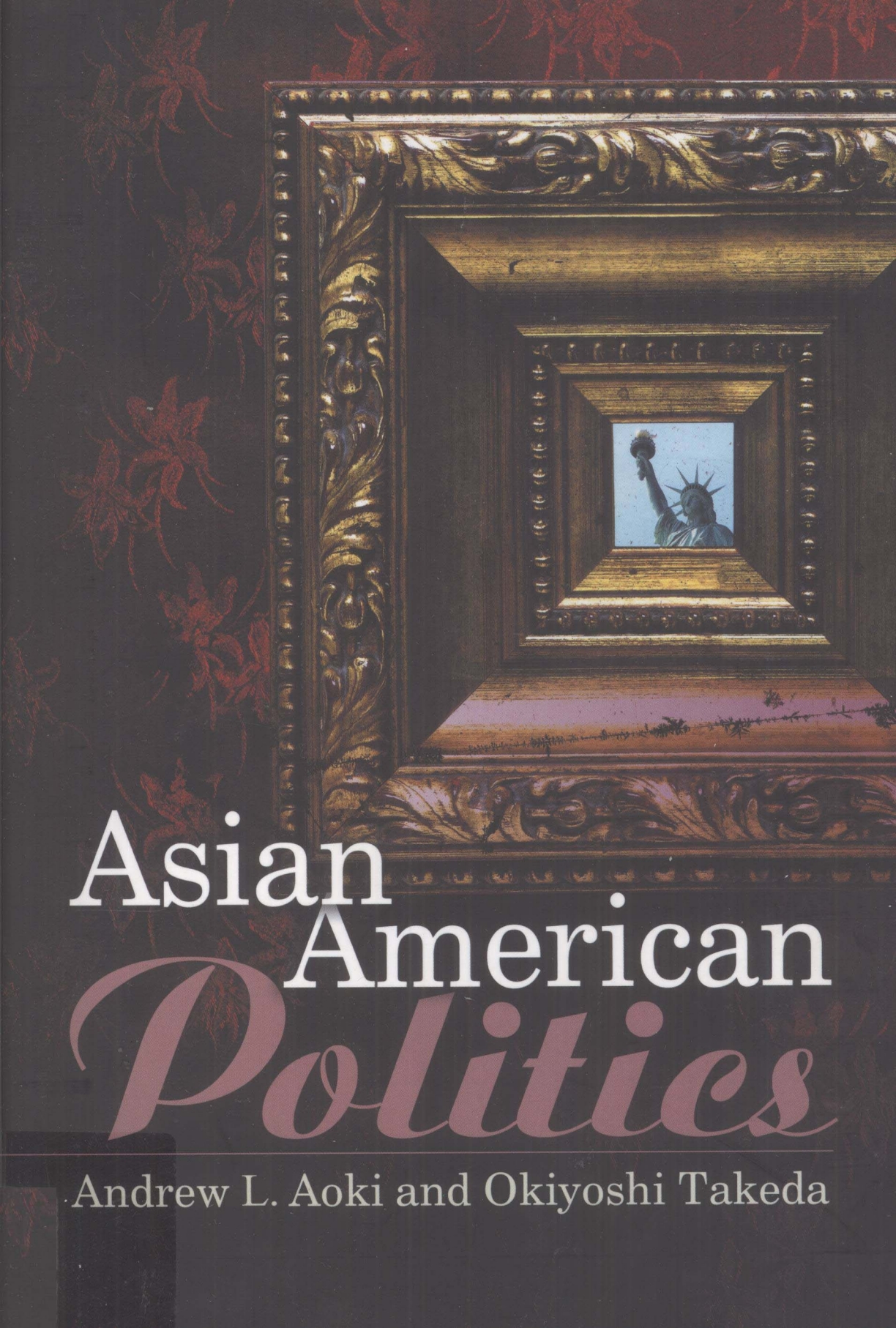

Asian American Politics

Andrew L. Aoki and Okiyoshi Takeda

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ANDREW L. AOKI AND
OKIYOSHI TAKEDA

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PREFACE

Asian Americans and the Politics of Identity

This book tells a story. Unlike most stories, however, ours has no ending, because the struggles for equal rights and full political incorporation continue to this day. Although our story takes the form of a straightforward account of Asian American politics, we have tried to convey some of the ways that this politics has powerfully shaped the lives of many human beings.

