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The Multi-racial Asian Times

Newsletter
of
The Amerasian League
Unity in the Spirit of
Multi-racial and Multi-cultural
Asian Awareness

1990

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OFFICERS' MESSAGE

This has been an important year for The Amerasian League. We held our first educational forum, the Forum on Multi-racial Asian Culture. The events of the forum are recapped below.

We also are gearing up for our second annual End-of-Summer picnic at Will Rogers State Park. Please join us on September 15! The event is detailed in this newsletter.

We are sending this newsletter out to as many people as possible. However, as funds are limited and we won't be able to keep you on our newsletter mailing list unless you can provide us with a donation of at least \$25. We will continue to inform you of key events. Thank you for your support!

THE AMERASIAN LEAGUE'S FIRST EDUCATIONAL FORUM

The Amerasian League's first educational forum was held with success on March 17, 1990, at U.C.L.A.'s Ackerman Student Union. We enjoyed a cozy attendance of about 60 people. President Velina Hasu Houston and Executive Vice President Phil Tajitsu Nash opened the all-

day event as keynote speakers and gave the participants an introduction to the mission of The Amerasian League.

Velina is an award-winning poet and playwright, screenwriter and academic lecturer. Her plays and poetry about the migration of native Japanese women to the U.S. and the multi-racial Japanese heritage this migration catalyzed was ground-breaking work in the exploration of multi-racial/multi-cultural Asian experience. Velina shared her personal background, artistic works, academic experience and community involvement that led to the conception and creation of The Amerasian League. Attorney, community activist, writer and lecturer Phil provided a socio-historical context by looking at contemporary American society and leading participants through a journey of U.S. legal history affecting the Asian/Pacific American experience.

A plethora of issues was initiated by expert panel members, and participants joined in and contributed to the lively discussions. The topics included a historical look at multi-racial identity, group identification and possibilities of an all-inclusive name for multi-racial peoples of partial Asian ancestry, identity development, racial stratification among multi-racial Asians, multi-cultural Asians from Latin American countries, and various social and psychological issues involving multi-racial identity and multi-culturalism. Perhaps the most anticipated discussion of all was the "What Do We Call Ourselves?" panel. There was general disagreement about the use of any specific term. While some preferred "Amerasian," others preferred "multi-racial Asian." Still others preferred "hapa," a Hawaiian indigenous term. Some participants asserted a necessity to use many terminologies while others argued the need for a unifying term for po-

litical reasons. Both panel members and audience participants stated that each individual had his/her own personal labels with which they were raised. While some questioned whether or not terms and labels were necessary at all, the need for an umbrella name that could encompass all of the diverse peoples who were of multiple racial and cultural Asian lineage remained apparent.

Some of our distinguished panel guests included three of the pioneering scholars on multi-racial identity, psychologist Christine Iijima Hall from Arizona State University-West Campus, psychologist George Kitahara Kich from Berkeley, California; and sociologist Michael Thornton from the University of Wisconsin. Dr. Amy Iwasaki Mass from Whittier College also shared her post-doctoral research work on "interracial Japanese-Americans." Finals' week could not even stop the enthusiastic student panelists from participating --graduate student, Teresa Kay Williams, UCLA student body president John Hoang Sarvey, and undergraduate Luis Ishii Hernandez. Former Pacific Citizen editor, George Toshio Johnston, artist Norman Guy, poet and social scientist Sabrina Michiko Taylor, and Asian-Latin Americans, Diana Shinzato, Akemi Yamakawa, Davy Lin, and Miki Yamazaki also shared their experiences, cultures, and histories.

After a long, yet informative and inspirational day of panel discussions with professors, students, social scientists, writers, artists, community activists, and friends, everyone enjoyed a delightful dinner prepared by the Japanese American Citizen's League --Southern California American Nikkei Chapter and the Asian Pacific Alumni Association of U.C.L.A. Music, poetry readings, song and dance

performances, and comedic monologues by distinguished artists and performers followed. Writer and lecturer Ms. Emma Gee served as the emcee for the entertainment program. Artists included the founder of GREAT LEAP, Inc., Nobuko Miyamoto; comedienne-actress and director Amy Hill; poets Diane Ujiye, Thelma Seto, Velina Hasu Houston, and Phil Tajitsu Nash. Mike Davis provided the high quality sound system and great dance tunes.

The forum's agenda included a keynote address entitled, "The Multi-racial Asian Identity," and sessions on the following topics: "History of Multi-racial Asian Culture," "What Do We Call Ourselves?," "Multi-cultural Asians," "Psychology of Growing up Multi-racial Asian in America," and "Racial Stratification Among Multi-racial Asians (European vs. Latin vs. African Descent)."

Some of the highlights from the entertainment portion of the forum included the following performances: "Schizophrenic," a musical portrait from the critically acclaimed musical, "Talk Story II" (it was a positive and humorous look at a Mexican-Japanese woman's multi-dimensional identity and her many moods); "The Color of Love," another musical vignette from "Talk Story II" (a rather serious piece in which a Japanese American woman writes a letter to her disapproving father, reflecting her past love for an African American man and her decisions to give birth to a multi-racial son). Comedienne-actress/director Amy Hill kept everyone laughing hard with her hapa jokes. Poetry from Diane, Thelma, Velina, and Phil illustrated the lives and struggles of people mired in the international and inter-cultural realities of multi-racial identities.

