On February 11, 2007, Senator Barack Obama, who had just the day before in Springfield, Illinois, declared his intention to run for the U.S. presidency, gave an interview with the 60 Minutes reporter Steve Kroft. Shortly into that interview, they had the following exchange:

**Kroft:** Your mother was white. Your father was African.
**Obama:** Right.
**Kroft:** You spent most of your life in a white household.
**Obama:** Yeah.
**Kroft:** I mean, you grew up white.

Obama’s response to this statement was quite interesting:

I’m not sure that would be true. I think what would be true is that I don’t have the typical background of African Americans. Not just because my mother was white, but because I grew up in Hawaii; I’ve spent time in Indonesia. There [were] all sorts of ethnicities and cultures that were swirling around my head as I was growing up. . . .

There were times where that was difficult. One of the things that helped me to resolve a lot of these issues is the realization that the African American community, which I’m now very much feel a part of, is itself a hybrid community. . . .

What I also realized is that the American experience is, by definition, a hybrid experience. I mean, you know, one of the strengths of this country is that we have these people coming from, you know, all four corners of the globe converging . . . sometimes in conflict . . . to create this tapestry that is incredibly strong. And so, in that sense, I
feel that my background, ironically, because it’s unusual, is quintessentially American.

Undaunted by Obama’s attempts to explain his hybridity, and the hybridity of the American people in general, Kroft continued:

**KROFT:** You were raised in a white household?
**OBAMA:** Right.
**KROFT:** Yet, at some point, you decided that you were black?

Obama responded:

**OBAMA:** Well, I’m not sure I decided it.¹

The present book is about this exchange, and the thousands of others like it that took place in the public sphere during the 2007–2008 presidential campaign. It is about the nation’s journey toward electing its first non-white president in its history, a time period spanning more than two centuries. It is about the awkward, fraught, and determined questionings of the nature, meaning, and authenticity of Obama’s blackness. And it is about the responses of the multiracial electorate to the narratives of national triumph, racial redemption, and post-racialism that were spun by the media and by the Obama campaign.

The key issue that is explored in this book is how Barack Obama’s presidential candidacy served to reflect and shape the dynamics of race in the contemporary United States. The study is timely and important, because the present moment constitutes a pivotal juncture in the sociopolitical life of our nation. Obama’s election will have a lasting impact on race relations in this country, and it is perceived to have ushered in a “new age” in American racial politics. Thus the conclusions that are reached concerning the meaning of race at this particular juncture are likely to set the parameters for teaching, activism, and scholarship about race for decades to come.

*Theoretical Concerns*

A number of prominent theorists have claimed that with regard to the issue of race, we find ourselves in a period of profound uncertainty and instability. As we move forward into the post–civil rights, post-feminist,
and ever more global age, they ask, what institutional, experiential, and ideological contours will the social construct of race take on?

This question has acquired even more urgency, uncertainty, and interest with the recent election of a man socially identified as black as the president of the United States. For the last several years, scholars, pundits, and laypeople alike have furiously debated what the Obama phenomenon says about the current state of race relations in the United States, and what it portends for our future. I conceive of this project as a case study in U.S. race relations that takes the candidacy of Barack Obama as its object. The power of this particular case is that it allows for a close exploration of a number of the most pressing questions in the field of race relations at this time, including the following:

- How do we adequately capture the complexity of race in the 21st-century United States?
- How does racism most often manifest itself in the United States today? What fundamental differences are there in how whites and non-whites understand race?
- To what extent are race and gender parallel constructs, and in what ways do they differ?
- Is the black/white binary still the primary axis around which race relations in this country revolve? Or has the racial map been fundamentally altered by the mass influx of immigrants from Latin America and Asia in the last several decades?
- Does it make sense to speak of “a” black community, or “the” black experience? Or have differences in socioeconomic status among African Americans led to markedly divergent worldviews, experiences, and identities?
- Will the “browning of America” result in a peaceable redefinition and expansion of national identity? Or will it provoke a culture war over what it really means to be an American?
- Is the United States on the verge of overcoming its legacy of racial exclusion? Or will racism in the 21st century simply become more covert, insidious, and entrenched?

