American, and Middle Eastern immigrants in the late twentieth century. In the United States, I suggest, there is no general theory of race; only particular practices of racialization. Moreover, race often matters in relation to the economics of immigration, by which I mean that immigrants' racialization is intertwined in complex ways with the issue of class and the political economy of social regulation. Even in the most racist movements, such as the eugenics war against eastern and southern European immigrants in the late nineteenth century and

the early twentieth, the desire to exclude members of these groups from the American polity reflects socioeconomic concerns that these newcomers would become "public charges." Similarly, the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 may have been dictated as much by the economic crisis in western states as by the theory of Gobineau then current that human races are not equal. I hope that my broader argument, which pertains not so much to the specifics of race relations in America as to the general dynamics of projecting the immigrant other, will help to establish more clearly the connections among various accounts of race and racialization in theorizing national identity in the United States.

In the past few years, while pursuing this book project, I have had the opportunity to work with many wonderful students. I have learned a great deal from them, and their ideas and comments have influenced in important ways my thinking about immigration and nationalism. I wish to especially thank Mary Pat Brady, Linda Greenberg, James Hyung-Jin Lee, Nush Powell, and Erin Williams, all of whom directly contributed to this book as research assistants and without whose help this project would have taken even longer to complete.

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Introduction

Nation and Immigration

"We're ignorant about how we started."—Lee Iacocca[1]

A few months after the passage of the Immigration Act of 1891, which established the first federal immigration agency, Ellis Island was formally opened on 1 January 1892 to become the main port of entry to the United States.[2] Over 70 percent of those who came to this country from 1892 until 1924 were processed there.[3] A self-contained station with a work force that eventually numbered over seven hundred, Ellis Island was essential to the development of the country's immigration policy and to the rise of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) as a powerful state apparatus.[4] For it was there that the newly born Immigration Bureau developed, refined, and formalized its regulatory practices and other immigration procedures, while the federal government used the example of Ellis Island to elaborate and institute its exclusionary policies of immigration. And yet, if you visited the Ellis Island Museum of Immigration—which opened in September 1990 to commemorate the nation's immigrant tradition—you would not find any reference to the INS, nor would you learn much about how the federal government's experiments there helped to usher in a new era of immigration control.[5] In spite of a few passing references to its having been an "Isle of Tears" for "a few unfortunate" immigrants who were rejected or detained, the historical Ellis Island is mostly celebrated as an "Isle of Hope," America's "front doors to freedom."[6] A symbolic repository of the nation's "immigrant heritage," the museum aims to enable its visitors to retrace the steps of their ancestors in a welcoming fashion that erases most evidence of the island's

original disciplinary function. The museum devotes only a small exhibit, titled "Public Servants," to the doctors, nurses, inspectors, interpreters, matrons, stenographers, and clerks who often worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week, during the peak immigration years. And discussion of the nation's anti-immigrant tendency is confined to a small exhibition called "The Closing Door" that deals mostly with the restrictive legislation of the early twentieth century, thus relegating to a distant past any negative sentiment toward immigrants or the state's exclusionary practices of immigration control. Transforming the disciplinary institution into a national monument that celebrates America's immigrant tradition, the museum obscures the very historical and political significance of Ellis Island.

When I asked an informed park ranger about this historical amnesia, he admitted that the museum's planning committee, headed by Lee Iacocca, for the most part had to erase the unpleasant aspects of immigration control at the island in order to turn it into the symbol of America's immigrant heritage. "The organizers and sponsors romanticized Ellis Island for fund raising,"[7] he pointed out; "they wanted to create a positive image of America's immigrant history."[8] The pragmatic decision to leave out most of the history of immigration control in the island reflects the forgetful way in which the museum represents the country's immigrant tradition. In the celebratory and patriotic exhibitions of the Ellis Island Museum, "memory is not reclaimed" but officially invented, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observes.[9] The museum's representation of America's immigrant heritage is an "invented tradition," in which romanticized images of the past inculcate patriotic values in the viewer.[10] In explaining the function of the Ellis Island Museum, Iacocca describes it as an "ethnic Williamsburg" created to make "people feel that this is a great country, that they have a heritage to be proud of" (Smith, "A Leader for Liberty," 30). Funded by the private sector and built, ironically, in the wake of a new era of immigration restriction in the 1980s, the museum therefore not only marginalizes the disciplinary practices and exclusionary policies of the original immigration center but also chooses to ignore the complexities of the nation's immigration history, by making those "who passed through the facility become prototypes for all arrivals to America no matter what their point of origin, port of entry, time of arrival, or circumstances" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 180). The museum's monolithic and patriotic narrative of immigrant heritage, in

sum, eclipses both the violent history that characterizes the peopling of America and the actualities of the nation's immigration policies that continue to regulate, discipline, and exclude certain "aliens" to this day.

