

a different mirror

FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

A History of Multicultural America

Ronald Takaki

Adapted by Rebecca Stefoff

Seven Stories Press

New York

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A Triangle Square Books for young readers first edition,
published by Seven Stories Press.

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SEVEN STORIES PRESS
140 Watts Street, New York, NY 10013
www.sevenstories.com

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(212) 226-1411.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Steffoff, Rebecca, 1951-

A different mirror for young people : a young people's history of mul-
ticultural America / by Ronald Takaki ; adapted by Rebecca Steffoff.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-60980-484-8 (hbk. : alk. paper) --

ISBN 978-1-60980-416-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I., Minorities--United States--History--Juvenile literature. 2., United
States--Race relations--Juvenile literature. 3., United States--Ethnic
relations--Juvenile literature. 4., Cultural pluralism--United States--
History--Juvenile literature., I. Takaki, Ronald T., 1939-2009. Differ-
ent mirror. II. Title.

E184.A1T335 2012

305.800973--dc23

2012017004

Printed in the USA

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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INTRODUCTION

MY STORY, OUR STORY

I WAS GOING TO BE A SURFER, not a scholar.

I was born and grew up in Hawaii, the son of a Japanese immigrant father and a Japanese-American mother who had been born on a sugarcane plantation. We lived in a working-class neighborhood where my playmates were Japanese, Chinese, Portuguese, Korean, and Hawaiian. We did not use the word multicultural, but that's what we were: a community of people from many cultural, national, and racial backgrounds.

My father died when I was five, and my mother remarried a Chinese cook. She had gone to school only through the eighth grade, and my stepfather had very little education, but they were determined to give me a chance to go to college. My passion as a teenager, though, was surfing. My nickname was "Ten Toes Takaki," and when I sat on my board and gazed at rainbows over the mountains and the spectacular sunsets over the Pacific, I wanted to be a surfer forever.

Then, during my senior year in high school, a teacher inspired me to think about the problems of the world and of being human and to ask, "How do you know what you know?" In other words, how do you know if something is true? The same teacher inspired me to attend college outside Hawaii, which is how I found myself at the College of Wooster in Ohio in 1957.

College was a culture shock for me. The student body was not very diverse, and my fellow students asked me, "How long have you been in this country? Where did you learn to speak English?" To them, I did not look like an American or have an American-sounding name. When I fell in love with one of those students, Carol Rankin, she told me that her parents would never approve of our relationship, because of my race.

Carol was right. Her parents were furious. Still, we decided to do what was right for us. When we got married, her parents reluctantly attended. Four years later, when our first child was born, her parents came to visit us in California. After I said, "Let me help you with the luggage, Mr. Rankin," Carol's father replied, "You can call me Dad." His racist attitudes, it turned out, were not frozen. He had changed.

By that time I was working on my Ph.D. degree in American history. I became a college professor at the University of California in Los Angeles and taught the school's first course in African American history. In 1971, I moved to the University of California at Berkeley to teach in a new Department of Ethnic Studies. In the decades that followed, I developed courses and degree programs in comparative ethnic studies, and I wrote several books about America's multicultural history. My extended family, too, became a multicultural, mixed-race group that now includes people of Japanese, Vietnamese, English, Chinese, Taiwanese, Jewish, and Mexican heritage.

I have come to see that my story reflects the story of multicultural America—a story of disappointments and dreams, struggles and triumphs, and identities that are separate but also shared. We must remember the histories of every group, for together they tell the story of a nation peopled by the world. As the time approaches when all Americans will be minorities, we face a challenge: not just to understand the world, but to make it better. *A Different Mirror* studies the past for the sake of the future.



CHAPTER ONE

WHY A DIFFERENT MIRROR?

I ONCE FLEW FROM San Francisco to Norfolk, Virginia, to give a speech at a teachers' conference on multicultural education. In the taxi on the way to the conference, the driver, a white man in his forties, chatted with me about the weather. Then he asked, "How long have you been in this country?"

The question made me wince, even though I had heard it many times before.

"All my life," I said. "I was born in the United States."

"I was wondering because your English is excellent!" he replied. He glanced at me in his rearview mirror. To him, I did not look like an American.

Feeling suddenly awkward, we fell silent. I looked at the Virginia scenery and thought about how our route was taking us through the beginning of multicultural America.

