

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Ronald Takaki
Free Speech Movement Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Lisa Rubens
in 2000

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INTERVIEW WITH RONALD TAKAKI

Interview 1: August 23, 2000

Tape 1

Rubens: We're speaking in the Stone Room of The Bancroft Library with Professor Ronald Takaki.

Takaki: You might want to look at that book [*A Larger Memory: A History of our Diversity with Voices* (1998)]. It's a collection of life stories from the eighteenth century to the present. I also have three student papers in this collection. These papers are based on oral histories done by them, with their mothers. So I'm practicing the pursuit of oral history as a methodology to reach toward this intersection between what C. Wright Mills calls the sociological imagination: the dynamic intersection between biography and history. I tell my students that, "your parents and grandparents may not have been important, famous people, but nevertheless, they mattered. They are actors, they have been actors in history. Their lives intersected with enormously important historical events."

And I have students whose parents, say, came from Vietnam, and so they can retell the story of their mother or their father. One of the student papers is a life story of an Indian woman who came here in the 1970s and had to make tremendous adjustments.

Rubens: East Indian?

Takaki: Yes, South Asia--not an American Indian. It's a powerful story.

Rubens: Ron, could I interrupt you just for this: I'd like to start out talking about your intersection between history and biography.

Takaki: Okay.

Rubens: Where were you in 1964?

Takaki: I was here at Berkeley. I was a graduate student studying for a Ph.D. in American history. At that point, I was pretty naive about history. I thought of history in the old-fashioned way. In other words, American history was maybe even exclusively the history of just one group--the group that came from Europe. This is the master narrative of American history forged by very preeminent historians, such as Oscar Handlin, who wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning book entitled *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People*. In Handlin's book, all of the migrations came from only one place, Europe.

So you have this pervasive, but also mistaken, notion that “American” means white or European in ancestry. So here I was, at Berkeley, studying American history.

Rubens: Who are you at that point, for the record? How would you define your identity in relation to your family, to your community, to America?

Takaki: Okay, I’m third generation American. My grandfather came from Japan in 1886. My mother was born on a plantation in Hawaii. I’m the first one in my family to attend college. In fact, I was not very academically inclined as a teenager. I used to be a surfer. My nickname was “Ten Toes” Takaki.

But then, during my senior year, I was required to take a course in religion. I was a student at an Episcopalian high school, and my religion course had a teacher named Dr. Shunji Nishi, Ph.D. And this was the first Asian American Ph.D. I had ever met in my life. I had met Asian American doctors, but they were all MD’s. This one was a Ph.D. And I can remember going home and telling my mom--I said, “Mom, my teacher’s name is Dr. Shunji Nishi, Ph.D. Mom, what’s a Ph.D.?” And my mother, who had been born on a plantation and had only an eighth-grade education, said, “I don’t know, but he must be very smart.” And I think a light went on in my mind that possibly someday I could become Ronald Takaki, Ph.D. And that, I think, put me on the path that led me to Berkeley to study for the Ph.D. in American history.

However, before I studied for the Ph.D., my plan was to study for the ministry. Dr. Nishi was also a minister. I was planning to become a minister. However, between my junior and senior years, I had a change of mind. I began to question the existence of God. I became an agnostic--I think even an atheist, at that point. And so my bishop had told me that history would be a good major to prepare you for seminary, and I thought, well, I’m not going to seminary. What do I do with myself? Then I thought, well, maybe I’ll get a Ph.D. in history.

So I graduated from this small college in Ohio, the College of Wooster.

Rubens: Where was your high school?

Takaki: In Hawaii. I grew up in a small valley called Palolo Valley, and my neighbors were Japanese, Chinese. There was a Portuguese family living right next door, a Hawaiian family across the street, and so it was a working-class, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural community. We would visit each other’s homes and we would hear voices in Cantonese and Portuguese, for example, and we would think nothing of it: “Oh, this is America.” And we communicated with each other as kids through pidgin English.

However, our textbooks and our teachers never taught us why this diversity of people was living and working together in this valley in Oahu. And then, when I went to Wooster--this was in 1957--.

Oh, I should tell you how I managed to get into Wooster. So this Dr. Nishi and I developed a relationship with one another. He became a role model for me. He required all of his students to read a book by C. S. Lewis entitled *The Screwtape Letters*. We had to read a letter a week and then we had to write a letter a week--an essay. Dr. Nishi would scribble marginal comments on my papers. He would ask me epistemological questions, like, "How do you know this is true?" "Is this really valid?" And I'd have to rethink my statement. He would often write, "Interesting." And every now and then he would write, "Insightful."

Well, during the second semester of my senior year, as I was walking across campus, Dr. Nishi said, "Ronald, wait. I have a question for you." He said, "I think you should go away to college. It would be good for you in terms of your educational growth, but also your personal growth." And he said, "There's this fine liberal arts college in Ohio called the College of Wooster. Would you like to go to the College of Wooster?"

And I blurted out, "No!" I had never been off of the island, and Ohio seemed so distant! But Dr. Nishi said, "Well, let me write to the college and tell them about you," and I said, "Okay." And I walked away, and kind of completely forgot about this conversation. And this was in April. It was late in--

Rubens: You had no plans to go to the university?

Takaki: I had been admitted to the University of Hawaii, and my idea was to just get a bachelor's degree there and become a teacher--a high school teacher--in Hawaii; so I was not very ambitious at that point. But nevertheless, Dr. Nishi was a kind of role model for me.

A month after this conversation, I received a letter from the dean of the College of Wooster, and the letter read, "Dear Mr. Takaki, You have been accepted to the College of Wooster. But please fill out the application form." So this dean had admitted me on the basis of Dr. Nishi's letter of recommendation. When I look back at that admission, I realize that this was an early version of affirmative action. This dean was not offering me what Ward Connerly would call "preferential treatment." He was offering me an opportunity to pursue equality in education--to give me a break, in other words.

