Saturday was publication day aboard the British convict ship Hougoumont. Cutting through the waves on a 14,000-mile journey from England to Australia in 1867, the three-masted vessel held 280 prisoners. Among them were sixty-two Fenians—a secret society of Irish nationalists dedicated to the violent overthrow of British rule in Ireland—who each week eagerly awaited the next issue of the Wild Goose, a handwritten and decorated newspaper produced onboard by several of their group. The Fenians read the paper aloud to each other. “Amid the dim glare of the lamp, the men at night would group strangely on extemporized seats,” wrote John Boyle O’Reilly, assistant editor of the journal. “The yellow light fell down on the dark forms, throwing a ghastly glare on the pale faces.” O’Reilly would later escape from Australia and travel to Boston, where until his death in 1890 he edited the Pilot, one of the most important Irish American newspapers of the nineteenth century.

The zeal with which a group of Irish prisoners labored to produce a tiny, onboard journal may seem strange today, when media forms include radio, television, and the near-instantaneous communication of internet and wireless devices. Some scholars refer to the time between the creation of the printing press in the fifteenth century and the dawn of television in the 1940s as the era of the printed word; in the nineteenth century in particular, rising literacy rates and new printing technologies produced an explosion of reading material. The printing of periodicals, handbills, and other materials was
a common occupation in the 1800s, and many well-known figures from American history began their writing lives at newspapers—as printer’s devils, reporters, editors, or publishers. In the nineteenth century, for example, abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison pushed for the emancipation of slaves through his weekly, the *Liberator* (1831–1865). Radical economist Henry George, advocate of a tax on land and author of the best-selling *Progress and Poverty*, spent his early working years typesetting, writing, and editing at a variety of papers, eventually founding the *San Francisco Daily Evening Post*. Former slave Frederick Douglass, inspired by Garrison’s newspaper, founded the *North Star* in 1847. Philosopher John Dewey and influential early sociologist Robert E. Park hoped to spread their ideas in a newspaper called “Thought News”; Park, in fact, was a journalist for various newspapers from 1887 to 1898.³ Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Theodore Dreiser, and many other American poets and novelists began their writing careers at newspapers.⁴ Print, in short, was king, and the newspaper medium in particular served as both training ground and sounding board for a wide variety of Americans who hoped to spread their vision for social and political life.

Especially vigorous in the nineteenth century were newspapers, mainly weeklies, created by and for those who, like Douglass and O’Reilly, fell outside of majority, native-born American norms or Anglo-Saxon, Protestant heritage. African Americans and European immigrants vigorously embraced the newsweekly as a forum to move public opinion, cohere group identity, and secure a spot for themselves as full citizens of the United States. Black and ethnic media—defined here as presses produced primarily by and for African Americans or American immigrant groups—educated their readerships in the ways of the mainstream population even as they might aggressively push for change. African Americans founded *Freedom’s Journal*, the first black periodical, in 1827, and by 1890 more than 600 black papers had been started. Many failed, but more than 150 were operating in 1900, asserting citizenship rights long deferred.⁵ Ethnic or immigrant media likewise pushed for group rights while also linking new Americans to the Old Country. Irish nationalists in particular used the newspaper medium to push for Irish independence from Great Britain and to defend Catholicism—and worked to make such struggles seem part of the American grain. Foreign news was frequently covered in black and ethnic presses; editors were keenly aware of how racial and religious fissures in American identity could shift during the years of U.S. expansion abroad. The newspaper, in short, was key in the black and Irish struggle for full American belonging.

