

## **A Hapa Future: Creating a New Racial Frontier**

*Kaori Mori*

Abstracts:

More and more people are now crossing over national boundaries. One of the consequences of this human diaspora is the increase of interracial marriage and the birth of racially mixed children. In an American context, racially mixed people with Asian heritage are called “Hapa.

Due to the American racial hierarchy that posits whiteness on its top, interracial marriage was banned in the US. Hapas were as a result excluded from the mainstream society. This exclusion troubled their identity formation, and the sense of belonging.

On the other hand, Hapas have succeeded in convincing the US government to allow them to mark more than one racial category in the US Census recently. Their multiracial identity is now officially acknowledged. This achievement is significant for Hapas because it enabled them to affirm their multiraciality. Rather than complaining about their social isolation, Hapas have started articulating their voices. Frank Wu finds the positive force of Hapa, and notes that Hapas could challenge the existing racial hierarchy and create new race relations.

This paper examines how Hapa could challenge the existing racial power relations and empower all the racially and ethnically marginalized people in the world.

Key Words: Hapa, Multiraciality, Race Relations in the United States

## 1. Introduction

Due to globalization's time and space compression, more and more people are now crossing over national boundaries. One of the consequences of this human diaspora is the increase of interracial marriages and racially mixed children. In the US, it is reported that there were about 4.3 million interracial marriages as of 2005, which means 7% of Americans have racially different spouses<sup>1</sup>

Multiraciality has been discussed in terms of black and white racial mixing in the US and from this discourse, racially mixed people with Asian ancestry have been excluded. They have long been the invisible people. Yet, they have existed all through American history since the first Asian immigrants set foot on the American shore at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. They are therefore not a recent entity.

Since the 1970s, some scholars have started shedding light on racially mixed people with Asian ancestry with the intention of challenging the black and white racial paradigm of multiraciality. As the academic attention to them has increased, racially mixed people with Asian ancestry have gradually gained visibility in the US.

Some have called those racially mixed people with Asian ancestry Hapa<sup>2</sup>. The term, Hapa, originally came from Hawaiian slang for racially mixed people. It once had a derogatory connotation but more and more racially mixed people with Asian ancestry today identify themselves with this term positively. With this term, racially mixed people with Asian ancestry have started uniting and struggling for social recognition.

This paper examines how Hapas could challenge the existing racial power structure through confounding black and white dichotomy of American racial paradigm, and empower themselves with their political and

cultural activities while debating the problems they have generated. This paper limits the discussion of multiraciality only to the case of Hapas in the US but the development of Hapa consciousness in the US will benefit all the racially marginalized people in the world.

## 2. Hapa History

As mentioned above, Hapas have existed since the first Asian groups such as Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, and Indians, immigrated to the US as laborers around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, married American women, and had interracial children with them. Yet, since interracial marriage, which disrupted racial purity, was long banned in the US, the number of Hapas were unknown and they were treated as if social outcasts<sup>3</sup>.

The increased visibility of Hapas started around the 1960s. There are some factors that enabled the increase of Hapa population and their visibility. First, the 1965 Immigration Act allowed more immigration from the Southern hemisphere, and as a result more Asians immigrated to the US<sup>4</sup>. The second factor was the American military involvement in Asian areas in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many American servicemen married Asian women, and brought their wives and Hapa children back to the US. The third factor is the abolishment of the anti-miscegenation law in 1967. These legal and social changes have created an environment in which Hapas have been accepted by society and gained social recognition. The visibility of Hapas culminated in their mixed race movement.

## 3. The Mixed Race Movement

The US Census conducted by the US Office of Management and Budget (hereafter referred as OMB) had not had a category for multiracial peoples. They had an “Other” category for racially ambiguous peoples, and

10 million Americans, supposedly many of them Hapas, had to mark themselves as Other. The mixed race movement was born out against this discriminatory Census practice in 1993.

The Association of Multiethnic Americans, allegedly the first lobbying group for the rights of multiracial peoples, had succeeded in convincing the US government to allow racially mixed people to mark more than one racial category in the US Census in 1997<sup>5</sup>. This achievement is significant for Hapas because it enabled them to affirm their multiraciality.

Rather than complaining about their social isolation and invisibility, Hapas have started articulating their voices in American society. Not only challenging social systems, but they challenge the social consciousness, so Americans can embrace diversity in race. Frank Wu, an Asian American political scientist, finds the positive force of Hapa, and notes that Hapas “engender confusion about categories, [and] destabilize a universal order in which all know their place and stay here.”<sup>6</sup>

Hapas’ power to destabilize the racial power structure has been celebrated and Kip Fulbeck, a Hapa artist, calls Hapa “the new face of the millennium.”<sup>7</sup>

#### 4. Hapa Polemics

The mixed race movement not only has changed the Census system but also made hitherto invisible Hapas visible. In doing so, it reveals the fact that race is not a fixed destiny but rather changeable. If race were changeable, racial hierarchy could be changed, too. Hapa thus seems to contribute to the end of racism in the US.