This translates into two goals for the book. One is to give a summary of Asian American politics that will be accessible to undergraduates taking courses in race and ethnicity. A second is to sketch out larger themes that run through the politics of Asian Americans and other racialized groups. These larger themes help suggest responses to critics who claim that courses in race and politics are not needed. Throughout the larger themes, the common thread is the politics of identity, but we stress that we mean something somewhat different from what is usually thought of as "identity politics."

The "politics of identity," as we use the phrase, refers to the basic question of how Asian Americans are defined – including *who* gets to define them. Scholarship on race has shown how racial categories are social creations that have shifted over time. We believe that a persistent issue in Asian American politics has been where Asian Americans are to be placed in the American ethnoracial universe.

Classifications have serious consequences. Racial classification has played a critical role in denying opportunity to generations of Americans.

The first nineteenth-century immigrants from Asia did not fit well within the widely understood racial categories, but, within a short period of time, they were being classified as nonwhite. Given the enormous advantages for those classified as "white," it is no surprise that Asian immigrants resisted being identified as nonwhite.

Many things have changed over the past century and a half, but the question of identity continues to be a central issue. Today, rather than fighting against classification as "nonwhite," Asian Americans are more likely to be criticizing their depiction as a "model minority," or fighting against the "forever foreigner" stereotype. What has not changed over all these decades is the attempt of Asian Americans to define themselves, and to be accepted on their own terms.

Terms have had powerful consequences in the politics of race, and so it is important to explain the ones we use. Perhaps most important is the reason why we usually write "Asian Americans" rather than "Asian and Pacific

Islander Americans" or one of its variants. We do so because this book focuses primarily on Asian Americans. Although we discuss Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islander Americans (NHOPI) on occasion, they are not included in our primary focus.

We exclude NHOPIs not because we think their politics is less important but because we think it deserves *more* attention than it often receives. We agree with the argument that NHOPI politics is distinctive, and should not be treated as an extension of Asian American politics. While there continue to be extremely valuable alliances between Asian Americans and NHOPIs, the history and central issues of the two groups are very different. Hawaiians, numerically dominant in the NHOPI category, face many challenges typical of indigenous peoples – ones that are often very different from the concerns of immigrant groups. Asian American politics, in contrast, is strongly influenced by the fact that the Asian American population currently includes a high percentage of immigrants. Issues of paramount importance to Native Hawaiians are little known to most Asian Americans, at least those outside of Hawai'i. Sovereignty (control over a territory), for example, is a primary concern for many Native Hawaiian activists, but would make no sense as a concern for immigrants. Incorporating Pacific Islander (some have suggested that it should be called Oceania) studies in a text on Asian Americans can too easily lead to a serious understudy of NHOPI concerns (Diaz 2004).[1]

Our usage also reflects changes made in census categories. In 1990, Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders were placed in the same category as Asian Americans, but, in response to NHOPI requests, the groups were split apart in Census 2000. Activists did not necessarily favor a new racial listing, as some seemed to feel that they would fit best in the "AIAN" category – American Indian and Alaskan Native, the other indigenous peoples of the United States. However, the unique legal status of American Indian and Alaskan Native tribes made them concerned about adding new groups to their category, so a compromise was to move NHOPIs out of the category they shared with Asian Americans and into one of their own (Espiritu and Omi 2000).

We have also followed the preference of many native Hawaiians in spelling Hawai'i with the *okina* (similar to an upside-down apostrophe) between the last two letters. "Hawai'i" is considered to be the proper spelling in the Hawaiian language.