Barack Obama’s presidential bid brought each of these issues sharply into focus. From the moment he declared his candidacy in February 2007, the nation was forced to undergo a thorough reexamination of its core beliefs, subconscious fears, and highest ideals concerning the concept of race—and the place of African Americans, in particular.
Data, Methods, and Study Design

The vigorous debates about the election found in the print and online media constitute particularly fertile ground for a study of the changing politics of race in the 21st century. Thus articles, postings, and commentary gathered from the mainstream media and the blogosphere constitute the chief source of primary data used in this book.


The arguments developed in the book are based on my analysis of some 1,500 articles published or posted over an approximately three-year period. I began collecting data in earnest in November 2006, about three months before Obama declared his candidacy. That month saw the publication of the article “What Obama Isn’t: Black Like Me on Race” by the cultural critic Stanley Crouch, which was one of the first questionings of Obama’s blackness. That month the Washington Post also printed Benjamin Wallace-Wells’s influential “Is America Too Racist for Barack? Too Sexist for Hillary?” This was an early attempt to parse the differing ways that race and gender would likely play out in the election. My analysis extends well into the first three years of Obama’s presidency, during which observers continued to take stock of the historical and cultural import of Obama’s victory, and during which new controversies over race, politics, and nation would erupt.

At each stage of reporting on the election, I focused on the ways that race figured into the stories and reports that were offered. I examined the frames—both positive and negative—used to interpret Obama’s life history, his relationship to the social construct of blackness, his appeal to voters across racial lines, and his political beliefs and affiliations. I studied the ways that ideas about race circulated through debates about the economy, gender, religion, patriotism, and foreign policy. I was particu-
larly interested in assessments of the broader role of race in the election, and the significance of Obama’s candidacy for the nation at large. After identifying key themes found in discussions of the election, I linked these themes to wider discourses about race in American society.

One of the unique contributions of this book lies in its intersectional approach. Scholars of intersectionality have argued that in order to understand how race works in any given context, we must consider the role of other social variables as well. Race, gender, class, and sexuality do not act independently of one another, but rather interrelate and are experienced simultaneously. One of the most fascinating aspects of the 2008 presidential election was that as race came ever more to the fore, questions of gender, religion, class, age, and nation were dragged right into the middle as well. Thus, while two chapters of this book focus primarily on the variable of race, others examine race in relationship to gender and to nation.10

The Landscape of Race in the 21st Century

To set the stage for this study, we must consider the racial conditions that established the context for Barack Obama’s presidential bid. I begin with the observation that racial dynamics at present are contradictory, complicated, and in flux. The sociologist Charles Gallagher has stated that we live in a racially “schizophrenic” time. Similarly, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes of “the strange enigma of race in contemporary America.”11 And as Howard Winant has observed, “The contemporary United States faces a pervasive crisis of race, a crisis no less severe than those the country has confronted in the past. . . . The cultural and political meaning of race, its significance in shaping the social structure, and its experiential or existential dimensions all remain profoundly unresolved as the United States approaches the end of the twentieth century. As a result, the society as a whole, and the population as individuals, suffer from confusion and anxiety about the issue (or complex of issues) we call race.”12

The predominant features of the contemporary racial landscape include the following:

*Persistent inequality.* The important but partial gains of the civil rights movement. The contradiction, or irony, of formal legal equality and a widespread commitment to racial equality in the abstract, contrasted with profound, and in many cases deepening, inequality in education, housing, wealth, income, employment, life expectancy, child welfare, and criminal justice.13
New immigrants of color. Mass immigration from Asia, Latin America, and Africa following the elimination of national origins quotas in 1965. The development of “new racial subjects” and the emergence of Asian American and Latino pan-ethnicity. The new immigrants complicate, but do not displace, the black/white binary understanding of racial dynamics. And as Ngai writes, the new demographics “have both enhanced the politics of diversity and multiculturalism and provoked nativist sentiment and campaigns.” In the 2008 campaign, fears about immigration were especially relevant to the larger discourses of race and nation that emerged from the political right. (Among liberals however, the conversation about race was primarily a discussion about black and white.)

