

PREFACE

On January 6, 2021, the US Congress met to count and confirm the electoral college votes that would declare Joe Biden and Kamala Harris as the newly elected President and Vice President of the United States. That morning, at 10:15 am Pacific Time, I began my large-enrollment Sociology of Race and Ethnicity class by conducting a visual analysis of a painting depicting the scene at the signing of the Constitution of the United States. The painting, created by Howard Chandler Christy in 1940, shows George Washington of Virginia presiding over the Federal Convention of 1787 as delegates sign the US Constitution at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson are notable leaders pictured among the delegates. The four-month-long Constitutional Convention was convened to decide how the United States was going to be governed; the resulting US Constitution laid the framework for the national government.

During class (we were meeting virtually because of the COVID-19 pandemic), students and I decoded the imagery of the painting portraying the leadership of the nascent country. Students volunteered several observations: All the decision-makers were White, no people of color were in the room; only men were pictured, no women; the fashion was uniformly fancy, frilled, and well-heeled, suggesting wealth; the room boasted high ceilings, curtains tied back from large windows, a chandelier, and the thirteen-colonies flag adorned the wall. The homogeneity of upper-class White men and their interests became encoded in the governing documents of the United States because they were the decision-makers and signatories; other voices and perspectives were omitted, judged to be governable rather than governors. White supremacy, patriarchy, and class divisions depicted in the painting illustrate the seeds of inequality that were planted in early days of the country. Generations later, the nation and its inhabitants contend with those continued inequalities.

Assigned reading for class that day highlighted systemic racism embedded in the founding of the country. For example, none of the fifty-five delegates “advocated that the abolition of slavery and freedom for all Americans should be an integral part of the new Constitution.”¹ We had also read from W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*. Students offered numerous favorite lines from the reading, all of which turn on structural reasons for racial inequality and the difficulties of living under the weight of oppression. Du Bois writes of Black people in the United States, “He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.”² This “simple wish” is to dissolve structural racism (“doors of opportunity”) as well as disappear social interactions loaded with racism (“cursed and spit upon”).

After drawing links from the establishment of the country—imprinted with White supremacy, patriarchy, and class division—I informed students that the 20 by 30 foot oil painting hangs in the Capitol building today. By the time class ended that day, the siege of the Capitol building in Washington, DC by pro-Trump supporters had launched. There is a through line connecting who is literally “at the table” at the signing of the US Constitution—and whose interests are therefore represented and whose are excluded—and the insurrection at the Capitol building that had commenced during our class session. Despite having officially lost the 2020 election to Joe Biden by more than seven million votes,³ Donald Trump whipped up his supporters with rhetoric of White entitlement and false victory, inciting them to make unlawful and violent claims to take over the nation. In the aftermath, observers noted wildly disparate police responses to Black Lives Matter protesters in summer 2020 following the death of George Floyd, when police in full riot gear lined the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, and the underprepared and minimal security presence at the Capitol building on the much-anticipated day of counting the electoral votes in January 2021.⁴ Allegations of White privilege resounded on social media and popular news sources, Black people decrying that had *they* sieged the Capitol building, they would have been met with lethal force. The symbolism of the signing of the US Constitution in 1787 by White men of the bourgeoisie juxtaposed with a mass of White insurrection-

ists storming the Capitol building shines a light on the White privilege seared into the nation. This vignette draws a straight line from the signing of a founding national document in 1787 that was being discussed in a University of Oregon class to the siege of the Capitol building that was co-occurring. This coincidence is not really a coincidence—it reveals that social power, social value, privilege, representation, and safety are distributed differentially by race. The problem of enduring racial inequality motivates this book.

Burdens of Belonging is rooted in the premise that not everyone feels equally valued in the United States, and that race is a dividing line of perceived worth. As political scientists Natalie Masuoka and Jane Junn write, “belonging exists on a continuum that reflects the racial hierarchy.”⁵ Belonging is a feeling and more—it concerns membership in a community. Society adjudicates membership through policies and institutions, enabling or constraining belonging through facilitating or curtailing access to group membership, influence or efficacy, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection.⁶ Reasons why belonging is shaded by racial status—and the varied consequences this has—are empirical questions that *Burdens of Belonging* takes on. My intellectual journey thus far has included investigating how racial identity is transmitted or transformed over multiple generations in a family (my first book *Mexican Americans across Generations*) as well as how race and racism influence marriage desires and decisions (my second book *Marriage Vows and Racial Choices*). I turn now to the question of how race affects a person’s relationship to the nation—and how this perceived relationship rebounds in people’s lived experience, bodies, behaviors, emotions, and goals.

