Preface

THIS BOOK PURSUES QUESTIONS about the role of marriage and family dynamics in racial-ethnic identity that arose from my first book, *Mexican Americans Across Generations.* That book explored the transmission and transformation of racial-ethnic identity across three-generation families. All of my Mexican American respondents in that book were middle-class by the third, if not second, generation. Much of the literature at that point in time predicted that Mexican immigrants and their descendants were likely to be integrated into an already marginalized subgroup; that racial-ethnic identity would be reinforced in an underclass; and that racial-ethnic identity would wane for those who gained upward mobility. In contrast to the prevailing image of Latinos in the United States when I was researching that book in the early 2000s—as synonymous with lower-class status, if not gang membership—I delved into the world of middle-class Mexican Americans: those who had risen from their forebearers' poverty and now owned homes and were earning college or graduate degrees. One message of the book is that assimilation (the loosening of ethnic ties in favor of mainstream culture) does not inevitably accompany middle-class achievement. Instead, an assimilation trajectory—what I describe as "thinned attachment"—is one possible outcome alongside another: "cultural maintenance," an ethnic identity trajectory geared toward retention.

One puzzle presented by that book inspired the research for this book: Precisely how do marriage and family dynamics fit into the picture of racial identity? In analyzing the second-generation (U.S.-born) Mexican American respondents in *Mexican Americans Across Generations,* I noted the emergence of a clear trend: those who intermarried with non-Hispanic whites were in the thinned attachment category, whereas those who intramarried with other Mexican Americans or Latinos were in the cultural maintenance camp. Although this was a distinct pattern, it raised the conundrum: Which came first, the chicken or the egg? (technically known as reciprocal causality). I was less interested in measuring the inputs and

outputs characteristic of quantitative methods than in the rich sequence of life. I was fascinated by the life experiences, reactions, and thought processes that people leverage to arrive at major life decisions. Being an interviewer and interested in hearing people's stories and getting a peek into their internal worlds, I wanted to know about the process of *meaning-making* that people go through as they choose romantic partners. Do people intentionally seek to marry within or outside of their racial-ethnic group—and if so, why? What benefits do people think there will be to partnering with someone from the same or a different group? What are the effects of these different types of marital partnerships on racial-ethnic identity and practices? Do people attain what they sought in the first place? Moreover, how might other social features besides race-ethnicity, such as gender and class status, construct desires and play into outcomes?

I acknowledge that while my principal analytical lens is race-ethnicity, it might have little bearing on why people marry whom they do. As a good interviewer should, I let the interviewees tell me what was important to them and what drove their life-changing decisions. With mountains of interview transcripts in front of me (109 to be exact), it was my job to sift through the data, find the patterns, and answer the questions that demanded their own book. The pages that follow contain my best efforts to piece together the puzzle of why people seek whom they do for lifetime partners and the ramifications of these choices for themselves, for the next generation, and for race relations more generally.