

Hapa: The Word of Power by Wei Ming Dariotis

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Preface: I have been struggling for several years with this apparently un-resolvable issue: what to do about "Hapa/hapa"? I finally decided I had to start writing about it, had to start engaging the dialogue, even though I have been afraid of what the controversy might visit upon my professional career. Nearing 40, and having done everything I can to get tenure (though not, as of this writing, having it), I have resolved to live a life more free from fear. This essay represents my commitment to be fully involved in this dialogue, this journey, no matter where it might take us. The poet Truong Tran told me that when he was a young boy his Tolkiensian "ring of power" was the English word "fuck." This word made him American; it was like a secret language, something his parents didn't speak, a word of his own. He used it gleefully, like Bilbo used the ring, to set himself above where he had been. Eventually, like Frodo, Tran had to destroy the ring before it would destroy him. Tran accomplished this by writing his book of poetry, *Within the Margin*.

My ring of power was also a word, the word "Hapa." I first learned this word in 1992, when I was 23 years old. I was a second-year English Literature doctoral student at UC Santa Barbara, and I was enrolled in the course, "The World of Amerasians," taught by Teresa K. Williams. When I learned the word "Hapa," I felt as though a whole new world had opened up to me. Before this, when anybody asked me, "What are you?" I had to answer, "Chinese Greek Swedish English Scottish German Pennsylvania Dutch." This was a list of my ancestry. It is my heritage. However, this list is not my identity. Heritage does not equal identity. To paraphrase the title of the book on Asian Americans of mixed heritage edited by Teresa K. Williams and Cynthia Nakashima, my identity is something more than the sum of my parts. "Hapa" gave me such an identity. Instead of worrying, "where am I going to find another Chinese Greek Swedish English Scottish German Pennsylvania Dutch American?" I realized I already had a Hapa community.

The word "Hapa" made me something more than just a half Chinese or a fake Filipino. When I joined the board of the Asian American Theater Company, I fulfilled the need for diversity in terms of being Hapa despite the fact that most of the other board members at that time were Chinese -- and so am I. When I joined the faculty of the Department of Asian American studies at San Francisco State University, I also fulfilled their need for a mixed heritage Asian American. In fact, the position I occupy, as far as I know the first one in the US so described, is for a specialist in Asian Americans of mixed heritage. For reports from the various ethnic units in our department, I am not counted among the Chinese American faculty, rather, I am referred to as the Hapa unit, or to paraphrase the Eurasian writer, Diana Chang, "The Hapa Contingent."

Of course, the years I worked with Hapa Issues Forum were the height of the power of the word Hapa for me. In particular, I recall a leadership retreat in which two remarkable things happened. First was simple, and nobody planned it: throughout the entire weekend, among the more than 30 people present, I never heard anyone ask anyone else, "What are you?" I find this remarkable because it is actually quite common for mixed heritage people to ask each other about their ethnic heritage -- we are often trying to find points of commonality, but sometimes we are just competing a little bit to find out who has the longest list. What struck me during this weekend, was the fact that the 30 of us may have shared almost no common ethnic heritages, but for that weekend it did not matter; we were all Hapa. We were part of a larger community. The other thing that happened was planned by our executive director, Sheila Chung. Sheila, who is Argentinean and Korean, lead us on a visioning exercise that I have never forgotten. Sitting around a campfire, we were instructed to close our eyes and envision the earth below us while we hovered above in the sky. Slowly we descended through the clouds and we could see a landscape below us. Within this landscape was a building; a sign on the building read, "Hapa Culture Center." Within the building there was a library stocked with books about Asian Americans of mixed heritage, an art gallery for art by Asian Americans of mixed heritage, a theater for gatherings and performances, a space for an after-school program and a summer camp, and meeting rooms.

We never built that building, or have not yet built it. Hapa Issues Forum as an organization lasted only from 1992 to 2004. Yet the word Hapa in many ways has been that building for me and many other mixed heritage Asian Americans. It has given us a space of our own, a place where we can be us, without having to explain ourselves. Anyone entering the space created by the word accepts our identity. In this way it works opposite from Bilbo and Frodo's ring of power, which makes the wearer invisible; the word "Hapa" makes my community visible, that is its power.