Because alliances between Asian Americans and NHOPIs are common, we refer to both groups at times. Indeed, most panethnic organized groups refer to both in their names, which often include APA (Asian Pacific Americans), APIA (Asian and Pacific Island Americans), AAPI (Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders), or AAPIA (Asian American and Pacific Islander Americans) in their names. When referring to both subpopulations, we use one of the broader designations (e.g. AAPIA). We understand that there are some strong preferences about which term is to be used, and we have tried to balance that against a recognition of terms that are actually being used today.

When we do refer to Asian Americans, we are referring to all living in the United States with the intention to stay. Tourists would not meet our definition, nor do we usually consider temporary workers to be Asian Americans (e.g. Japanese corporate executives stationed in the U.S. for a few years). However, immigrants – including those who have proper authorization and those who do not – are counted by us as Asian Americans. Given past efforts to prevent Asian immigrants from naturalizing, we are sensitive to the need to be inclusive in our definition of the Asian American community.

In addition, we follow the widespread (although not universal) preference of Asian Americans to write the term without a hyphen. Many are concerned that the hyphenated version – "Asian-American" – implies a less-than-complete belonging, implying that Asians in America are not full members of society. The unhyphenated term, "Asian American," more clearly implies that the modifier is meant to identify only region of origin. We follow the same approach with Asian American subgroups, so we write "Chinese American" rather than "Chinese-American." We realize that some style manuals call for hyphenating these terms, but we prefer to follow usage that is more sensitive to the preferences of the people being named.

We have tried to be sensitive to the preferences of other groups in our terminology as well. However, it is impossible to be completely successful at this, since it is rare that everyone in a group agrees. In addition, our goal is to help readers understand the constructed nature of these terms, so we want to be careful how we use them.

This becomes a challenge immediately when we try to describe the broad categories that we use. While it is conventional to refer to these categories as "racial," that still begs the question of which categories are defined as racial ones. The problem, of course, is that the Census Bureau and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) categories are at odds with the way that many people understand racial categories. "Hispanic" presents the primary problem. The Census Bureau and OMB give "Hispanic" a unique status, which has resulted in many scholars referring to "Hispanic" as an "ethnic group," rather than a racial one. However, evidence suggests that many Latinos think of themselves as comprising a separate racial group, which is reflected in the fact that Latinos were by far the dominant group selecting the "Other race" category in the 2000 census (Wright 1994).

In an effort to reflect these different realities, we use the term "ethnoracial" to refer to the categories that include African American, American Indian, Asian American, Latino, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, and White.

We should note that we also use the term "politics" in a broad sense. While some political scientists might limit "politics" to activities connected closely to governmental actions, we prefer a more expansive meaning. Indeed, a major development in the study of politics has been a growing realization that "politics" can encompass a broad range of activities, perhaps most famously

expressed in the feminist declaration that "the personal is political." In the case of Asian Americans, we might say that "the perceptions are political," as images of Asian Americans can have important political consequences, a topic we explore in some depth in chapter 7.

Historically, the political consequences have usually been negative for those seen as nonwhite, a topic we explore in chapter 1. Ethnoracial minorities share a history of disadvantage, pushed to the margins of society and defined as outside the mainstream. Although their exclusion was often justified by references to physiological differences, in reality race was a social creation. We explain how political decisions helped to create and maintain racial categories, to the disadvantage of those defined as nonwhite. For Asian Americans, this process of racialization helped to define them as foreign as well as nonwhite.

Racial classification is only one way of identifying social groups, as we explain in chapter 2. A less restrictive concept is that of ethnicity, which is often conceived as something much less deterministic than race. Ethnicity is sometimes seen as a way of subdividing racial groups. For example, while Asians are often defined as a separate racial group, Asian subgroups such as Chinese Americans or Vietnamese Americans are seen as ethnic groups. Although racial classification implies uniformity, the reality is that racial groups are very diverse, and Asian Americans may be the most diverse racialized group. That diversity presents substantial challenges, since political influence is much more likely if Asian American subgroups are able to join together, but a common effort requires overcoming considerable differences.