And my GPA wasn't that high; but GPA is cumulative, and I was getting good grades during my senior year. But my grades before my senior year were pretty average. And so, this is one problem with using GPAs as a measurement for admission because it doesn't give you a snapshot of the

student at the time of applying. Also, my SATs were not high at all. But SAT scores are correlated with family income: they rise together.

Rubens: In mainstream culture?

Takaki: Mainstream culture. Middle-class, professional culture. But nevertheless, this dean admitted me. I think there may have also been another reason why this dean admitted me. He thought that it would be good for the College of Wooster to have some diversity.

Rubens: Had Dr. Nishi gone?

Takaki: No, no, he was not a graduate of the College of Wooster, but a colleague teaching at Iolani had graduated from Wooster, and that was the connection. This was Rev. Harvey Buston.

So I went to Wooster, and I can remember arriving on this campus--a small campus of a thousand students--in a small town with a population of only 17,000. And I began to feel like a stranger from a different shore. My fellow white students would ask me questions like, "How long have you been in this country?" And my grandfather, as I said, came here in 1886.

Rubens: "Here" meant Hawaii.

Takaki: "Here" meant the United States, I think, because Hawaii became a territory of the United States. But these Wooster students couldn't see me as an American, and they also asked me where I had learned to speak English. I learned to speak English in the United States of America.

But when I look back on my Wooster experience, I realize that it was not the fault of my fellow white students that they could not, did not, see me as an American. I didn't have an American-sounding name to them, and I didn't have an American-looking face. But it wasn't their fault; it was the fault of the curriculum. What had they learned, say, about Asian Americans in courses of American history, and what had they learned about Puerto Ricans or the Cherokees or Choctaws or African Americans? So there was this Eurocentric curriculum that was practiced at Wooster as well as other colleges and universities across this country.

But I graduated from Wooster, and I entered Berkeley in 1961 to study for the Ph.D. in American history.

Rubens: Anything specifically draw you to Berkeley?

Takaki: It was in California. My parents had moved to California at that point.

So when I came to Berkeley, I thought, gee, what am I going to study in terms of American history? And here I took courses from Henry May, who was a leading historian in the field of American intellectual history, especially history of religion. And I wrote a master's thesis on Reinhold Niebuhr as a young theologian. So I became interested in studying religion in American history, and that, I think, may have been connected then to my interest in the ministry, which I had abandoned.

But then I took a course from Charles Sellers, a seminar on Southern history, and this led me to write a paper on the movement to reopen the African slave trade in the 1850s. Charles Sellers was very impressed with this paper. The paper was accepted for publication by the *South Carolina Historical Magazine*. That brought a smile to my face. Here I am, a graduate student, and soon to be a published author.

But while I was working on that paper, the Free Speech Movement exploded, and I think there was a connection between the study of slavery and my participation in the Free Speech Movement. We have to remember that the Free Speech Movement was a movement for civil rights. We wanted freedom of speech on campus in order to speak out against racial injustice in American society--in San Francisco as well as in the South.

And then the Regents said we were not allowed to have rallies on the steps of Sproul Hall, that this was property that they possessed, they controlled, and they prohibited the students from using the Sproul Hall for purposes of agitating for social justice for African Americans.

So at that time I was working on slavery--

Rubens: This was a dissertation?

Takaki: Yes. But I think what happened was first there was a seminar paper I had done on the movement to reopen the African slave trade, which, I think, was done, like, in 1963. And then '64, the FSM exploded. I had been already stirred by the moral vision of Martin Luther King, and I think that's the reason why I did that paper on slavery to begin with. But then, when the Free Speech Movement exploded, I began to see the connection between the student movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and my scholarship. They became woven together.

What is the Free Speech Movement? I was a graduate student and also a teaching assistant, and I was teaching, as a TA, a survey course in U.S. history. This meant that I led small sections. Many of our students were a part of the Free Speech Movement. Like, one of them emerged as a vibrant leader of the FSM, and that was Bettina Aptheker. Then I found out about her famous father, Herbert Aptheker. And so I had a tie to the Free Speech Movement through my students, especially Bettina.

But I was there on campus that day when the police car moved into Sproul Hall Plaza and made the arrest and I can remember a student--I think it was a female student--sitting down right in front of that car, and then two or three other students joined her. And before you knew it, there was a ring of students around the car, and the car couldn't move! And then there were scores of students around the car! And then students began to climb onto the car and began to give speeches, asserting our rights of free speech.

I think that was the explosion that became known as the Free Speech Movement. But I was there when it happened. I was swept into the excitement of it, and it was exciting. And then that led to weeks of rallies and demonstrations and speeches, and that's, I think, when Mario Savio rose as a great leader--charismatic and also a leader with a magical voice. It was not just his voice; it was also his hair and his eyes as he spoke to us. His eyes--and his hands--and, of course, he had that famous jacket.[laughs] I can still picture him!

Rubens: Corduroy. I think it was a corduroy jacket.

Takaki: With that sheep wool around the collar, or something like that.

So I attended those rallies and those demonstrations. I arrived on campus one day, and I saw members of the Oakland Sheriff's Department, or Alameda County, dragging students out of Sproul Hall pretty brutally, and I thought that--I was shocked to see students victimized in this way. I thought, that's not a university, and immediately I joined a picket line. And as a teaching assistant I refused to attend my teaching responsibilities. I refused to lead the sections, and I told my students that "I'm on strike." Hundreds of teaching assistants went out on strike together.

I can remember walking down the corridor of Dwinelle Hall, and the chairman of the history department waved a letter at me, and he said, "This letter is to warn all teaching assistants on strike that you will be fired, and you may even be subject to academic discipline." In other words, we could be expelled from the university for our actions. I disregarded that. I thought, okay, if you're going to fire me, if you're going to expel me, do it. I'm willing to put my academic future on the line for freedom of speech.

Rubens: And in your mind, was this done threateningly rather than informing you that this might happen?

Takaki: Well--

Rubens: The history department had a reputation for being--

Takaki: How can you be informed without feeling threatened? So I was informed, and I perceived the presentation of that information as a threat. In other words, the chairman was trying to warn us to discontinue the strike.