The Amerasian League wishes to thank the panel mem-

bers who flew in from Northern California, the Southwest, the Midwest, and the East Coast.

We would also like to thank everyone from the greater Los Angeles area, the lively participants of all backgrounds, the volunteers and helpers -- especially Dura Temple, Leland Saito, Luis Santos, Kiyoshi Houston, Reginald Daniel, Allison Carlisle Erkelens Shutler, Frank Irizawa, and T.F. Reid-- the artists and performers, The J.A.C.L.-SCAN chapter, UCLA Asian Pacific Alumni Association, Pacific Asian American Women Writers--West, U.C.L.A. Asian American Studies Center, The Amerasian League's board members, Glenn Omatsu, Emma Gee, John Hoang Sarvey, Velina Hasu Houston, Phil Tajitsu Nash, and Teresa Williams for their planning and organization. Thanks to those who volunteered driving to the airport to greet the forum participants and escorting them to West Los Angeles and Santa Monica. Thanks to those who so generously opened their homes to the out-of-town guests. Thanks to all of those who contributed their personal expenses and valuable time to insure the success of the forum. Thank you, everyone, for making the 1990 educational forum a great success. All of your participation and contributions made this happen!

The Amerasian League's 1990 FORUM ON MULTI-RACIAL ASIAN CULTURE was co-sponsored by Japanese American Citizens' League Southern California American Nikkei (SCAN) chapter, U.C.L.A. Asian American Studies Center, The Amerasian League - U.C.L.A., Asian Pacific Alumni of U.C.L.A., and Pacific Asian American Women Writers--West.

POETRY/LITERATURE READING

In conjunction with the JACL-SCAN chapter, The Amerasian League is presenting a night of poetry/literature readings called "The Amerasian Voice." It will feature four multi-racial/multi-cultural Asian poets and writers. They include writer and scholar Teresa Kay Williams who is native Japanese and Euro-American, Japanese Canadian and Euro-American poet Thelma Seto, native Japanese and Euro-American short story writer Mari Sunaida; and award-winning poet and playwright Velina Hasu Houston who is half native Japanese, one-quarter Blackfoot Pikuni Indian, and one-quarter African American. Teresa and Mari grew up in Japan and in the U.S. Thelma grew up in the Middle East and is the only one of this group whose father is the parent of Japanese descent. Velina is the author of the critically acclaimed play, "Tea." The reading is tentatively scheduled for 8/23, Thursday, 7-9 p.m., at Cafe Rutts, 10863 Venice Boulevard. However, this date is being worked out with the proprietors of Cafe Rutts. For confirmation, please contact The Amerasian League at (213) 479-3369.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Japan America Theatre is presenting two staged readings of the critically acclaimed play, "Tea," by Velina Hasu Houston. The readings will be held on August 3, Friday, and August 4, Saturday, at 8:00 p.m. in the Doizaki Gallery in the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center in Little Tokyo. The readings will be directed by Patti Yasutake and will star Patti Yasutake, June Kyoko Lu, Patricia Ayame Thomson, Saachiko, and Takayo Fischer.

Patti and Takayo are part of the original Off-Broadway cast of the show.

"Tea" focuses on the lives of five native Japanese women who married American servicemen of various races at the end of World War II. They came to live in Kansas because of U.S. Army re-settlement policies that required active-duty personnel married to "Orientals" to be stationed at selected forts. When the first member of this community of international brides dies by a violent suicide, four women come together to pack her belongings and clean her house. During that day, they examine the choices that have shaped their bi-national/bi-cultural/multi-racial lives. It leads them to an understanding of what binds them together as modern-day Japanese women pioneers and also allows the spirit of the dead woman to go on to the next world in peace.

Sylvie Drake of the Los Angeles Times selected the play as one of the best ten plays of 1988. She said of the play, "Houston has taken her consciousness as a woman and as a Japanese American, filtered them through the lessons of history and the experience of parents and others, and brilliantly illuminated a much broader socio-political canvas. None of these Japanese women can shake her displacement -- the trauma of coming from one society to another and ultimately belonging to neither. The fabled melting pot doesn't always do its job."

"Tea" also will have a staged reading this fall at Columbia University in New York. Please contact the Center for American Cultural Studies at Columbia for more information.

END-OF-SUMMER PICNIC!!!

The Amerasian League is holding its End-of-Summer Picnic on Saturday, 9/15/90, at Will Rogers State Park from 2-5 p.m. Everyone is encouraged to join the group for this annual event. Bring your own lunch, blanket, chair, tales of growing up Asian/Pacific American or multi-racial or mono-racial or whatever the case may be! Please bring along any friends who could use the fellowship! Take Sunset Blvd. west to Will Rogers State Park Road (last major light is Allenford). Go right on WRS Park Road all the way to the top of the hill to the park. Park your car and come to the ranch house lawn. Look for The Amerasian League sign!