Even if they are able to bridge their differences, political influence is not guaranteed. Because substantial numbers are immigrants, they are not eligible to vote until they are naturalized. Research suggests that voting registration requirements present another obstacle. However, other avenues for participation exist, and Asian Americans have long utilized them, contrary to the stereotype which suggests that they have been politically inactive. In chapter 3, we explore Asian American political participation and attitudes.

While chapter 3 focuses on individual participation, chapter 4 examines participation in groups. Political effectiveness usually requires collective action, so we describe some of the many groups working to advance the interests of Asian Americans. We note how these efforts may be helping to develop a stronger sense of a pan-Asian American identity.

Achieving full political equality requires not just participation but representation in government. In chapter 5, we look at Asian American representation in the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Although our focus is primarily on the federal government, we also describe representation in California, where large numbers of Asian Americans reside.

In chapter 6, we turn to a rapidly developing issue in American politics: relations between communities of color. Although racialized groups have confronted similar challenges, they also have considerable differences, and

tensions have sometimes exploded into violence. Conflict has often received more attention in the media, but we also consider prospects for cooperation, and we look at examples in alliances between ethnoracial groups.

Prospects for conflict or cooperation can be influenced by how each group is perceived. In chapter 7 we look at perceptions of Asian Americans. In particular, we explore what appear to be two powerful and contrasting images: that of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners, and those of Asian Americans as model minorities. We explain how both those images promote the common theme that Asian Americans are somehow fundamentally different, and we look at efforts to challenge these stereotypes.

Chapter 8 looks at Asian Americans and public policy. We focus primarily on two policies: education and immigration. We note how educational attainment is often cited as evidence for the model minority image of Asian Americans, but we explain how the reality is somewhat different. In addition, we explore the important question of *transnationalism*: how connections with countries of origin can influence the public policy efforts of Asian Americans.

In our brief concluding chapter, we return to the question of Asian American identity. Where Asian Americans "fit" into the larger society has important political consequences. We note that there is some evidence that many Asian Americans may be able to gain greater acceptance for themselves, but possibly at the expense of other communities of color. The Asian American struggle to control their own identity can progress in ways that connect or separate them from other groups seeking a more just society. Young adults, such as those reading this book, are likely to play an important role in determining which path is taken.

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This book is a collective effort of far more people than the authors listed on the cover. We have been fortunate to be part of a remarkably collegial and mutually supportive group of scholars who have worked in many ways to advance the study of Asian American politics. This book would not be possible without the efforts of these colleagues. Our citations give an indication of our scholarly debts, but we also want to thank many individuals who provided direct assistance to us in the writing of this book: Chuck Aoki, Lars Christiansen, Kim Geron, James Lai, Taeku Lee, Pei-te Lien, Don Nakanishi, Jennifer Nelson, Karthick Ramakrishnan, and Janelle Wong.

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Finally, Aoki would like to dedicate this book to his mother. She lived through some of the most searing injustices described in these pages, and what merits this book may possess owe much to the inspiration provided by the grace, courage, and dedication to justice which has defined her life. Takeda wants to dedicate this book to his friends and colleagues who have taught him who Asian Americans really are. Since the 1995 sit-in for Asian American

Studies courses at Princeton University president's office, many friends answered his questions or shared their Asian American experience. Without their personal insights, this book would not have been written, although their testimonies are not quoted.

Contents

CHAPTER ONE

Why Study Asian American Politics?

Racialization and its Consequences

Introduction

Why should you read a book about Asian American politics? Why not just cover it in a general American politics text, or in a book on the politics of multiple minority groups? To put it briefly, there are two central arguments for the separate study of Asian American politics. First, the political struggles of Asian Americans have contributed significantly to a larger struggle important to the entire United States, the struggle for equal opportunity and access. Second, Asian Americans have experienced politics in unique ways. In this chapter, we explain these justifications for a separate study of Asian American politics as well as the theoretical framework that underlies this book.