But what was great about the faculty was that after the arrest took place, the faculty, as I remember it, had this emergency meeting, and they voted to support the students. The faculty said, "Yes, this is a university. This university as an institution has a commitment to the principle of free speech." What impressed me was how the faculty became listeners. In other words, the students were teaching the faculty what is a university, and what is the mission and the responsibility of the university. And this faculty responded to us, saying, "Oh, thank you for reminding us why we are here." And it was an overwhelming vote, as I remember it. You probably have the count.

But when we look back at the lesson of the Free Speech Movement, one lesson that emerges is how, when students and faculty came together and confronted the Regents, they were able to force the Regents to rescind their unjust policy. I was hoping we'd be able to do that again when the Regents abolished affirmative action. We had solidarity, but that time we weren't able to succeed. Maybe we needed more demonstrations and more arrests by students!

Rubens: Do you think the political climate had changed?

Takaki: The political climate had changed. And also, in the case of the Regents, for affirmative action, they were politically driven--fiercely politically driven.

Rubens: Say what you mean by that.

Takaki: That there was a political agenda, and a partisan political agenda, that had been related to Governor Wilson's bid for the Republican nomination for the presidency. Ward Connerly had a special agenda. In the case of the Free Speech Movement, I don't think the Regents had a special agenda. They simply said, "Oh, these kids are misbehaving. Let's say, 'Hey, you can't have demonstrations and rallies on campus.'"

Rubens: I was struck, Ron, that [when] you said when you saw these strikes taking place, and you saw the police carrying the students out so brutally, you said, "This is not how a university should treat its students." Your vision of the university was very different than what the Regents and the administrators had [in mind].

Takaki: Well, I think what I said was when I saw the police dragging students out brutally from Sproul Hall, I asked, is this or is this not a university? And I think you're right. I was asking, is this behavior appropriate for a university? But actually I would extend that to say, should this happen anywhere in America? You see? But especially at the university. And I think that students

felt sort of privileged: “Oh, you know, we’re not going to be victims of police brutality. That only happens in South Central L.A. or in Watts, you see, not here.”

Rubens: Or Selma.

Takaki: Or Selma at that point, yes--Mississippi. But it happened here, and I think that was a shock of recognition that we, too, would be targets of this type of police brutality.

Rubens: Ron, I stopped you on the street to ask you, “Would you be so kind as to let me interview you?” And I said, “Where were you in ‘64?” And you explained it to me: “I was here, and the Free Speech Movement changed my life.” It was a quick, direct, immediate answer. There’s a lot you have opened up here, and I’ll want to ask you a couple of follow-up questions, but what do you mean by that, in just a nutshell?

Takaki: I think when you look at my life, I had already made a choice. I was on a path toward really finding America. I told you about my community in Palolo Valley and how my textbooks and my teachers did not explain why this diversity of people existed, what’s there in this little valley, but I didn’t think about it that much. And then when I went to Wooster, I realized that other people didn’t see me as an American. Something’s wrong with this picture.

Then I came to Berkeley, and I first did some work in American religious history, but then I got, like, drawn into the study of Southern history, especially race in Southern history. But that happened about the same time that explosions were happening in the South, and you had Martin Luther King and the March on Washington in 1963.

Rubens: You were paying attention to that.

Takaki: I was paying attention to all of that. In fact, I was participating in some of the marches and so forth in San Francisco. My wife and I--I was married at the time--we drove to San Francisco, and we would march to protest injustice in the South. So then the Free Speech Movement exploded, and I began to weave my student activism with my personal passion to redefine America with my scholarship. But still it focused on the South and racism in the South. At that time, we weren’t really aware of Northern racism or racism as a national problem. So this led me then to do this dissertation on slavery.

Rubens: And you completed that dissertation?

Takaki: Yes. As I was working on this dissertation during the Free Speech Movement and after, in 1965, Watts became a war zone. I can still remember watching TV--and at that time we had black-and-white TV--but seeing that black smoke

rising to the skies above L.A. and seeing a city burning, as if there were a war. And it was indeed a war.

Rubens: One of the first ghetto--

Takaki: Uprisings, for me, yes. But it was an uprising, because we had race riots before, but they were anti-black race riots. Like the Detroit race riot of 1943, when twenty-five blacks were killed and three fourths of them had been shot by the police. These were race riots where violence was directed against the other--the marginalized Americans. In this case, with Watts, they expressed themselves rising up to claim their humanity, and to claim an America that [was] founded on what Lincoln called "the proposition"--I like that term--"the proposition that all men are created equal."

And so here Watts exploded in '65. Up here, I was watching it on TV. I was working on my dissertation on slavery, and I began to realize that racism was also a Northern problem; it was a California problem; it was not just a Mississippi problem. But the Watts riot led UCLA to create a position in the history department, to offer the first black history course. It was called Negro history at that time. So that was in '66. I was finishing my dissertation at that point.

So I applied for that position. There weren't too many people doing dissertations on slavery or on race relations at that point, and I was offered the position, so I went to UCLA to teach the first black history course. But I was bringing the vision of the Free Speech Movement with me down to UCLA--this vision of a democratic society where all the people, regardless of race--"We, the people," would have to include African Americas.

Rubens: And you could discuss what had not been part of the academe?

Takaki: I could.

Rubens: You could point to such a reality?

Takaki: Well, I could create windows in the curriculum so that students had an alternative to the cannon of American history, the narrative created by the Oscar Handlins and the Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s of America.

When I went to UCLA, I was a young man. I was only twenty-eight years old, had a crew cut, looked like a student still. My hair was not silver; it was all black. Here I was scheduled to teach the first Negro history course.

Rubens: It was literally called--it hadn't changed to Afro-American?

Takaki: No, no. Because "Negro" was the word at that point, you see. It was just called Negro history.

Rubens: Had you ever had any “Negro history”?