EDITORIAL NOTES

Please send all material for THE MULTI-RACIAL ASIAN TIMES to The Amerasian League, 3250 West Olympic Boulevard, #113, Santa Monica, CA 90405. Thanks!

We invite your opinion pieces, articles, poetry, drawings (black and white ink), and interviews. All material must be typed, double-spaced; preferred format is Macintosh disk in MacWrite, Microsoft Word or FullWrite Professional. Any article over two pages must be submitted on disk. For the Autumn/Winter issue, deadline is 9/30.

ARTICLES

This newsletter contains articles written by officers of the organization and one written by James Kumpel, a multi-racial Asian of Japanese, English, Irish and German ancestry. We encourage all of you out there to contribute your thoughts to the newsletter!

All articles solely represent the opinions of the authors and are

not the opinions of The Amerasian League. The authors are responsible for their content.

Eurasian Identity

by

James Kumpel

Eurasians are an odd breed: they're not all white and they're not all yellow. They are sort of a faded tan color all their lives. Because of their uniquely tinted skin, they are often looked upon by many Caucasians as solely Asian and, consequently, suffer discrimination as mono-racial Asians would.

Eurasians may seem completely Asian to many Americans, but, in Asian countries, the Caucasian features seem to stand out. In the Far East, people with brown hair who are lighter-skinned and hazel-eyed also stand out. These multi-racials are taunted, teased and looked down upon by their Asian peers who cringe at the thought of impurity and overt difference.

Because they represent two races, Eurasians feel a unique inner struggle to come to grips with proud, but distinctly different cultures. Their mothers may be quiet, submissive Buddhists who value self-restraint and respect of elders. Their fathers, on the other hand, may be garrulous, liberated atheists who value openness and question authority. The combination of these two value systems can cause "culture shock" and, in many cases, conflicting emotions.

As an American of Japanese, English, Irish and German ancestry, I have endured many of the inner conflicts and characterizations that Eurasians routinely deal with. All through elementary school, schoolmates would label me "chink" or "Jap." They saw a difference in my eyes and

immediately thought of me as strange and foreign -- even though I was born in America. Others would occasionally defend me against the epithets by offering, "But his eyes are cute," or "Why don't you pick on someone your own size". Clearly, vast improvements over name-calling, but not reassuring or ego-boosting by any means.

In response to tormentors, I would counter that I was really predominantly English, Irish and German. I avoided floral-patterned to-shirts which reminded others of Hawai'i, which in turn reminded them of tropical people and Asians. I would never speak of Japanese customs or beliefs for fear of being an easy target for vindictive attacks. In addition, I would generally speak only when spoken to. This reticence, I reasoned, might help me to blend in with other students without much notice. Throughout my educational "formative years," I was trying to assimilate by being as "white" as possible.

I could not deal with my physical difference. Why couldn't I be just another face in the crowd? In junior high school, I was able to allow some of my personality to come out, but I always had the nagging worry that someone would dismiss me as a "chink." However, I wanted to stop constantly dwelling on my Occidental heritage.

By high school, more people began taking an interest in the identity of Jim Kumpel. Whenever someone inquired as to my ethnicity, I would now try to pass myself off as a novelty: "I'm a mutt. I'm part Japanese and part English, Irish and German." Most people responded that it was an interesting make-up and proceeded to talk to others. While I did not take particular pride in my Asian genes, at least they were recognized as

acceptable in combination with European heredity.

In the tenth grade, I underwent a transformation which changed much of my self-perception. My mother began talking about World War II. She recounted how her father had been taken to an internment camp mere hours after the Pearl Harbor attack. I was shocked to find out that the government ignored constitutional guarantees for 120,000 Japanese Americans and imprisoned them for up to four years in concentration camps. Why didn't I know about this atrocity? For that matter, why didn't any history course bother to mention this unfortunate result of war-time racism?

During my research on the topic for a term paper, I came across an interesting fact. Not only were "pure" ethnic Japanese interned, but also anyone who possessed as little as 12.5 % Japanese blood. Essentially, not only were people illogically imprisoned for their potentially "unassimilable" Asian norms, but also for being even remotely associated with a certain ethnicity. Had I been living on the West Coast and married to a Swedish woman at that time, I would have been imprisoned, our children would have been imprisoned, and our grandchildren (who could very well have been blonde, blue-eyed American citizens with one-eighth Japanese ancestry) would have been imprisoned. Because of our ethnic ties, my hypothetical Eurasian family would have been liable to internment in a barbed-wire-enclosed camp.

At this point, I could feel a real sense of respect and pride for my grandfather who had suffered through four years of wrongful separation from his family. My newly discovered pride instilled in me a bond with the Asians who had suffered through concrete, systematic discrimination, not just taunts or jokes. I real-

ized that I'm not just a Caucasian in a compact Asian body. I am a combination of very different cultures which could all be sources of pride and understanding.

This recognition of my background and heredity bolstered my self-image and self-respect. Whereas I had always cringed in shame at racial slurs, I now confronted the perpetrators of racial intolerance on a solid, confident footing. Whereas I had always assumed an inconspicuous role in a classroom or social gathering, I now acted more personably and humorously. Whereas previously I would have been crushed by the disapproving reactions of some students, I was now able to accept myself and disregard some of the negative feelings of others.

