

Uniting Hapas

The Global Communities of Mixed-Race Nikkei on YouTube

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As with all racial and ethnic collectives, the community encompassed by the term “Japanese American” has undergone significant changes in recent decades and must be recognized as fluid and shifting. Given the high levels of outmarriage for Japanese Americans (Pew Research Center 2012) and the multiracial/multiethnic/multicultural children that are produced in such marriages, Japanese American millennials constitute a particularly flexible collective. Nearly eighty thousand individuals who identify as Japanese American have only one parent of Japanese descent, and their families identify in multiple ways (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). The national boundaries denoted by the term “American” within the category of “Japanese American” are also subject to questioning, as many individuals of Japanese descent identify with multiple nations, cultures, and geographic communities. For Nikkei, or members of the global Japanese diaspora, the boundaries of their ethnic and national communities may be blurry, but they still play an important role in shaping lived experiences and identities. This chapter explores the meaning of these categories and the specificities of their stories through conducting a textual analysis of YouTube channels that tell the stories of mixed-race Nikkei millennials.

Media representations of marginalized communities serve an important role in shaping how individuals see themselves and how others understand their identities and stories, particularly for communities undergoing the demographic shifts that we see in the global Japanese diaspora. In this chapter, I focus on media that are created by mixed-race Nikkei who utilize new media to portray their own stories using their own voices. YouTube’s user-

created channels provide a rich site for exploring the changing contours of Japanese American millennial identifications through the preponderance of “vlogs,” or personal video blogs. While digital spaces such as these can host a wide variety of content (including mainstream promotional or corporate content), YouTube is often heralded for allowing everyday consumers to upload their own videos and share them with a wide audience. The genre of the vlog consists of amateur videos used to convey the user’s own personal story, relying on his or her own personality and narrative to attract viewers. With 72 percent of U.S. millennials using YouTube (eMarketer 2015), examinations of Japanese American vlogs largely center around users age eighteen to thirty and can give much insight into the daily lives of these participants. Through investigating the YouTube vlogs of collectives that include many mixed-race Japanese Americans, we can better understand what it means to be Japanese American in the twenty-first century—both in terms of the multiracial, transnational, diasporic identities that are embodied by these individuals and the way that they express these identities through their personal narratives.

This investigation serves to remind us that when we study millennial Japanese Americans, we must continue to question both the ethnic and national borders of this community. The online activities of those who are active within mixed-race spaces clearly reify the salience of their identity as Japanese Americans, but that identity is simultaneously reflective of ethnic and national hybridities. Indeed, what we see in these YouTube communities are millennial Japanese Americans who are actively reaching out toward mixed-race Japanese all over the world because they believe that they share important commonalities. For today’s mixed-race Japanese Americans, it is not only the commonality of Japanese American culture that connects them to one another, but experiences of hybridity and the complexity of negotiating a relationship to one’s global positioning that is most salient and meaningful. From the networks and affinities we see developing in digital spaces, we can more clearly reposition mixed-race Japanese Americans within a diasporic framework of mixed-race Nikkei, rather than relying solely upon frameworks of nation as sites for belonging, identification, and the construction of ethnic community.

Examining YouTube’s Mixed-Race Communities

This examination centers on the content of two different YouTube channels, HapaUnited and Max D. Capo. These channels were selected because they both focus explicitly on mixed-race Asian communities, but have a wide variety of posts specifically on mixed-race Japanese Americans/Nikkei¹ millennials and their experiences. While many YouTube videos discuss a broad array of mixed-race experiences, these two channels include over fifty videos

that discuss the experiences of being mixed-race Nikkei. The content of these videos and their accompanying comments are examined in this chapter. I ask how the affordances of digital participation in YouTube communities shape the way that mixed-race Nikkei millennials are connecting to those who are similar to them and to those who are different from them, and how these online communities complicate our understanding of mixed-race Japanese American experiences. In exploring the videos posted to these channels, I argue that an apparently new form of diasporic community has come about through a deliberate performance of highlighting similarities and common experiences across communities of mixed-race Japanese and mixed-race Japanese Americans.