Takaki: I had only studied slavery, and that’s part of Negro history. In fact, very critical--in fact, it is the heart of Negro history: slavery. So I went to UCLA, and I can remember walking to the classroom at the opening of the fall semester. It was a huge auditorium with 450 seats, and every seat was occupied. In fact, students were in the aisles. They were excited about this course: the first Negro history course ever offered by UCLA.

I can remember walking into that room, and there was a high level of chitter-chatter. A course here that had never been offered and so forth, and I was going to relate it to what’s happening in the past and also to the present because Watts had just exploded two years earlier. So I walked into the classroom, and I had to step over students in the aisles to get up to the front. Suddenly, a silence descended on the whole room as students’ eyes riveted on me. They said, “Oh, that’s the professor!” And I could just feel them saying to themselves, “Funny, he doesn’t look black.” [laughs] So here I was, a very anxious and nervous young professor.

[I] walked up to the front of the room. There was a stage there. Stood behind the podium, and before I could say anything, this black student stood up. And these were the days of black militants. And he asked, “Well, Professor Ta-ka-ki--”

[tape interruption]

Takaki: “--what revolutionary tools are we going learn in this class?” [laughs] And I thought to myself, this is not the way I would like to begin my teaching career. And you’re probably wondering, how did I answer that student? I can’t remember exactly what I said, but I said something like this: “We’re going to study the history of the United States as it relates to the Negro people. We’re also going to develop our critical thinking skills and our writing skills, and these can be revolutionary tools if you want to make them so.”

But I had to do more than give them that kind of a statement. I also had to show them that I had something that they didn’t have. I had knowledge of history that they didn’t have. To be black doesn’t mean that you know black history. But I found myself working very closely with the black students, especially the militant ones. There were a few--a handful--of black faculty at UCLA, but they kept their distance from the black students. I didn’t have a choice. They were in my classroom, so I worked closely with them. And I became the faculty sponsor to the Black Student Union. So the word went out, you know, to black students on other campuses that there was this bad Asian dude at UCLA organizing the BSU.

Rubens: And “bad” at that time meant?

Takaki: That means, like, a terrific dude, you know? [laughs] But as I looked out at the faces of my students in this black history course, I saw not only students whose roots went back to Africa, to Europe, but I also saw students whose roots went back to Mexico and to Asia, and I thought that I would like to teach a course that would reflect the diversity in my classroom. So that led me to teach a course called “Racial Inequality in America: A Comparative Historical Perspective,” that would take the study of race beyond black and white.

And for the first time in my life, I was studying Asian American history. I was going up that learning curve. I was learning about Chinese immigration to this country and doing my homework. Also, I had to learn Mexican American history and Native American history. I began to rethink the way that I had been thinking about American history because initially I thought about American history as European American history, and then as European American and African American history. But now I thought, oh, in America we have a great diversity of Americans of color.

But also at that point I began to study Irish immigrants, too. What about whites? Whites are not homogeneous. They’re a diverse group, too. We looked at whites in terms of their ethnic origins, and so at UCLA I began to do readings in Irish immigration history.

Well, the activism that I brought with me from Berkeley got me in trouble at UCLA. I was leading the struggle for ethnic studies in the history department, and I demanded that the history department offer courses in Mexican American history, Asian American history, Native American history, and also make appointments in those fields, which were not fields yet, but we would create those fields with these appointments.

Rubens: Was it felt that by having one Negro history course that [it] would contain the movement to black students?

Takaki: I don’t think they were thinking about it. They thought, oh, there’s turmoil in society. We should offer Negro history. But I don’t think they saw how political it could be for the university itself. Those were the days of tremendous demonstrations at UCLA, also at Berkeley, demanding the inclusion of more minority students through special action. It wasn’t called affirmative action then, but special action. So we were recruiting black students from the inner cities. We were recruiting members of the Black Panther Party and Ron Karenga’s US Organization.

Rubens: Can I take you through just a few questions to get back to there? I wanted to just ask you--and please stop me if you want to continue--were there any students of color in your graduate program at Berkeley? Do you remember?

Takaki: One. One black student. That was it.

- Rubens: Do you have his name?
- Takaki: No, I don't.
- Rubens: Do you know what happened to him?
- Takaki: No, I don't.
- Rubens: Leon Litwack came, I believe, in '63, visiting, and then '64; and then shortly before this his book, *North of Slavery* (1961), had come out. To me, that was a revolutionary book--to see that there was racism in the North. That was only about the period of the 1840s and 50s. Did you have any particular encounter with Litwack?
- Takaki: I was one of his teaching assistants.
- Rubens: In that survey course?
- Takaki: In that survey course. But my major influence was Charles Sellers. Charles Sellers was very active in the Civil Rights movement.
- Rubens: Yes, particularly in campus CORE [Congress of Racial Equality]. It was in his office that the history faculty met who took pro FSM positions.
- Takaki: Yes, Leon Litwack was also one of my intellectual models.
- Rubens: You know, of course, he came from California. He was a Santa Barbara--son of real lefties. He worked on ships. But I don't believe that he talked very much about California. I heard one of his first survey courses.
- Takaki: It could have been the study of black history.
- Rubens: And finally there was George Stocking, who was beginning to really think about race theoretically.
- Takaki: I didn't really have a chance to work with George Stocking, but I did work with Winthrop Jordan.
- Rubens: Oh, yes, that wonderful book.
- Takaki: *White Over Black* (1968), which was stunning.
- Rubens: I was just going to ask you if there were a few books that--
- Takaki: Yes, *North of Slavery*; of course, Kenneth Stampp's *A Peculiar Institution* (1956); and Winthrop Jordan's *White Over Black*. But still, when you think about these books, these books focused only on blacks, you see, and I had

moved beyond that. I was strong in black history; in fact, my dissertation was published then as my first book, *A Pro-Slavery Crusade* (1971). But I wanted to offer a more inclusive and hence, I believe, a more accurate study of the past. “We, the people,” in terms of all the different peoples in the United States. And I wanted to do this in a way that would allow us to understand how the paths of different groups criss-crossed one another. I’m including here not only Americans of color, but also Americans of different ethnicities.

