

“Epistemology and Epiphany” **from Ronald Takaki’s** ***A Different Mirror***

As it turns out, the history I have written is reflected in my own life: my personal experiences have resonated with those of America’s multicultural people — their disappointments but also their dreams, their tribulations but also their triumphs, and their separate but also their shared identities. What happened to me and what happened in history illustrate and illuminate one another.

Born in Hawaii in 1939, the son of a Japanese immigrant father and an American-born Japanese mother, I grew up in the working-class community of Palolo Valley, Oahu. My neighbors were Japanese, Chinese, Portuguese, Korean, and Hawaiian. As children we visited each other’s homes, where we heard a rich diversity of languages.

Playing together, we spoke pidgin English. “Hey, da kine *tako ono*, you know,” we would say, combining English, Japanese, and Hawaiian. My father died when I was five years old, and shortly afterward, my mother married an immigrant from China, Koon Keu Young.

I attended the nearby public elementary school, where the students said the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag every morning. I did not realize then that I had been assigned to a non-English standard school, a system that tracked Asian and Hawaiian students to a high school without a college prep curriculum.

My mother had been born on a sugarcane plantation and had only an eighth-grade education, and my stepfather also had very little schooling. They were determined to give me the opportunity to be college educated. At the beginning of fifth grade, they pulled me out of the public school and, sacrificing the family finances, enrolled me in a private school, Iolani.

As a teenager, I developed a passion for surfing. My nickname was “Ten Toes Takaki.” My parents operated a Chinese takeout restaurant in Waikiki, and every day after school I went there to help wash pots and cut vegetables; after finishing my chores, I ran to the beach with

my surfboard. I idolized and befriended the beachboy surfers like Jama Kekai, Steamboat, and Blackie. Sitting on my board and gazing at the rainbows over the Koolau Mountains and the spectacular sunsets over the Pacific, I wanted to be a surfer forever.

During my senior year, however, I had a teacher who changed my life. At the first class meeting, he introduced himself as Dr. Shunji Nishi, Ph.D. Most of the students at Iolani were Asian American, and we knew other Asian-American doctors, but they were all M.D.s. Impressed with my new teacher's unusual credentials, I went home and asked my mother: "Mom, my teacher's name is Dr. Shunji Nishi, Ph.D. Mom, what's a Ph.D.?" She replied: "I don't know. But he must be very smart."

Dr. Nishi required his students to read *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis. These were letters that the chief devil wrote to his nephew, Wormword, giving instructions on how to entrap Christians into committing sins; for example, convince them that the ends justify the means, including lying and warfare. Dr. Nishi's writing assignments were challenging: we had to read a letter and then write an essay on the problems of the world and the human condition. Like a Screwtape letter, each essay had to open with the greeting: "Dear Wormwood." Dr. Nishi returned my essays with extensive marginal comments, many of them asking questions of epistemology: How do you know what you know? The "how" includes evidence, approaches, and assumptions. The "how" of knowing something is more important than the "what," for the "how" determines the "what."

A relationship blossomed between the two of us through my essays and his marginal comments. In April of the spring semester, Dr. Nishi stopped me as I was walking across campus. "Ronald," he said, "I think you should go away for college. It would be good for your personal growth and intellectual development. There's a fine liberal arts college in Ohio called the College of Wooster. Would you like to go to the College of Wooster?" Immediately, I replied, "No." I had already been accepted to the University of Hawaii, and the idea of transplanting myself so far away was intimidating. "Well," said Dr. Nishi, "would be it okay for me to write a letter to the college and tell them about you?" I agreed, and a month later, I received a letter

informing me that I had been accepted. That one teacher and that one letter put me on a new path.

At college in the fall of 1957, I experienced a culture shock. The student body was very homogeneous, and my fellow students would ask 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 and did not have an American-sounding name.

I was extremely homesick. Almost weekly, my mother sent me beautifully written letters. In one of them, she described her day: “It’s 8:00 P.M. as I sit writing to you. About 1 A.M. in Ohio and I imagine you are snug in bed. We are still down at the store since Dad has to catch up soaking the teriyaki steak, etc. This week has been very busy and I am exhausted.” In another letter, she wrote: “I never went to school much and you can say that again. What I do know is from reading. In my small way I am trying and doing my best (working) so that you being an exception *can and must* be above our intellectual level. At times I yearn for rest (6 years without a vacation).”