I believe that, to some extent, all Eurasians must face a critical point in their lives when they question their own identities: European American or Asian American? (Or European or Asian, whatever the case may be.) If they emphasize their Caucasian backgrounds, will they be more acceptable to society? Will life be easier? Or will they be ignoring an essential element of themselves? Occasionally, Eurasians may over-emphasize their Asian heritage and ignore their European American traditions. In so doing, they likewise fail to recognize one of their essential cultural components and cut themselves off from much of mainstream American culture.

Being Eurasian means having an interest or tie to divergent histories and customs. It also means facing the unique problems that evolve from an "impure" heritage which eludes simple classification. But perhaps Eurasians' and Eurasian Americans' extra soul-searching allows them to accept individual differences and better appreciate the attributes and hardships of different cultures.

[This article takes a look at what life is like for someone like Velina and is important not only for others of mixed Japanese ancestry, but also for both Japanese and for Americans as attention is turned towards a need for deeper cultural understanding. It first appeared in The Pacific Citizen in 1986.]

**Japanese
American/American
Japanese:
On Being Multi-racial
Japanese in Modern Times**

by

Velina Hasu Houston

Tokyo, Japan. Aoyama district. Day. I buy pastries at a sweet shop near Tokyo University. As I emerge from the establishment, a Japanese schoolboy sees me and his eyes grow wide with excitement. I am his latest anthropological find. He points his finger at me as if I am a new exhibit at the zoo and squeals, "Hora! Hora! Indoneshiya! Indoneshiya!" Basically, he is ecstatic because he thinks he has stumbled upon an Indonesian and he wants his five squealing friends to share in his gawking. And they do, unnerved that the brown-skinned, petite, black-haired, black-eyed creature placidly returns the stares. The composure and seeming dispassion of my face is familiar to them; it is the mask of their grandmothers, except the coloring is different. Too, the eyes are sloe-shaped like Micronesians and a fire burns in them which they cannot define. I explain that I am not Indonesian, but Japanese and Indian and black. They are stunned. But enlightened.

Urawa City, north of Tokyo. Saitama prefecture. Inside the Isetan department store. A 15-year-old Japanese stares unabashedly at me. His 12-year-old

sister participates. As I examine handkerchiefs, I am aware of their unblinking audience. But the sweltering summer temperatures leave me in no mood to be entertained. The girl then points at me to show her mother her exotic discovery. Her parents stare, and bob their heads up and down in the way only Japanese can. It means yes and it means no. The heat burns into the brown of my skin. I look at it. I like it. But I am not an item for sale in an Isetan display. I am not here to suffer the scrutiny of these Japanese. "Chisai, ne," the girl says quietly, commenting that I am "Japanese-size." My familiarity with the popular Japanese sport of staring at gai-jin (foreigners) drowns my thoughts. I am upset; they are making me anxious. Then the boy turns to his father and says, "Mah, Kirei." "Kirei desho. Korombia-jin, ne," says his mother. I sigh. They think I am pretty. They think I am from Colombia. They don't realize that I share their history and culture in a very organic way. Can I forgive them their ignorance.

Tokyo. Shibuya district. A middle-aged Japanese watches me as we wait for a traffic light to turn green. He stands closely behind me. As we walk, he comes to my side and states, "You are from India." I shake my head. He makes another statement: "You are from Pakistan." I shake my head. His curiosity now in high gear, he now reduces himself to questions: "Malaysia? Thailand?" I tell him that I am Japanese and American. He says, "Oh, I thought you were foreign." "I am very foreign," I tell him, "wherever I go."

Los Angeles. In the women's steam sauna at a Santa Monica health spa. A Caucasian woman, about 50 years old, observes me. Her face is intelligent, analytical and scrutinizing. I am its current

object of scrutiny. As she follows me into the showers and maintains a close watch, I wonder if she is a lesbian. After the shower, she brings her clothing to my section to dress. She attempts being inconspicuous, but I am painfully aware of it. She allows me the decency of putting on my lingerie before she moves in for the attack. "Excuse me, miss," she says. "Do you speak English?" I think about it, decide I speak fairly well considering my childhood existence among Japanese immigrants, and nod. She is delighted. Thinking English is my second language, she speaks slowly with exaggerated annunciation. "I... am... an... anthropologist," she says. I nod readily to speed up her explanation. "I don't see many Micronesians in Los Angeles. You must be a recent transplant," she states. She zealously continues relating her experiences in Micronesia and how her village friend looked just like me. Or vice versa. As she speaks, I wonder silently if Micronesia, tucked away in the South Seas, was a place where African adventurers and Japanese refugees were shipwrecked together centuries ago.

It is difficult being Japanese.
It is difficult being
American.

But try being both. No, I do not mean in the relatively easy way of being mono-racial Japanese in America, or being a white or African American in Japan thinking you have a Japanese soul.

I mean, literally, Japanese and American. People call us many names: Amerasian or Eurasian, the Hawaiian term of "hapa"; the Japanese term for mixed blood, "konketsu-ji"; or the Japanese term meaning love-child, "ai no ko," which is considered derogatory in some dialects of the language. If we are mixed with white, the Japanese colloquial term for us is "golden

halves." If we are mixed with color, we are called "twilight halves." Some just call us half-breeds. It is easy, quick and may feed a subconscious desire to make us feel inferior. But the term "half-breed" is, perhaps, the greatest misnomer.