This book explores African American and Irish American newspaper editors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and how they understood and advocated for perceived group interests through their weekly presses. Black and Irish journalists saw themselves, through their
newspapers, as able to form, organize, and channel political groups, including far-flung diaspora; communicate solutions to national tensions related to race, labor, and civil rights; and preserve, craft, and calibrate race nationalisms—and even recover and reinvigorate racial identity. As such, I explore newspapers as more than just bully pulpits used to spread particular viewpoints or as forums for debating the issues of the day. Editors strove to make the newspaper itself a site for the construction of ethnic, racial, or religious identity, through columns that tried to revive lost languages, for example, or via illustrations and photographs designed to meld American and Old World iconography or to counter racist imagery. And unlike many studies of black or ethnic media, I pay particular attention to the materiality of these presses in an attempt to tease out, where possible, how the newspaper medium itself—through illustrations, cartoons, and halftone photographs; as a site of labor and profit; via advertisements and page layout; and by way of journalism’s evolving conventions and technology—shaped and constrained editors’ struggles around American citizenship during a tumultuous time of racial unrest, economic turmoil, and imperial expansion.

Media influence on racial and ethnic identity should not be taken for granted. Can the press really create identities, or does it merely respond to, or at most magnify or modify, group and individual self-conceptions that stem from other sources? Especially since Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, many scholars seem confident that print media is historically and intimately tied to notions of nationhood and race.6 Jeremy Popkin writes convincingly of the explosion of print media in Revolutionary France, which “altered the basic framework for daily life for much of the population and created new frameworks for social interaction.”7 In fact, Popkin stresses the speed with which media can prompt new forms of identity. Print media, Popkin agrees, performs the roles described in Anderson’s “imagined community,” as well as James W. Carey’s ritual view of communication, whereby newspapers are seen not simply as transmitters of information but as dramatic portrayers and maintainers of life’s overall form, order, and tone.8 But these two theorists stress gradual processes of identity formation. According to Popkin, print media in the French Revolution “directs attention to sudden processes of identity transformation,” not just maintenance; media can “restructure identity and redefine community boundaries” with surprising speed.9

The effect of the medium on the message is a complicated affair and often remains elusive in this study. Where it cannot be determined, attention to what race activists hoped their presses could achieve and what they thought newspaper technologies might do can shed new light on late nineteenth-century struggles for American citizenship. “What preacher ever reached as many minds as the newspaper can reach?” asked the editor of a Catholic weekly in Portland, Oregon, in the 1870s. “The preacher’s word, when once
spoken, dies with the echo of his voice; but the printed word remains and men may read it again and again.”

Citizenship in this book refers to more than formal legal rights or responsibilities and encompasses the broader acceptance of a particular group as part of the American fabric. The end of the Civil War put notions of citizenship in flux; Reconstruction amendments to the Constitution were hotly debated over several years, bringing into focus a multiplicity of races—American Indians and Chinese immigrants in addition to freedmen—in conjunction with ideas of “heathen” religious status. Scholars have long studied the relationship between newspapers and nationalism; most prominently, Anderson posited that it was through print capitalism—the circulation of books, newspapers, and other print media in the vernacular language—that communities in the Americas and Europe first imagined themselves as nation-states. But concepts of nationhood and belonging are not set in stone. They are continually contested, particularly in heterogeneous nations such as the United States, which became home to millions of descendants of African slaves and experienced multiple waves of immigration after its founding. If newspapers helped people imagine nationhood itself—a “deep, horizontal comradeship,” according to Anderson—such media also surely played a role in expanding or, conversely, policing notions of citizenship within the nation. Black and Irish newspaper editors sensed this and fought fiercely through their newspapers for inclusion in citizenship’s shifting “borders of belonging.”

What does it mean, particularly for the study of campaigns for social justice and political rights in the United States, that so many U.S. activists and intellectuals—“race men” in the parlance of the time—started at and in many cases remained intimately connected to newspapers during their battles over American belonging? Did newspaper entrepreneurialism strengthen and broaden or stifle and narrow activists’ intellectual work? Did weekly race papers encourage cross-racial solidarities or inhibit them? Does the highly personal infighting among rival editors within a racial group point to healthy political debate, or did sitting at the helm of these very personal presses present a kind of moral hazard—of ambition, say, or flattery?