Black identities. The emergence of plural black identities and complicated meanings of blackness. Of chief importance is the growing class divide among black Americans, leading to differences in identity, experience, and political ideology. Dominant understandings of blackness today are further challenged by the increasing visibility of multiracial Americans, and the presence of black immigrants from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa. Of particular relevance to the issues addressed in this book is the emergence of a highly successful cohort of “post-racial” black figures in music, sports, movies, television, and politics.

Crisis in white identity. As a number of scholars have written, the post–civil rights United States is characterized by considerable anxiety and insecurity associated with the social construct of whiteness. As whites have themselves become “racialized,” whiteness is no longer a transparent or taken-for-granted category of identity. But what it means to be white is far from clear. The anxieties of whiteness have been provoked by the demands of the racial justice movements of the 1960s, mass immigration from developing countries, the decline of American international hegemony, and shifts in popular culture toward a valorization of “diversity.”

These changes, scholars claim, have led to a pervasive sense of white marginalization, disadvantage, and victimization. The range of current responses to the crisis of whiteness includes looking to one’s ethnic roots for sources of “tradition,” seeking authenticity in the cultures of others, embracing multiculturalism, rejecting multiculturalism, adopting an identity as a member of a “beleaguered minority,” or seeking to affirm the roots of the “real America” in Christianity, “small-town America,” and conservative values. One of the central arguments of this book is that
the racial politics of both Obama’s supporters and his detractors were formulated in response to the anxieties associated with whiteness and with race in the contemporary United States.

Globalization and the construct of nation. The global dimensions of the anxieties of race must be considered as well. They stem first from the demographic and cultural shifts accompanying mass immigration from developing countries, as referenced above. The second most important factor in the production of racialized anxieties of nation is the threat of global terrorism. Questions that have been asked anew include: Who is an American? Do whites even have a place in their “own land” anymore? Or does the current wave of immigration in fact constitute a dangerous “immigrant invasion”?

Colorblind individualism. The landscape of race is also very much shaped by the predominance of the ideology of colorblind individualism. This ideology holds that racial discrimination against non-whites is largely of a thing of the past, that it is better not to speak about racial matters, and that policy initiatives designed to remedy racial inequality are themselves discriminatory and unfair. The Obama presidency could lead to the consolidation of this ideology, by seeming to “prove” that race is no longer a significant barrier to achievement. Alternately, this or other 21st-century racial realities could lead to cracks in the hegemony of racial colorblindness.

Post-racialism and the new politics of race. The 2008 presidential election brought to the fore discussions of post-racialism and new racial politics. Currently the new race politics is an elaboration of the ideology of colorblind individualism, articulated as a set of racialized expectations of black Americans and other non-whites. It holds the potential, however, to develop into a more inclusive, empowering politics.

As the discussion above suggests, this book engages with the theories of scholars who have made broad predictions about race relations in the coming decades. The authors I am in dialogue with include (but are not limited to) Howard Winant, Charles Gallagher, Michael Omi, Joe Feagin, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Eileen O’Brien, Claire Jean Kim, George Yancey, and Andra Gillespie. I draw especially on theoretical insights concerning the nature of contemporary race relations found in Winant’s The New Politics of Race and Bonilla-Silva’s Racism without Racists. The central theoretical concepts I work with, and expand on, in this book include colorblind individualism, post-racialism, “new race politics,” and white racial anxiety.
Elements of the Argument

We heard from many corners in the 2008 election that race was largely irrelevant to the majority of Americans. Whites in particular did not “see” Obama’s color, they just saw Obama the man. And having elected a black president, the logic went, we were on the verge of achieving a truly post-racial society, where race no longer significantly affected one’s opportunities or life chances.

Social indicators, on the other hand, would seem to demonstrate the opposite. In terms of average wealth, income, educational achievement, rates of death, disease, arrest, incarceration, infant mortality, single parenthood, voter participation, and home ownership, the United States remains profoundly racially stratified. While immigrants from certain parts of the globe have become fairly well integrated into the economic and cultural life of the nation, lower-income African Americans in particular seem to remain the insoluble, indigestible “other.” And despite claims that race mattered little to Americans choosing a president, a review of the evidence reveals that the mainstream media and the blogosphere were saturated with race talk in 2007/2008. So how do we make sense of these apparent paradoxes?