What I am is whole Japanese and whole American. And, as I write these words and envision an audience made up of one or the other of those groups, I know it is time that I exposed both factions to a being that encompasses two cultures in a fuller, organic, more spiritual -- and more painful -- way than you could ever imagine. For unless you are born of a Japanese immigrant parent and of an American parent, and were reared in an atmosphere that fully respected and demanded the presence of each culture, you cannot begin to realize the complicated poly-cultural, poly-racial journey of an Amerasian life.

Some of us have suffered more difficult times than others. Orphaned by war or by the abandonment of our care by our natural parents, we grew up in Japan as outsiders, denied Japanese citizenship by careful laws that only granted it to children born of Japanese fathers (and, for all of us, our maternal parent was Japanese). Furthermore, living in Japan as outcasts and not having any intimate knowledge of America, any documentation of our American fathers' identities or any means to migrate to our fathers' country, we were also denied American citizenship. Some of us were luckier; our parents stayed together and reared us in a usually poly-cultural family environment, either in Japan or in the U.S. But, wherever we lived, all of us -- orphaned or in our parents' laps -- were (and still are) psychological remnants of World War II. This is especially true in Japan where our physicality distinguishes us from our Japanese brothers.

Regardless of the circumstances of our childhoods, however, it is undoubtedly more difficult being Japanese, Indian and African than it is to be Japanese-European. I will tell you a little bit about my life in the hopes of enlightening you to the true dimensions of Japanese-American life and to the future of multi-racial Japanese-Americans as the inter-group rate of interracial marriage climbs upwards from its current high percentage of 66 2/3 percent. Indeed, if there is to be a forceful existence of Japanese in America in future years, we must recognize that their emerging identity will be a multi-racial identity which will include not only fifth-, sixth- and eighth-generation mono-racial Japanese Americans, but also new generations of multi-racial Japanese whose cultural relationship with Japan may be stronger and closer than that of their pure-blooded brothers. Let me share with you my life, with one foot in Japan and one foot in America, comfortable in neither and in both. As a Japanese television producer and friend told me during my last visit to Japan in August of this year, "You may look Polynesian or Brazilian. You may have been raised in America. But your heart is Japanese. You should come home for a while."

Home. I have never been certain what that meant. I certainly could not adhere to the conventional definitions of the word. Home was wherever my mother was. Home was not a physical place, but a spiritual place. I could surely not touch it, but when I was there, I was there. When I think of home, I think of three generations of women who share a similar spirit of freedom and truth. It began with Takechi Fusae, my grandmother, a woman who was born and died on Shikoku, Japan's small southern island. It continued in Setsuko, my mother, a woman reared in a provincial Japanese

family that operated a Japanese inn (a ryokan) and a large tenant farm with acres of persimmon orchards near Matsuyama on Shikoku. It continues in me as I seek to explore the human condition in my writing in the hope of fostering enlightenment in the people who are exposed to my work.

My work is that of a dramatist and poet. For roughly six years, I have worked as a professional artist in those genres. The first three plays are a trilogy which trace the life of a native Japanese woman (based on my mother) who marries an African-Indian American (based on my father). The first play ("Asa Ga Kimashita") takes place in Japan, and focuses on the lives of my maternal grandparents and the circumstances which led up to my grandfather's suicide and my mother's decision to marry my father. The second play ("American Dreams") focuses on the American soldier who brings home his Japanese bride to find both his family and American society unwilling to open its arms to a woman they still perceive as "the enemy." The third play, an abstract piece, ("Tea") deals with the lives of four other Japanese women who also married Americans after World War II. It traces their lives over a 20-year span, concentrating on their struggle to survive in the mid-western environment where the Army forced them to settle when the families migrated to the U.S. after the end of the U.S. Occupation of Japan.

The fourth play, "Thirst," is on a Japanese-American theme as well. It is about the lives of three Japanese-American sisters and their struggle to maintain their culture, sisterhood and integrity as women in contemporary American society. The recent death of their mother, through whom they defined both their culture and their sense of family, causes them to re-evaluate their

existence. Born in Japan and reared in America, the three women explore who they are and what they mean to each other now that their mother has gone on to the next life.

As for my poetry, I have been writing for many years. The poems include both cultural poems about the Japanese-American experience, and other poems which explore my existence as a woman and artist. The unpublished collection is entitled, "Green Tea Girl in Orange Pekoe Country." I perform readings of the poetry internationally.

As for my past, I was reared in a tightly-knit, non-American, feminine, immigrant Japanese environment which existed in the middle of a forgettable mid-western American purgatory called Kansas. The Japanese community consisted of roughly 300 Japanese women -- all immigrants who had married Americans during the U.S. Occupation of Japan after World War II. Because of the U.S. Army's resettlement policies for any Japanese brides of Americans entering the country in the post-war period, these women and their families ended up in places like Kansas. Places where there were no Japanese Americans, Japanese religion or Japanese foods. Places where the immigrant women would have the least chance of coalescing their numbers into political power. Places where these families could condone each others' interracial existence. Places where the American minds were either so narrow that they openly hated the Japanese, so pseudo-liberal that they tolerated them, or so scared of anything new that they somehow made friends with the Japanese women through each others' mutual fears.