Here, on land taken from the Indians, English

(left, detail)
Arrival of
a Dutch slave ship
at Jamestown,
Virginia, 1619.

colonizers founded the settlement of Jamestown in 1607. After they discovered that great profit could be made by growing tobacco and shipping it to England, they wanted more Indian land—and people to work it. In 1619, a year before the English Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in Massachusetts, a Dutch slave ship arrived at Jamestown, bringing the first twenty African laborers to the American colonies. From the beginning, this land was multiracial and multicultural.

But it was not my taxi driver's fault that he did not see me as a fellow citizen. What had he learned about Asian Americans in his school courses on US history? He saw me through a filter—a version of American history that I call the “Master Narrative.”

Challenging the “Master Narrative”

The Master Narrative says that our country was settled by European immigrants, and that Americans are white. People of other races, people not of European ancestry, have been pushed to the sidelines of the Master Narrative. Sometimes they are ignored completely. Sometimes they are merely treated as the “Other”—different and inferior.

Either way, they are not seen as part of America's national identity.

The Master Narrative is a powerful story, and a popular one. It is deeply embedded in our culture, in the writings of many scholars, and in the ways people teach and talk about American history. But the Master Narrative is inaccurate. Its definition of who is an American is too narrow.

Harvard historian Oscar Handlin was one of many scholars who followed the Master Narrative. In his prize-winning book *The Uprooted*, about “the epic story of the great migrations that made the American people,” Handlin wrote about immigrants—but only those who came to the United States from Europe. His “epic story” overlooked Native Americans, as well as people who came from Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Things have changed since Handlin's book was published in 1951. Our expanding racial diversity is challenging the Master Narrative. Demography, which is the study of population trends, is declaring: Not all of us came originally from Europe!

A third of Americans today trace their ancestry to somewhere other than Europe. In California, blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans have become the majority. Minorities

outnumber whites in cities across the country, such as Boston, New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Detroit, Houston, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Within the lifetime of young people today, people of European descent will become a minority in the United States. We will all be minorities.

How can we prepare ourselves for this future? One way is to recover the missing chapters of American history. We must study our diversity to understand how and why America became what poet Walt Whitman called a "teeming nation of nations."

The change is already happening. In recent decades, many school systems and colleges have added multicultural studies to give students a more diverse and complete education. Scholars and historians, meanwhile, have delved into the experiences of various immigrant and minority groups.

A More Inclusive History

An even bigger picture of race and ethnicity in America comes from looking at many groups comparatively. Although it would be impossible to cover all racial and ethnic groups in one book, A

Different Mirror focuses on African, Asian, Irish, Jewish, Latino, Mexican, Muslim, and Native Americans. Woven together, the experiences of these minorities show how the landscape of our society's diversity was formed.

African Americans have been the central minority throughout our country's history. At first, the English plantation owners in the colonies preferred white workers, for they wanted their new society to be all white. But after an armed uprising by the workers in 1676, the elite or upper-class colonists turned to Africa for their main supply of laborers, who would be enslaved and prevented from owning guns.

After the Civil War ended slavery, a grim future awaited African Americans: racial segregation, lynchings, and race riots. Still, they insistently struggled for freedom and equality. Joined by people of other races in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, African Americans won significant victories that changed society. The history of African Americans has been stitched into the history of America itself. Martin Luther King, Jr., clearly understood this when he wrote from a jail cell, "We will reach the goal of freedom . . . all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom.

Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America's destiny."

Asian Americans began arriving in America long before many European immigrants. The Chinese came as gold prospectors and railroad builders. Later they became farm and factory workers. Although the Chinese were wanted as



temporary laborers, they were not welcomed as permanent settlers. During an economic depression, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the first law that prevented immigrants from entering the United States based on their nationality.

The Japanese also painfully discovered that their accomplishments in America did not lead to acceptance. In the 1940s, during World War II, the government sent 120,000 Japanese Americans to camps where they were guarded like prisoners. Two-thirds of them were US citizens. "How could I as a six-month-old child born in this country," asked Congressman Robert Matsui years later, "be declared by my own Government to be an enemy alien?"

Another wave of Asian immigrants arrived in 1975, when tens of thousands of Vietnamese fled to America to escape the Vietnam War. Joined by arrivals from Korea, the Philippines, India, Cambodia, Laos, and other countries, Asian Americans have become one of the fastest-growing ethnic groups in the United States, projected to reach 10 percent of the population by 2050.