However, power, as we all know, always creates the seeds of its own destruction. The very success of the word "Hapa" has been in some ways its downfall. What I mean to say that the word "Hapa" as it is used now can never go back to what it (or what "hapa") once meant: a Native Hawaiian word meaning mixed or part or half, as in the phrase *hapa haole*. This phrase means part European American, with the implication being that the person is also part Native Hawaiian. In Hawaii there are other kinds of hapa people. You will notice that I'm not capitalizing the word when I use it in its Native Hawaiian context. I am also not using the term here like in ethnic signifier, which is what the word "Hapa" has become in the mainland context. In contrast, the native Hawaiian word is an adjective. Increasingly, many Native Hawaiian people object not only to the way the word has been changed in its grammatical usage, but also to how it is applied to anyone of mixed Asian and or Pacific Islander heritage, when it implies Native Hawaiian mixed heritage. This is not merely a question of trying to hold on to word that like many words encountered in the English language has been adopted, assimilated, or appropriated. This is a question of power. Who has the power or right to use language? Native Hawaiians, in addition to all of the other ways that their sovereignty has been abrogated, lost for many years the right to their own language through oppressive English-language education. Given this history and given the contemporary social and political reality (and reality—as in real estate) of Hawaiian, the appropriation of this one word has a significance deeper than many Asian Americans are willing to

recognize. To have this symbolic word used by Asians, particularly by Japanese Americans, as though it is their own, seems to symbolically mirror the way Native Hawaiian land was first taken by European Americans, and is now owned by European Americans, Japanese and Japanese Americans and other Asian American ethnic groups that numerically and economically dominate Native Hawaiians in their own land. In "Foregrounding Native Nationalisms: A Critique of Antinationalist Sentiment in Asian American Studies," Candice Fujikane argues that Asian Americans are "settlers" in Hawaii, and therefore "support American colonialism" (76) even while trying to fight racism and discrimination in a "colonial context" (80). She defines the term "settler" in opposition to "native" and argues that Asian Americans "refuse to see themselves as the beneficiaries of [the US] colonial system" (84). Although Fujikane does not here specifically mention the use of the word Hapa by Asian Americans, her argument is certainly in line with the critique that Asian Americans have wrongfully appropriated the term in a way that disenfranchises Native Hawaiians from their culture.

There is a website called www.realhapas.com, on which Lana Robbins states

When Hawaiians began to mix with Caucasians they began to have offspring who were Hawaiian and Caucasian. That is when Hawaiians of Hawaiian and Caucasian ancestry created a Hawaiian word to describe themselves and people like them. Eventually these Hawaiians of Hawaiian and Caucasian ancestry began to use the word "hapa" for a part, portion, or fragment of Hawaiian people, places, and things. Until [Japanese Americans] began to rape their language. Today's rape of the Hawaiian language also implies that the Hawaiian language means nothing and thus the Hawaiian people are nothing.

Robbins continues,

The raping of Hawaii continues with a new group of Colonizers, the California Wanna Be Hapas. As colonizers, California Wanna Be Hapas raped from Hawaiian Hapas their very identity, culture, and history and called it their own. These colonizers justified their illegal actions by creating organizations such as Hapa Issues Forum and other "Hapa" online forums. They gained allies from elite mixed Eurasians who like California Wanna Be Hapas, stole their term from the wartime and colonial Eurasians while stomping on the rights of Amerasians and Hawaiian Hapas.

My response to first hearing this protest was to say, "But I like the word Hapa; look at everything it has done for us." I didn't want to give "Hapa" up. I remember how hard it was just to get people to use it. When I first started to use the word in 1992, I encountered Korean, Chinese and Filipino people of mixed heritage who objected to using the word Hapa because they thought it was a Japanese term. They didn't want to feel colonized by the Japanese language the way their ancestors had been colonized by Japan. When I informed these people that the word was Native Hawaiian in origin, they gladly adopted it for themselves. Native Hawaiians have never colonized anyone. Besides, most mixed Asians are mistaken for being Hawaiian -- and there is a certain glamour in being associated with the islands. Like many of us, I have been frequently told, "You must be from some exotic island somewhere!" (I had long hair at the time. I cut it.)