The place where the army sent us is called Junction City, Kansas. Back then, it was a town of barely 20,000 people. Ninety percent of them were Caucasian

and the only industry was agriculture. The townspeople had never seen a Japanese in person, only in the caricatures and pictures provided by national magazines. The other "business" that kept Junction City alive was that of the U.S. military. Two miles away was a large army base called Fort Riley, to which my father was assigned as a military policeman.

We came to this area in 1959. Ten years later, my father was dead. Behind us lay my Japanese family's bitterness towards us for breaking centuries of tradition by marrying the American enemy, my father's family's hatred towards us because he had married a "Jap" and 10 years of living in a safety zone behind my father's tall, lean frame, protected from the American society that fought our insistence on living a poly-cultural life as if it were a disease that threatened their definitions of what was right and what was wrong. And we -- with our chopsticks, shoes coming off at the door, Japanese-style English, strange foods, inseparably multi-racial identity and lack of Christianity -- were wrong. Ahead of us lay an uncertain future, now that my father was dead. Would we go back to Japan? Would we move to a place called California where we were told many Japanese lived? Would we go on to the next life, the three of us: my mother, my older sister and I? Japan was only a memory and my mother feared for us, having to live as multi-racial Japanese in Tokyo. California was unfamiliar to my mother. My mother's father had taken his life after the U.S. Occupation land reclamation acts took away the farm land which had been in the family for centuries and gave it away to the peasants who farmed the land. Mother owned the house in Kansas. She was familiar with Kansas; she knew where to find

the store, the school, the doctor. That was enough. We stayed.

My mother had raised us the only way she knew how, as Japanese daughters, and she didn't want us to lose that, regardless of what survival in America might demand of us. My sister became a businesswoman. It was a practical and real and acceptable choice in the Japanese scheme of things. I didn't "become." My mother waited for me to become something real. But I had been born what I was: an artist. I was possessed with writing instruments and textures of papers from the time I could wiggle my fingers. I wrote my first poem when I was eight. I met the greatest love of my life, playwriting, when I was 15. From then on I read Western plays and studied the craft of playwriting. My mother watched uncertainly, saying only that the daughter of an immigrant could not be an artist; it was something that should happen one or two generations down the road. But it was and is my fate and so, here I am, a dramatist and a poet, multi-racial Japanese and pure artist surviving in a world that understands neither. I attack my writing with compulsive obsession, and try to explore culture and emotion with frankness and an honesty that spare nothing and no one, including myself.

In America, I exist as a cultural oddity because I am not Japanese American in the Caucasian definition (or white-washed Asian American definition) of what that means, neither am I African American or Native American Indian. An Asian hybrid with an immigrant mother, I cannot and do not care to be infused in any of those categories. I am not much for conventional definitions. The government says that I am Japanese because I am more than one-eighth Japanese. The government also says that I am Indian because I am at least one-quarter Indian.

African Americans, holding on tightly to the definitions oppressed into their psyches by the slave masters of old, want to define me as a member of their group because I am part African. I reject all those imposed definitions. I am what I am. I am what God put me on this earth to be: a multi-racial and multi-cultural being. It is not up to mortals to tear me into three pieces and claim me for their own. I am my own person, sympathetic to all the cultures of which I am composed. But I do not belong to any of them. My hybrid culture is unique. I participate where my familiarity and heart lead me. No culture has ownership on any part or the whole of a multi-racial being.

Japanese America has come to accept me because of my artistry, but on their terms. I think I make the community uncomfortable because, even though I am multi-racial, I am closer to my Japanese culture than many of their offspring by virtue of the fact that my mother is a native Japanese. Also, unlike them, I never had to diminish my intimacy with being Japanese to prove that I was a loyal American. Indeed, I am probably less loyal than them. It may be of further irritation to Japanese Americans to see someone like me because I am brown-skinned and sloe-eyed on the outside, and yet deeply Japanese on the inside. I also am the victim of discrimination from Japanese-Caucasians who think they are "more Japanese" than me because they are half white as opposed to being half colored. Indeed, racial warfare among Japanese America may possibly be more extreme than any other group of color in the U.S.

As for Japan, she does not know me for who I truly am. By this I mean that I am never identified as an American. I am always seen as Polynesian or South American, another exotic

foreigner wandering the eclectic streets of Tokyo. And that's okay. From faraway, the anonymity of being a foreigner who defies cultural categorization is enjoyable.

Close-up, however, thorough excavation must be done, both from the perspectives of friends and of strangers. With strangers I cannot, as my aunt in Japan suggests, allow them to label my race incorrectly. My aunt says, "If they ask you if you are Indonesian, just say yes. It is easier." I have never begged the easy route. I must tell these strangers just what I am. Sometimes they remain interested and ask me about my parents. Sometimes their faces grow long and reflective, as if I have forced them to think about World War II and all the pain associated with its memory. Sometimes there is tension in their brows and in the way they set their mouths just so, as if my very presence stands as an insult to the purity of the Japanese race, as if they want to spit in my face but Japanese decorum forbids such a frank display of feelings.