Rubens: I find that you were interested in the Irish is so unusual.

Takaki: Because I was studying the Chinese, okay? And the Irish were pitted against the Chinese—[because of the fact] that the transcontinental railroad was built by the Chinese--by immigrant Chinese--and by immigrant Irish. But I was fired from UCLA. It was a pretty discouraging, devastating experience.

Rubens: When was that?

Takaki: In 1970. So I was there--in ‘71 it actually occurred. So I was there at UCLA for four years at that point.

Rubens: And taught this multiracial--

Takaki: The first multiracial course--the first black history course. But I was involved in the movement to transform the curriculum, to make it more inclusive, and targeted the history department.

Rubens: Was Al Saxton still there?

Takaki: Saxton had come on board. In fact, I was a key player in Saxton’s appointment because I went to UCLA in ‘67, and Saxton was teaching at Wayne State University. In those days there were many positions that were taken, so [we thought], “Oh, let’s bring about this fellow graduate student named Alexander Saxton.” So we offered him an appointment.

Rubens: Had he already done *The Indispensable Enemy* (1975)?

Takaki: He was working on it.

Rubens: That was so seminal.

Takaki: Yes. And Saxton, of course, helped me rethink American history to include Asian immigrants and not just the Chinese.

Rubens: But you were fired.

Takaki: I was fired. I was appointed chair of the ethnic studies departmental committee, a committee of the history department. And there were militant

students on this committee as well as some faculty from the history department. And as chair of this committee, I had to present the report and recommendations to the history department, and this is in the spring of 1970. That was a spring of great political turmoil, especially with the anti-war movement. The students were occupying buildings and smashing windows. The LAPD had to make sweeps across the campus.

Rubens: I think far more violent than it was here.

Takaki: I think so. I think so. And in this crucible of protest and violence, I presented in May of 1970 this report and recommendations. I recommended that the history department make appointments in Native American history, Mexican American history, and Asian American history, and that we also commit one fourth of all of our TA budget to minority students.

And these recommendations were presented then at a meeting of the history faculty. I can remember that meeting very vividly because every member of the history faculty showed up, and we had over fifty faculty. But outside, in the hallway, there were about 500 students supporting, demanding the approval of what came to be called the Takaki Recommendations, the Takaki Recommendations.

Rubens: They knew ahead of time what you were going to argue?

Takaki: Yes, they knew what it was. And so the history department faculty, I think, felt the presence of these students outside in the corridor. Of course, there was this climate already on campus of turmoil and fear, and a member of the history department offered a motion that the department accept, in principle, the Takaki Recommendations. They would not accept the Takaki Recommendations, but they said, in principle—

That was the escape hatch for the history department. They approved it. What did the students do? Well, they celebrated. Oh, the Takaki Recommendations have been approved. But they took my recommendations to other departments: political science, sociology, and so forth. [laughs] But I can remember going home that afternoon--early evening actually, because that was a long meeting--going home and saying to my wife, "Carol, I think I put my job on the line today, but I'm not certain. But I don't think they'll fire me because I have a book in press, and I'm respected as a teacher."

Rubens: Were you on a tenure track?

Takaki: I was on tenure track, but I was only an assistant professor.

Rubens: And the book in line was?

- Takaki: Was *Pro-Slavery Crusade*. It had been accepted by the Free Press of Macmillan. And so I felt pretty confident [that] I would be able to continue. Anyway, after the history department approved in principle the Takaki Recommendations, I received a letter from the chairman of the department, saying they would put me up for accelerated tenure review, although this is only my fourth year.
- Rubens: Normally it would have happened in six?
- Takaki: And I thought, oh, they're putting me up because I have a book in press. I didn't think about it. I was so naive. I didn't realize that this was their strategy to terminate me!
- Rubens: No one warned you, or maybe saw it, either?
- Takaki: No one saw it. But that was just between me and the chair of the history department. And I had received an NEA scholarship for the following year, for '70-'71, so I went to Harvard to do research for my second book. And while I was away, I received a letter from the chairman of the history department, saying that "the history department voted and has denied you tenure." That was pretty shattering because I had three young children at that time, ages five, three, and one. So I thought that my future as a scholar, as a professor, had been destroyed. I came back to UCLA to teach for one more year, '71-'72.
- Rubens: Was that galling to be there?
- Takaki: Yes, it was difficult. Students mobilized in protest and so forth, a lot of letters to the *Daily Bruin*. But it's hard to fight a personnel committee that is invisible, and so there was no way I could win a battle for tenure politically. So I was at UCLA, sort of finishing up my one year at UCLA, my terminal year. And then I received a phone call in 1971--spring of '71--asking me whether or not I'd be willing and interested to come to Berkeley to join the ethnic studies department because Berkeley had had a strike in 1969--
- Rubens: The Third World Strike?
- Takaki: And this strike led to the establishment of ethnic studies faculty positions and [they were trying] to fill these positions. Anyway, this was one of the leaders of the Asian American Studies Program here at Berkeley.
- Rubens: Who was?
- Takaki: Colin Watanabe. Colin Watanabe had been one of the student activists at UCLA, and that's where we worked together in the struggle. Then he came up to Berkeley to work in the Asian American Studies Program. And Colin called me and said, "Would you like to come up here, to join us in the struggle? We

have an academic program, a department. We can make appointments.” So I came up here for an interview. It was an interesting interview because all of the faculty members were part time. They were half time. None of them had a Ph.D. In fact, some of them didn’t even have their bachelor’s degree, yet they were teaching ethnic studies.

Rubens: Did Watanabe have a degree?

Takaki: He had his master’s degree, but it was in chemistry! But he was teaching the reading composition course in Asian American Studies.

I came up here, and Patrick Hayashi was one of the coordinators of Asian American Studies. So I came up for an interview, and it was an intriguing interview because, as I said, there were no full-time faculty here, and many of them didn’t even have their bachelor’s degree, and they’re all teaching half time.