To shed light on these and other difficult questions, this book considers four editors in depth: two African Americans, T. Thomas Fortune and James Samuel Stemons, and two Irish Americans, the Reverend Peter C. Yorke and Patrick Ford. Ford is a well-known figure in Irish American history. Publishing the storied Irish World and American Industrial Liberator helped him become a major player in Irish nationalism and (for a time) labor activism in America. There is still much to be done with Ford and his newspaper, as I hope to demonstrate. Father Yorke was famous more regionally, as a San Francisco labor leader and preeminent Irish American advocate; beyond
academic circles his virulent anti-Chinese sentiments and white Christian nationalism may be less known. Fortune is a giant in African American journalism history, but his fascinating trip to Hawaii and the Philippines as an agent of the U.S. government has remained largely unexamined for several decades. Stemons and the rich personal letters he left behind are slowly becoming known to historians; I believe I am the first to detail his efforts to transform one Philadelphia newspaper and found another.

Each editor receives his own chapter. Part I considers the Irish editors, Ford and Yorke; Part II explores African American journalists Fortune and Stemons. Brief introductions to the Irish American and African American press occur before each section. Though I examine the words and newspapers of several other black and Irish American editors throughout, a close, largely biographical approach toward these four journalists enables me to tease out how newspapering may have affected their activism. Directing a newspaper in the “age of personal journalism” made these editors public figures and public intellectuals with influence in debates around group empowerment. For African American editors in particular, pressures were acute; individual success or failure in the marketplace might be seen as reflecting on the race as a whole. And the newspaper medium introduced its own rules and priorities, including aesthetic genres in visual elements on the page—cartoons, illustrations, and advertisements—that might undermine, not simply augment, editors’ agendas. Funding a newspaper might require support from an outside party, as when Ford’s Irish World received Republican Party patronage or when James Samuel Stemons operated under church sponsorship. When subscription fees or advertising revenues could not make a newspaper profitable, some editors found financial gain through public speaking engagements. Other activist-editors presented economic, not just ideological, competition, and seeing one’s name in print—call it the moral hazards of celebrity culture—always threatened to turn tactical disagreements into ego trips. Following each editor closely through time surfaces these pressures and potentials. Ultimately, these race activists’ thinking, I believe, cannot be separated from their newspapering—the newspaper form and practice influenced what, when, how, and to whom they communicated their beliefs.

Now is an auspicious moment to look again at African American and Irish American newspapers and journalists. Many major studies of black and ethnic media are several decades old. As late as 1987, Sally M. Miller could write that the only major work on ethnic media was Robert E. Park’s The Immigrant Press and Its Control, published in 1922. Though scholarship on the African American press as a whole is more current, the sole biography of T. Thomas Fortune, perhaps the top black journalist of his time, is more than forty-five years old. A frequently cited study of the Irish American
press dates from 1976, and the most thorough examination of Patrick Ford, for whom a biography does not yet exist, remains James Rodechko’s 1968 Ph.D. dissertation.18

Yet since the 1970s, several academic fields have changed dramatically, and new fields and subfields relevant to this study have emerged. (More primary source material, too, has been digitized, aiding researchers in accessing far-flung newspaper archives and tracing particular issues in the press through searchable databases.) In immigration studies, Oscar Handlin’s metaphor of “uprooted” immigrant groups, backward-looking and conservative, has given way to scholarship that stresses a less primordial and more dynamic conception of group culture and boundaries.19 I posit that this ongoing “invention of ethnicity” happened frequently through the newspapers of the ethnic press.20 In the related field of “whiteness” scholarship, Matthew Frye Jacobson and other historians have traced the evolution of the late nineteenth-century’s “probationary white groups”—Celts, Slavs, Hebrews, Iberics—into twentieth-century Caucasians; David R. Roediger has approached the same questions from labor history, examining white racism and the formation of working-class politics. Whiteness scholarship has been repeatedly debated and refined. Following Eric L. Goldstein, this book does not reveal the Irish “becoming” white so much as negotiating and successfully enhancing their whiteness within a field of competing identities.21 Newspapers and other periodicals, I assert, were key to this negotiation.