In the nineteenth century, a wave of Irish immigrants arrived—four million of them,

(left) Arrival of a Dutch slave ship at Jamestown, Virginia, 1619.

driven out of their native land by starvation and homelessness. Because they were Catholics who wanted to settle in a fiercely Protestant society, the Irish became victims of hostility and prejudice. Because they were white, however, the Irish could become American citizens, unlike Asian immigrants. (Under a law called the 1790 Naturalization Act, only white immigrants could apply for citizenship.) By 1900, the Irish were entering the middle class.

Many Jews came to the United States from Russia because they were fleeing pogroms, or organized massacres by the non-Jewish majority in Russia. Jews settled into the Lower East Side of Manhattan, in New York City—a beehive of crowded apartment buildings and garment factories where Jewish women worked.

To these Jews, America represented the Promised Land. This vision energized them to rise into the middle class by emphasizing education. But in the 1930s, as Jewish immigrants and their children were entering the mainstream of American society, they found themselves facing the rise of German leader Adolph Hitler and the ultimate pogrom: the Holocaust, Hitler's mass killing of millions of European Jews and other minorities.

When American Jews demanded that the United States do everything possible to rescue people destined for Hitler's death camps, they were met with a lack of interest or even with anti-Semitism, which is prejudice against Jewish people. The result was a strong wave of Jewish American activism for human rights and social justice.

Mexican Americans first became part of the United States in 1848, when the United States won a war with Mexico. These Mexicans did not immigrate into America, however. Instead, the US border was moved. People living in what had been the northern part of Mexico suddenly found themselves living in California and the southwestern territories of the United States.

Most Mexican Americans today, though, have immigrant roots. The trek of Mexicans to *El Norte*—"the North," or the United States—began in the early twentieth century. Mexican Americans have had a different experience from other immigrants because their homeland borders the United States. That closeness has helped them maintain their language, ethnic identity, and traditional culture.

Mexicans still cross the border from the south, seeking to escape poverty and find work. Most of

the nation's "illegal aliens"—as non-citizens in the United States without proper paperwork have been called—are from Mexico. A burning political question is: What to do with them? Yet many Mexican Americans, like members of other groups, have been learning English, applying for citizenship, voting, and becoming Americans.

Like the Mexicans who lived in the Southwest when it was conquered by the United States, the people of the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico had American citizenship thrust upon them. Puerto Rico became a colony of the United States in 1898, and in 1917 an act of Congress granted citizenship to all Puerto Ricans, although they cannot vote in presidential elections.

Puerto Ricans have been migrating from their island to the US mainland since the middle of the twentieth century. At the time of the 2010 census, 4.7 million Puerto Ricans were living in the States—nearly a million more than lived in Puerto Rico. Along with immigrants from other Caribbean islands such as Jamaica, Cuba, Trinidad, Guadeloupe, and the Dominican Republic, Puerto Ricans make up a significant presence in many communities, especially in East Coast cities such as New York.

Muslim Americans have been coming to the United States from many countries, but those who came as refugees from the war-torn western Asian nation of Afghanistan have faced unique difficulties. The Afghan refugees were hardly noticed in America until September 11, 2001, when terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon suddenly changed their lives.

The terrorists were traced to a group called Al-Qaeda, based in Afghanistan. While Western powers led by the United States invaded Afghanistan, seeking to destroy Al-Qaeda, Afghan Americans lived with the fear of anti-Muslim prejudice and violence, and with the knowledge that a return to their homeland was unlikely.

Native Americans are different from all other groups within United States society. Theirs was not an immigrant experience—the native Indians were the original Americans, here for thousands of years before Europeans arrived. The Europeans labeled them "savages" and seized their lands by force, first along the eastern shore of the continent, and eventually westward all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Soldiers who led military campaigns against the Indians were honored as heroes.

Whites saw controlling the Indians as progress, but the Indians had a different view. As Luther Standing Bear of the Sioux nation said, "The white man does not understand the Indian for the reason that he does not understand America. The man from Europe is still a foreigner and an alien."

Conflicts and Shared Dreams

As these groups met and mingled in America, seeking work and a place in society, they often were swept into ethnic conflicts. In the nineteenth century, for example, hostility flared between African Americans and Irish immigrants.

The Irish were viewed by mainstream Protestant society as ignorant and inferior, and they had to settle for the worst, lowest-paying jobs. In the North, Irish workers competed with blacks to become waiters or laborers on shipping docks. In the South, they did jobs considered too dangerous to be done by slaves, who were regarded as valuable property by their owners.

