Analysis of "Pacific Crossings"

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Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror* chronicles the plight of immigrant groups and other people of color throughout the history of America. In Chapter 10, entitled *Pacific Crossings*, he describes the experience of Japanese Americans in the late 1800s, the discrimination directly because of their race, the discrimination they faced along the lines of gender, and conditions working experienced on plantations in Hawaii compared with California. Throughout this, a consistent theme is that the owners and managers of the plantation sought to turn the Japanese against each other and against other workers, preventing any form of solidarity from growing.

Takaki begins the chapter by establishing the economic motives that the Japanese had for coming to America, much like the other immigrant groups we have studied. He cites a Japan Weekly Mail article which reports that "[m]ost of the farmers have been unable to pay their taxes", have "lost their lands", and are eating "rice husk or buckwheat chaff ... mixed with leaves and grass" (232-233). Given the economic motives, Takaki begins by looking at one specific group fleeing this economic destitution: women perturbingly called "picture brides" (234). This described a phenomenon where daughters would be sent to America in arranged marriages due to a loophole in the Chinese Exclusion Act that allowed "women to emigrate as family members" (234). Takaki recounts how this leads to what he dubs as the "proletarianization of women", where women increasingly became wage laborers suffering "sixteen hour work shifts and lived in dormitories" comparable to their counterparts in industrial Europe (234). Takaki notes that this was a product of a combination of factors, most of which were out of her control: The Meiji government's declaration that "girls should be educated ... alongside boys", the Hawaiian government's declaration that "40 percent of the contract labor emigrants from Japan were to be women", that planters saw families as a "mechanism of labor control" because "men with families were more likely to stay on the plantations", and their husband's expectation that they'd work as "unpaid family labor" as shopkeepers or farmhands (235-236). This pattern, of the owners of the plantation seeking to engage of "labor control" by exploiting divisions shows up again

several times in the struggle of Japanese Americans.

Plantion owners used racial disparities in a "divide-and-conquer" strategy to prevent union activity and worker solidarity. The Japanese workers "aggressively protested" against the unfair labor conditions they were subjected to (242). Unfortunately, they often organized into "blood unions" along explicitly racial lines, which often had the effect of undermining union activities. Takaki describes a particular incident where the Portuguese laborers were paid $22.50 a *month*, while the Japanese were paid $18.50. The Japanese went on strike, but then "Koreans, Hawaiians, Chinese, Portuguese, and Filipinos" were hired as scabs (243). Later, even when the Japanese and Filipino unions managed to cooperate and form the Hawaii Laborers Federation, the owners of the sugar planatation sought to turn them against each other by bribing one of the Filipino leaders, spreading propaganda about the strikers "Japanis-[ing]" the Filipinos, and hiring "Hawaiians, Portuguese, and Koreans" as strikebreakers. While the strikers eventually achieved some gain, once again, it seemed that the planation owners had managed to turn oppressed people of different ethnicities against each other. Indeed, the owners sought to very explicitly implement this divide and conquer strategy. For example, in a letter to a planter, a labor supply company described that they wanted 2/3 Chinese laborers and 1/3 Japanese laborers in order to "[break] up the preponderance of the Japanese element" (237). Later, they sought to pit Korean laborers against the Japanese to "drive the Japs out".

This union action was only necessary due to the dehumanizing and abhorrent conditions on plantations, which Takaki contrasts with the slightly better conditions they found on the mainland in California. On the Hawaiian plantations, white *lunas* fiercely controlled the laborers, referred to the workers by numbers instead of their names, treated as animals. They had to "hoe ... for four hours in a straight line and no talking", sweating in the "heat of a steamer" (239). The workers woke at 5 AM, worked "like machines", and the *lunas* carried whips to threaten any that got out of line. The conditions in California were somewhat better. The Japanese in California worked under a similar system to sharecropping in the South, where the land owner provided the means, tools, seeds, etc. while the Japanese farmer provided the labor. Nonetheless, the Japanese had some more power than African-American sharecroppers, and were able to harness their "timely entry into agriculture", right before an increase in the demand of for fresh produce to produce a large majority of California's produce by the early 1900s (252). Despite this measured economic success, however, the Japanese still were prohibited from owning land, and in the case of Ozawa v. United States, the supreme court ruled that only white people could be citizens. Even when they enjoyed economic success, the United

States government sought to deny rights to immigrants.