The blossoming of the field of religious history in recent years helps me trace religion as a key component in these activists’ struggles for American belonging. One recent historian, looking primarily at conflict between Catholics and Protestants, claimed that in the nineteenth century, religion’s role was as central as that of race or ethnicity in the construction of group and national identity.22 Joshua Paddison argues that race and religion were, in fact, “mutually constitutive” of citizenship during Reconstruction, especially in the American West.23 Each historian sheds light especially on the Irish American journalists profiled in this study. Catholicism was both an important wellspring and precarious fault line of Irish American identity, yet Patrick Ford strove for a racially egalitarian vision of American citizenship, while Father Yorke advocated economic justice through a religio-racial vision of Christian white male supremacy. And as we shall see, publisher-priests like Yorke brought the priesthood further into the public realm and into tension with Rome, which kept a watchful eye on Irish American newspapers in the late 1800s.

Empire and its intersection with race and nation, particularly the Philippine-American War and the first years of U.S. rule in Spain’s former colony, is another common theme in most of the following chapters. Wars of empire highlighted and heightened struggles over American belonging, of-
ferring the race men of the black and Irish press new possibilities for group advancement, even as imperialism raised the specter of Anglo-Saxon backlash and retrenchment. In the country at large, white nationalist fantasies could be mustered to either push forward or hinder the hand of U.S. imperialism; black and Irish editors had to navigate these tricky currents. The U.S. effort to end Spanish control of Cuba was supported by most of the black and Irish press, which was eager to join the fight and prove American belonging. Irish American editors even labeled the Spanish army “Iberian Orangemen,” despite their misgivings about anti-Catholic rhetoric in the U.S. buildup to war. But after U.S. troops stayed on in Cuba and Americans, not Cuban rebels, dictated the terms of victory over Spain, the Philippine-American War across the Pacific became much more contentious. African Americans debated through their presses the role of black soldiers in the Philippine-American War and the race’s proper relationship to Filipinos, with some editors putting racial affinities over national ones. Historians have linked U.S. imperial projects and their justifications abroad to educational and vocational uplift programs—and coercive segregation and disenfranchise-ment—for African Americans and American Indians at home, a phenomenon some call “Jim Crow colonialism.” As we shall see, T. Thomas Fortune preached Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee uplift pedagogies as he traveled to Hawaii and the Philippines, even as he simultaneously tried to turn white civilizationist rhetoric against itself. The Irish, meanwhile, feared that in the Philippines the United States was imitating English imperial brutality. Empire rattled old racial conceptions and introduced new narratives and histories that Americans could embrace or reject. It thus complicates linear histories of national identity and immigrant assimilation.

One way to focus on these activists’ strategies and their newspaper presses’ materiality is to pay special attention to visual culture. Where possible, I draw on images from the editors’ own newspapers, but many come from other black or Irish weeklies, mainstream periodicals, or circulated advertising cards. Racial images in these other print culture formats were frequently reprinted in newspapers. All the race activists herein kept watch on how their groups were depicted in these forums, each knowing intuitively that filler cartoons and other illustrations were more than an irritant or insult to their group—they threatened to fix African Americans or the Irish in the national imagination as second-class citizens. I analyze these images as more than symbolic representations of racial ideas developed elsewhere—perhaps in the minds of race scientists or novelists or union leaders—and then translated visually into sketches or cartoons. Instead, I see such imagery as constitutive of the nation’s conversation about race, class, religion, and citizenship from the start—a force that, in conjunction with other cultural forms, helped to create and promote both exclusionary and inclusionary
racial viewpoints. The very words “cliché” and “stereotype,” in fact, originally referred to the printing plates of stock images that “cut agencies” provided to the periodical press.²⁹ And even when commentators in the pages that follow appear to be referring to actual human beings and not caricatures, they often classified black and ethnic Americans through a typology that so closely matched the visual elements of nineteenth-century periodicals that one easily detects this discriminatory visual field in the background, its power to shape thinking about race, and the interpenetration of race science, stage shows, and illustrated racial humor in periodicals.