I begin my discussion of immigration and cultural identity in the United States with the resurrection of Ellis Island as a national monument, because it provides a cogent example of what I explore in this book: how the liberal myth of immigrant America denies the actual history of immigration in the United States, a denial that I argue is paramount to the imagining of a national culture. The Ellis Island Immigration Museum is but the most recent articulation of the myth of immigrant America upon which the nation is founded. Indeed, beginning with J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's invocation of America as "every person's country" in 1782, through the celebration of the country as a "nation of many nations" in the poetry of Walt Whitman in the nineteenth century, to John F. Kennedy's portrayal of the United States as a "nation of immigrants" in the twentieth century, the official archive of the nation is replete with examples of a founding myth that defines immigration as a form of national hospitality. Like these earlier articulations of the founding myth, the nation's monument dedicated to commemorating its immigrant heritage is a forgetful reinvention that suppresses historical knowledge about the economics of immigration,[11] while producing a pseudo-historical consciousness about what it means to be an American. Dedicated to recounting "America's immigration story," the museum, like other cultural iterations of the founding myth, constitutes a "retrospective illusion" that disregards how the nation's open-door immigration was born of a colonialist will to power and a capitalist desire for economic expansion.[12]

Modes of Forgetting

Historical amnesia toward immigration, I argue in this book, is paramount in the founding of the United States as a nation.[13] But before I elaborate my argument about the productive function of amnesia in imagining the nation and its cultural and political implications, let me take a short theoretical detour to distinguish my usage of the concept of forgetting. I use the notion of amnesia throughout my discussion

to mean a form of cultural disavowal that simultaneously denies certain historical facts and produces a pseudo-historical consciousness of the present. Forgetting in this case does not entail mnemonic foreclosure—what Freud called *Verwerfung*—but negation, or *Verneinung*, to use the language of psychoanalysis.[14] In other words, the historical amnesia that I elaborate here is not to be equated with the kind of repression in which an ideational representative (*Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*) is kept completely out of our collective consciousness. Repression as foreclosure, Freud reminds us, "cannot occur until a sharp distinction has been established between what is conscious and what is unconscious: that *the essence of repression lies simply in the function of rejecting and keeping something out of consciousness*" (*General Psychological Theory*, 105; emphasis in original). Foreclosure is an emotional defense mechanism against certain internal instinctual impulses that are distressing or disturbing to us and that we therefore unconsciously wish to banish from our consciousness.

The kind of historical forgetting that I thematize throughout my discussion is closer to the Freudian notion of negation, "a repudiation, by means of projection, of an association that has just emerged" (*General Psychological Theory*, 213). In contrast to foreclosure, in which an ideational representative has no access to our consciousness because we have unconsciously repressed it, in negation "the subject-matter of a repressed image or thought can make its way into consciousness on condition that it is *denied*" (213–14; emphasis in original). Negation, Freud explains, "is actually a removal of the repression, though not, of course, an acceptance of what is repressed" (214). In negation, one may acknowledge an event, but the subject either denies its significance or refuses to take responsibility for it. As such, disavowal is a split perception of what constitutes our reality, a perception vacillating between denial and a supplementary acknowledgment. The notion of historical amnesia that I elaborate in this book entails a negative acknowledgment of what ultimately is historically and collectively suppressed. Forgetting here is a form of disavowal in which one consciously decides to keep certain knowledge at bay. "To deny something in one's judgment," as Freud remarks, "is at the bottom the same thing as to say: 'That is something that I would rather repress' " (214).

Disavowal, as the psychoanalyst John Steiner further elaborates, can take two forms: it can be either "turning a blind eye" or a "retreat from truth to omnipotence."[15] On the one hand, disavowal can be a

nonsystematic need to be innocent of a troubling recognition, a kind of vague awareness "that we choose not to look at the facts without being conscious of what it is we are evading" ("Turning a Blind Eye," 161). In this form of denial, Steiner suggests, "we seem to have access to reality but choose to ignore it because it proves convenient to do so" (161). The average citizen, for instance, may have a vague idea of the violent acts committed by the U.S. military in Iraq, but he or she disregards them by way of supporting the American troops and being patriotic. On the other hand, disavowal can be a more systematic form of denial in which the subject takes a self-righteous position, acknowledging what happened but refusing to take responsibility and yet feeling guilty for having done something. While this form of denial, like turning a blind eye, marks an ambiguous relation to knowledge, it involves conscious "distortions and misrepresentations of truth" (233). Throughout the second Iraq war, for example, the defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other members of the Bush administration denied any responsibility for the killing of innocent civilians, blaming Saddam Hussein for using them as human shields to muster opposition toward the American invasion. In this form of denial, the subject often projects his or her guilt onto others by blaming them for what has occurred, attempting thus to hide the implications of his or her own actions. Disavowal, as a retreat from truth to omnipotence, entails deception and a deliberate attempt to cover up records and memories of the past. This form of denial, as Ross Chambers remarks, "ensures a perpetually renewable state of cultural innocence, but it does so at the cost of inevitably betraying some knowledge of the injustice, the guilt, or the pain that the act of denial fails (or refuses) to acknowledge, and of which it is, therefore, as Freud taught us, a symptom."[16]

As will become clear in the chapters that follow, by describing the United States as a forgetful nation I wish to make several interrelated points about the history of its national culture. First, I suggest that the nation's forgetful representation of its immigrant heritage is part of a broader form of historical amnesia about the formation of the United States as an imagined community. Theorists of the nation form, from Ernest Renan to Étienne Balibar, have demonstrated the importance of forgetting to the political project of founding a nation.[17] Histories of nations, they argue, are always presented as triumphant narratives that repress the means of brutality through which national unity is achieved. The will to imagine a unified community entails