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Asian Americans in Contemporary Society

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**What it Means to be Japanese American: An Exploration of Japanese American Identity
across Borders**

I. Introduction/Methodology

How do Japanese Americans develop an identity in America versus Japan? This age-old question regarding identity is particularly interesting for Japanese Americans, who innately possess transnational experiences. In particular, these experiences are easily seen in a multiracial person, who is inherently part of two or more different cultures, leading to a questioning of how they fit in with their societies, both by the individual themselves and the people around them. As a multiracial Japanese American myself, I have found myself questioning my identity throughout my entire life, and so I began to research multiracial Japanese American identity. However, while researching this topic, I came to the realization that in America, this questioning of identity is not limited to multiracial Japanese Americans, but extends to monoracial Japanese Americans as well. Under the umbrella categorization of these two groups as “Japanese American,” I became interested in how the development of identity is the same or different for Japanese Americans in Japan and America.

Before delving further into a discussion of Japanese Americans, I would first like to identify exactly whom I am referencing. Although the term “Japanese American” can be categorized in a number of ways, for the scope of this paper, “Japanese American” refers to anyone of Japanese ancestry, whether this is a person with two ethnically Japanese parents, one ethnically Japanese parent, or one ethnically Japanese grandparent, who (also) associates themselves as an American. It should be noted that in order to identify as an American, it is not necessary that the individual was born in America. In other words, the individual who is Japanese American may have been born and/or raised in America, has a parent who was born and/or raised in America, spent a significant portion of their life in America, etc. Furthermore, the research concerning the topic of Japanese American identity showed a need to distinguish between multiracial Japanese Americans and monoracial Japanese Americans. While a monoracial Japanese American refers to a Japanese American whose parents are both ethnically Japanese, a multiracial Japanese American, for this paper, refers to a Japanese American whose ancestry extends beyond that of Japan and Asia. In other words, multiracial Japanese Americans are not one hundred percent ethnically Japanese, and have ancestors from countries that are not in Asia. This paper is organized into the dissection of four groups: multiracial Japanese Americans in America, multiracial Japanese Americans in Japan, monoracial Japanese Americans in America, and monoracial Japanese Americans in Japan.

The research surrounding this paper was collected through various articles and qualitative studies involving in-depth interviews with Japanese American individuals residing in America and Japan. The focus of many of these interviews was identity formation. However, finding sources proved difficult in many cases because there are not many studies that focus on Japanese American identity within America, or even Asian American identity in America; it was easier to

find sources dealing with Japanese American identity in Japan. Furthermore, the research was divided between interviews with multiracial Japanese Americans and monoracial Japanese Americans and exposed that rather than a difference between how Japanese Americans develop an identity in America versus Japan, there is a larger discrepancy between how multiracial Japanese Americans and monoracial Japanese Americans develop an identity, regardless of where they reside. The research question was therefore refined to: How do multiracial Japanese Americans and monoracial Japanese Americans develop an identity in America versus Japan?

Comparing interviews between multiracial Japanese Americans and monoracial Japanese Americans showed similarities between the two groups in that they both felt like outsiders in America and Japan originally, but eventually arrived at very different conclusions about their identities. Where multiracial Japanese Americans tended to willingly adopt a positive identity of embracing more than one culture, monoracial Japanese Americans tended to settle with an identity as foreigners in both cultures.

II. The Multiracial Japanese American Experience

A. Place: America

Although one of the main measurements of assimilation is interracial marriage, historically, America has not always been as welcoming of interracial marriage as it is perceived to be today. as Qian points out, a Supreme Court case in 1967, *Loving v. Virginia*, finally ruled “that laws forbidding people of different races to marry were unconstitutional”¹. As a result, interracial marriages rose significantly. While this is a fantastic achievement in breaking social

¹ Qian, Zhenchao. "Breaking the Last Taboo: Interracial Marriage in America." *Contexts* 4, no. 4 (2005), 301.

norms, interracial marriage rates still remain at about 8% of marriages in the United States², meaning that the multiracial population, or children birthed from these interracial marriages, continues to be low as well. Due to their population being rather low, a number of questions arise concerning multiracials; in particular, a question of identity emerges, with an expectation that multiracials are not fully adapted to either culture, and therefore where do they “fit in” with society?