I said, “Why would you want to bring on board a Ph.D. who would be tenure track and would be research oriented?” They said, “In order to bring you on board, two of us have to give up our half-time positions to create a full-time position for you.” And I said, “Well, why is everyone here half time?” And they said, “We’re half time because we don’t believe we should work full time at the university because we’re revolutionaries; we should be out in the community organizing.” And I said, “Well, why do you want to bring me on board and give up your positions here?” They said, “We’ve decided that the revolution isn’t imminent.” And they said, “Unless we bring on board Ph.D.s like you, we believe that this department will be dismantled within three years.” And so, the understanding was that I would join the ethnic studies department. I would be the first Ph.D. and a member of the ethnic studies department, and I would help to build the core faculty of Ph.D.s in ethnic studies. So I thought, well, I’ll take this risk because I couldn’t get another job in the history department because the UCLA historians made sure that I could not get an appointment anywhere else.

So at that point I was thinking about teaching at a junior college, at a high school. And then Berkeley offered me this opportunity.

Rubens: Had you tried? Had you called other departments or written letters?

Takaki: Yes. I was interviewed for positions at UC Santa Cruz, UC Santa Barbara, but they received these phone calls saying, “Oh, you don’t want to hire Takaki. He’s a troublemaker.” Also the University of Oregon was interested in me, but again all of a sudden the interest suddenly disappeared. And so, I knew that I would not be able to get a position in the history department. So I joined ethnic studies.

Now, when I look back at it, I'm really glad that UCLA fired me because I became a different kind of historian and realized that history was not the field for me to flourish intellectually, and decided that I would create a new field called ethnic studies. But I wanted this ethnic studies field to be multicultural. I didn't want it to become departmentalized: Asian American studies, Chicano studies, Native American studies, African American studies. I wanted to bring my UCLA experience with me--that diversity of faces that I saw in the classroom--and this new course, Racial Inequality in America: A Comparative Historical Perspective.

So I brought that course with me. That course became the basis of the undergraduate ethnic studies major and the ethnic studies Ph.D. program. Both are comparative ethnic studies. And then, of course that vision of the United States and its efforts became the basis of the American Cultures department, which was approved by the faculty senate.

Rubens: Were you a driving force in that, too?

Takaki: Yes, I worked with the student leaders--with Beth Bernstein and Mark Min. Beth Bernstein--she approached me in 1987, two years before the faculty approved the American Cultures Department. Beth Bernstein had just been elected vice president of the Academic Senate, in charge of academic affairs. She hired Mark Min, a Chinese American student, to be her assistant. They met with me in July of 1987, and they said that, "We're having problems at the dorms. The students--the different ethnic groups --aren't getting along with each other." And there is racist graffiti on the doors of black students and so forth.

We talked about what we can do to address these problems with racial tension, conflicts on campus. One idea was, of course, to have a diversity orientation program for entering students. And I said, "But I think if you're really serious about trying to address this problem of racial conflict and tension on campus, you have to do it in the curriculum." And that's where we came up with this idea of an ethnic studies requirement for graduation.

Rubens: Did you have people that joined in with you then?

Takaki: At that point it was just the three of us: Mark, Beth Bernstein, and myself.

Rubens: It's so visionary.

Takaki: You see, at that point we had just begun to use computers with these five-inch floppy disks. I can remember a draft--the first draft of the ethnic studies requirement--and hand-carrying that draft on a computer disk to Mark Min, who was working at the ASUC building, and he put it on his computer. And so, we were able, then, to work on these drafts. Then that became the draft presented by Beth Bernstein to the faculty.

But also at that point, we realized that it had to be a political movement, and so we formed the Faculty-Student Coordinating Committee for the Ethnic Studies. I was the faculty chair of this committee, and Mark Min was the student chair. And we met every two weeks to strategize and to plan actions.

Rubens: How did you get faculty people?

Takaki: It was hard. In fact, it was hard to get students. Often we'd meet in Dwinelle Hall and there would be only, like, maybe eight of us: myself and a few other students. Maybe one other faculty. So at first I thought, well, it's not going to happen. But I thought, well, I'll still work on it because I'm a kind of Don Quixote, and I'll tilt with this windmill just to stir the waters. But then suddenly, some actions occurred. The students took over the Faculty Club. They had a sit-in. And they said to the faculty, "You can't eat unless you educate us about our diversity," arguing with the faculty--

Rubens: Had that ever happened before? I'd never heard--

Takaki: I don't think the students had ever taken over the Faculty Club. But the target was the faculty, not the administration. They also began to debate faculty. They asked us, "Is this not a university? We thought a university was a place where students and faculty came together to study the universe--the physical universe and also the social universe--and this social university is racially diverse."

But what Beth Bernstein did was this, to launch this movement--as the vice president of academic affairs, she had a budget. She said, "Professor Takaki, I have a budget to fund a symposium. We're thinking about a symposium." Then my good friend, Roberto Haro, was an assistant vice chancellor at that time--'87. And he was, of course, working with Ira Heyman. And Roberto Haro then went to Heyman and asked Heyman to match that \$10,000 that Beth Bernstein said she would commit to a symposium. Roberto and I were jogging partners, so in the while we were jogging and we'd talk about politics and strategies. And so anyway, Roberto, as we were jogging, said, "Oh, the chancellor says he'll give you \$10,000 and match Beth Bernstein's \$10,000." So we had \$20,000.

And with that money, then, we funded a symposium, a campus symposium, entitled "The Educated Californian for the Twenty-first Century." At that time we presented the idea of an ethnic studies requirement for graduation. Thousands of students showed up for the symposium.

Rubens: This is April of--?

Takaki: This is probably now '88 because it began fall of '87, when we wrote the draft and so forth and began to strategize. So it was in the spring of '88 that we had

this symposium. Oh, it may have been November of '87, actually. It was early.