HapaUnited is a community whose content reflects the diversity of its many members. It was founded in 2011 by six individuals who identified as “hapa,” which they define as being part Asian or half Asian. In their first video, they state that they wanted to create a space for other hapas to come together and discuss the issues that affected them. The role of “moderator” was then opened up to any interested members, and these moderators served to populate the channel with personal video blogs discussing whatever issue was of interest to them. Most of the videos from this channel elaborate very straightforwardly on the topic of the strengths and weaknesses of being hapa; causes for pride and celebration, as well as common problems, frustrations, and negative experiences. Although not all of the individuals from this community are ethnically Japanese, of the twenty-seven moderators, at least eleven identify themselves as part-Japanese (of these, eight live in the United States), and together they contributed over thirty videos to the channel. Those who state their age are all in their teens and twenties, and the tone of the conversation is decidedly youthful, focusing on the identity-development process for adolescent and college-aged hapas.

The other channel examined in this study is Max D. Capo, the personal channel for a mixed-race Japanese American millennial who was born and raised in North Carolina but moved to Tokyo during college and lived there for four years. Capo, who is in his mid-twenties, is fluent in Japanese and often works as an actor or media personality when he lives in Japan. He has posted around sixty videos since 2008 that range from humorous sketches (in the mode of Asian American YouTubers such as NigaHiga and Kevjumba) to videos that give tips about things such as acting or living in Japan. Yet he also often states that he wants his YouTube channel to serve as a hub for building community for hapas, and to that end he has a regular segment called “Hapa Hour” that currently has eight videos that are each around ten minutes long and focus specifically on hapa issues. These videos are always shot with a cohost who also identifies as hapa, and together they discuss common hapa experiences. Capo has also posted eight videos under the topic of “Other Japanese/Half Japanese Themes” that include discussions of

being half Japanese within the context of life in Japan and life in the United States.

In examining the videos of HapaUnited and Max D. Capo about hapa experiences, it is important to first consider the use of the term *hapa*. This Native Hawaiian term stems from the term *hapa haole*, which referred to the mixed-race Native Hawaiians who resulted from miscegenation. In the early 2000s, there was a call to reclaim the term to be used exclusively for mixed-race Native Hawaiians, and indeed, an uncritical use of this term can inadvertently serve to erase the experiences of indigenous Hawaiians (Bernstein and De La Cruz 2008). Yet, as we can see in the naming of these YouTube channels and their content, many individuals throughout the United States continue to identify as hapa with much pride and affection (Taniguchi and Heidenreich 2005)—a troubling instance of a minority community striving for empowerment without regard for the histories of oppression and settler colonialism that may be obscured in doing so. Indeed, many videos on these two channels specifically discuss the personal significance of using this term. For instance, vloggers admit that they often did not know the term “hapa” existed until they joined a YouTube community, but that they are now happy to use this term in order to connect with other like-minded individuals. Max D. Capo tells the story of how he learned about the word “hapa” in 2011 when Asian American YouTuber David Choi used that word to describe him and that a woman told him and his half Japanese friend that they looked alike. Although they were both confused by the term at the time, this moment served to awaken him to the fact that hapas shared a common identity that was connected to common experiences such as this one. Later when he decided to make YouTube videos about his “24 years of experience as a half Japanese person,” he started asking other friends about their common experiences. He used the name “Hapa Hour,” but as he states, “I just borrowed this term for the sake of being able to share this video and have it easily understood as half Asian as well as half Japanese, so I hope I didn’t really offend anyone” (Capo 2014). Although no discussion has taken place on either site of the contested use of this term for Native Hawaiians, it is clear that the participants see their use of “hapa” as one of empowerment and pride.

Who Are Mixed-Race Japanese Americans?

The growing population of mixed-race Japanese Americans has long been of interest to scholars within ethnic studies. In Rebecca Chiyoko King’s (1997) investigation of Queen Pageants at the Cherry Blossom Festival in San Francisco’s Japantown, she finds that the increasing participation of mixed-race candidates in the pageant remind us that what it means to be Japanese American is constantly changing. Pageant contestants evidence the fact that

mixed-race Japanese Americans are forced to continually authenticate their ethnic identities in response to the perceptions of others that they do not fully belong. But at the same time, the Japanese American community also is in the process of changing to accommodate its shifting racial makeup and the increasing presence of mixed-race families. This process of continual change is also seen in documentary films about mixed-race Japanese Americans, such as those examined by Shima Yoshida (2013). He finds that documentary films exploring mixed-race Japanese American identity are often grounded in the impact of World War II on Japanese American families, which is often seen as the impetus for outmarriage and the creation of interracial families. Beyond the impact of the war, Yoshida also finds common ground across the documentaries in terms of narratives of assimilation into mainstream American culture, the loss of Japanese language and culture, and feelings of not physically appearing the way that they identified. These discussions of mixed-race Japanese American identifications must also be understood as continually in motion, as mixed-race Japanese Americans in particular undergo a long-term process of developing their identities in relation to their environments and communities (Collins 2000).