A number of studies have tried to identify a specific process of identity formation for multiracial people. In particular, Collins (2000) sites Kich (1982), who proposes a three stage developmental process of biracial identity. In stage one, multiracials experience an initial awareness of a dissonance between how they perceive themselves and how others perceive them. This is followed by a struggle for acceptance from others, and finally, through interactions with others and experiences of belonging, an acceptance of themselves as people with biracial identities³. In other words, a multiracial person is bound to come to terms with a biracial identity and exists in both societies. Collins (2000) also describes Poston’s (1990) five-stage approach for multiracials’ identity formation, which focuses more on differences and similarities among various groups. In stage one, mostly present in young who have yet to develop a group self-esteem, an individual has a personal identity, while in stage two, this individual chooses a group with whom he/she wants to identify. Stage three is when the individual is met with confusion and guilt about choosing to identify with one group, which leads to stage four, where the individual learns to appreciate having more than one identity and enters a phase of exploration of oneself.

² Passel, Jeffrey S., Wendy Wang, and Paul Taylor. "Marrying Out: One-in-seven New US Marriages is Interracial or Interethnic." *Pew Research Center (June 4)*. <http://pewsocialtrends.org/assets/pdf/755-marryingout.pdf> (2010), 1.

³ Collins, J. Fuji. "Biracial Japanese American Identity: An Evolving Process." *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 6, no. 2 (2000), 117.

In stage five, the individual becomes whole and appreciates all parts of themselves⁴. What is interesting about both proposed identity formation processes is not necessarily the individual stages themselves, but the fact that they both end with a positive construction of one's identity.

Collins (2000) attempted to explore how Japanese Americans in particular develop an identity as a result of comparisons to other individuals, groups, and the environment. In order to do so, he interviewed fifteen individuals, aged 20-40, each with one Japanese and one non-Asian parent. Of the fifteen interviewed individuals, four of them had never traveled to Japan, and all had moved to California in order to find more Japanese Americans. While their social experiences seemed fixed as youths, they were able to select a more personalized social and geographic setting as adults, which allowed them to explore different aspects of their biracial identity. This, Collins argues, reflected an emotional and conflicting process with themes of self-evaluation, belonging, exploration, confusion of categorization, acceptance, and situational use of identity that led to a positive assertion of identity⁵.

Based on his own study and the aforementioned models of Kich (1982) and Poston (1990), Collins proposes a four-phase model of identity formation for multiracial Japanese Americans. Phase one is where the individual experiences confusion and begins to question their identity due to a perceived lack of full affiliation with both the Japanese community and the larger, majority community. As a result, in phase two, the individual attempts to label him/herself and select one ethnicity over the other, suppressing the one they have rejected. Collins reported that many of the individuals in the study did not acknowledge their Japanese side when they were young because they grew up in predominantly white neighborhoods.

⁴ Collins, "Biracial Japanese American Identity," 117.

⁵ Collins, "Biracial Japanese American Identity," 115-116.

Furthermore, all individuals expressed being victims of discrimination and humiliation due to Asian features, leading to a desire to belong in the majority group. In cases where individuals wanted to identify with their Japanese heritage, they were met with Japanese phrases such as “*doko no uma no hone ka wakaranai*,” directly translating to “you don’t know what horse the bone came from,” meaning that you do not know where the person belongs. In phase three, the individual begins to search for a positive reference group that could help him/her develop a positive self-esteem, while also piecing together bits of information that he/she feels is relevant to his/her identity. For instance, many of the individuals interviewed traveled to Japan as a way of exploring their Japanese side, and all moved to the San Francisco Bay area, known for its flexibility in regards to societal, racial, and environmental themes. Phase four is that of acceptance, in which the individual acknowledges that he/she is a member of both communities, rather than having to choose one over the other⁶. In America, many multiracials, Japanese Americans in particular, refer to themselves as a *Hapa* or a *Halfie*, meaning half one culture and half another, and embrace a “best of both worlds” attitude. While identity seems to be compromised initially, again, the notion of a positive identity is the outcome for these multiracial Japanese American people.