Some people, however, find the mixed race movement problematic. With the increase of their members marrying out into other racial groups, minority groups feel their group identity and unity are being jeopardized.

Minority groups in the US need to unite to fight against the racism they have faced for long. Without the unity, they may have to undergo unjust treatment by the white-centered society. They therefore call interracial marriage “cultural genocide.”<sup>8</sup>

What is more problematic about interracial marriage is a “practice of whitening.” Wu points out that people of color prefer marrying whites to get a better social and racial standing. He writes,

[T]he idea of ‘marrying up’ is an admission of socioeconomic hierarchy. [...] For most Asian Americans, a white spouse ranks higher than a black spouse.<sup>9</sup>

The preference of having white spouses would clearly reflect American racial hierarchy in which whites are most privileged, and blacks are most devalued. Jon Spencer explains why people of color prefer marrying whites. He says that the “one-drop rule,” which means that a drop of black blood makes you black, still functions in the US. He argues, “mixed-race blacks, no matter what their mix, are always niggers.”<sup>10</sup> Wu adds that “thirty times as many interracial Asian Americans had white spouses as had black spouses”<sup>11</sup> in 1990. If so, it is doubtful to what extent Hapas really challenge the long and deep rooted American racial hierarchy.

Maria Root suggests the existence of a color line between Hapas who have Asian and black parents and those who have Asian and white parents. She writes,

Those persons with Asian and African American parentage suffered more rejection, more lack of recognition, and less

acceptance by other Asian Americans.<sup>12</sup>

While black Hapas are excluded from Asian/American community<sup>13</sup>, Yen Le Espiritu explains how white Americans prevent black Hapas from claiming their multiraciality. She argues,

Legally and socially, multiracial people of African American descent have been forced by white Americans to identify only as black and have been raised almost invariably in the black community.<sup>14</sup>

Since the notorious one-drop rule still functions in the American imaginary, Hapas with black parents are dissuaded from associating themselves with their Asian heritage. As a result, black Hapas have to identify themselves as blacks. For example, Tiger Woods, the internationally acclaimed golfer of Thai mother and African American father, is usually referred as a black golfer in the media although he identifies himself as Cablinasian<sup>15</sup>, meaning Caucasian, Black, Indian, and Asian. His case shows the persistence of the one-drop rule.

Contrary to Black Hapas, some biracial people who have Asian and white parents find it easier to pass either as Asian American or white American<sup>16</sup>. Some Asian Americans who have white parents try to pass as white because whiteness grants them more privilege in white-centered American society. Anne Xuan Clark illustrates the internalized racism in her short essay "What Are You?" She writes that at one point of her life, she was ashamed of her Vietnamese mother, and was proud of her white father. She confesses that she internalized the racist assumption that white was favorable and non-white was shameful.

Facing the emerging color line between white Hapas and black Hapas, Michael Omi contends that the mixed race movement is risky, because if the racial mixing between white Americans and Asian/Americans were more preferred, it might create a new racial dichotomy between blacks and non-blacks, by which blacks remained a lower social class, and were left out of the melting pot practice other groups enjoyed.<sup>17</sup> Rather than challenging the white and black racial paradigm, Hapas may strengthen white supremacy. Hapas may be far from finishing racism. If Hapa could not challenge race relations in the US, is the notion Hapa, which has the danger of excluding black Hapas, necessary?

#### 5. Hapa Umbrella

Ai, a writer with Japanese, African American, Caucasian, and Native American heritage writes, “the lesson most multiracial people must learn in order to live [is] the fact of not-belonging: there is no identity for me.”<sup>18</sup> Because of their racial ambiguity, many multiracial people find difficulty in perfectly belonging to any of their parent’s groups. They feel they are not totally a member of their mothers’ and fathers’ racial groups. This gives them a sense of belonging nowhere. This sense of non-belonging would make the term “Hapa” necessary for multiracial people whether they are black Hapas or white Hapas because it may give them a sense of belonging to a multiracial group.

Murphy-Shigematsu writes the importance of having an umbrella term for minority groups:

The assertion of a self-defined term for one’s group is an act of empowerment in which all American minority groups have engaged. The absence of the term which clearly associates them

with an ethnic group strikes at the very heart of being invisible.<sup>19</sup>

The term Hapa serves racially mixed people with Asian heritage for their empowerment, and enables their social visibility. The term also supports their identity.