After reading this chapter, you should have a better understanding of these topics:

1 How racial and ethnic minorities have struggled for equal treatment, and how that struggle has helped to define the kind of country America would be.
2 How the politics of Asian Americans are different than those of other peoples of color.
3 How racial categories are a creation of sociopolitical factors in a society.
4 What is meant by *racialization*.
5 How Asian Americans have been racialized in the past.

The underlying theme of this book is the struggle to define Asian Americans. As we explain in the coming chapters, the struggle over an Asian American identity is also very much a struggle over the identity of all of America.

Asian American Politics and the Struggle to Define America

Throughout American history, keen observers have argued that the United States was "the first new nation," one founded not on ancestry but on a shared set of ideals. Others have doubted this, suggesting that an inherent part of the American political tradition has been a deep commitment to the idea that people are not equal – that some are inferior to others (e.g. Smith 1997). The issue, in its simplest form, is "who are Americans?" Can anyone become an

American, or does the country confer full rights only on those considered to be white?

"Identity politics" usually refers to efforts of groups to achieve recognition and respect for their existence, but we have a broader idea in mind. When we refer to "the politics of identity," we mean the struggles to define the American identity. Is the United States a society which offers equal opportunity to anyone, or do the promises of opportunity apply only to those of certain ancestries?

The battle over the American identity is therefore part of a larger struggle over access to opportunities. Throughout the history of the United States, large numbers of people have struggled for basic political rights. Many of those in power have resisted these efforts, trying to deny a majority of the population the opportunity to participate in the political process.

The founding documents of the United States promise equal rights for all, but the reality has often made a mockery of those promises. In the Declaration of Independence, for instance, Thomas Jefferson declared that the Founders found it "self-evident" that "all men are created equal" and that they are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights," among them "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." And yet we know that many Americans have been denied many basic rights. African Americans were enslaved, and even after the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution ended slavery, many other schemes were developed to deny blacks basic civil rights. American Indians were forced off their lands, and their children were taken from them and placed in schools that sought to destroy the heritage of the many Native American tribes. The Fifth Amendment to the Constitution guarantees that "no person shall . . . be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law," and yet, during World War II, over 100,000 Japanese Americans were imprisoned without trial or even charges. We could easily fill a book with more examples.

The story of minority politics in the United States, including the politics of African Americans, American Indians, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders, is the story of people fighting to hold the United States to the ideals expressed in documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Despite great odds, many people have struggled against violations of those political ideals. Today, schools routinely teach about epic efforts such as the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, when black Americans braved police brutality and state-sanctioned terrorism to fight for basic rights. Much less well known is the story of Asian Americans' broad effort to win these rights.

How Asian American Politics is Different

But why not just learn about these struggles in a book that covers minority politics more broadly? The reason is that the Asian American political experience differs in important ways from that of other minority groups.

For instance, although both African Americans and Asians are usually considered to be "nonwhite," Black Americans confronted slavery – a far greater denial of freedom than ever experienced by Asian Americans. Yet after the Civil War, African Americans later found it far easier to claim American citizenship than Asian Americans, whose citizenship rights were not secured until the 1950s.

One key characteristic that distinguishes Asian Americans from African Americans is that Asian Americans have been defined as foreigners. Although African Americans are as visually distinct as Asian Americans, most Americans are likely to assume that someone with dark skin is a native to the United States, while someone with "Asian" features is assumed to be a foreigner, even though many Asian American families have been here for three generations or more, and third- or fourth-generation Asian Americans may speak no language other than English.

Like Asian Americans, Latinos also are often perceived as foreigners, but they have not faced the same array of legal discrimination that confronted Asian Americans. This is probably due to treaty agreements that gave Mexicans equal rights when America acquired what had been the northern portion of Mexico, in the nineteenth century. Although these agreements were often violated – most notably in parts of Texas – they created legal protections for Mexican Americans, protections that the first-wave Asian immigrants never enjoyed.