This research on mixed-race Japanese Americans can be contrasted with investigations of “hafu,” or mixed-race Japanese individuals living in Japan. Indeed, the sociocultural context of Japan is not the same as the United States, and thus the experiences of mixed-race individuals are shaped in distinctive ways. For instance, Sara Oikawa and Tomoko Yoshida (2007) find that the expectation for homogeneity in Japan leads to considerable discrimination and shame, with many mixed-race Japanese individuals wishing they could just be treated like a “normal Japanese” (645). As with mixed-race Japanese Americans, these experiences often shift over time, with other researchers (e.g., Oshima 2014) finding that older hafu can come to feel that being of mixed race in Japan is an asset because it can garner popularity and positive attention, or can reflect a shift toward a more multicultural Japan. Shifting representations of hafu in Japanese media reflect both the marginality and celebration of cultural hybridity, particularly when considering the treatment of African American–Japanese blending, such as with the hafu star Jero, who sings Japanese traditional music called enka (Fellezs 2012). The cultural, social, and historical differences described in these studies remind us that the context of the United States and Japan are very different in shaping the way that identities are developed and experienced. Indeed, studies of Japanese American people and studies of Japanese people are quite different, and this logic follows in considering mixed-race Japanese Americans and mixed-race Japanese.

Yet in investigating the YouTube communities that form around mixed-race identities, we often see the forging of connections between these different populations—not because there are no important differences, but

because these two populations have a strong desire to form a common identity and community via this digital medium. While much research on multiracial people agrees that adolescence and young adulthood are important moments for exploring and coming to terms with one's racial identity (Renn 2004), this examination of participation in online communities captures some of the ways that these explorations are manifested through the active participation of those who see a meaningful connection to one another. Mixed-race Nikkei are clearly using online communities such as those found on YouTube to work through their changing relationships to their own concept of race, ethnicity, culture, and family, because they feel that these communities offer a safe space for exploring, processing, and garnering support for these different facets of their lives. In the following sections, I first explore the affordances of YouTube for creating digital mixed-race communities and trace the affinities of those communities through analyzing the videos of mixed-race Japanese participants. I then conclude with a discussion of the idea that mixed-race Japanese American identities are fluid and ever-changing, even to the point of becoming banal, but that their diasporic configurations nonetheless help to point us in new directions for understanding the significance of forging meaningful and potentially transformative communities across racial, cultural, and national differences.

Building Virtual Communities around Mixed-Race Identities

As a site for uploading and sharing video with the motto "Broadcast Yourself," YouTube might seem like an unlikely space for building community. Yet researchers have found that despite the potential for users to merely passively consume content or to narcissistically promote their own videos, YouTube users revel in the opportunity to connect to other users (Lange 2008). Their participation in creating and sharing videos facilitates community building in terms of "the feeling of companionship, the ability to create meaningful relationships and practices, and even a sense of emotional attachment to 'their' site" (Rotman and Preece 2010, 330). In an investigation of the way that Inuit youth are using YouTube, Nancy Wachowich and Willow Scobie (2010) find that they use their fragmented videographies and visual excerpts of everyday life to create new online and offline social networks. Such outcomes are particularly meaningful for those who are geographically or socially isolated, as "storytellers might be by themselves in front of their cameras in their bedrooms at home, but on YouTube they are not alone" (100). This aspect of community creation seems to be a central motivation for those who participate in HapaUnited, particularly given that it is a group channel that is constantly inviting new participants to play a role in shepherding its continued growth. Many videos specifically discuss the fact that users enjoy meeting other hapas through the channel, such as this post: "I was

curious if you guys were interested in talking on Messengers and stuff, cuz I really like making new friends, and that goes for anybody else too. I've had a few people who watch these videos comment to my profile and they talk to me and they've become my friend on Messenger and Skype and MSN and stuff. And that's cool because I like making new friends and stuff" (Hapa-United 2011). Beyond discussions within the videos themselves of the relationships that are developing, there are often dozens (sometimes hundreds) of comments following each video with new users introducing themselves and affirming a connection to the discussion at hand. The moderators often respond to the comments, particularly when the comment is related to the content of the specific video, rather than the extremely frequent posting of individuals simply stating their own racial backgrounds in the comments. While the more popular channels on YouTube fund their programming through the monetization of viewership (Kim 2012), the site remains free to use (and free from advertisements) for relatively small communities such as those on HapaUnited. This openness does not erase the general desire for participants to create desirable content and sustain meaningful connections with their viewers—on the contrary, the lack of monetary reward simply contributes to the creation of a different economy of supply and demand based on the individual's ability to communicate clearly their identity and value (Banet-Weiser 2011).

