

## **Barack Obama: A Candidate Whose Time Has Come**

Ronald Takaki

Like Barack Obama, I grew up in Hawaii. He went to Punahou, while I attended Iolani. Both of us lived in a part of the United States where everyone belonged to a minority. Both of us left the islands for our college education on the mainland. But our Hawaii roots shaped our perspective on what America was and could become.

In Palolo Valley on the island of Oahu, my neighbors were Japanese, Chinese, Portuguese, and Hawaiian. As children, we visited each other's homes and heard a variety of languages. But we all spoke Pidgin English as our common language.

After graduating from high school in 1957, I attended the College of Wooster in Ohio, where I experienced a culture shock. My fellow students asked me questions like: "How long have you been in this country?" "Where did you learn to speak English?" But my grandfather had come here from Japan in 1886, before many European immigrants. Yet, they could not and did not see me as a fellow American. I did not look like an American, and did not have an American-sounding name.

Looking back at my Wooster experience, I realize that the ignorance was not their fault. What had they learned about Asian Americans in courses called U.S. history? Or about Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and African Americans. Nothing or almost nothing. They saw me through a filter – what I call the Master Narrative of American history. This narrative is the familiar story that our country was settled by European immigrants and that Americans are white or European in ancestry.

The Master Narrative is so deeply embedded in our mainstream culture that it is a powerful current swirling beneath the surface of everyday conversation, the curriculum, the news and entertainment media, and political decision-making. This narrow definition of who is an American is something we take as a given.

"Race," African American writer Toni Morrison explained, has functioned as a "metaphor" necessary for the "construction" of Americanness." In the creation of our national identity, "American has been defined as "white."

Today, the Master Narrative is being challenged by the tremendously expanding diversity of the American people. Demography is declaring: "No all of us came originally from Europe. And we are all Americans." Here the numbers do the telling. According to the 2000 Census, whites have become a minority in California. What has happened in California is happening in Texas, and will happen to the total U.S. population within the lifetime of young people today. Indeed, in the coming future, we will all be minorities!

Youth are aware of the changing colors of America. They can see diversity on the faces of students in classrooms across the country. They want to change America, to

make it more multicultural not only in demography but also in education, employment, and most importantly, in politics. They include young people of all races and ethnicities.

And, across America, now in Ohio and Texas, many of them are energetically and joyously seeking to “Barack” the vote. They are fired up by the fact that Obama has already made history as a viable African American candidate for the Democratic nomination for the presidency. They are also wildly excited over the probability that, if nominated, he will become the winner of the presidential election.

For me, regardless of what will happen in the primaries or the general election, Obama is already a winner. He has challenged the Master Narrative of American history. He has made his complexion an American one, and his name an American-sounding one. He has opened a new identity not only for African Americans, but also for Asian Americans and Latino Americans. As the son of a father from Kenya, he has remembered his immigrant roots; as the son of a Caucasian mother, he has represented mixed race complexity. Like Tiger Woods, Obama has inspired bi-racial and multi-racial Americans everywhere to embrace their ethnic multiplicity.

Moreover, as a historian of multicultural America, I welcome Obama’s affirmation of America as a nation peopled by the world. He personifies diversity as America’s “manifest destiny.” A leader of vision, Obama has reached for the ties that bind -- Lincoln’s “mystic chords of memory,” seeking to unite us as a diverse people belonging to one nation. Crossing racial, economic, and political boundaries, Obama has already inspired millions of us, both young and old, to be audacious in our hopes for changing America and the world.

Obama’s is a candidacy whose time has come.

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