Rubens: I will get it. The *Daily Cal* will--

Takaki: If I remember correctly, this is what galvanized this movement for an ethnic studies requirement. There was a two-year debate among the faculty, and I can remember that debate, where we asked the critics of the requirement to choose three of their faculty members, and we would choose three of ours, and we would debate each other in Pauley Ballroom. I think 2,000 students showed up, and also a lot of faculty.

I think coming out of this debate, many people realized that ethnic studies would enhance the academic purpose of the University of California. We even had faculty walking out who had previously been opposed or had not thought about the requirement. What's wrong with having a more inclusive and more accurate study of who we are as Americans and our history? Even the dean of the College of Engineering came over to our side--Dean Karl Pister. He endorsed our proposal.

So that led, then, to that meeting of the Academic Senate in 1989, when the faculty approved the proposed requirement for the American Cultures. With that requirement, we also included European immigrant groups, ethnic groups. Again, that's something that had come out of my UCLA experience--the course I taught there that was comparative. Already in my Ethnic Studies 130 course, I had included the study of Irish immigrants and Jewish immigrants.

Rubens: It wouldn't be until years later that there would be the book, *How the Irish Became White* (Noel Ignatiev, 1996).

Takaki: Yes, it would be years later.

Rubens: Years!

Takaki: You see, it's already in this book, *A Different Mirror* (1993).

Rubens: What was your second book that you said you were working on?

Takaki: *Iron cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (1979). But that was comparative, too, and that included a chapter on the Irish as well as the Chinese. So I was creating a body of scholarship for a new field of comparative ethnic studies, and I think that scholarship was reflected in the American Cultures requirement.

I want to say that the American Cultures requirement influenced the conceptualization of *A Different Mirror*. American Cultures was approved in 1989. *A Different Mirror* was published in 1993. Initially--you know, I had

been working on *A Different Mirror* for about ten years, but this was to be a study of racial minorities in the U.S.: Blacks, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, with reference to the Irish.

But then, in the debates over the American Cultures requirement proposal, it became clear that it would be important to include European American immigrants. And so I went up the learning curve. Now I was really studying Irish immigration seriously, and also Jewish American history seriously. And so I added chapters in *A Different Mirror* on Irish Americans and Jewish Americans, and so *A Different Mirror* became a larger mirror.

But this is one example of how a curriculum innovation made me stand back and let me rethink a book I had been writing. So in a way, I'm indebted to the American Cultures department for the way I finally conceptualized *A Different Mirror*.

[Tape 2]

Takaki: I said that the FSM changed my life--the FSM put me on a path that led actually to the writing of these books.

Rubens: *Strangers From a Different Shore* came--?

Takaki: *Strangers* came out, and was published in 1989.

Rubens: How visionary. You are intellectually struggling to make sense of the different America that you knew, a different United States. It's just extraordinary to me how early the roots are.

I want to ask three very quick questions. Were there Caucasians at all in your Hawaiian community? Did you have any Caucasian teachers?

Takaki: Well, at Iolani most of my teachers were Caucasians. They were from the mainland. This is a private school.

Rubens: Episcopalian. Was it your parents who wanted you to go to a religious school?

Takaki: You see, at that time public schools were segregated. It wasn't called segregation, but we had two tracks: the English standard track and the non-English standard track. The English standard track began in kindergarten and went to the college prep high school. I had to take that exam to enter the English standard school at the kindergarten level and flunked that exam, and my parents were so upset: "Oh, we'll never be able to get you into the University of Hawaii now." And so, in fifth grade my parents pulled me out of the local public school and placed me at Iolani, and that was a considerable sacrifice financially.

- Rubens: What did your father do?
- Takaki: He was actually from Japan. He was only thirteen when he came over, and he worked on the plantation. He ran away from the plantation as a teenager, however, got into photography in Honolulu and became a professional photographer. But then he died when I was only six, in 1945. My mother remarried then a Chinese immigrant, Koon Keu Young. So I was raised in a--
- Rubens: Multicultural--
- Takaki: --a trans-Asian or pan-Asian household. I grew up listening to my stepfather speaking in Cantonese.
- Rubens: Were there any other Takakis? Were you the only child?
- Takaki: There was a half-brother then.
- Rubens: Yes, but you were the only child of your father and mother?
- Takaki: No, I have an older sister. But I think that made it possible for me to write *Strangers from a Different Shore*, which is pan-Asian, because I don't think of myself just as Japanese. I'm Japanese, Chinese culturally, and--
- Rubens: I would love to interview another time. I just want to fire out a couple of things. Do you still have your reading lists of that first Negro history course and the first multicultural--
- Takaki: I can't remember what books I used, maybe I still have it. But mainly it was a study of white racism, and I have departed from that kind of approach. Now I want to look at history from the bottom up and not only view people as victims, but also as actors, agents making choices, taking actions to transform the circumstances of their lives. So, when reviewers of my books claim that I am writing victim studies, that's a misrepresentation of what I'm doing. We have been victims, but we have also--
- Rubens: Been actors.
- Takaki: We have agency. We have voices. We have minds and have taken actions.
- Rubens: If you'll permit me a comment about my own experience with history. I felt that the attention to social history that occurred in the late sixties as a result of some of all that foment was far better from the bottom up than it was on race. The hard work of really getting out there and getting the facts was done by people like you and then by Hispanic, Mexican American historians.
- Takaki: To think about ethnic studies, it's still a group's decision; and to think about ethnic studies scholarship, Cornel West could write a book entitled *Race*

Matters (1993), but it's still about blacks and whites. But race is not defined more inclusively [by this book] to include Latinos and Asians and other people.

Also, as a historian coming out of the Free Speech Movement, I have to ask myself the question, what are the ties that bind for us? What is it that makes us, a diverse people, into one people? This is where the study of diversity has led me down the path toward the sources of our unity, our national unity. And it turned to be sources located in the origins of our political culture, of the proposition that all men are created equal, and this is a self-evident truth. Also there are inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Take Lincoln and his Gettysburg Address. He drew not from the Constitution but from the Declaration of Independence; and he took the words of Thomas Jefferson, and he refined the meaning of those words to include equality of everyone, regardless of their race. For Jefferson, he meant equality of whites, not equality of blacks, too. But that was 1863 when Lincoln gave his Gettysburg Address, and then a hundred years later, look what happened on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial with Martin Luther King, who said, "I have a dream that someday this nation will live up to its dream."