In considering the unique affordances of YouTube, we can also consider the differences between YouTube videos about mixed-race Japanese communities and documentaries or other forms of traditional broadcast media. As mentioned earlier, there have been many explorations of mixed-race Japanese families and individuals within documentary film, including *Hafu: The Mixed Race Experience in Japan* (2013), *One Big Hapa Family* (2010), *Hapa: One Step at a Time* (2001), and *Doubles: Japan and America's Intercultural Children* (1995). Yet each documentary narrative must be understood as serving to capture a moment in time and rendering it a static portrait, in order to educate viewers about the way that things were. We can particularly note the many years that it takes to shoot, edit, and distribute a traditional documentary. Furthermore, the structure of a documentary film is such that it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Although YouTube vlogs can similarly be seen to memorialize a single moment as part of a historical record, we must also recognize that the constantly growing and shifting communities that serve to collectively produce YouTube's narrative database provide a way for stories to continually shift and be updated in real time. When users interact with a YouTube channel, they are free to watch videos in any order with little imposed direction as to the flow from one video to the next—they can watch videos that are grouped by moderator, by topic, by the date posted, or any other organizing mechanism. This flow is always changing, since there always remains the possibility that new videos can be

added, or that users will add new comments to the videos that enliven new conversations and dialogues.

The Evolving Construction of Hapa on YouTube

Within these YouTube communities centered around hapa issues, we can see many specific illustrations of this potential for growth and change, rather than stasis. At the most basic level, we can see many participants on HapaUnited encountering the word “hapa” for the first time when they create their video for the site. Their lack of familiarity with this term is evidenced in their shifting pronunciation—from “happa” to “hoppa”—as they post later videos. A few of the participants include videos where they apologize for pronouncing the word wrong and thank commenters for correcting their pronunciation. Max D. Capo and his “Hapa Hour” cohosts make a similar mistake, which he explains in one video: “We got a lot of flak, you know I actually read all those YouTube comments. Like people are saying you’re pronouncing ‘hapa’ wrong. I know, I know it’s wrong . . . I was used to half, hafu, halfie, just half Japanese, it wasn’t really like big enough of a thing that I thought there was a coined word for it. Hapa, I kind of learned about this word about three years ago” (Capo 2014). His explanation reveals the fact that he did not grow up identifying as hapa, but that he has just begun using the word to describe himself and connecting to other hapas through his participation on YouTube. This simple mistake in pronunciation is a reminder that many of these individuals are not already part of either mixed-race or Japanese American communities; they are learning about these communities and their role in shaping identities as they are posting these videos.

The idea of “hapa” has always been a somewhat nationalistic identity that has been taken up by those who are partially Asian, but who are primarily within the U.S. context. This Americentrism is also prevalent within discussions of mixed race on HapaUnited and Max D. Capo, particularly when we take into consideration that the language being used is English. This reliance on English serves to exclude those living in Japan who do not speak English, and thus causes us to consider whose voices are represented in these online communities. For instance, the documentary *Hafu: The Mixed Race Experience in Japan* (2013) includes the voices of those who have one parent who is Japanese and one parent who is Venezuelan, Ghanaian, or Korean, and their interviews are conducted in Japanese. This reminds us that when English is the primary language used within an online community, participation is limited to only some mixed-race individuals. Both HapaUnited and Max D. Capo center on participation by those who are American or living in an English-speaking country. Despite this Americentrism and guiding participation from mixed-race Japanese Americans, these online communities are

still finding many ways to extend the borders of this community and thereby to redefine what it means to be mixed-race Nikkei.