A focus on images also helps highlight the differing trajectories of Irish Americans and African Americans. African Americans struggled against racist aesthetic genres throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One black cartoonist examined herein produced images in minstrel form, making his editor uneasy. But his characters might still critique white power—to some extent, the genre proved a “pliable sign” for African Americans who worked within it.³⁰ By contrast, Irish Americans, who like African Americans protested vehemently against racial ridicule in print and on stage,³¹ found that by the end of the century they might laugh along with non-Irish Americans at softened depictions of comic Irish characters, images that had largely lost their derogatory, simian features. Advertisers even tried to link the vigor and righteousness of the Irish fight against discrimination to their own products but took a different tact with black caricatures.

Empire, too, introduced new visual tropes. The African American leader Booker T. Washington worked closely with T. Thomas Fortune during Fortune’s Pacific journey, and as Fortune prepared to travel from Honolulu to Manila, Washington told a Brooklyn audience that presently, “the Filipino seems to be undergoing the interesting experience of being carefully examined.” If his hair was deemed long enough and his nose and feet small enough, Washington said, the Filipino would be “designated and treated as a white man.” (If not, the Tuskegee leader seemed to hint, the Filipino just might become to African Americans an ally along the color line.)³² Much of this bodily examination, Washington and other black activists knew, would be done by illustrators in mainstream periodicals. African Americans in America’s new territories responded to these potentials, using photography, for example, to depict the Philippines as fertile ground for black dignity and advancement.

There are several reasons to examine black and Irish editors together, as opposed to other groups who also faced discrimination during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Certainly, other marginalized late nineteenth-century U.S. groups used their newspapers, particularly the powerful German-language press and perhaps the smaller but influential Yiddish press in New York, to fight stridently for their own visions of American belonging.
and societal change. But because most Americans could not read these papers, focusing on English-language media enables me to gauge, when appropriate, black and Irish journalists’ effect on broader public policy debates. Furthermore, examining two groups with divergent outcomes through the turn of the twentieth century helps contrast the relative importance of each group’s racial, class, and religious differences to their American citizenship.

In the late nineteenth century, the Irish still faced discrimination, particularly a nativist backlash against Catholicism, as a Church empowered by Irish immigration flexed its muscle and worried Protestants. But the overall trajectory of Irish America was positive; increasing numbers of Irish moved up the economic ladder, albeit more slowly than some immigrant groups. For the Irish, conceptions of race by skin tone began to displace or at least encompass racial conceptions more closely tied to nationality—the Celtic race “became white” (or perhaps better, enhanced its whiteness). African Americans, by contrast, saw in the nineteenth century’s second half the end of government commitment to their welfare, with the withdrawal of federal troops from the South in 1877, resulting in disenfranchisement, lynchings, and the onset of Jim Crow toward the end of the century—a period one historian has called the “nadir” of black history. Black, Irish, and mainstream newspapers alike reported on the so-called Negro Problem—a vaguely and variously defined, typically paternalistic construction by whites that often imagined black racial pathology and asked how to or even whether to more completely integrate blacks into mainstream American life. And as with debates over Irish nationalism, intellectual debate might be hard to distinguish from economic competition as race men offered their own solutions in their own newspapers.

Following African American and Irish American journalists and their newspapers also reveals important cross-racial commentary as the two groups, often in competition for low-wage work, gauged one another. Many scholarly studies portray the Irish in America as the enforcers—through their powerful urban political machines, representation on city police forces, and dominance of labor unions—of a virulent white supremacy. More recent whiteness scholarship, though it recognizes the prohibitory nature of ethnic Americans’ citizenship, typically has the Irish and other immigrant groups emerging victorious, and still racist, in their quest for full American belonging. Most recently, however, some scholars have emphasized the solidarity that many Irish and Irish American nationalists expressed toward nonwhite victims of British imperialism during the nineteenth century and sometimes toward oppressed groups at home. Ford in particular pushed such racial egalitarianism through the internationally circulated *Irish World*, calling African Americans “brothers,” sympathizing with Native Americans, and denoting South Asians “brown Irishmen.” T. Thomas Fortune looked with envy on Irish organizing efforts and hoped to model a black civil rights
organization on the Land League, an Irish nationalist group. From Frederick Douglass’s trip to Ireland in 1840, where he met with and was compared to the famed Irish nationalist Daniel O’Connell, to black nationalist Marcus Garvey’s Harlem-based Liberty Hall in the 1920s, which he named after the Dublin headquarters of Irish labor union members and revolutionaries, African Americans and Irish Americans demonstrated a “persistent if elusive affinity” for one another and for each group’s freedom struggle. Black and Irish newspapers were often the site for expressions of both affinity and resentment between the two groups, and the interplay between black and Irish nationalisms, religious concerns, responses to empire, and visual elements within these presses lends greater insight into the building of competing, racialized discourses of citizenship in the late nineteenth century.