During the spring semester of my sophomore year, I was introduced to a fellow student — Carol Rankin, from New Jersey. I asked her to be my date for my fraternity spring prom. Soon we were in love. But then Carol told me that her parents would never approve of our relationship: the problem was my race. When her parents found out about us, they reacted furiously, calling me a “Jap.” When she insisted that I was American, her father snapped back, “Impossible!” Claiming that the Japanese people were “treacherous” by nature, he pointed to the attack on Pearl Harbor. Her parents also feared that if she married me, she would be ostracized by white society and interned if there was another war with Japan.

Carol and I decided to do what was right for us. We were married in June 1961, with her parents reluctantly in attendance.

That fall, I entered the Ph.D. program in American history at the University of California, Berkeley. Like thousands of Berkeley students, I was inspired by the moral vision of Martin Luther King, Jr. During Freedom Summer of 1964, students of many races went into the South to register black voters. I was horrified by the news

that three young civil rights workers had been murdered in Mississippi. My outrage at this racial hatred and violence led me to study slavery for my dissertation.

In 1965 our first child was born. When Carol's parents arrived at our home in California to welcome her birth, I greeted them in the driveway. "Let me help you with the luggage, Mr. Rankin," I said, and he replied: "You can call me Dad." As it turned out, his racist attitudes were not fixed and frozen.

Also in 1965, while I was working on my dissertation, the Watts riot exploded. The days of rage and burning led UCLA's history department to create a new position in black history. I applied for the opening, and in the fall of 1967, I joined the faculty as a young assistant professor.

I vividly remember my first class meeting. When I entered the enormous classroom, I found a packed crowd of three hundred excited students. Those were the days of black student militancy, when students wore dashikis and sported Afros. Before I could begin my lecture, a tall black student stood up in the middle of the classroom and raised his hand. "Well, Professor Taa-ka-ki," he declared, "what revolutionary tools are we going to learn in this class?" After hesitating for a moment, I replied, "We will be studying the history of the United States as it relates to black people. We will also be strengthening and sharpening our critical thinking skills and our writing skills. And these can be revolutionary tools, if you want to make them so."

As I taught my courses, I noted that my students had roots reaching back not only to Europe and Africa, but also to Latin America and Asia. Awareness of this diversity led me to ask an epistemological question: How do I really know what I know about American history? Even though I had a Ph.D., I realized I would have to reteach myself and began to conceptualize a comparative approach to the study of racial inequality. Meanwhile, I actively joined students in demanding a more diverse faculty and curriculum.

In 1971, however, I was denied tenure by the history department. This was a decision I had not expected: my teaching had been rated

outstanding, and my dissertation had been accepted by the Free Press for publication as *A Pro-Slavery Crusade: The Agitation to Reopen the African Slave Trade*. Fortunately, Berkeley offered me an appointment as an associate professor with tenure in the newly instituted Department of Ethnic Studies. In 1972, I began teaching what would become Ethnic Studies 130, "The Making of Multicultural America: A Comparative Historical Perspective." This course provided the conceptual framework for the Comparative Ethnic Studies B.A. in 1974, the Comparative Ethnic Studies Ph.D. in 1984, and the American Cultures graduation requirement in 1987, which explores our society's racial and ethnic diversity comparatively. Out of my pursuit for a more inclusive and hence more accurate history came the writing of an abundance of books, including *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Knopf, 1979) and *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Little, Brown, 1989).

During this time, my family became increasingly multiracial. Our daughter's husband has Anglo-Saxon ancestry, and our sons' wives have Jewish roots. We have seven grandchildren, including our son's adopted daughter, whose biological father is Mexican. Our family belongs to a rapidly growing population of mixed-race Americans. Indeed, like Melville's America, we are "not a narrow tribe."

My surfer-to-scholar story belongs to what Walt Whitman celebrated as "the varied carols" of America. In the vibrant sharing of our "melodious songs," we are creating a larger memory of a nation peopled by the world. As the time approaches when all Americans are minorities, we are facing a challenge: The task for us is not only to comprehend the world, but also to change the world. In our very comprehending, we are in fact changing the world. *A Different Mirror* seeks to study the past for the sake of the future.