Alone Together: Mixed-Race Japanese as Hapa

We can better understand how mixed-race Nikkei experiences are participating in these online communities by further exploring the specific content of their videos. One of the first things that we can note is that nearly all of the participants on HapaUnited (including all of the part-Japanese contributors) initiate themselves into the community with an introductory video that affirms a common set of experiences. Following is an excerpt from an introductory video that explicitly does so, particularly focusing on the way that this contributor came to understand her own racial identity as different from those around her, which was uncomfortable and even distressing:

I think for the most part, growing up as a hapa is pretty much the same for everyone. Just, maybe at different times and whatnot. I'm pretty sure that's what really makes people be able to be closer to other hapas is that they're the same. But I'll still give you a bit of a story anyway. When I was little, I would grow up around Japanese people. As a child I didn't notice it, I didn't notice race, as I got older I would start to feel uncomfortable or like I didn't fit in. I always felt too big or too small. If I was at my Japanese friend's house, I would feel like a foreign friend, a white foreign friend. If I was at my non-Asian friend's house, I would feel like the foreign friend! No matter where I would go, I was always the foreign friend. So I couldn't really escape that and I started to feel not accepted anywhere. (HapaUnited 2012b)

This video serves to affirm and reify a set of shared experiences around feelings of being the racial “other” that are familiar for many hapas. Although she references her specific experiences as a mixed-race Japanese American in her story, she clearly indicates that she doesn't feel that this ethnic or national identity is significant—on the contrary, her feelings of foreignness are meant to be understood as universal for all hapas, regardless of ethnic specificities.

The universality of these narratives across national contexts is also indicated through the absence of familiar Japanese American generational terms such as *issei*, *nisei*, *sansei*, or *yonsei*. The failure to identify with this generational tradition is in line with James Fuji Collins's (2012) finding that bicultural Japanese Americans feel more comfortable identifying with the term “Nikkei” because it connotes a sense of multiple identities that are less fixed within a single context. Although none of the hapas on YouTube use the term

“Nikkei” to identify themselves (as mentioned throughout, the term “hapa” and identification with a Japanese parent are the only ascribed identities), it is useful, nevertheless, to orient this discussion around a term that is flexible yet can apply to mixed-race Japanese across the globe.

We can see a similar inclination toward creating a unifying narrative across hapa experiences in Max D. Capo’s early videos as well. His first “Hapa Hour” video, partnered with his half-Japanese friend Shizuka, is called “12 Things Half Japanese (half Asian) People Get All the Time.” The name alone indicates that there is a focus on their specific experiences as mixed-race Japanese Americans, but that the video has a broader aim of widening its relevance to all half Asian people. Their list includes questions such as “What are you?” and “Which half are you more of?” as well as accusations about not looking Japanese or white “enough,” about being exotic, and assumptions that the mother is Japanese and the father is white. While these descriptions are clearly ethnically specific—and even can be connected to specific sociohistorical constructs, such as the prevalence of marriage between white soldiers and Japanese women (Murphy-Shigematsu 2001)—the two hosts want to frame their experiences as universal across all hapas.

The predominance of these homogenizing discourses helps us to better understand the meaning of mixed-race Japanese American participation in these YouTube communities. The online testimony of mixed-race people serves to construct a common identity through reinforcing pride in their mixed-race experiences, as well as through marking the singularity of these experiences as a unique identity. This kind of storytelling is a common practice for those seeking to build identity-based affinities; for instance, members of South Asian student clubs have also been seen to downplay differences despite observable in-group differences (Shrikant 2015). In these YouTube videos, mixed-race participants affirm the common experiences of feeling like an outsider, being uncomfortable with the questions that others so often ask about their appearance and background, and struggling to develop a cohesive identity. We can clearly see that mixed-race individuals feel a strong desire to assert their existence within a world that is indefatigably biased toward assumptions of monoraciality, and where their identities are constantly being questioned and undermined. Yet we can also consider the fact that it is important for hapas to collectively articulate the commonalities of this identity in the face of extreme heterogeneity—after all, the collective of mixed-race peoples, even if narrowed to only those who are part-Asian, is a vastly diverse community. It includes individuals whose identities comprise an infinite array of ethnic, racial, cultural, generational, linguistic, class, religious, and other identifications. If scholars of race and ethnicity must continually point to the diversity contained within a single racial category such as Asian American or African American, this acknowledgment is doubly true for mixed-race communities. In the face of such

clear heterogeneity, it makes sense then that many mixed-race individuals can feel isolated and alienated amid the process of racial identity development and seek to reach out to others who share even the barest similarity of experience.

