

Evolution of the Multiracial Movement by Ramona Douglas

The Evolution of the Multiracial Movement by Ramona Douglas The formation of local grassroots organizations in the late 1970's and early 1980's, and the subsequent bonding of interracial adoptive families over issues of child-rearing, education, identity formation, and health created cohesive mission from which a national advocacy movement emerged. It is my belief that understanding the birth of the multiracial movement in America requires that certain questions be explored and answered. For instance, how did the multiracial movement come into being, and in the process, overcome the challenges of nomenclature and diverse community experiences? What were the origins of the movement that brought these communities together in the late 1970's and early 1980's? What issues were significant enough to warrant the need to form national and regional multiracial advocacy groups across the country throughout the 1980's and early 1990's? What ideologies divided the multiracial leadership regarding the labeling/identifying of multiracial people on the 2000 Census? What constitutes multiracial communities of the 21st century? Finally, where is the multiracial movement focused today and what are its hopes for the future? Since the exploration of each of these questions could easily be the basis for a chapter, my intent is to give readers an overview of the multiracial movement's history, its challenges and accomplishments. At the close of the discussion, there will be an introduction to a future possibility for multiracial people. What difference can be made in our society as a whole? What conversations need to be had across diverse racial and ethnic community lines that will transform our relationship to race as a nation and give our next generation of multiracial people a future worth living in?

Birth of the Multiracial Movement Multiracial people and interracial relationships have been an integral part of America's history since the first European settlers arrived in the New World and established the first North American English colony in 1607. At that time, only White male settlers and Indigenous populations were present. The first ships that carried African slaves as cargo arrived 12 years later, and in that same year the first women of strictly European descent joined their White male counterparts in the tiny colony. This shortage of what was perceived as suitable women during the early development of the Americas resulted in widespread mixing of the races. ² Those early relationships were not all voluntary. Many were formed out of rape, servitude, and denial of basic human rights. The offspring of those unions suffered the fate of the non-White parent in most instances, whether they were free, indentured servants, or slaves. ³ There were brief periods in this early history when it was not deemed "immoral" or "unlawful" for different races to mix. But it was not until 1967 that the U.S. Supreme Court gave legitimacy to relationships between people of different racial backgrounds. The historic ruling of *Loving v. Virginia* ⁴ finally put to rest "the last vestiges of our nation's anti-miscegenation laws, ⁵ which had tarnished our historical growth and development" since the 1600s. ⁶ It took another 12 years post *Loving* before the first viable multiracial organization emerged in 1978 in San Francisco that is still in existence today — Interracial/Inter-Cultural Pride (I-Pride). Other organizations soon sprang up around the country, notably: Biracial Family Network (BFN) of Chicago in 1981; Interracial Family Circle (IFC) of Washington, D.C., in 1983; Multiracial Americans of Southern California (MASC) in 1987; Project RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally) in 1991, and Hapa Issues Forum (HIF) in 1992. Many others groups in key American cities came together for social interactions, political development, and networking of ideas on interracial living. By the late 1980's the climate and conversations on race, specifically on mixed race, had escalated to a degree where a very vocal group of interracial families and multiracial adults decided that a national advocacy organization would be the best way to have their concerns and issues brought to the forefront of America's public consciousness. They were no longer satisfied with potlucks and picnics. Multiracial families with school-aged children and mixed race adults entering the job market would no longer accept people outside the community defining their cultural, ethnic, and racial affiliations. The Formation of the Association of MultiEthnic Americans (AMEA)

On November 12, 1988, these pioneers in multiracial civil rights gathered in Berkeley, California, and called themselves the Organizing Committee of the National Association of MultiEthnic Americans. Out of that meeting, with 14 charter member organizations from across the country in attendance, AMEA was born. AMEA's first Executive Committee was elected with Carlos Fernandez (I-Pride), president; Ramona Douglass (BFN), vice president; Reginald Daniel (MASC), secretary; and Sarah Ross (HONEY), ⁷ treasurer. Next, AMEA drafted a basic statement of purpose, defining itself as an educational organization that "promoted positive awareness of interracial and multiethnic people and families." ⁸ In the years between 1988 and 1995, AMEA's efforts concentrated on a) incorporating and obtaining 501(c) 3 nonprofit status; b) testifying before Congress through its Political Action Committee (PAC) on the necessity for creating a multiracial/multiethnic category on all federal forms that requested racial data; c) creating an educational/legal advisory board with connections to prestigious institutes of learning; and d) forming strategic alliances with other national advocacy groups such a project RACE and Hapa Issues Forum (HIF) to monitor local, state, and federal activities affecting interracial communities.