The Irish complained that blacks did not know their place. A common cry among the Irish was, "Let them go back to Africa, where they belong!" Blacks born in America, however, complained that

the Irish newcomers were taking jobs from them. The Irish "are crowding themselves into every place of business and labor," one African American complained, "and driving the poor colored American citizen out."

In spite of competition and hostility, though, minorities have also had much in common. They have shared similar hopeful dreams of the good life in America. An Irish immigrant woman wrote home to her father about "this plentiful Country where no man or woman ever hungered." A Japanese man said of his decision to come to the United States:

*Day of spacious dreams!
I sailed for America,
Overblown with hope.*

And Jews in Russia, eager to escape the violence, sang of their dream:

*As the Russians mercilessly
Took revenge on us,
There is a land, America,
Where everyone lives free.*

No matter what minority group they belonged to, workers shared another experience as well—the experience of being exploited, or being taken advantage of, by factory owners and other bosses. Sometimes the workers rose above their racial and ethnic differences, uniting in strikes for better pay or better working conditions. In 1903 in California, Mexican and Japanese farm laborers went on strike together. Japanese and Filipino laborers did the same in Hawaii in 1920. During the 1930s, the labor union known as the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) called for “absolute racial equality in Union membership.” This kind of cooperation showed that differences do not have to keep people apart.

America's Epic Story

The people of multicultural America have sometimes been reluctant to speak, thinking they were only “little people.” As an Irish maid said in 1900, “I don't know why anybody wants to hear my story.” But people's stories are worthy. Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko explains why:

*I will tell you something about stories . . .
They aren't just entertainment.
Don't be fooled.*

The stories of minorities capture not just moments of history but also powerful emotions and thoughts. After she escaped from slavery, Harriet Jacobs wrote, “[My purpose] is not to tell you what I have heard but what I have seen—and what I have suffered.” A Chinese immigrant hoped in 1920 that his story would help Americans “realize that Chinese people are human.” And a Jewish immigrant dedicated her autobiography to “the descendants of Lazar and Goldie Glauberman,” in the hope that future generations would “know where they came from to know better who they are.”

But what happens when historians do not record these stories, leaving out many of America's peoples? An incomplete history is like a mirror that does not reflect everything, a mirror that treats some people as if they were invisible. But it is possible to hold up a different mirror to history. That different mirror reflects everyone's history. It lets us glimpse the nation that the poet Langston Hughes described:

Let America be America again.

.....,

*Let America be the dream the dreamers
dreamed—*

.....,

O, let my land be a land where. . .

.....,

Equality is in the air we breathe.

.....,

Say who are you that mumbles in the dark?

.....,

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,

I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.

I am the red man driven from the land,

I am the immigrant clutching the hope I

seek—

The struggle to “let America be America” has been this nation’s epic story. The original inhabitants were joined by people who were pushed from their homelands by poverty and persecution, or pulled to a new land by their dreams. Others came here in chains from Africa, and still others fled as refugees from wars in countries like Vietnam and Afghanistan. All of them were part of the making of multicultural America, a

process that began when Europeans first landed on American shores.

ONE OF THE GREATEST ACHIEVEMENTS OF American industry in the nineteenth century was the transcontinental railroad. Together the Chinese workers of the Central Pacific and the Irish of the Union Pacific laid this ribbon of steel that connected the nation's two coasts. It became part of a network of railroads that moved people, raw materials, and goods throughout the entire country.

The building of the US railway system required the labor of people from many racial and ethnic backgrounds. Different as these people were, their work songs told the story of shared experiences.

Black laborers sang as they laid railroad ties:

*Down the railroad, um-huh,
Well, raise the iron, um-huh,
Raise the iron, um-huh.*

Irish workers shouted as the sweat on their backs shone in the sun:

Then drill, my Paddies, drill—

*Drill, my heroes, drill,
Drill all day, no sugar in your tay [tea]
Workin' on the UP railway.*

Japanese laborers sang as they fought the changeable weather of the Northwest:

*A railroad worker—
That's me!
I am great.
Yes, I am a railroad worker.
Complaining:
"It is too hot!"
"It is too cold!"
"It rains too often!"
"It snows too much!"
They all ran off.
I alone remained.
I am a railroad worker.*

And in the Southwest, Mexican American laborers added their voices to the chorus of songs about the hard, hard work:

*Some unloaded rails
Others unloaded ties,
And others of my companions
Threw out thousands of curses.*