Takaki's analysis complements our understanding of immigration and labor in the late 1800s America. We learned about the labor struggles as a product of the Industrial Revolution (AMSCO 343). AMSCO describes the "industrial warfare" that management engaged in to prevent union activity, including lockout (closing a factory before a labor movement starts), blacklists (sharing lists of union leaders with other owners), yellow-dog contracts (which prohibited employees from joining a union), private and state militia (to put out strikes), and court injunctions against strikes. Takaki describes some more techniques that the owners used when participating in this industrial warfare. The aforementioned examples of pitting races against each other is a crucial example of this. In the Portuguese $22.50/month wage example, Takaki notes that "The planters responded by pressuring the government to arrest the strike leaders for 'conspiracy.' ". It seems like not only did the state support the planters with their militia and injunctions, but also arrests and prosecutions for "conspiracy" (244). We have also studied racism very similar to what the Japanese faced. In a letter from the Chinese American Wong Ar Chong, he argues that the characterization of Chinese people as "heathans", unhealthy, and unclean are inaccurate, and that they are as generous, as well-kept, and "as good citizens as any other race" (Document D). A very similar sentiment is expressed by Takashi Tsutsumi, one of the leaders of the Hawaiian Labor Federation. He says that "The fact that the 'capitalists were haoles [Caucasians]" and the 'laborers Japanese and Filipinos' was a 'mere coincidence' " and that it would be important for "laborers of all nationalities" to unite (Takaki 245). It seems that the fundamental ideas of racial equality had already begun to take hold among the immigrant population. Having realized that they were being pitted against each other, oppressed people had, at the very least begun to unite.

Yet another aspect where Takaki enhances our understanding of the plight of East Asian immigrants to the United States is in the discussion of the role of the state in their oppression. We studied the Chinese Exclusion Act, which "prohibited further immigration to the United States by Chinese laborers" (AMSCO 312). Takaki provides some more details in how the government denied rights to these people. For example, he provides the example of Takao Ozawa, a Japanese-American denied citizenship, even though, as the district court found, "in every way eminently qualified under the statutes to become an American citizen". The *only* problem was that he was not white, and the Supreme Court reaffirmed this. The Supreme Court passed a whole slew of similar rulings, including *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, which essentially came to the exact same conclusion, except for Indians. Yet another example of the government denying rights to Asian Americans is

elucidated by Takaki's discussion of California's "Alien Land Law" (257). This law flatly denied the right to own land to any and all "aliens ineligible to naturalized citizenship." As we saw earlier with respect to the Dred Scott decision, it appears that the reigning view of the United States was still that "only 'white' persons could become citizens." Yet another aspect through which Takaki enhances our understanding of the Chinese Exclusion Act is in his discussion of the so-called marriage loophole. Following the Act, Japan negotiated the 1907 Gentleman's Agreement, which still prohibited Japanese laborers from entering the United States, but allowed women to emigrate as family members. Takaki discusses the consequences of this, leading to over sixty-thousand women coming to the US (234). He points out that many of these marriages were at extremely young ages largely without consent of the girls involved, as Ai Miyasaki recalls, "I was engaged at the age of sixteen and didn't meet Orite until I was almost eighteen. ... I was unromantic. I just believed that girls should get married.". Such seemingly secondary effects are often ignored in history, consigned to a footnote – who could *possibly* care about what female Japanese immigrants during the 19th century felt about their arranged marriages – but the historical implications of them are often really important. For example, in 1915, it was observed that "[n]early all of these tenant farmers are married and have their families with them" (qtd. in Takaki 236). These farmers ended up being the source of much of the United States fresh produce as cities grew and the demand for produce increased. By being sure not to ignore women, we can develop a more comprehensive picture of what life was like for Japanese American immigrants, and what that might mean for how we deal with the still relevant political issues of immigration today.

Altogether, Takaki reveals some extremely crucial aspects of the history of Japanese Americans, ideas which are often glossed over, but have massive relevance to our understanding of America today. By noticing the economic destitution the Japanese fled, perhaps we can better understand and appreciate the struggle of economic refugees on our southern border. By noticing the ways in which the plantation owners of the past engaged in anti-union activities, we can become more resilient to the same sort of division along along lines of race. By noticing the abhorrent conditions of workers in the past, we can reflect on the way we treat certain members of society today, and ask ourselves what we can do to change that. And perhaps most importantly, we can look at decisions that our government made in the past, flagrantly racist decisions that we look back on with shame, and ask how we can do better today.