My study begins with Irish American journalist Patrick Ford, whose prominence among Irish nationalists worldwide, combined with the long run of the *Irish World*, reveals the whole sweep of late nineteenth-century Irish American history and introduces many of the main themes of this book: editors’ stands on ethnic nationalisms; the complex interplay between race, labor, religion, and empire in the construction of citizenship; and a close textual look at newspaper elements. The powerful *World*, with its respectable circulation of more than a hundred thousand by 1900, was viewed with admiration and envy by many black and ethnic Americans and even, to an extent, feared by its enemies in Great Britain and the United States. With Ford the newspaper weekly itself became a locus for the excavation, maintenance, and construction of Irish American history, language, and identity. Social movements discussed within a newspaper frame were lent legitimacy and magnified; Ford’s newspaper could help reveal a movement to itself as members read about the fund-raising efforts and spirited resistance of like-minded souls across the nation and across the Atlantic. Ford, who started in journalism as a printer’s devil for famed abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, mostly maintained his racial egalitarianism throughout his life. But running a successful weekly could mean giving space to diverse voices, and Ford lost some control of his egalitarian message as his top columnist backpedaled on African American rights.

Remaining with the Irish but shifting to the West Coast, Chapter 2’s exploration of Father Peter C. Yorke and his newspaper-based activism further elucidates the importance of race, labor, and religion to Irish American identity and examines more closely the Irish American encounter with Asia as a key element of race and citizenship in the late nineteenth century. Editing a newspaper and publishing his own writings in other San Francisco newspapers enabled Yorke to lend moral suasion to labor struggles and calibrate Catholic doctrine in support of both workers’ rights and notions of Western and Caucasian civilizational superiority in the face of Chinese labor
competition. Simultaneously, it brought him into conflict with the Catholic Church as increasing channels of print communication blurred lines of Church authority. Making arguments from Catholic perspectives could also foment backlash and incite anti-Catholic anger from the populace at large in an age when urban reform efforts often had a Protestant, anti-immigrant cast. Despite these hazards, Yorke and other Irish American newspaper editors exercised considerable clout and, in a campaign to defend a perceived threat to Catholicism in the Philippines, wound up influencing U.S. educational policy in the islands. The American priesthood itself, I argue, was changed in part by lay and clerical Catholic editors and their newspapers, which brought priests more fully into the public arena. Scholars who have judged Catholic thought as intellectually dormant during these years must not neglect Yorke’s and other Irish American newspaper editors’ creative use of religious doctrine as they confronted issues of the day.