Accomplishments and Challenges on Issues of Race & Multi-Race

The period between the mid-1990's until the implementation of the 2000 Census saw the coming together and splitting apart of several factions within the multiracial movement. Alliances that were formed out of necessity between AMEA's President Ramona Douglass and Project RACE's Executive Director, Susan Graham, during the years 1994-1997 enabled our diverse communities to be considered a force to be reckoned with on issues of race and multirace. Graham, a European Jewish American woman who was interracially married with two African American/Caucasian children, and Douglass, a multiracial adult of African, American Indian, and Italian decent, represented major blocks of interest within the multiracial community. Project RACE systematically obtained multiracial category legislative victories in Ohio (sub. H.B. No. 154 in 1992), and Illinois (S.B. 421-Public Act 88-71 in 1993). In 1994, a model piece of legislation, Senate Bill 149, was accomplished in Georgia that added a "multiracial" category not only to public school forms, "but to all state agency forms, as well as all employment forms and

applications. By 1993, both AMEA and Project RACE had testified on behalf of the multiracial community at Congressional Hearings on Racial and Ethnic Standards. In 1994, Project RACE was asked to represent multiracial interests at a meeting of federal government agencies at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C. However, it was the appointment of AMEA's multiracial president, Ramona Douglass, to the 2000 Census Advisory Committee in December of 1995 that gave diverse multiracial/multiethnic interests a national forum in which to be heard by all branches of federal government. Douglass's appointment to the Census Advisory Committee was soon criticized as endorsing a too "conservative" pace. Charles Byrd, editor of the Internet-based *Interracial Voice*, believed that too much time and energy was being wasted in self-explanation to traditional civil rights organizations and ethnic special interest groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), and the National Coalition for the Accurate Count of Asian and Pacific Americans. These organizations vehemently opposed the possibility of adding a multiracial category or any distinction for multiracial people on the 2000 Census. Byrd and others felt that a multiracial stand-alone category was more acceptable than any compromise that would only allow our community to check two or more boxes. In June 1997, these ideological differences came to a head at the Third Multiracial Leadership Conference in Oakland, California. The participating organizations from across the country reached a consensus that a "check one or more box" format rather than a separate multiracial identifier would serve the highest community good. It would: a) allow for the celebration of diverse heritages; b) support the continued monitoring of existing civil rights legislation that impacted multiracial people directly; and c) it would also provide the most information for the accurate collection of racial/ethnic data for medical diagnosis and research. Of the organizations in attendance, only Project RACE rescinded its initial endorsement of the Multiracial Summit Statement. With that decision, AMEA and Project RACE ended their three-year strategic alliance. However, advocates of the "check one or more box" format found that their position was aligned with diverse organizations including the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), the American Medical Association (AMA), and the federal Interagency Committee for the Review of Race & Ethnic Standards, which endorsed the implementation of that format on the 2000 Census race question.

What Constitutes the Multiracial Community in the 21st Century?