With my friends, just as many misunderstandings exist. They say I look "more African" or "kind of Puerto Rican" or "like a Polynesian." They say it with a smile, as if they think they understand me and this allows them the indulgence of ethnic ignorance or shallowness. I am expected to keep quiet, smile and acknowledge that they may be right. But I cannot. I must say to them, "It is not what I look like, but what I am." Sometimes a moment of stillness occurs, wherein they ponder whether or not they have insulted me and I ponder whether or not even the people who profess to love me will understand that things are never what they seem. That nothing is black and white; there is grey, thank God.

I remain a misfit. Both a foreigner and at home in Japan

and in America. I find something to love and something to hate about being Japanese, about being American, about being African and Indian. Every August especially, I am painfully, pointedly absorbed with thoughts of the war that created me. My soul is filled with green tea and steeped in the ways of pre-war Japanese women. The thoughts of the war make my cultural paradox grow even more intense as the world also looks back on the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, bombings that, when measured against the whole of humanity, represent a defiling and ultimate destruction of innocence -- and not just for Japan, but for America as well. I return to Japan every year across a sea of clouds and think of my mother who, many years ago, undertook this same journey many miles below me on a different kind of sea. My vessel is a metal bird; hers was a metal ship. I cross the path in 11 hours; she, in 15 days.

Time. It is all a matter of time, perhaps. We will learn to live together even if we cannot learn to love one another. Poly-cultural, poly-racial people like me know that color is a superficial thing, armor that eventually gets burned off or eroded away when the time comes to go on to the next life.

One summer, I met a beautiful little girl named Kenyan in San Francisco. Her mother is an immigrant from Japan. Her father was a African American. She is four years old. Most of the Japanese-American mixtures I meet are older, usually direct products of World War II. If I meet young multi-racial Asians, they are generally Southeast Asian mixtures. So it was a delight to meet Kenyan. But a sad story accompanied my introduction to her. She didn't understand why her skin was brown and why her mother's skin was yellow. In her naivete, she surmised that

when she grew up, her skin would be like her mother's. Then when she burned herself one day, she looked at the whitish-pink scar and said that if she burned herself all over, maybe she would become the same color as her mother. Even at the age of four, the American society which is so dominated by the ideals and values of Caucasians, this child was being mentally mutilated. To help her to begin to appreciate your own unique beauty, I told her a story about my color curiosity when I was her age. I will share that story with you now.

As soon as I could speak, my parents said I became obsessed with color and would ask them, "Papa, why are you chocolate and why is Mami vanilla?" My parents were unprepared for my interrogation; they had thought it would come later. But my father thought of a way to make their point about being proud of being multi-racial and not letting anyone push me into a racial category. For I was something new. Something that looked new and thought new, and they wanted that to sustain and persevere. He went to the grocery store and came back with neapolitan ice cream.

"You see this vanilla stripe?" he said. I nodded, challenging him. "Well, that's your mother," he said. "You see this chocolate stripe and the strawberry one? That's me; half Indian and half black. You following me, Pumpkin?" I nodded as he lovingly pinched my cheek. I feared that pinch. My face was already round enough, thanks to my Japanese heritage. I watched as my father took a teaspoonful out of each color of ice cream and stirred it together in a bowl. Soon, the colors melted into a soft, even brown tone. "You see that?" I nodded. "That's you," he said. "Now, Pumpkin. Think about this. Can you take this blend and separate it back into the three colors?" "No," I said,

looking at him as if he was being silly. "You can't take them apart." He had made his point and the worried look in my mother's eyes disappeared, giving way to relief and love that she could only convey with her eyes and not with words. "Okay, Pumpkin," Papa said. "That's how we want you to live your life. Don't try to take the colors apart and don't let anybody try to do it for you. Because it can't be done and you'd only waste a lot of time."

Papa was right.

New York City. August. I wait in the rain for a taxi at the corner of 43rd and Park Avenue. I have no umbrella so I succumb to the elements and allow the rain to soak me. A cabbie pulls up to the curb and throws open the door. As I climb into his hack, he says, "You Asians are something. You just stand there in the rain like it's not even there, like it's the most natural thing in the world. Must be living on the islands that does that to ya, huh?" He grins jarringly and waits for a response. I simply stare. "Oh," he offers, "you don't speak English, do ya?" He smiles more softly and shakes his greying head. Taking a closer look at me, he says, "Are you Polynesian? You know, Pol-la-nee-shun?" With a touch of boredom and in tidily articulate English, I tell him I am not. I study him to discover the source of his curiosity. He is fifty-ish, Caucasian, overweight. The tattoo of a busty, naked woman disgraces his upper right arm. Still generous with laughter, he smiles again with certainty. "Oh, you're Amerasian," he says. I am surprised. I lean toward him and ask him how he knows. Delighted with his ethnic awareness, he adds, "From L.A. probably, too, right? Yeah, I can't tell what your mix is, but you're Asian

and American, and your accent is definitely Californian." I sit back and hear my disbelieving laughter, hidden behind a passive Japanese mask. He only sees the mask. He frowns. "Gee, I didn't mean to offend you," he says. I smile briefly, sincerely, and assure him his words were well-taken. His grin returns and he says, "It ain't often that I see one of you."