B. Place: Japan

Unlike America, which is made of countless different races, religions, and cultures, Japan remains a relatively homogenous nation. Consequently, multiracial Japanese Americans can find it even more discouraging at the start to develop an identity in Japan in comparison to America. Jane Yamashiro, a sociologist and professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, blames this on Japanese politicians and media, which “...promote a narrow, homogenous view of

⁶ Collins, “Biracial Japanese American Identity,” 127.

‘Japanese’ as ancestry-based and ‘pure-blooded’” and explains that as a result, “people of Japanese ancestry who are also of other ancestries are excluded from claiming a ‘true’ Japanese identity.”⁷ However, Yamashiro is also quick to defend, acknowledging that life for multiracials in Japan continues to improve through a history of various terms used to talk about multiracials.

During the postwar period, multiracials in Japan were referred to as *ainoko*, a blatantly derogatory term used to describe the mixing of animal species. At this time, most multiracial children were born of U.S. military men and lower class Japanese women, causing them to be viewed as lower class and looked upon unfavorably due to remaining animosity towards the U.S. military. However, in the post-Occupation era, when war animosities cooled down, people began using the term *konketsuji*, literally meaning, “mixed blood child,” to refer to multiracial Japanese; while it was considered a politically correct alternative to *ainoko* at the time, *konketsuji* has now been deemed an offensive term as well. The most commonly used term to describe multiracial Japanese people today is *hafu*, literally meaning, “half,” and conjures up a more popular and exotic image of multiracials that emerged from the 1960s. Generally, *hafu* means a mix of Japanese and white heritage, and most people visualize the glamorized image of half white, half Japanese people known as *talento* who exist on Japanese TV as models and celebrities. The problem with the image of *hafu* today is that it is superficial and emphasizes Japan’s globalization and international relations where parents are often businesspeople, diplomats, or upper class global elites. While the image of the multiracial in Japan has arguably changed in a positive light, they are still depicted in stereotypical ways and are not treated as “regular” Japanese⁸.

⁷ Yamashiro, Jane Hisa. *When the Diaspora Returns: Transnational Racial and Ethnic Identity Formation Among Japanese Americans in Global Tokyo* (2008), 205.

⁸ Yamashiro, *When the Diaspora Returns*, 205-208.

While *hafu* encompasses language ability, phenotypical traits, international experience(s), and cultural knowledge(s), efforts to show that identity is not compromised by being between multiple cultures has led to the emergence of a new term in Japan: *daburu*. The term *daburu* literally means, “double,” and is used by some biracials in Japan under the idea that the combination of two different identities results in what is more than the sum of its parts – identity is doubled⁹. The term *daburu* is preferred by some multiracial people because it implies that the individual identifies fully with more than one culture, whereas *hafu* could be taken to mean that the individual is only half of each culture. While the term is not used very widely yet, it shows a paradigm shift for how to understand people of multiple backgrounds. Furthermore, portrayals in popular media are changing with mixed race celebrities born and raised in Japan, who only speak Japanese. This adds a new dimension to the concept of multiracial people in Japan as not always being bilingual or bicultural, nor phenotypical traits as the only signs of foreignness. For a multiracial attempting to create an identity for oneself in Japan, this may provide the opening for a third social category in Japan beyond that of “Japanese” and “foreigner.”

