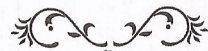


RONALD TAKAKI

A  
DIFFERENT  
MIRROR



*A History  
of  
Multicultural  
America*

REVISED EDITION



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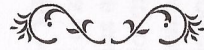
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# 1



## A DIFFERENT MIRROR

### *The Making of Multicultural America*

I HAD FLOWN from San Francisco to Norfolk and was riding in a taxi. The driver and I chatted about the weather and the tourists. The sky was cloudy, and twenty minutes away was Virginia Beach, where I was scheduled to give a keynote address to hundreds of teachers and administrators at a conference on multicultural education. The rearview mirror reflected a white man in his forties. "How long have you been in this country?" he asked. "All my life," I replied, wincing. His question was one I had been asked too many times, even by northerners with Ph.D.'s. "I was born in the United States," I added. He replied: "I was wondering because your English is excellent!" Then I explained: "My grandfather came here from Japan in the 1880s. My family has been here, in America, for over a hundred years." He glanced at me in the mirror. To him, I did not look like an American.

Suddenly, we both became uncomfortably conscious of a divide between us. An awkward silence turned my gaze from the mirror to the passing scenery. Here, at the eastern edge of the continent, I mused, was the site of the beginning of multicultural America. Our highway crossed land that Sir Walter Raleigh had renamed "Virginia" in honor of Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen. Taking lands from the Indians, the English colonizers founded

Jamestown in 1607, and six years later they shipped the first four barrels of tobacco to London. Almost immediately, tobacco became an immensely profitable export crop, and the rise of the tobacco economy generated an insatiable demand for Indian land as well as for labor from England, Ireland, and Africa. In 1619, a year before the arrival of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock, a Dutch slave ship landed the first twenty Africans at Jamestown. Indeed, history saturated the surrounding landscape.

Questions like the one that my taxi driver asked me are always jarring. But it was not his fault that he did not see me as a fellow citizen: what had he learned about Asian Americans in courses called "U.S. history"? He saw me through a *filter*—what I call the Master Narrative of American History. According to this powerful and popular but inaccurate story, our country was settled by European immigrants, and Americans are white. "Race," observed Toni Morrison, has functioned as a "metaphor" necessary to the "construction of Americanness": in the creation of our national identity, "American" has been defined as "white."<sup>1</sup> Not to be "white" is to be designated as the "Other"—different, inferior, and unassimilable.

The Master Narrative is deeply embedded in our mainstream culture and can be found in the scholarship of a long list of pre-eminent historians. The father of the Master Narrative was Frederick Jackson Turner. In 1893, two years after the Census Bureau announced that Americans had settled the entire continent and that the frontier had come to an end, Turner gave a presentation at the meeting of the American Historical Association. Entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," his paper would make him famous. Turner would become the dean of American history, his influence spanning generations of historians to come.

In what would be hailed as the "frontier thesis," Turner declared that the end of the frontier marked "the closing of a great historic movement"—the colonization of the Great West. He explained that the frontier had been "the meeting point between savagery and civilization." At this intersection, the Europeans had been "Americanized" by the wilderness. Initially, "the wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in a birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization, and arrays him in the hunting shirt and moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois.... Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in ortho-

dox Indian fashion." But "little by little he transforms the wilderness"; in "a series of Indian wars," the "stalwart and rugged" frontiersman takes land from the Indians for white settlement and the advance of "manufacturing civilization." "The outcome is not the Old Europe," Turner exclaimed. "The fact is that here is a new product that is American."<sup>2</sup>

In Turner's footsteps came Harvard historian Oscar Handlin. In his 1945 prizewinning study *The Uprooted*, Handlin presented—to use the book's subtitle—*The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People*. In his introduction, Handlin wrote: "I once thought to write a history of immigrants in America. I discovered that the immigrants were American history."<sup>3</sup> However, Handlin studied only the migrations from Europe. His "epic story" overlooked the indigenous people of the continent and also the "uprooted" from Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Contrary to the views of historians like Turner and Handlin, America is a nation peopled by the world, and we are all Americans.

The Master Narrative's narrow definition of who is an American reflects and reinforces a more general thinking that can be found in the curriculum, news and entertainment media, business practices, and public policies. Through this filter, interpretations of ourselves and the world have been constructed, leaving many of us feeling left out of history and America itself.

Today, our expanding racial diversity is challenging the Master Narrative. Demography is declaring: Not all of us came originally from Europe! Currently, one-third of the American people do not trace their ancestries to Europe; in California, minorities have become the majority. They already predominate in major cities across the country—Boston, New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Detroit, Houston, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Diversity is emerging as America's "manifest destiny."

Within the lifetime of young people today, Americans of European ancestry will become a minority. Indeed, we will all be minorities. How can we prepare ourselves for this future, when the Master Narrative is such a powerful force in our thinking about the past? Analyzing the problem, fourteen-year-old Nicholas Takaki reported that his American history course had taught him "next to nothing about the significance of Asian Americans. I believe our education system as a whole has not integrated the histories of *all* people into our education system, just the Eurocentric view of itself, and the White-centered view of African Americans, and even this is slim to nonexistent. What I find is that

most people don't know the fact that they don't know, because of the complete lack of information."<sup>4</sup>

