

Keywords in Asian American Studies

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Keyword: Multiracial

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According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *multiracial* means “made up of or relating to people of many races.” Coming into common use in the mid 1920s, *multiracial* initially referred primarily to relationships that spanned across racial groups or collectives of monoracial people from different racial groups. But this word has shifted meaning in the United States, particularly over the last 80 years. In the contemporary era, *multiracial* began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, to refer more specifically to people of mixed racial and ethnic descent as individuals i.e. multiracial or mixed-race people and identities. Many, more specific terms, have been used to describe people of mixed Asian and Pacific Islander descent such as: mixed race, biracial, hapa, halfu and Amerasian.

‘Hapa’ is a term that comes from the Hawaiian term ‘hapa haole’ meaning half white/foreigner and is used in local parlance in Hawaii to describe people who are part Asian. Because it is a native Hawaiian word, its use has been criticized by Native Hawaiians as a cultural appropriation by Asians in the islands. The word ‘hapa’, found its way to the West coast of the American mainland in the 1990s and was used by some to describe groups of people of mixed Asian descent often united by poor treatment or downright discrimination within Asian American and Pacific Islander (API) communities. On the mainland, the term ‘mixed race’ (or mixed-race when used as an adjective) also started to become popular and more politicized during the 1990s as a part of the multiracial movement. Again, the word ‘mixed race’ has also been criticized as a word that reifies the concept of ‘race’ (i.e. that you have to be part one race and part another, which takes for granted that races actually exist). Social scientists for the most part have taken the lead of people and activists themselves and refer to the multiracial movement as by and about mixed-race people.

Biracial is a term that has come out of the psychological literature and was traditionally used to discuss the identity development of people who are mixed with two distinct groups, but again, this has been criticized by multiracial activists as too ‘pathologizing’ and not all encompassing enough to deal with people who are mixed with more than two backgrounds. Within Japan, the term ‘halfu’ in the post WWII era was used to describe the mixed children of American servicemen and Japanese women. The term later spread to other parts of Asia in the wake of US military occupations in Korea, Vietnam and Okinawa. Again, the word ‘halfu’ has become outdated and rejected by many as emphasizing just ‘half’ of what you are and not all of what you are. The term ‘doubles’ in Japan became a popular replacement in the 1990s, based on the claim that mixed people in Japan were not ‘half’, but ‘double’. ‘Amerasian’ was a term used mainly in Vietnam, again to describe mixed children of US servicemen and Vietnamese women. As such, it evoked faces that were reminders of war and occupation and

has been dismissed in the present day as too focused on national origins and again, not capturing the complexity of this mixed experience.

In 1967, the *Loving V. Virginia* case found that laws that prohibited people from marrying across racial lines were illegal. Prior anti-miscegenation laws were based on the fear that mixed marriages challenged claims to white supremacy and threatened white racial purity. The assumption was that if racial groups mixed, that the resulting mixed children would be 'hybrid degenerates' with physical, mental and/or social problems (Nakashima 1992). Others argued in response to scientific racist arguments against intermarriage that in fact, mixed people would not be degenerate, but instead have 'hybrid vigor'. In truth, there had long been interracial sex at the highest levels of political life in the US, including the likes of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings, but much of this was never formally or legally recognized for fear of challenging white supremacy and power.

By 1994, the US Census was under pressure a multiracial movement to better represent the reality of the racial diversity of the US including the growing population of people who wanted to identify both personally and publicly as being multiracial. Just a generation after the *Loving* decision, the critical mass of multiracial people was starting to gather and seek to be heard and the Census was ready to listen opting to add not a universal 'multiracial' category to the census, but instead opting to allow people to 'check one or more boxes' to illustrate their racial/ethnic backgrounds and identities. Again, this was controversial as the NAACP and the National Council de la Raza opposed multiracial activists claims to the right to express their identities in the Census. The worry was that if mixed-race people checked 'multiracial' and not the communities of color that they felt they belonged to, that this would undermine the gains of the civil rights movements (particularly in voting districts, affirmative action and the like). However, in 2000, 6.8 Americans (or 2.4% of the country's population) indicated they were two or more racial identities (Nagai 2010) one of the fastest growing populations in the US.

However, the term *multiracial* didn't suit everyone. In reference to Asian Americans more specifically, many mixed-race and multiracial Asian Americans felt that they weren't multiracial in the same ways that black/white mixed people were or that if you were mixed Asian/black you faced more discrimination from both larger society and the API community than if you were Asian/white. Importantly they felt both historically and contemporarily excluded and less accepted in Asian American communities due to a lack of history of racial mixing in the US and/or that there was a history of mixing in Asia which was tangled with resentments against military occupation and colonization and colorism.

Student and community groups of mixed Asian Americans began using terms like *Hapa* (as in *Hapa Issues Forum* founded in 1992 in the San Francisco Bay Area and now defunct after 15 years). They reappropriated this term to have positive meaning and to move away from more derogative terms often used to describe mixed descent, part Asian people often linked with military occupation and war

(war babies, Eurasian, Amerasians), illicit sexual relations (Ainoko, love child) and impurity (halfu, mixed bloods).