The next two chapters focus on African American editors. Empire remains prominent in the frame in Chapter 3 as I follow one of the most famous black editors of the time, T. Thomas Fortune, on his state-sponsored journey to Hawaii and the Philippines. In late 1902 mental and physical exhaustion, financial distress, and the feeling that he deserved a political appointment—combined with aspirations to serve as a broker for the export of African American labor abroad—led Fortune to secure a government appointment to investigate trade and labor conditions on the outposts of U.S. empire. Though Fortune was away from his own storied paper, the New York Age, the chapter examines local ethnic newspaper reaction to his visit and continues to explore newspapering as a material and ideological practice, for Fortune employed the tools of his publishing trade, including photography, polling, and even poetry during his travels. In Hawaii Fortune publicly allied himself with island business interests and a missionary educational tradition connected to Booker T. Washington. He was treated respectfully by the sons and daughters of abolitionists—and by a planter oligarchy eager to end federal exclusion of Chinese so as to obtain cheap field labor—but his hopes for African American emigration were vigorously opposed by most papers connected to this planter establishment. Hawaii’s robust in-language indigenous and ethnic newspapers, meanwhile, had their own views on black labor in the islands. In Manila a fiercely independent, entrepreneurial, and militaristic U.S. press, itself at odds with many of the goals of the U.S. commission government in the Philippines, attacked Fortune and his plan. Fortune attempted to survey public opinion on black immigration to the Philippines by circulating a questionnaire and, on a trek through northern Luzon, used a camera and a portable painted background to craft a portrait of himself as an intrepid African American explorer and cast the Philippines as a possible home for millions of African Americans. Recent scholarship has emphasized both Washington’s
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and Fortune’s complicity with Western imperial projects; this chapter posits that both men also saw empire and African American participation in it as a force that could destabilize racial regimes. Fortune in particular saw newspapers as a key instigator of new political and racial alignments.

Chapter 4 explores the work of a black journalist, mostly unknown to scholars, who hoped to establish himself as an expert on race relations. Though the print editions of James Samuel Stemons’s newspapers are lost to history, the voluminous notes he left behind on the nuts and bolts of publishing a small weekly in early twentieth-century Philadelphia provide invaluable glimpses into a black weekly’s newsroom, if not quite its balance books. Extensive letters between Stemons and his sister reveal much of the business side of running a weekly African American press as well as the print economy of other formats, including pamphlet publishing. They portray an economically challenging but, for Stemons and other reformers, enticing arena whereby publishing—essentially self-publishing—could lead to name recognition and entry into debate over the so-called Negro Problem, including potentially lucrative speaking engagements. Historians in their investigations have tended to examine newspapers with extensive runs to track changes in opinion or emphasis on particular topics through time; less studied are the many hundreds of newspapers, including black weeklies, that lasted just months or even weeks. These intensely personal and competitive ventures influenced public debate even as their operation helped shape the politics of the time; Stemons seemed to have had both a political critique and, in modern parlance, one eye toward his Stemons “brand.” Stemons in particular and perhaps Father Yorke show how figures currently unknown to most historians participated in vibrant, diverse forums whose intellectual output has, with the passage of time, come to be associated with only a handful of top black and Irish leaders.

The central figures in this study move through many relevant historiographies, and as such this book builds on and offers critiques of several of them: journalism history, Irish American history, African American history, and broader histories of the nineteenth and late nineteenth century. Much work on Gilded Age journalism has focused on the rise and prominence of the large metropolitan dailies and their jingoistic fervor for war at century’s end; mainstream weekly newspapers as well as immigrant newsweeklies have often been overlooked. Yet the power and reach of the newsweekly endured well into the twentieth century. Frank Luther Mott places the high point of weekly newspapers in 1914–1915 and notes that weeklies in rural areas held their own for some time against dailies after the latter started free rural delivery.40 With respect to the more metropolitan immigrant press, older scholarship that stressed the process of assimilation naturally saw ethnic media as having largely completed its task of helping newcomers adjust
to American society by 1900 or so. But black and Irish weeklies as sites for
the creation of race and ethnicity continued, as did their clout. As Chapter 3
demonstrates, the “race papers” of two groups affected U.S. policy in the
Philippines: the Irish pushed for and won the appointment of Catholics to
educational bodies in the islands, and the white soldier press harassed U.S.
commissioners by opposing U.S. plans to Filipinize governance there.

The chapters that follow also complicate the notion of print culture as a
unifying force in American nationhood. As has been noted, scholars posit
newspapers as key sites of nationalism. More popularly, media is regarded as
a fourth estate keeping watch over the nation’s democratic institutions. In a
different vein, and building on Trish Loughran’s important reassessment of
Anderson, I find newspapers as sites of discord and division as well as unity.41
The newspapers in this study—white or “mainstream,” African American,
or Irish alike—could be sites for the promotion of racio-religious national-
isms that clashed with the country’s civic nationalism, its ideology of univer-
sal human equality and governance by democratic consent.42 The twenty-
first-century rise of internet-based race nationalisms, especially those
delivered within journalistic frames and with a Christian cast, make the
examination of the deep roots of such publishing important.