Boundary-Crossing in the Nikkei Diaspora

For mixed-race Nikkei in these videos, we can also see the significance and salience of connecting to the Japanese diaspora, rather than restricting their community within the borders of the United States or North America. As mentioned earlier, the use of English language in both of these communities certainly privileges the participation of Americans and those whose heritage includes an American parent. Yet we also see a vibrant contingent of participants from all over the globe. Of those who are part-Japanese, we can see participants who are half Japanese and half English (princesspinkypeach), half Japanese and half New Zealander (ItsLisaDoll), as well as half Japanese and half Greek (Pinkribbonsxo). These three participants identified speak English with the accents of their native British, New Zealander, and Greek homelands, which serves to position them globally amid the other American-accented speakers. ItsLisaDoll, from New Zealand, discusses how hapas fit into various social groups. She described her own happiness at being accepted by Japanese students in New Zealand: “At my school, the Japanese people invite me along to stuff, which is really cool. Even though I’m half I’m still included. They actually gave me a nickname, ‘Champon,’ which is like a noodle mixture dish, a mixture of things, and I think that’s sort of making reference to my nationality, I’m a mixture of things, half Japanese, half New Zealander.” This brief anecdote reminds us that there are many national and ethnic identities at play in the lives of mixed-race Nikkei, even as such stories speak to common experiences. Beyond including these diasporic participants among their ranks, we can also note that many of the mixed-race Japanese Americans who participate in HapaUnited and Max D. Capo’s “Hapa Hour” have spent time living in or visiting Japan. Capo himself frames his entire channel around his experiences as a mixed-race Japanese American coming to live in Japan and adapting to life there. Through his “Hapa Hour” videos, we are then introduced to many of the mixed-race Japanese American friends he meets while living in Japan, and together they discuss their humorous encounters and experiences.

Although Japan has had a long history of its populations flowing outward to all parts of the world, the concept of “diaspora” is not commonly used to describe these formations. Japanese Americans in particular have not tended to maintain the sense of connection to an idealized homeland or identification with members of the global diaspora that distinguish other migrant members of a diaspora (Butler 2001). The idea of a diaspora is

sometimes used within the Latin American context, and the term “Nikkei” itself indicates a population of Japanese outside of Japan (White 2003). I argue that a diasporic perspective can help us to better understand the connection that the part-Japanese members of HapaUnited and Max D. Capo’s “Hapa Hour” feel to one another. A diasporic perspective can help to more accurately describe the many different participants—who, as described earlier, represent a complicated and heterogeneous population of those who live all over the world and are constantly moving to new locations, including Japan. But it also helps us to make sense of the emotional connection that participants feel toward this global community of hapas and to their own identification as part Japanese.

This becomes particularly evident when looking at the videos posted by mixed-race Nikkei individuals on their own personal YouTube channels, which are always included as a link from the HapaUnited or Max D. Capo YouTube channels. On their own individual channels, when they are freed from the constraints of needing to talk exclusively about being hapa, many of the mixed-race Nikkei post videos of themselves singing covers of Japanese pop music, doing tourist activities in Japan, practicing their Japanese language skills, or doing “beauty hauls” where they describe purchasing Japanese beauty products. Although examining the videos of these personal YouTube sites in detail is beyond the scope of this chapter, they nonetheless provide evidence of the connection that mixed-race Nikkei from all over the world feel to Japan as a site for cultural and personal engagement. This identification with Japan and its culture reinforces the relevance of a diasporic identity within these mixed-race Nikkei millennials, as opposed to a distinctly national identity such as “Japanese American” or “Japanese Australian.” In fact, the term “Japanese American” is not used on any of the YouTube communities studied in this chapter, and the term “Japanese” is only used to describe ethnic identity, rather than national affiliation.

The failure of hapas to identify as Japanese American is also reflected in the way that Capo labels his videos; he is always very careful to make the distinction that he is hapa, mixed race, or half Japanese. This distinction is most apparent in his “Hapa Hour” series that focuses on the topic of mixed-race Japanese experiences where he clearly foregrounds his mixed heritage, but we can also see this distinction in his other videos, which include a wide range of material including skits and humorous sketches, playing video games, doing silly challenges, giving tips for actors, and otherwise creating records of his life. In these other videos, we might expect to see some discussion of being a Japanese American living in Japan, or meeting other Japanese Americans who live in Japan, or otherwise identifying with the larger category of Japanese Americans. Yet this is not the case—he avoids using the term “Japanese American” to describe himself or the incongruity of his experiences living in Japan, despite the fact that so many of his videos focus

specifically on what makes living in Japan strange or uncomfortable. Moreover, we can also see that he does not describe himself as Japanese either. For instance, one of his videos is titled “Two and a Half Japanese Guys Punching Each Other,” as it features himself and two friends. Similarly, in a video featuring a diverse ensemble cast, he includes in the description, “Fun Fact: There are a total of 3 1/4 Japanese people in this video!” It is clear that he does not identify as fully Japanese or fully Japanese American and allows for no slippage between himself and those who are 100 percent Japanese. It seems as though he does not see any common ground between himself as a mixed-race Japanese American and a full-blooded Japanese American or Japanese.