Asian Americans also differ from Latinos and African Americans in their much greater diversity. Whereas over 50 per cent of all Latinos are of Mexican ancestry, no single nationality group comprises even 30 per cent of Asian Americans. Also, although both groups have large numbers of recent immigrants, Asian Americans are considerably fewer in number, creating different political challenges.

Asian Americans share with American Indians a history of political oppression, but the origins of the oppression differ significantly. Perhaps most importantly, American Indians have struggled as indigenous peoples (people whose ancestors lived here long before anyone else), while most Asian Americans are either immigrants or the descendants of people who immigrated within the past century or so. All these distinctions explain why we need a book on Asian American politics separate from one on minority politics in general.

But isn't the struggle of Asian Americans for equal political rights and opportunity really just a historical issue? As we will demonstrate in this book, it most certainly is *not* just history. The struggle continues. Racial discrimination continues – a point we will discuss later in this book – and the legacy of past racism has not yet been eradicated.

As we explain below, the very fact that "whites" are seen as different from other "races" is something that needs to be explained. Although most people today assume that racial difference is based in nature, the ways we understand race does not have any genetic or other scientific basis. To understand this, it helps to look more closely at how race divides us.

The Color Line and its Consequences

Political systems distinguish between "insiders" and "outsiders," giving benefits to the former that are denied the latter. In the United States, insiders have often been defined as "white." Outsiders, whatever their physical or genetic characteristics, have often been defined as nonwhite. And for much of the country's history, to be defined as "nonwhite" was to be placed at considerable economic, political, and social disadvantage.

The division between white and nonwhite is sometimes referred to as the "color line." As we will explain later in this chapter, the very notion of "white" or "nonwhite" is based only superficially on perceptions of physical appearance; in fact, these designations have derived from efforts to establish and maintain economic, political, and social advantage. The idea of race is not rooted in genetic studies of humankind, but rather in the efforts of some groups of people to gain advantages over others. The idea of race was created to make discrimination easier. The use of race to discriminate against others can be traced back at least to the earliest colonial times, but we will focus on discrimination that has occurred since the United States gained its independence.

Racial discrimination was present at the birth of the USA. In 1787, the new Constitution protected slavery, in a glaring contradiction to its claim to "secure the blessings of liberty." Only a few years later, in 1790, Congress passed an act limiting naturalization (the process of becoming a citizen) to "free white persons." Immigrants could become citizens, but only as long as they were of the proper race.

Citizenship promised its recipients important constitutional protections. Racial restrictions on naturalization – the opportunity to become a citizen – left individuals vulnerable to a wide range of discriminatory measures. One important example is the ownership of property. The United States Constitution includes important protections for property rights, but noncitizens have not always enjoyed those protections. In the past, preventing immigrants from becoming citizens could allow governments to prevent those immigrants from owning property. Not being able to own property could make it much harder for immigrants to escape poverty and enjoy other opportunities.

But how was the color line created? To answer that, we need to explain the nature of racial categories.

The Political and Social Construction of Race

Most people probably think of race as something with biological roots. Careful examination, however, shows race is something that people have invented with little or no help from nature. Racial categories are politically and socially constructed.

For example, how do we determine who is considered to be of the "white" race? Superficially, "white" refers to skin tone, but it is clear that skin tone is an insufficient means of determining who is white, who nonwhite. Many of southern European ancestry have skin tones much darker than those of Asian ancestry, yet the latter are never considered today to be "white." Some believe that the scientific term for "white" is "Caucasian," but that only begs the question of what "Caucasian" means. Presumably, Caucasians are descendants of peoples who originated in the Caucasus Mountains region, but this category includes some of the peoples of India, who are generally not considered to be white. Furthermore, only about a century ago, many considered native Hawaiians, Maoris (the aboriginal people of New Zealand), Samoans, and other Pacific Islanders to be Caucasian (Haney López 1996, 70–1). Our current understanding that "Caucasian" means "European" only developed in the twentieth century.