When criticism against Asian Americans using the term "Hapa" first started being raised strongly in 2002, I realized that the fact that Native Hawaiians had never colonized anyone, and that is therefore why mixed heritage Asian Americans feel comfortable to use the word, was a sign of the relative power of Asian Americans in this context. Maybe the word "Hapa" was a colonizing violence in which I was participating. At a 2003 talk at UC Berkeley I mentioned my increasing concerns about using the word Hapa. I was very surprised when a young man in the audience became visibly upset at the suggestion that the word Hapa might be somehow taken away from him. It meant so much to him for the same reasons it meant so much to me--it provides a sense of community and identity in one simple word.

In other words, quite possibly, the word "Hapa," which I had been so happy to wear because of the sense of identity and community it gave me, might have to be destroyed--or like Frodo's ring, which was forged in the fires of Mt. Doom, returned to the point of origin to be destroyed or at least re-shaped. I say this knowing that the word can never be again what it once was. There is a nostalgia here that cannot be satisfied even if everyone were to stop using the word "Hapa" to refer to non-Native Hawaiian mixed Asians. But while I certainly do not have the power to fling this word into a "Mt. Doom" of linguistic destruction, I do feel responsible to participate in the dialogue. I have been silent on this issue for too long, perhaps hoping that it would go away, so I could keep "my" word.

The controversy has not gone away, it has only grown stronger, and it is time for me--and other mixed heritage Asian Americans--to recognize that when we use the word "Hapa" it causes some people pain. What is so troubling about this is that the word "Hapa" was chosen because it was the only word we could find that did not really cause us pain. It is not any of the Asian words for mixed Asian people that contain negative connotations either literally (e.g. "children of the dust," "mixed animal") or by association (Eurasian). It avoids the confused identity and the Black-White dichotomy implied by English phrases (e.g. mixed blood, biracial). It was adopted to enhance an Asian-focus to our mixed identity, thereby allowing us to use the word to participate more fully in our Asian American communities--rather than being separated into the larger mixed race community (and perhaps being subsumed under the Black-White dichotomy).

Making a change away from using "Hapa" will be a steep uphill struggle. Aside from the growing usage of the word both within and beyond the Asian American and mixed heritage communities, the word is featured in the titles of such publications as Marie Hara and Nora Okja-Keller's anthology, *Intersecting Circles: the voices of hapa women in poetry and prose*; Kip Fulbeck's photo book, *Part Asian 100% Hapa*; and the recently published memoir by May-Lee Chai, *Hapa Girl*. Where does that leave us? Is it too late to stem the tide? Languages grow and evolve, and how they do so reveals the traces of power--but is it our lot to merely record and uncover those changes? Or is it our responsibility to shape those changes? I have to acknowledge that, through my work with Hapa Issues Forum and as

a writer and an educator, I have contributed to spreading the use of the word Hapa by Asian Americans. Meanwhile, Hapa Issues Forum has folded as an organization, though many still believe that there is a real need to have an organization specific to the needs of mixed heritage Asian Americans (it focuses on issues specific to the Asian American community, outside of the Black-White binary oppositional racial dialogue, and it provides mixed heritage Asian Americans a venue in which to be authentically Asian American). The Hapa Clubs that had started on so many college campuses in the late 1990s and early 2000s have mostly abandoned this term in favor of more general mixed heritage inclusion: Berkeley's Mixed Student Union, Variations (UCSB-formerly VariAsians and SFSU-formerly the Hapa Club), Fusion (Wellesly), Half and Half (Bryn Mawr), Students of Mixed Heritage (Amherst), The Biracial and Multiracial Student Association (NYU), The Multiracial Identified Community (Stanford), Multiracial and Biracial Student Association (University of Maryland), Check One (University of Pennsylvania), and MiXed (University of Washington). Cornell Hapa Student Association, Harvard HAPA (Half Asian People's Association), and the UCLA Hapa Club retain the term Hapa. Communities and the language that represents them change quickly, and redefine themselves even before you have a chance to write them into history.