Increasingly aware of this ignorance, educators everywhere have begun to recognize the need to recover the missing chapters of American history. In 1990, the Task Force on Minorities for New York stressed the importance of a culturally diverse education. "Essentially," the *New York Times* commented, "the issue is how to deal with both dimensions of the nation's motto: 'E pluribus unum'—'Out of many, one.'" Universities from New Hampshire to Berkeley have established American cultural diversity graduation requirements. "Every student needs to know," explained University of Wisconsin chancellor Donna Shalala, "much more about the origins and history of the particular cultures which, as Americans, we will encounter during our lives." Even the University of Minnesota, located in a state that is 98 percent white, requires its students to take ethnic-studies courses. Asked why multiculturalism is so important, Dean Fred Lukermann answered: As a national university, Minnesota has to offer a national curriculum—one that includes all of the peoples of America. He added that after graduation many students move to cities like Chicago and Los Angeles and thus need to know about racial diversity. Moreover, many educators stress, multiculturalism has an intellectual purpose: a more inclusive curriculum is also a more accurate one.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the study of diversity is essential for understanding *how* and *why* America became what Walt Whitman called a "teeming nation of nations."<sup>6</sup>

Multicultural scholarship, however, has usually focused on just one minority. Thus, Cornel West in *Race Matters* covers only African Americans, Dee Brown in *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* only Native Americans, Irving Howe in *World of Our Fathers* only Jewish Americans, Mario Barrera in *Race and Class in the Southwest* only Mexican Americans, and even I myself in *Strangers from a Different Shore* only Asian Americans. While enriching and deepening our knowledge of a particular group, this approach examines a specific minority in isolation from the others and the whole. Missing is the bigger picture.

In our approach, we will instead study race and ethnicity inclusively and comparatively. While it would be impossible to cover all groups in one book, we will focus on several of them that illustrate and illuminate the landscape of our society's diversity—African Americans, Asian Americans, Irish Americans, Jewish Americans, Mexican Americans, Muslim Americans, and Native Americans.

\*Note: Pages 7-20 have been edited to create this excerpt.

Indeed, the accounts given by the people in this book vibrantly recreate moments in history, capturing the complexities of human emotions and thoughts. They also provide the authenticity of experience. After she escaped from slavery, Harriet Jacobs wrote in her autobiography: "[My purpose] is not to tell you what I have heard but what I have seen — and what I have suffered."<sup>39</sup>

Their stories burst in the telling. "I hope this survey do a lot of good for Chinese people," an immigrant told an interviewer from Stanford University in the 1920s. "Make American people realize that Chinese people are humans. I think very few American people really know anything about Chinese." But the remembering is also for the sake of the children. "This story is dedicated to the descendants of Lazar and Goldie Glauberman," Jewish immigrant

Minnie Miller wrote in her autobiography. "My history is bound up in their history and the generations that follow should know where they came from to know better who they are." Similarly, Tomo Shoji, an elderly Japanese-American woman, urged Asian Americans to learn more about their roots: "We got such good, fantastic stories to tell. All our stories are different." Seeking to know how they fit into America, many young people want to hear the stories of their ancestors, unwilling to remain ignorant or ashamed of their identity and roots. One of them vowed to remember:

*The story of your fight,  
Though not recorded  
In any history book,  
Yet lives engraved on my heart.*<sup>40</sup>

But what happens when historians do not "record" their stories, leaving out many of America's peoples? What happens, to borrow the words of Adrienne Rich, "when someone with the authority of a teacher" describes our society, and "you are not in it"? Such an experience can be disorienting — "a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing." What should we do about our invisibility? Poet Audre Lorde answered:

*It is a waste of time hating a mirror  
or its reflection  
instead of stopping the hand  
that makes glass with distortions.*<sup>41</sup>

Reflected in a mirror without distortions, the people of multicultural America belong to what Ishmael Reed described as a society "unique" in the world because "the world is here" — a place "where the cultures of the world crisscross."<sup>42</sup> Out of this intermingling arose a poem by Langston Hughes. So succinctly, so sonorously, the black poet laureate captured our multicultural memory:

*Let America be America again,  
Let America be the dream the dreamers  
dreamed,  
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,  
O, let my land be a land where,  
Equality is in the air we breathe.*<sup>43</sup>

The struggle to "let America be America" has been America's epic story. In the making of multicultural America, the continent's original inhabitants were joined by people pushed from their homelands by poverty and persecution in Asia, Latin America, and Europe, and pulled here by extravagant dreams. Others came here in chains from Africa, and still others fled here as refugees from countries like Vietnam and Afghanistan. And all of them belonged to "the great migrations that made the American people."

The men and women in this study might not have read John Locke, but they came to believe that "in the beginning, all the world was America." Like F. Scott Fitzgerald's Dutch sailors in the seventeenth century, they held their breath in the presence of this "fresh, green breast of the new world." They envisioned the emerging country as a place for a bold new start. Crossing borders not delineated by space, they broke the "cake of custom" as they transcended traditional fixed points of classification. Marginalized and degraded as the "Other," minorities came to believe even more fiercely and fervently than did the Founding Fathers in the "self-evident truths" that "all men are created equal," entitled to the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."<sup>44</sup>

Together, "We the" diverse "people of the United States" transformed America into a mighty economy and an amazingly unique society of varied races, ethnicities, and religions. In the process, we transformed ourselves into Americans. Together, we composed "E pluribus unum" — a reality discerned by Herman Melville over one hundred years ago. Our country was settled by "the people of all nations," he wrote. "All nations may claim her for their own. You can not spill a drop of American blood, without spilling the blood of the whole world." Americans are "not a narrow tribe."<sup>45</sup>

This truth is reflected in "a different mirror." Remembered more inclusively, history offers all of us hopeful ties that bind — what Lincoln cherished as our "mystic chords of memory."