III. The Monoracial Japanese American Experience

A. Place: America

Many Americans grow up with a stereotypical conception of Asians that results from the media. In particular, these stereotypes include the model minority, the nerd/poor communicator, and what seems to be the most overlooked, the foreigner. The model minority and the nerd are more obvious stereotypes that seem to categorize an entire person, whereas the foreigner stereotype is perpetuated more subtly. Japanese Americans (and other Asian Americans) are

⁹ Yamashiro, *When the Diaspora Returns*, 208.

often ostracized as outsiders with questions that can seem innocent, such as “Do you speak English?” and “Where are you really from?” Furthermore, Zhang (2010) found that Asian Americans are perceived as more likely to be left out than other racial-ethnic groups because they are seen as more exotic and non-American and do not belong to the same degree as other groups¹⁰. One Japanese American woman described that being Japanese American in America can feel *chuuto hampa*, which roughly translates to “halfway,” or simply the feeling of something left unfinished. In other words, the woman felt neither fully Japanese nor American¹¹.

Attempts to create an identity in America are further compromised due to the absence of information. Elders often shy away from giving their children stories of their family history because they do not want them to feel negatively towards or shameful of their history (i.e. Japanese internment camps)¹². The lack of information surrounding Japanese American identity (and Asian American identity) is in itself proof of Japanese Americans as foreign. It is a topic that, in America, is not very explored because Japanese Americans do not seem to be a proper part of society. Furthermore, when there is information regarding Asian Americans, there is not much separation between different nationalities (i.e. Japanese, Chinese, Korean, etc.) and there is a larger focus on keeping Asian culture alive, rather than attempts to negotiate their Asian and American nationalities. Unfortunately, this vicious cycle of the association of foreignness with Japanese Americans and the resulting lack of information made finding research about monoracial Japanese Americans in America particularly difficult.

¹⁰ Zhang, Qin. "Asian Americans Beyond the Model Minority Stereotype: The Nerdy and the Left Out." *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 3, no. 1 (2010), 31.

¹¹ Moriizumi, Satoshi. "Exploring Identity Negotiations: An Analysis of Intercultural Japanese-US American Families Living in the United States." *Journal of Family Communication* 11, no. 2 (2011), 97.

¹² Takaragawa, Stephanie. "The Japanese American National Museum and the Construction of Identity." *Visual Anthropology Review* 18, no. 1-2 (2002), 44.

B. Place: Japan

As a result of their homogeneous tendencies as a nation, in Japan, people are subject to placement into one of two social categories: *nihonjin* and *gaijin*, or in other words, “Japanese” and “foreigner,” respectively. To be *nihonjin*, you have to have Japanese blood, be a Japanese citizen, be a fluent speaker of Japanese, and be culturally knowledgeable members of Japanese society, while anyone who does not encompass all of these characteristics is labeled *gaijin*. This leads to an awkward position for Japanese Americans in Japan, who are Japanese in terms of phenotype and ancestry, but are foreigners in language, culture, and citizenship. In other words, when Japanese Americans travel to Japan from the U.S., there is a tradeoff of social and linguistic similarity and ethnic difference with a social and linguistic difference and ethnic similarity.

Yamashiro (2011) interviewed 50 monoracial Japanese Americans (aged 20-50) living or planning to live in Japan for at least one year. Most individuals were born and raised in the U.S., varying in generations of Japanese Americans, though many had visited Japan before living there as adults, and differed in their cultural knowledge of Japan and language skills of Japanese. However, there was a focus on phenotypically-Japanese Japanese Americans born and socialized in the U.S., not fluent in Japanese, and not knowledgeable about Japanese social norms¹³.