I presented an earlier version of this paper on November 15th, 2007, at a talk at Occidental College. At the end of my two hours of sharing my research and my poetry—which included a series of “Hapa Poems” written mostly around 2002-2005—a young woman, who identified herself as Native Hawaiian and Japanese American, told me that my use of the word Hapa felt like a violence—like something was being taken away from her—another piece of Hawaii, another piece of Native Hawaiian culture and identity. She reminded me that I am part of this problem, that I am responsible and have influence and power in this dialogue. She was right. So here is the first step—my first attempt to send the word of power into the fire, to be re-forged to serve the community for which it was originally intended—people of mixed Native Hawaiian heritage. A word used to give power to one community, while taking power away from another, is not a word I can use in good conscience. However, I will still slip up, I will still say Hapa to mean people like me the way I still sometimes use sexist language despite 20 years of trying to train myself not to, but I will not read my “Hapa Poems” any more until I can find a way to elegantly revise them [Laura Kina kindly reminds me that perhaps I should simply recognize that these are the works of a particular time period, rather than trying to revise all of my former work to meet a new standard], and I will not use “Hapa” anymore in my academic writings as a shorthand for Asian Americans of mixed heritage.

What to replace it with? We could switch from using “Hapa” to using “Asian Americans of mixed heritage,” which is the title of the class I teach at San Francisco State. The problem is that it is much harder to rally around the “mixed heritage Asian American community” than it was to be part of the Hapa Club. But it is for other reasons that I am growing uncomfortable with using the term “mixed heritage,” which has always seemed something of a stop-gap measure. It is meant to be inclusive of transracial adoptees as well those who are of mixed ethnicity (who must deal with ethnic hierarchies within racialized groups), but then it seems to elide what is still the main issue in our society—race. Jayne Ifekwunigwe makes a good argument, in her introduction to “Mixed Race” Studies: A Reader, for using “mixed race” in quotation marks rather than mixed heritage—because “mixed heritage” can be so easily co-opted—who is not, to some extent, of “mixed heritage”? Furthermore, as I mentioned earlier, heritage does not equal identity, and “Hapa” was for me an identity that conveyed community.

It was Marlon Hom, as Chair of Asian American Studies at SFSU, who set up the course I teach and named it “Asian Americans of Mixed Heritage,” not “Hapa Studies,” though this is what many people regularly call it. It was also he who recently suggested maybe we should change the name because mixed heritage does not quite seem to satisfy. Ah, but to what? Multiple Identity Asian Americans? —That raises the specter of split personalities, which of course is a common stereotype of us. Manifold Community Association Asian Americans? Asian Americans Plus? I am drawn to the image of the Venn Diagram implied by the title Intersecting Circles, but while that makes a great visual to describe how we can and do maintain allegiances to multiple communities and identities, it isn't a great label (Venn Asian Americans?). I hate to say this, but “Hapa” has great mouth feel as a word, until the bad taste of Native Hawaiian oppression slips in. My talents as a wordsmith do not extend to creating new language whole cloth, with no negative connotations, so, for now, this essay is only the first stage in the anti-colonial project of refusing to mis-use the word “Hapa.” Stage two will be coming up with a new word that encompasses mixed heritage Asians and Pacific Islanders, without coming from a dominating or oppressed language. I feel a little bit like an advertising executive, being asked to avoid another Chevy Nova fiasco. Calling all poets—we've got to be able to come up with something good, short, and catchy—that's the challenge. My dear friend, Dr. Marianne Maruyama Halpin, reminded me, after reading this essay, that “A name, to work, needs to be something loved.” With that in mind let us find a name we can all love calling ourselves and that also causes no one else pain.

Works Cited

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