It is my argument that race played a central role in the 2008 campaign, though in ways different than in the past. Blackness did not figure here as an automatic disqualifier for political office, but it was hardly irrelevant either. Obama won not in spite of race, but because he offered an appealing, carefully mediated version of blackness that a majority of the electorate readily consumed. Crucially, this model of blackness provided a powerful “rebuke” to more problematic versions of black politics understood to be embodied by leaders such as Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, and Jeremiah Wright. Obama’s election was said to herald the dawn of a “new politics of race.”

The central narrative of the election crafted by the press was in many ways the story of America’s definitive “triumph” over racism. Obama was seen to offer the nation, and whites in particular, redemption and absolution for the sins of the past. Supporting the Obama campaign was presented as a revolutionary act that would bring about meaningful and definitive social change. This was so despite the fact that Obama was clearly most comfortable in the middle of the political spectrum. Further, while Obama invited Americans to believe that his campaign was a move-
ment for racial justice, he was clear that he would neither make substantive demands of whites nor fundamentally disrupt the racial order.

Obama’s win has already influenced U.S. racial politics by bringing certain trends to the forefront while decreasing the likelihood that others will take root. In the former category are the expansion of black public identities and the ascendance of the 21st-century racial etiquette that I identify as the “new politics of race.” Obama’s win also means that a renewal of white support for race-based affirmative action is very unlikely. The racial controversies of the first years of the Obama administration (the Sotomayor nomination, the Henry Louis Gates arrest, the racially inflected backlash politics of the “Tea Party”) further suggest that racial dynamics under the regime of the new race politics may be shifting to the right.21

The election has particularly important ramifications for internal and external conceptions of American national identity. The person selected as president is the symbolic embodiment of a certain vision of our national past and present. With the election of Barack Obama, the “we” that we are is now potentially conceived of as red, white, blue, and brown. Obama won the 2008 election while claiming an impressive 43% of the white vote. But post-electoral developments—such as the vocal protests of “birthers” claiming that he is not a U.S. citizen, the attempts of certain members of the Tea Party movement to reestablish whiteness as a criterion of national identity, and the proposals to revise the 14th Amendment to restrict citizenship rights—suggest that contentious debates over race and national belonging will continue well into the 21st century.

Organization of the Book

In chapter 2, I turn to the weeks immediately following November 4, 2008. I identify and critically evaluate the predominant interpretation of the meaning of Obama’s victory, which I call the “triumphalist narrative of post-race America.” It is my argument that this ostensibly celebratory narrative encoded a series of deeply problematic assumptions about black Americans, the course of American history, and the roots of social inequality. Its assertion that the nation had been proved to be officially race-blind ignored the crucial, if complicated, ways that race did play into the presidential race. Most fundamentally, this narrative strongly supported the conservative, “colorblind individualist” perspective on race—
one that masks and defends entrenched racial inequality while paradoxically claiming to champion racial justice. But in the absence of a vigorous critique—or even better, an alternative, critical, and empowering analysis of the significance of Obama’s win—this narrative is likely to take root in the American psyche and become the new “common sense” about race in the United States today.

Chapter 3 discusses the so-called new politics of race that the age of Obama is said to herald. The highly celebrated “new politics of race” is an outgrowth, or elaboration, of the ideology of colorblind individualism. The new politics focuses on the responsibilities of blacks (and other non-whites) in achieving a society free of racial strife. In the new politics, blacks are called to “get over” race by ceasing to talk about it, leaving behind identity politics, and viewing racism not as systematic or structural but as episodic and rare. Reasonable blacks should agree that most whites are well intentioned and colorblind, that whites and blacks can be equally racist, and that blacks must pull themselves up by their bootstraps and solve their own problems.

There were many moments in the 2008 election in which the “new” politics of race were juxtaposed against the “old.” Obama’s careful presentation of himself as a next-generation black politician, fundamentally different from previous African American leaders, was, and continues to be, crucial to his ability to garner white support. I contend that the new politics of race as presently formulated constitute a form of colorblindness in the defense of white racial privilege. But I suggest that the concept of new race politics may hold some promise, as the social and political realities of the 21st century do demand new ways of thinking about and dealing with race.