Such a framing can be seen to challenge the standard definitions of Japanese American identities as rooted in national citizenship and, moreover, may be implicitly critiquing the assumption that Japanese American communities are necessarily inclusive of mixed-race families. This stance does not deny that mixed-race individuals actually do identify as Japanese American, but that they seem to avoid doing so within these mediated spaces for hapa community formations. As with all forms of self-branding, such identifications must always be understood as a performance of only one version of themselves that takes specific audiences into consideration. In this case, the lack of identification with Japanese American communities may signal the perception that Japanese Americans are not the targeted audience or that a significant collective of Japanese Americans who could be interpellated by such videos is lacking. Yet it also clearly indicates that this specific identity is not central to their characterization of their own heritage, background, or sense of affiliation.

The absence of national identifications is even more striking in comparison to the wide range of mixed-race identities subsumed under the category of “hapa,” which is the central mode of identification. We can see this inattention to nationality in the Capo’s videos—he seems quite rigid in how he defines “Japanese” (in that he is not Japanese), but he is flexible and fluid in the way that he defines the term “hapa.” His cohorts on the “Hapa Hour” segment come from many different backgrounds, including individuals who are half white and half Burmese, three-quarters black and one-quarter Japanese, half Taiwanese and half white, and half white and half Japanese like himself. He invites each of these individuals to share the screen with him in discussing topics such as “More White or Asian? Parent, National Pride, Identity” and “Do All Half Japanese / Half Asians (of the Same Mix) Look Alike?” By inviting those who are of different racial and ethnic backgrounds from himself to join in his discussion of mixed-race experiences, we can see how as a mixed-race Japanese American, he seems to feel he has more in common with other hapas from around the world than other Japanese Americans.

The identification of slippage within the boundaries enclosed by categories such as “nation,” “ethnicity,” “culture,” and “citizenship” reflects a common

way of viewing mixed-race communities. As literal embodiments of hybridity, mixed-race people are often theorized as occupying “third spaces” that transgress or disrupt many different kinds of fixed categories (Bolatagici 2004). Beverly Yuen Thompson (2000) writes about how her experiences of racial complexity as a biracial woman overlap with and complement her experiences of sexual fluidity as a bisexual woman, while Rafael Perez-Torres (2006, 4) reminds us that the body of the mixed-race Chicanos, or *mestizaje*, have always undertaken projects of decentralization and forging new relational identities wherein the body is a “site of tenuous, complex, and conflicted change.” Given that mixed-race coupling and marriages are often the result of immigration and other forms of shifting racial geographies (Wright et al. 2003), this potential for hybridity in terms of national identification is clearly relevant and is evident in the mixed-race Japanese Americans analyzed in this chapter. The hybridity embodied by these mixed-race Nikkei is what helps to more firmly constitute a diasporic sensibility, as diasporas too are sites that are always in motion and adjusting to accommodate global identifications within local contexts.

The Banality of Being Mixed-Race Japanese American

While we have seen some of the ways that mixed-race Nikkei discuss the meaningful aspects of their identities that draw them together with other hapas, these are not the only ways that identity is discussed on these YouTube channels. Another common theme within the videos is a discussion about struggling to come up with new content. This theme may seem counter to the reality, which is that over 120 videos are posted on the site and it was clearly quite lively with new content until it began to wane in 2013, yet many videos focus on this problem. One woman discusses the experience of identifying mixed-race people on the street and then states, “That’s all I really have to talk about. It’s kind of hard sometimes to think of hapa-related topics . . . Sorry, this was probably a little lame.” Another one of the site’s moderators says in a video, “I feel bad because everyone really knows what they’re going to talk about, but I have no idea. . . . Are you guys maybe interested in learning Japanese? I could do that. What type of stuff do you guys want me to talk to you about?” Many individuals profess that they are not sure what they should be talking about and ask their audience to be sure to submit topics they want to hear more about. This struggle could possibly be attributed to the somewhat strict schedule that the moderators often impose, given that at the site’s height its schedule called for a new video every two days.