Even equating "white" with "European" does not solve the problem of racial definitions. Using this approach, Greeks and Bulgarians are white, while most of their neighboring Turks are not, since they live in what geographers consider to be western Asia. Turks and Bulgarians unquestionably have more in common than Turks and Japanese, yet Bulgarians are considered to be Europeans, while most Turks are considered to be Asian. Even more ludicrously, a Turk living in Istanbul, on the European side of Turkey, would be white, while a fellow Turk living just across the Bosporus Strait would be nonwhite, if we equate "white" with "European." One might reply with the common sense suggestion that Turks should be considered to be white, but that then raises the question of Syrians, Armenians, Iranians, and others in western Asia. So, defining "white" as "European" does not solve the problem of racial definition, in large part because "Europe" is also a cultural creation. The boundaries of whiteness must be set arbitrarily, because there is no obvious geographical line where people on one side are unquestionably white, while those on the other are not.

Whiteness, it turns out, is a cultural creation. This means that racial categories are not based on biological differences, but rather have been created because of the way that some people view other people. The racial categories we use today have no more basis in biology than do other social groupings – for example, book groups or baseball fans. Individuals we consider to be of different races are no more biologically different than, say, New York Yankees fans are biologically different from New York Mets fans.[1]

Evidence for the constructed nature of race can be found in the way that the "white" category has been expanded. People we assume today to be white – such as Irish and Italians – were often not viewed that way when they first immigrated to the United States. Their acceptance as "whites" occurred over time, and often after considerable effort (Ignatiev 1995; Jacobson 1998).

Further examination of our Alice-in-Wonderland world of race only emphasizes the curious way that racial categories are constructed. It has often been

noted that white women can give birth to black children, but black women cannot give birth to white children. Biologically, that is nonsense. But race is not about biology; rather, it is about power and what is often called "social construction."

Racial Formation, Racialization, and Inequality

Our underlying theoretical framework here – and throughout this book – is the concept of *racial formation*. Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant, who developed the idea of racial formation, define it as "the sociohistorical processes by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (Omi and Winant 1994, 55). Racial formation is developed through "racial projects," which Omi and Winant define as "an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines" (Omi and Winant 1994, 56). To put it somewhat more simply, a racial project is a way of portraying race and the way race works, with the result that some so-called "racial" groups get more resources, and others get less. If someone writes opinion columns about the influence of race on crime, that person can be part of a racial project. People who argue about affirmative action are often participating in racial projects. A racial project is usually not a formal effort, although there may be some coordination between participants. At any given time, many racial projects may be underway, and the effects of some may work against the effects of others. Racial formation takes place through the interaction of racial projects. Some racial projects may be more successful than others and therefore have a greater influence on racial formation. In short, racial formation happens as a result of both the way people think about racial categories and the way that they behave based on that thinking.

One possible consequence of racial formation can be *racialization*: the portrayal of a large group of people as inferior. For instance, in the nineteenth century, many Americans cited supposedly scientific evidence that "proved" Europeans were superior to Chinese and Japanese. As George Yancey has noted, "racialization in the United States has been historically assessed by a standard of 'whiteness' " (Yancey 2003,125) Those seen as inferior were defined as nonwhite. "If a group was considered white, then that group was accepted in mainstream American society. The more white a group was considered, the more social prestige and legal rights members of this group would have" (Yancey 2003, 125). For much of the history of the United States, racial categories were created to divide humans into different groups, with one usually receiving favored treatment, while most or all of the others have usually been at a disadvantage (Kobayashi 1992). The greatest opportunities have usually been reserved for those considered to be white.

One of the challenges of racialization is that it can be difficult to maintain. Those not blinded by prejudices can see that claims of racial inferiority are