And what is that dream? That we will live up to the ideal, the principle, that all men are created equal. So here was a change, now echoing Lincoln and echoing the Declaration of Independence. And I think this is the tie that can bind us as a diverse people. But I would not have come to this conclusion had I not studied, been a student of race and ethnicity.

Rubens: I find this stunning.

Takaki: My most recent book, *Double Victory* (2001), is on World War II, a multicultural American movement. It challenges the master narrative of World War II presented from the top down, through the lives of our presidents and our generals.

There's a book by Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (1994). When you think about the movie, *Saving Private Ryan*, did you see any black soldiers in that movie? No. So it presents World War II as the heroic achievement of white soldiers. It was the whites, but there were black soldiers there on the beaches of Normandy. What were they doing? They were unloading the ships and they were feeding the white combat troops. So this country was fighting the Nazis with a Jim Crow army. This is what my book, *Double Victory*, seeks to do. It seeks to prick that balloon of the "Greatest Generation". It seeks to say that, in reality, a diverse American people went to war--not just Americans of color, but also Jewish Americans went to war for two victories: victory against Fascism abroad and victory against racism and anti-Semitism here.

- Rubens: There was the segregated Japanese contingent at Anzio Beach, while their parents were--
- Takaki: Yes, in the internment camps. But even when you think about Jewish Americans, they too had a government that refused to admit Jewish refugees fleeing the horror of Hitler.
- So when you think about *Double Victory*, it brings out the trajectory of the FSM, my experience at UCLA, Berkeley, and ethnic studies--
- Rubens: Now, this is not the one with the narratives that we began with in the very beginning, with the student papers?
- Takaki: No, that's *A Larger Memory*.
- Rubens: *A Larger Memory*. I have two books of yours I haven't read. I can't believe it. I'm going to get them.
- Takaki: *A Larger Memory* was published in 1998. *Double Victory* was just published last June. I'm going to have a conversation with Elizabeth Farnsworth on the "Jim Lehrer Newshour" in September.
- Rubens: Oh, wonderful. Where do you speak, Ron? How do you get so many of these books out?
- Takaki: My scholarship-- my writing--is a moral, political passion, and that passion was born in the throes of the Free Speech Movement.
- Rubens: You had a moral passion and thought that you were going to be a minister, and then you added the political passion because you found the forum. I'm struck that you keep talking about the first time you taught at UCLA. You look out and you see these multicultural faces. I dare say, you didn't see as many here at Berkeley. Is that correct?
- Takaki: Well, even there at UCLA I just saw a handful of Asian Americans. At that time they had not entered the university in flocks the way they have now; and also there were only, like, two or three Mexican American students in my class. And there were only a few black students. It was mainly Caucasian students. But nevertheless, when I looked out and saw the students, there was a more diverse America than black and white in front of me.
- Rubens: You have been so kind.
- Takaki: Just think about it.

- Rubens: I meant to say to you: Part of the original vision of the anti-Federalists--the people who, like Jefferson, believed that interest group balanced interest group--it was really we, the states, and not we, the people.
- Takaki: I would say that in the twenty-first century, already in California, whites are becoming a minority. What's happening in California will happen across this country by the year 2050. So we will all be minorities. I like that vision--that we will all be minorities--because it redefines who we are as Americans, but also it gives us the opportunity to rethink the way we think about American history. So when you look at World War II and what happened then, we're going to be more aware of the diversity of Americans who fought that war, the reasons why we fought.
- Rubens: When you talked about Watts, I had a vivid image of a *Life* magazine cover of the boy crying, and it says, "The Cry That Must Be Heard" [1968]. It could have been Detroit, actually--that picture. But a picture that I use for this work I'm doing is--I forget the date--but it was a computer-generated woman's face on the cover of *Time* that said, "The New Face of America." Have you ever seen that?
- Takaki: Oh, "The Changing Face of America" [1993]. This is the future.
- Rubens: Do you have a date of that?
- Takaki: That was 1990 or 1992.
- Rubens: Yes, yes, yes.
- Takaki: It was an astonishing issue. But it frightened a lot of white Americans. I think it led to the backlashes of Prop 187, 227, Prop 209: [they asked,] "What kind of America is this where I will become a minority? Imagine all these mixed-race people." Yes. Who is an American?! But what I'm trying to say is that we don't have to be afraid of this diversity. We can embrace the diversity and this difference, and it can enrich us.
- When I went to UCLA to teach black history, culturally I became part black, you know? But that's what's so great about America, is that ethnicity--our ethnic identities--are not fixed and frozen, say, the way they might be in Japan or China or in Yugoslavia, where you're Serbian or Croatian. But here in America, we can reinvent ourselves. And that's what's happening. That's what can happen, where we can become multicultural as individuals, as well as multicultural as a people.
- Rubens: I think it happens more easily in the realm of culture, where it could be exploded or commercialized. You have jazz, blues, dancing, basketball players.

Takaki: Entertainment. But I maintain that it could also happen in the realm of scholarship--and history, where you begin to understand the history and cultures of different groups and immerse ourselves in the histories of other cultures. We then become--we, ourselves, change, and we look at ourselves differently, in a different way. So those are the possibilities, I think, and the opportunities that wait for us.

Rubens: You're an optimist.

Takaki: I don't know. The pessimistic side of me is the side that looks at the economy. I think the optimism dissipates when you look at our economy, with its globalization and so forth. This diverse American people are not in a hopeful economic situation, and I don't know what the alternatives are to globalizing the economy. Even if there were alternatives, how would one pursue it? The big money interests control our state. So that's the depressing side, the depressed side of me.

Rubens: Thank you so much.

[End of Interview]