But it also may be the case that a resistive potential of mixed-race Japanese Americans is being made visible within these struggles. Indeed, discussions of how difficult it is to find new ways to mine the depths of one’s identity may point to the fact that one’s identity can often become banal and

that not all who participate within the HapaUnited community find their own mixed-race identity to be a generative source for discussion and commentary. One video that depicts the nuances of this struggle features two high school mixed-race Japanese Americans. They are having a conversation where a male participant is trying to get the female participant to stay on target in discussing hapa issues. Yet she resists, refusing to answer his questions with any depth, eventually making a flippant joke and brushing off the entire conversation.

A: You being half Asian, what do you think of all of the cookings your mom makes?

B: It's awesome, Japanese food rocks! I like Italian food, too, though.

A: No, you have to talk about, like, how being half Asian influences what your mom makes.

A: Um, she's Japanese, that influences what she makes.

B: Does she still cook like American food?

A: No. My mom doesn't. . . . She cooks Japanese food, because she Japanese! Oh, I need to go to CVS later. (HapaUnited 2012a)

We can see in this exchange that the male asking questions feels some responsibility to keep the conversation focused on how being half Asian becomes meaningful or important. Yet we must also consider that this evaluation is perhaps not the case—perhaps she truly feels that the reflection of her ethnic identity in her food choices is not meaningful or significant. Later in the video, we witness the following exchange, with the male participant again asking questions of the female participant:

A: If you were to be born in Japan instead of America to your same parents, and were to live in Japan, would you be different?

B: Probably, because the culture is different there.

A: If you were full Japanese and were born and raised in America, do you think you would be any different [from who] you are right now?

B: No.

Again, we see the refusal to consider that her identity as a hapa or a mixed-race Japanese American has made a significant impact on her life. Although she briefly considers that life in Japan would be different than life in the United States because of external differences such as culture, she does not even consider the fact that changing her own racial or ethnic identity would make her life in the United States any different. Such a statement seems to directly contradict the arguments that other participants make about how significant their identities are or that being hapa has had a profound effect

on their ability to find community and feelings of belonging. The woman interviewed in this video does not seem to want to consider or discuss her identity in this way, and yet she remains an active participant within the HapaUnited community. She posts a total of six videos, including discussions of cooking and eating, dating, beauty, and responding to common questions. Within these videos are many references to the common experiences of hapas, such as her video complaining about the repetitive questions that hapas are always asked. Given that she continues to post these videos, we can see that she clearly values the community aspect of participating in HapaUnited—that participating in this community is what is meaningful and worthwhile, perhaps more so than actually hashing out what her own identity means to her.

Videos such as these remind us that participating in identity-based communities requires labor in order to construct a proper performance. The relentless repeating of mantras and affirmations of common experiences across the different videos together produce the ideal hapa subject position. These videos work to discipline the variety of hapa experiences into a cohesive whole, as if there can possibly be unity within this constructed identity. Yet within the videos narrated in this section, we can see resistance to this dominant positioning. Rather than continuing to rehearse the acceptable narratives, this woman refuses to participate and begins to expose her disinterest or perhaps even frustration with these questions about her hapa identity. Although no videos are posted within these communities that actively work to deconstruct narratives of a collective hapa identity, the enthusiastic participation of even those who are weary of discussing their identity further foregrounds the struggle inherent to building diasporic communities.

Conclusion

The videos analyzed in this chapter help to reveal some of the different ways that mixed-race Nikkei are using online tools to reify the construction of a global hapa community that is deeply connected to a diasporic sense of Japanese identity. These videos make up only a small sample of mixed-race Nikkei perspectives, and the cultural norms of these specific YouTube communities profoundly shape the discourse that is shared through these individual vlogs. Yet, even these limitations clearly help to point to the existence of a meaningful discourse about mixed-race Nikkei experiences: within a digital community that is premised on mixed-race belonging, we can ask why it is that so many participants feel obligated to repeat the same narratives over and over, and what is gained in doing so. This study particularly helps to shed light on the ever-growing population of mixed-race Japanese Americans, who we can see must be distinguished from monoracial Japanese

Americans in many ways. Through their active participation in online communities that center both hapa and diasporic Japanese identifications, we are reminded that the fluidity and hybridity of shifting identifications for mixed-race Japanese Americans can work toward deconstructing the fixity of categories such as “race” and “nation,” even as they work toward collectively building something new.

NOTE

1. Throughout this chapter, I attempt to differentiate between mixed-race Japanese Americans and mixed-race Japanese, who together make up mixed-race Nikkei (along with other part-Japanese individuals all over the world). Yet it is often extremely difficult to distinguish between these categories, as the identities of mixed-race individuals reflect complex relationships to race/ethnicity, nation, culture, citizenship, community, and family background.

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