Being asked “what are you?” is a shared experience of Hapas because of their racial ambiguity. Having the term Hapa helps them avoid explaining their racial heritage. Nora Okja Keller, a writer with Korean mother and Caucasian American father, explains the usefulness of the term Hapa. She says, “almost as soon as I meet someone, I explain: ‘I am hapa’ [...] as if that statement, self-explanatory, says it all.”<sup>20</sup>

There would be no denial that the term Hapa gives Hapas a way for a sense of identity and belonging. However, as Lisa Lowe warns that “the risk of a cultural politics that relies upon the construction of sameness and the exclusion of difference,”<sup>21</sup> cultural effort to name a minority group has a problem. While the umbrella term empowers Hapas by giving them a sense of identity and belonging, it has the danger of emerging as a new racial category, and of antagonizing other racial groups for hegemony.

Spencer questions if having an umbrella term for multiracial peoples is really empowering. He writes that in South Africa, the coloureds -- biracial people with black and white parentage -- prefer associating with white rulers to blacks. He claims,

[T]he reflex of mixed-race people as a social group is to identify with the dominant group, resulting in a gulf between mixed race blacks and the subordinate black race.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, during the negotiation with members of the mixed race

movement, OMB did not concede to have a separate multiracial category for multiracial people saying that it might cause racial tensions.<sup>23</sup> While the term Hapa empowers multiracial peoples by giving them a membership and a power of self-definition, it may worsen racial hierarchy as the coloureds in South Africa illustrate. Hapas might emerge as a new racial group that may discriminate other racial groups. If that happened, could Hapas really be the “new face of the millennium” who could rewrite the racial hierarchy in the US? Or would they end up in becoming the American coloureds who looked down other racial groups, and in doing so, strengthened the white supremacy?

#### 6. Conclusion: Racial Dystopia or Utopia?

Hapa polemics and the ensuing racial anxiety would continue and no one knows what kind of a future Hapas could create. As some fear, Hapas might create a racial dystopia in which everyone craved for whiteness, and antagonized each other for racial hegemony. If whiteness was preferred among people of color, having the term Hapa may be problematic because it might result in the practice of whitening and the exclusion of black Hapas. The term, Hapa, might fail to embrace the diversity in Hapas themselves. If the racial dystopia is the future that Hapas may bring, should interracial marriage be discouraged? Should we return to the era in which interracial marriage was banned?

One thing what is clear now is that Hapas will increase.<sup>24</sup> The flow of people beyond national borders and the consequent increases of international marriages will not stop. It is impossible to return to the anti-miscegenation times.

A Hapa writer Donna Midori Lance writes, “Hapa means to be partial, it’s an infinitive, not a noun, and has infinite potential for division.”<sup>25</sup>

As she says, if Hapa is not a noun designating the fixed identity but an entity what is always being divided and changing, another future Hapa could envision would be a one in which race was divided until it was inconceivable. In that future, race would finally have no significance in judging other people. The term, Hapa may signify the evaporation of racial codes. If this future came, not only Hapas but also all the people in the world could be the new face of the millennium, being finally liberated from the long nightmare of racism.

\*This research is funded by “KAKENHI.”

### **Bibliography**

- Ai. “On Being Multiracial.” Marie Hara and Nora Okja Keller, ed.  
*Intersecting Circles: The Voices of Hapa Women in Poetry and Prose*. Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge Press, 1999. p.275-277.
- Chai, May-Lee. *Hapa Girl: A Memoir*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2007.
- Clark, Anne Xuan. “What Are You?” Marie Hara and Nora Okja Keller, ed.  
*Intersecting Circles: The Voices of Hapa Women in Poetry and Prose*. Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge Press, 1999. p.27-30.
- Crary, David. “Interracial Marriage Surge across U.S.” *USA TODAY*.  
[www.usatoday.com/news/health/2007-04-12-interracial-marriage-N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2007-04-12-interracial-marriage-N.htm)
- Espiritu, Yen Le. “Possibilities of a Multiracial Asian America.”  
 Teresa Williams-Leon and Cynthia Nakashima, ed. *The Sum of Our parts: Mixed Heritage Asian Americans*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2001. p.25-34.
- Fulbeck, Kip. *Part Asian 100% Hapa*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006.