Census 2000's historic "check one or more" change resulted in nearly seven million Americans self-identifying with more than one race. Of the 6.8 million Americans who indicated two or more races on Census 2000, the actual number who identify as part of a multiracial community is still debated by federal health, social, and political agencies as well as community advocates of every hue and persuasion. Do multiracial people today even agree on racial/ethnic nomenclature? The answer is...not really. Some are wedded to non-race specific identifiers like "mixed" or "multiracial," which when used alone makes it impossible to distinguish what specific races actually apply. Because this would obscure much needed medical data for proper diagnosis and research on multiracial health is one reason why the single term, "multiracial," on the 2000 Census met heated opposition and obstacles both from within and outside this diverse community. Others have created or use terms unique to their specific racial mix. Some examples include "Blacknese," "Mexopino," or "Eurasian." Still others in the community have suggested that we abandon racial categories altogether and advocate for the adoption of legislation like the Racial Privacy Initiative (RPI),¹⁰ sponsored by the controversial University of California Board of Regents member, Ward Connerly. Champions of RPI believe that passage of this Initiative on the California ballot in March of 2004 will help bring us closer to a colorblind society for subsequent generations of multiracial people. Many multiracial and multiethnic Americans, unlike those who choose to identify solely with one race, remain unsure about whether or not to embrace their collective identity. The sheer diversity of the mixed race community also presents unique issues. For instance, the issue of hypodescent¹¹ resonates differently with Black/White multiracial people than with Asian/White and any other racial combination of multiracial people. For those who call themselves "hapa," (of mixed Asian or Pacific Islander heritage) instead of "multiracial," the ability to honor the heritages of both parents took precedence over the need to have a single multiracial identifier on Census 2000.¹² Similarly, for those who identify with both their Hispanic and non-Hispanic origins, common language and specific ethnic mix sometimes had mixed race Hispanics at odds with their non-Hispanic multiracial brethren on discussions and alliances around the Census race question. Multiracial people are often asked by monoracial people how such diverse communities can ever be cohesive. These questions fail to recognize the diversity of "monoracial" communities. Who could say that there is not incredible diversity of shade, opinion, and experience among African Americans or Asian Americans? Despite the considerable diversity of the mixed race community, there is much that people who do not fit into one racial category share in our highly race-conscious society. Future Possibilities Post-Census 2000, multiracial advocates are left with the aftermath of their embittered battles over the race question. Inevitably, questions like, "What is next?" and "What is the new generation of multiracial leaders standing for in this decade?" arise. The answers are still forming. One thing is for sure: the face of the movement is changing. Dozens of multiracial student groups have popped up on college campuses from coast to coast. MAVIN magazine, which was founded by Matt Kelley in 1999 as a freshman at Wesleyan University, was created to help young multiracial people share their personal experiences. Today, it has become a national foundation addressing mixed race and transracially adopted issues. Annual conferences such as the Pan Collegiate Conference (held since 1996) and Hapa Issues Forum's regional conferences have helped to create annual focal events for mixed race college students. Most of these groups continue to celebrate the mixed race experience through art, poetry, composition, and other creative forms of self-expression. Many of these organizations are also incorporating the transracial adoptee experience into their mission statements. Although much of the campus organizations' focus remains on creating a social outlet to explore mixed race issues, many are also beginning to explore political and health issues, like holding bone marrow drives and fighting against anti-Affirmative Action legislation. At the MAVIN Foundation

National Conference on the Mixed Race Experience held in April 2003, students representing dozens of mixed race student organizations came together to create a national coalition of mixed race student organizations to help shape the future of the multiracial movement. New national organizations like Swirl are also playing prominent roles in the movement. Following the lead of some of the movement's pioneers, this young generation is also expanding ties with other diverse communities. As AMEA celebrates its 15 years of advocating on behalf of multiethnic people and families, the organization has shifted from its focus on census recognition of multiracial people. AMEA conducted its first highly successful conference honoring the multiracial child during the fall of 2002 in Tucson, Arizona. Today, AMEA is committed to assisting governmental organizations to comply with Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Directive #15 requiring organizations who receive federal aid and trace race to allow for a "check one or more" policy. AMEA is working with the newer organizations in order to see a generation of American children unfamiliar with the pain and confusion of "check only one race." What is apparent in all of these efforts is the necessity for our multiracial group leaders or representatives to continue to collaborate and dialogue with other communities. If we are ever to eliminate institutional racism in America, we must look to educate not only ourselves but the government agencies that tabulate people, the social services and health departments that categorize, diagnose, and treat people, as well as the general population that attempts to define us. We cannot know true freedom and the celebration of our diversity until we can be comfortable and supportive of every individual's right to choose in the matters of race and ethnic identity.

AMEA ~ Association of MultiEthnic Americans The Association of MultiEthnic Americans's mission is to educate and advocate on behalf of multiethnic individuals and families by collaborating with others to eradicate all forms of discrimination. Founded in 1988, AMEA played a pivotal role in the U.S. Census allowing people to check "one or more races" on Census 2000 forms. Today, AMEA is committed to helping organizations comply with new federal guidelines on racial reporting and hosted the first national conference on the multiracial child in 2002.

Learn more: www.ameasite.orgNotes

1 Families where the race of the parent(s) differs from the race of the adoptive children.2 K.E. Russell, M. Wilson and R. Hall, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).3 Ibid4 Mildred Jester and Richard Perry Loving's landmark interracial marriage case.5 Laws against the mixing and co-habitation of different races.6 D. Brown, "Making the Invisible Visible," in *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier*, ed. M. P.P. Root (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996), 324.7 Honor Our New Ethnic Youth (HONEY), Eugene, Oregon.8 Excerpted from AMEA's mission statement (1988-1999).9 S. Graham, Personal Interview, 1994.10 American Civil Rights Coalition.11 Term from the mythical "one drop of Black blood makes you Black" rule.12 The California-based nonprofit organization Hapa Issues Forum (HIF) was at the forefront of this issue.