Within the Asian American community fewer people identify as mixed than Latinos, Native Americans and some Pacific Islander groups. And yet, in the 2000 census, most people who reported two or more races were actually biracial and Asian-white was one of the top three identities expressed. The Asian American community also has had continued migration from Asia to the US and therefore while intermarriage rates have stabilized somewhat, there is not a proportionately large mixed population. There are also cultural historical legacies around 'racial purity' (Armstrong 1989) that make some Asian American suspicious of those that are less than 100% blood quantum Asian are not 'truly' Asian. Evidence though can be seen of shifting racial attitudes within Asian American communities, but there are still racial eligibility rules in many Japanese American and Chinese American beauty pageants and basketball leagues, which state if you are less than 25% Japanese or Chinese you are not considered Asian 'enough' to represent or participate in the community (King-O'Riain 2006).

Within Asian American Studies, research initially focused on Asian pride and the development of Asian American communities within the US. Within this narrative, interracial marriage was seen as assimilation and a particular threat to the sustenance of the Asian American communities. Further, because the out marriage rates in some, like the Japanese American community, was gendered (more likely women to marry out then men with whites) women came under particularly political scrutiny in their marriage choices (Shinagawa and Pang 1996). As Asian American Studies matured as a discipline, a more nuanced understanding of issues of multiraciality developed. One significant response to this was a special issue of *Amerasia Journal* edited by Cindy Nakashima and Teresa Williams-Leon in 1997 entitled *No Passing Zone* which clearly made the case that multiracial Asian Americans were not all assimilated and trying to pass as white but that their identities were as diverse as they were. It was a unique and important contribution both about but more importantly researched and written by multiracial Asian Americans themselves. An edited book by the same authors followed this in 2001 perhaps ironically titled *The Sum of Our Parts*.

By the mid 2000s, multiracial Asian Americans were well represented both within the Association for Asian American Studies, but also within Asian American Studies Departments and in scholarship with mixed-race courses and research projects regularly occurring. However, some stereotypes of mixed marriages/relationships and particularly of mixed Asian American people still proliferated. Often global ideas of beauty, flowing from West to the East impacted on popular looks both in terms of news anchors, media presenters, popular music and acting icons. Some saw multiracial Asian Americans as exotic, 'kinder gentler,' or more 'palatable' Asian Americans. Others argued that it was white western society that saw 'lighter as being better" and Rondilla and Spickard tackled the issue of skin tone discrimination amongst Asian Americans, including multiracials, in their book of the same title in 2007.

Multiracial Asian Americans are now expanding their foci to ask how the multiracial experience is different in Asian nations or Asian and Pacific Islander communities that historically recognize racial mixing such as Filipinos, Samoans, South Asian and Southeast Asian Groups. Through these analyses, it has opened up a discussion about the link between colonialism, sexualization, racialization, and how that is played out on mixed race bodies both in Asia and the US.

Likewise, the election of Barack Obama, has centered multiraciality across the world in new ways. Obama who politically is seen predominantly as African American nevertheless has raised the visibility of multiracial people by openly claiming his black father from Kenya and white mother from Kansas. But Obama is also equally proud that he grew up in Hawaii strongly influenced by Native Hawaiian and Asian American cultures while also recognizing influences from having Indonesian relatives and more recently discovered Irish ancestry. In many ways though, Obama has faced the classic conundrum of mixed people. For many he was heralded as the first 'black' president, for others he was 'not black enough' (Dickerson 2007) and for yet others, he was just a black man who was really 'white' and had 'neo-mulatto politics' (Bonilla-Silva 2008). Still others argued like Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, the majority leader, stated that he believed Barack Obama could become the country's first black President because he was light-skinned and had the advantage of "carrying no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one" (Zeleny, 2010). Others agreed that Obama opened up the definition of blackness and expanded it to represent a much broader and more diverse community that could be considered essentially black (Logan 2008). But as Kimberley Dacosta (2008) points out, what is interesting is not what Barack Obama, 'really' is, but that we ask this question at all and expect him to make political and identity choices based on single race affiliations.

While the context and choices for multiracial people have shifted drastically in the last 20 years, the artistic expression and scholarly work on multiracial people and multiracial Asian American continues apace. Kip Fulbeck's installation and photographic book/exhibit 'Part Asian, 100% Hapa' was one of the most successful in the history of Asian American Studies. Still others, such as Stephen Murphy Shigematsu (2012), have turned to Asia and personal biography to think about the types of hybridities and crossings that multiracial Asian Americans can take or, as Laura Kina has done, how that is expressed through art. Others feel that multiraciality is becoming ubiquitous and that everyone is jumping on the multiracial bandwagon because it is 'cool' or 'chic' to be multiracial (Spencer 2009) and that mixed race people are just being commodified like Benetton posters to sell ideas of racial colorblindness across Asia and the world (Matthews 2007).

Multiracial, as a word, has come a long way, and while there may be positive views of multiraciality and mixed people now, it is probably best to recognize that not all multiracial people are symbols of racial harmony and the rainbow nation and while it may link the east and west, even Hawaii is not multiracial paradise. Many people who claimed to be mixed or monoracial still face discrimination not based on what they have done or not done, but because of who people think they are and how they appear to others. Other multiracial

people may be put under constant social and political pressure to 'choose one and only one identity' for fear of being called inauthentic or illegitimate members of the racial and ethnic groups to which they belong. In the end, the word *multiracial* holds within it both the hope of recognizing racial hybridity and multiple racial/ethnic backgrounds, ties and connections, but at the same time it is clear that it has not, nor may it ever be, a cure for racism.

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