Kaori Mori

- Keller, Nora Okja. "Circling Hapa." Marie Hara and Nora Okja Keller, ed. *Intersecting Circles: The Voices of Hapa Women in Poetry and Prose*. Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge Press, 1999. p.17-26.
- Kitano, Harry and Roger Daniels. *Asian Americans: Emerging Minorities*. New jersey: Prentice Hall, 1995.
- Kiyama Gary. "Cablinasian Like Me." <http://www.salon.com/april97/tiger970430.html>
- Lance, Donna Midori Hakumalamalama King. "To Halve And Halve Not." Marie Hara and Nora Okja Keller, ed. *Intersecting Circles: The Voices of Hapa Women in Poetry and Prose*. Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge Press, 1999. p.370-375.
- Lowe, Lisa. "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiraciality: Making Asian American Differences." *Diaspora, I*. 1991. p.24-44
- Murphy-Shigematsu, Stephen. *The Voices of Amerasians: Ethnicity, Identity, and Empowerment in Interracial Japanese Americans*. USA: Dissertation Com, 2000.
- Nakashima, Cynthia. "For My Baby Daughter, Whom I Was nce Afraid to See." Marie Hara and Nora Okja Keller, ed. *Intersecting Circles: The Voices of Hapa Women in Poetry and Prose*. Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge Press, 1999. p.362-367.
- Omi, Michael. "Forward." Teresa Wiiliams-Leon and Cynthia Nakashima, ed. *The Sum of Our parts: Mixed Heritage Asian Americans*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2001. p.ix-xii
- Root, Maria. "Factors Influencing the Variation in Racial and Ethnic Identity." Teresa Wiiliams-Leon and Cynthia Nakashima, ed. *The Sum of Our parts: Mixed Heritage Asian Americans*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2001. p.61-70.

Spencer, Jon Michael. *The new Colored People: The Mixed-Race Movement in America*. New York: New York UP, 1997.

Spickard, Paul. "Who Is an Asian? Who Is a Pacific Islander? Monoracialism, Multiracial People and Asian American Communities." Teresa Williams-Leon and Cynthia Nakashima, ed.

*The Sum of Our parts: Mixed Heritage Asian Americans*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2001. p.13-24.

Wu, Frank. *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> David Crary.

<sup>2</sup> There are other expressions for racially mixed people with Asian heritage such as Amerasian, Eurasian, Afroasian, half, and etc.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Spickard, p.13-18. Spickard points out while Hapas in general tended to be isolated from the mainstream society, the degree of their acceptance by Asian American groups had varied in ethnicity and geography. For example, Filipino and Indian American communities accepted Hapas but Japanese American community in the mainland shunned them because interracial marriage was for the community a stigma. On the other hand, Japanese Americans in Hawaii accepted Hapas more openly since they did not have an antipathy towards interracial marriage as Japanese Americans in the mainland had.

<sup>4</sup> Kitano and Daniels. *Asian Americans: Emerging Minorities*. p.18

<sup>5</sup> Yen Le Espiritu, "Possibilities of a Multiracial Asian America," p.27.

<sup>6</sup> *Yellow*, p.285

<sup>7</sup> *100% Hapa*, p.17

<sup>8</sup> Cynthia Nakashima, "For My Baby Daughter, Whom I Was Once Afraid to See," p.362.

<sup>9</sup> *Yellow*, p.273

<sup>10</sup> *The New Colored People*, p.57

---

<sup>11</sup> *Yellow*, p.273

<sup>12</sup> “Factors Influencing the Variation in Racial and Ethnic Identity,” p.67.

<sup>13</sup> I use the term “Asian/American” to signify the complexity of Asian and Asian American group formation. Asian immigrant groups and Asian American groups are sometimes separate but since most Asian American groups have been originated from Asian immigrant groups, they intermingle in many cases. The slash between Asian and American thus illustrates their inseparable relations. On the other hand, I use the term, “Asian American” to refer to Americans with Asian heritage, and who are monoracial in this paper. It needs to be kept in mind however that many Hapas identify themselves as Asian Americans and Asian American community has embraced Hapas as their members. For the further discussion on the terminologies, see “Reconfiguring Race, Rearticulating Ethnicity” by Williams-Leon and Nakashima in *The Su of Our Parts*.

<sup>14</sup> “Possibilities of Multiracial Asian America,” p.28.

<sup>15</sup> Cablinasian is a term Woods coined and it means “Caucasian-black-Indian-Asian.” When he appeared on a TV show, and asked if he did not like to be called an African-American, he said he did not. After this remark, he was accused by some African American people as a traitor. (Gary Kamiya).

<sup>16</sup> It is possible for some white Hapas to pass as white but for others it difficult. For example, May-Lee Chai of Irish American mother and Chinese American father recounts the racial discrimination she had suffered because of her round face and straight black hair inherited from the father.

<sup>17</sup> “Forward,”p.xii.

<sup>18</sup> “On Being Multiracial,” p.277.

<sup>19</sup> *The Voice of Amerasians*, p107.

---

<sup>20</sup> “Circling Hapa,” p.17.

<sup>21</sup> “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiraciality,” p.28.

<sup>22</sup> *The New Colored People*, p.117.

<sup>23</sup> Yen Le Espiritu, “Possibilities of multiracial Asian America,” p.27.

<sup>24</sup> Interracial marriage rate has increased gradually as the following figures show: 2% in 1970, 5% in 1990, 7% in 2005 (Crary).

<sup>25</sup> “To Halve And Halve Not,” p371.