Through the interviews, Yamashiro (2011) came up with a four-step process of identity formation for monoracial Japanese Americans in Japan. The first step is being categorized as a *nihonjin*. In this phase, monoracial Japanese Americans experience a feeling of acceptance, as they are, for the first time in many cases, able to visually blend into a crowd; this is integral to

¹³ Yamashiro, Jane H. "Racialized National Identity Construction in the Ancestral Homeland: Japanese American Migrants in Japan." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34, no. 9 (2011), 1508.

being accepted as a *nihonjin*. Furthermore, one interviewee expressed feeling liberated, as back home in the U.S., coming from a predominantly white neighborhood, he felt that he had the burden of representing an entire race due to physical appearance. However, as monoracial Japanese Americans begin interacting with *nihonjin* in Japan, they enter step two, where their linguistic and cultural differences are revealed; their categorization as *nihonjin* ends at phenotypical characteristics. As a result, *nihonjin* are confused by the monoracial Japanese American because they look Japanese, but do not speak and act Japanese, and often times mis-categorize them as Asian immigrants (i.e. Chinese or Korean). At this point, monoracial Japanese Americans feel misunderstood for being mistaken as a person from another part of Asia, and enter step three, where they assert their American identity. They find that Japan has a hierarchy of foreigners in which Americans are more respected than foreigners of other Asian countries, and are able to represent the U.S. in ways that they have never been able to previously. Unfortunately, in Japan, there is an image of an American as blonde-haired and blue-eyed, and when monoracial Japanese Americans do not fit this image, they are questioned on their racialization as American. In other words, Japanese people tend to have an image of America as racially white, and therefore have difficulty coming to terms with a racially Asian person as American. These four steps lead to the development of “Japanese American” as a racialized national identity¹⁴; they are distinct from “normal Americans” because they are not white. In America, “Japanese American” is categorized as an ethnic minority identity, but in Japan, it is reconstructed as a racialized national identity and shows that social categories, i.e. the concepts of race and ethnicity, vary by society.

¹⁴ Yamashiro “Racialized National Identity,” 1517.

IV. Conclusion

Whether it is in Japan or America, both multiracial and monoracial Japanese Americans seem to go through a process of questioning their identity and trying to develop that identity. However, it is not the difference in country that seems to affect the formation of an identity for Japanese Americans, but whether the Japanese American is multiracial or monoracial. For the monoracial Japanese American, identity formation begins rather ambiguously, where, caught between two or more distinct cultures, the individual feels the necessity to choose between one and the other, or is expected by society to do so. Instead of succumbing to these expectations, whether it is through a process, as described for multiracial Japanese Americans in America, or through the media, present for multiracial Japanese Americans in Japan, the multiracial Japanese American is able to come to terms with the two different cultures, and in a positive turn, embraces both. In the end, the multiracial Japanese American adopts a double identity instead of a split identity of incompleteness.

Contrary to the rather optimistic outcome of the multiracial Japanese American, the monoracial Japanese American appears, somewhat forcibly, to come to terms with the position of a foreigner in both America and Japan. In America, monoracial Japanese Americans are blended into the larger category of Asian American, which is sugarcoated as the “model minority,” but seen as the eternal foreigner in a country that shows more concern to black and white racial problems. The struggle to fit in causes many monoracial Japanese Americans to seek a home in Japan, but the search is more often than not met with the same label as a foreigner. However, identity is made slightly more complicated in Japan, where monoracial Japanese Americans are able to fit in phenotypically, but are not fully accepted due to their cultural background as a “foreigner.”

Inherently, both monoracial and multiracial Japanese Americans are faced with the problem of the marginal man, a situation in which an individual struggles to establish an identity because they are stuck between two cultural realities¹⁵. As interracial marriage becomes more popular and people continue to immigrate to America, the larger the population that concerns the marginal man will become. Furthermore, Asians are the fastest growing minority in America, yet there continues to be little research on them because America seems to be stuck in black and white racial terms. As a result, Asians often feel left out of large, yet common, topics such as race, and continue to be seen as foreign, making for a difficult situation in trying to create an identity as an American. Similarly, Japan remains close-minded in their conception of *nihonjin* and *gaijin*, which has a heavy effect on monoracial Japanese Americans, who face confusion and stress over their identity in their ancestral nation. As America and Japan continue to become more global and more issues of identity arise, the lack of research pertaining to this topic is astounding and needs to be brought to attention.

¹⁵ Stonequist, Everett V. "The Problem of the Marginal Man." *American Journal of Sociology* (1935), 1.

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