In chapter 4, I discuss and compare the ways that race and gender figured into the democratic primary. Here I rely on evidence from the print and online media, as well as quotes from a subsample of a large set of in-depth interviews I conducted with college students in the weeks preceding the election.22 In the first part of the chapter, I discuss the impassioned, often angry debates about race and gender that the contest occasioned, and the deep divides that were revealed to exist between women to the left of center. Among other things, the debates demonstrated that despite decades of discussion about multiculturalism and inclusiveness, conceptions of “womanhood” among many prominent feminist activists and white female members of the rank and file remained tied to notions of whiteness. They also entailed an increasing sense of victimization vis-
Chapter 5 analyzes the relationship between race and nation in the discourse of Obama’s campaign. Though many pundits argued that Obama ran a largely “deracialized” campaign, it is my contention that race was a central, if implicit, element in Obama’s core narrative. Obama positioned himself as heir to both the civil rights struggle and the American Revolution, and implied that through his candidacy, the highest ideals of the nation would be fulfilled. Having triumphantly lived up to its creed, the nation would be absolved of the sins of past and present.

While the archetype of national identity that Obama presented was very different from the racially bounded, exclusionary forms of nationalism to emerge from the right, I argue, it was not without its own shortcomings. National unity was to be achieved in part by glossing over historical and contemporary manifestations of racial injustice, and by promoting a vision of national “diversity” largely devoid of an agenda for social justice.

In chapter 6, I discuss racial politics among Asian and Latino voters in the 2008 contest. The chapter is motivated in part by a series of theoretical questions pertaining to the racialization of non-black non-whites in the 21st century. Specifically, I assess the usefulness of a black/white understanding of race relations for understanding the experiences of non-black populations of color, and I explore Claire Jean Kim’s concept of “racial triangulation.” I look both at portrayals of Latino and Asian American communities found in the mainstream media, and I consider the politics of race from the perspective of those in the “racial middle” themselves.

I find first that the national discussions about race that took place during the 2008 presidential campaign were overwhelmingly framed in terms of black and white. The members of the racial middle, while not entirely absent from the discourse about race, were mostly peripheral to it. To the extent that Latino and Asian voters were discussed in the mainstream media at all, they were most often presented as the racial antagonists of African Americans. Their early, overwhelming support for Hillary Clinton was taken as a manifestation of deeply held anti-black prejudices, and as confirmation of the raging antipathies said to exist between blacks and other non-whites. I argue that this characterization of Latino and Asian voters had a functional role in the larger narrative of the election, as it served to verify whites’ own triumph over race.
The seventh chapter of the book critically examines the racial politics of the right. I argue that the “real America” narrative forwarded by the McCain/Palin campaign was rooted in the racially coded populist discourse that the right has aggressively forwarded since the late 1970s. According to the architects of this discourse, the nation is profoundly imperiled by cultural and demographic trends characteristic of the present age. At the top of the list are non-white immigration, secular liberalism, gay rights, feminism, “black racism,” political correctness, and Islamic terrorism. Obama was figured as the embodiment of these threats, a foreign other who stood in opposition to the interests of “everyday Americans” and the nation itself. A vote for the Republican ticket, we were told, was a vote to uphold the sanctity and security of conservative, white, Christian America.

In the concluding chapter, I discuss how developments since the election relate to the larger arguments that I have presented in the book. In particular, I focus on the birther and Tea Party movements. In the last section of the chapter, I consider the legacy of the 2008 election for the politics of race and nation in the future.

What we saw in 2008, I argue, was neither that race no longer matters in American politics nor that the United States is irredeemably racist. Rather, we learned that a certain kind of black candidate, relying on a specific deployment of blackness, could in fact make it to the presidency. Obama won for many reasons—because he appeared to be an antidote to the Bush years, because he had an excellent team of advisers, because the economic meltdown made McCain look out of touch, and, in part, because of his race. Making scholarly sense of this fact is crucial to addressing the puzzle of race in the 21st century. I attempt to do so in this book.