Religion in this book comes up time and again as a fault line for Ameri-
can belonging, with importance for the construction of race in the late nine-
teenth century. Following recent scholars who see Reconstruction as a mul-
tiregional and multiracial process that reimagined citizenship’s boundaries,
I find the West Coast’s Chinese question integral to discussions of race and
inextricably bound up in questions of religion. The rhetoric in Father Yorke’s
speech to the California Chinese Exclusion Convention in 1901 is not so dif-
ferent from similar anti-Chinese speeches during Reconstruction and shows
the Irish shoring up their own fault lines in citizenship by creating a broader-
based Christianity and European cultural heritage. But scholars who seek to
make multiracial California and the West a key part of the decades-long
debate over American citizenship after the Civil War might productively
broaden their horizons to encompass direct U.S. encounters with Asia at the
turn of the century. Chapter 3 shows that African American hopes for op-
portunity abroad intersected with American imperialism in tense, complex,
and surprising ways. Fortune’s state-sponsored visit to American posses-
sions in the Pacific surfaces the (somewhat) egalitarian racial views of Ha-
waiian missionary culture; virulent, Southern-style white nationalist presses
abroad that resisted more paternalistic relations with Filipinos; a split among
the black press over national or cross-racial affinities with Filipinos; racist
beliefs among “people of color” groups in the region, promulgated from their
own newsweeklies; and, combined with Stemons’s intimations of publishers
freezing out black authors in 1907, disturbing hints in the early twentieth
century of a wish on the part of U.S. political and cultural leaders to be done with the Negro Problem once and for all—perhaps with a Philippines solution. Empire was in deep communication with race, religion, and domestic politics at century’s end.

Finally, this book both supports and troubles recent scholarship on the Progressive Era. Much in the pages that follow confirms the negative aspects of many Progressives uncovered by historians, including the anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant biases in their urban reform efforts and their support of segregation and abandonment of African American rights. But Ford, Fortune, Stemsons, and Yorke were reformers themselves, black and Irish muckrakers who, like Progressives, used fact-based rhetoric and publishing in their efforts to remake America. Where to draw the boundaries of Progressivism has always challenged historians of the era. Perhaps more exploration of the “unexpected places” of black and Irish writing and activism—like that handwritten, ship-based Fenian journal or a black newspaper lasting weeks, not years—can better uncover and describe the period’s passion for reform.

The activist-editors herein never seemed to tire of print periodicals. After all, newspapers could pull old institutions, such as the Catholic Church, in new directions, and a vibrant ethnic press united around an issue could effect policy change at even the highest levels of government. Yet the strife produced by individually empowered activists directing their own sounding boards could strain and break coalitions, too. And newspaper weeklies might promote illusions of power, a mirage of influence over a virtual or at least fleeting public sphere; Stemsons’s newspapers, for example, lasted as long as his investors thought there was any chance of profit and no longer. Activist-editors fought against destructive racial ideologies but found whole discourses, whether of race and labor or education and uplift, and entire aesthetic sensibilities, such as minstrelsy, difficult to write or draw or photograph around.

No simple historical lines can be drawn from our own twenty-first-century world to the lives of Ford, Yorke, Fortune, and Stemsons. Yet something of the vibrancy and vulnerability, brilliance and amateurism, earnestness and arrogance of these four newspapermen’s enterprises recalls today’s online media, risen from the ashes of the large, commercial dailies that grew to dominate the twentieth century. The United States will succeed or fail in defining itself, in creating inclusive or exclusive American identities, through conversations mediated by modern communication technologies. To suggest that we have gone back to blogging collapses important distinctions between our time and the long nineteenth century. But I do hope some wisdom about the promises and perils of very personal media may be gleaned from this study.