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What Color is *Half-White* ?

by

Teresa Kay Williams

The media has been bombarding the American public with issues concerning interracial marriage and multi-raciality in general. While some members of the multi-racial community applaud the attention and hype, others skeptically sit back, hoping that this isn't just another "(multi-)ethnic fad." Questions such as "Black or White?" and "Do the children suffer?" have dominated this popular dialogue. As an interracial person with no African ancestry, I may not understand the depth of world-wide oppression of African peoples. And certainly, I am not in a position to tell African Americans what their experience is or is not. However, being part "of color" and part "white", I feel this issue of interraciality speaks to me on deep personal and political levels.

Being "part white" is a very peculiar existence in a race-conscious place such as the United States. I am told by peoples of color and by Euro-Americans that my unconditional allegiance must be with my "colored" ancestry because possessing double and triple loyalties is impossible. European-Americans buy

into the old racist notion (often unconsciously) that any mixture with color, makes a person "colored." (Many of us who are part "yellow" and part "white" often forget because we are more often than not given the privileges and opportunities this society has to offer.) Multi-racial peoples with a certain amount of social and educational clout are allotted, "honorary white" status. There is a justification that usually follows, "Well, you're different; you're not like *them*." North Americans of color, on the other hand, proud of their 1960's Third World Movement accomplishments, demand their multi-racial cousins' unlimited loyalty to *The Cause*. Some time ago during the formation of the United States of America, being "half white" and "half of-color"* became contradictory and fizzled into non-existence. And thus, as a nation, we have been acting and reacting to the phasing out of racial and cultural multiplicity for hundreds of years.

Although I understand all too well the threat that many minority communities (particularly in the U.S.) feel about intermarriage, some of the arguments against this growing phenomenon sound very familiar to the European-American racists who told African Americans to give up the civil rights struggle and to settle for second-class citizenship. Indeed, our racist society may view part-white/part-minority children as minority. Does this mean we should succumb to this racist classification system? The one-drop rule for African Americans is deeply-

* I use the term "half" because where I was raised (Tokyo and Kanagawa-ken, Japan) "haafu" or "half" was the only positive designation that identified my international, intercultural, interracial reality.

rooted in our not-so-faraway past of slavery. The one-eighth clause, that ordered persons "more than one-eighth Japanese" to be imprisoned at a time when intermarriage was illegal (and hence, such unions highly uncommon), reminds us of the Japanese-American internment camps during World War II. These blood-quantum laws are a product of one of the most insidious and calculating forms of racism ever created by mankind. And thus, my question to anyone and everyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, or ancestry, is why internalize this racism that only serves to degrade *all of us*!

For multi-racial people who feel comfortable identifying with one parent group, they should do so by all means. In a world where there is very little racial choice, we should grant them that freedom of self-definition. However, people, who choose to defy the monolithic, monocultural, monoracial set of rules and world views in American society, face a difficult struggle. We, as a society, should also accept this brave act of self-determination. Having the choice of self identity is empowering to an individual's personhood as well as to the groups' to which he/she is biologically, socially, and culturally bound.

"Are the Children of Mixed Marriages Black or White?" shouted the front cover of the May 21, 1990 issue of *JET* magazine. With this rather politically loaded headline, photographs of attractive multi-racial stars who identify with only one parentage stared enticingly at the readers. First of all, the question is an absurd one. Children of mixed marriages are . . . SURPRISE . . . children of mixed marriages!!! Nothing more! Nothing less!

The next question usually raised is, what about society? As an aspiring sociologist, this question is of great concern to

me. Yes, what about society? An Amerasian friend of mine who is part-African American often reminds me that society also says that African Americans are unintelligent, shiftless, criminal, violent, and inferior. Therefore, we should conclude that all African Americans are unintelligent, shiftless, criminal, violent, and inferior? Does this make sense? A racist society says and does a lot of things, but it is up to conscious individuals and collectives to stand up to these injustices, look them in their ugly faces, and smash them into their graves. Isn't that what honorable men and women did in the 1960's? All forms of racism deserve neither acceptance nor sympathy.

"What about the children?," is the killer-question asked to appeal to our paternal and maternal emotions. The assumptions underlying this question is that they'll suffer from an identity crisis as marginalized peoples aimlessly roaming the boundaries of their parent worlds. And indeed, some multi-racial persons did and still do suffer from cultural maladjustment and group misidentification. What can we expect when we live in a society that violently maintains imaginary categories of people based on so-called biology and ranks them according to their likeness to the dominant group(s), including allocation of resources?

Minority peoples who identify with only one racial/cultural group suffer as much, if not more in a white-male-dominated society. Female children also suffer in a patriarchal world. And thus, should we conclude that unless we are wealthy and white, we should NOT have any children? It would be silly and senseless for me to tell people of color to 'think about the children.' Why burden their children by giving them the gift of life only to suffer the dire consequences of white racism. And,