Fence Sitters, Switch Hitters, and Bi-Bi Girls: An Exploration of "Hapa" and Bisexual Identities

Beverly Yuen Thompson


Stable URL: http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0160-9009%282000%2921%3A1%2F2%3C171%3AFSSHAB%3E2.0.CO%3B2-R

*Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* is currently published by University of Nebraska Press.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/journals/unp.html.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
Fence Sitters, Switch Hitters, and Bi-Bi Girls: An Exploration of *Hapa* and Bisexual Identities

I had been wondering about taking part in a student theatre project about being Asian American, and I said to Tommy, “The thing is, I don’t feel as though I’ve really lived the . . . Asian American experience.” (Whatever I thought that was.)

Tommy kind of looked at me. And he said, “But, Claire, you are Asian American. So whatever experience you have lived, that is the Asian American experience.”

I have never forgotten that.

—Claire Huang Kinsley, “Questions People Have Asked Me. Questions I Have Asked Myself”

Claire Huang Kinsley articulates a common sentiment among multiracial Asian Americans regarding their racial and ethnic identity. She describes the reaction that her mixed heritage has provoked from Asians and Anglos, both of whom frequently view her as the “other.” In response to these reactions, her faith in her racial identity has been shaken, and she feels unable to identify herself—fearful of being alienated for choosing either her Chinese or Anglo heritage, or both. Although she knows that she is mixed race, the question that still plagues her is whether or not she is included in the term “Asian American.”

When I first read Kinsley’s article, I was elated to find recognition of a biracial Asian American experience that resembled my own. I have a Chinese mother and an Anglo-American father, as does she, and I am constantly confronted with questions about my ethnic background from curious individuals. Like Kinsley, I also question my ability to call myself Asian American because of my mixed heritage. However, in addition to my mixed heritage, I am also bisexual, which brings with it additional complications and permutations around my identity.
formation and self-understanding. The process of identity formation, especially of multiple identities, is complex and lifelong, and my experiences have been no exception.

Though I have always understood that I was mixed race, a true understanding of what this meant in terms of my self-understanding and my relation to the dominant culture and Asian American communities did not develop until I was much older. My first exposure to the political side of identity politics came at the ages of fourteen and fifteen when I began to develop a feminist understanding of the world around me. Then, at seventeen, I first began to call myself bisexual after two years of questioning my sexuality and believing that the only options that were available were either a lesbian or straight identity. Finally at the age of nineteen I began to uncover the history of Asians in America through my college course work and developed a newfound understanding of my racial identity and its political implications. Yet, as is usually the case, this process was never as linear as it may sound.

Growing up, I was very aware that I was both Chinese and white—but I did not possess a term or racial category that recognized my position. Instead of creating or claiming a category that would accommodate me, I was left in confusion. How was it possible that I existed outside of the racial order of the census forms in my grade school, and what would I have to do in order to correctly fill in the answer to my racial puzzle? This confusion led to great discussions with my father about how I should identify myself. Well-meaning as he was, the only answer that he could arrive at was to choose between the two. This answer did not satisfy me because it would imply that I would be choosing between my parents—a choice I could not make.

Multiracials of Asian descent have a variety of choices available for self-identification; however, this “choice” may become obscured by others who may be quick to categorize based upon their own monoracial template of racial understanding. Physical traits are frequently scrutinized as ethnic signifiers, and one's mixed-race identity may not be accepted by outsiders. Maria P. P. Root elaborates:

To assume that the biracial person will racially identify with how they look is presumptive, but pervasive. Besides, the biracial person is perceived differently by different people. Many persons make the mistake of thinking the biracial person is fortunate to have a choice; however, the reality is that the biracial person has to fight very hard to exercise choices that are not congruent with how they may be visually or emotionally perceived.
Biracials and multiracials, then, develop a racial identity that risks criticism or denial from others; this influences the ways in which they self-identify, which may change in different contexts. When faced with the “What are you?” question, multiracials may try and consider what the person is really asking and respond accordingly. Racial fluidity is difficult to “see” in a world constructed by mutually exclusive categories based on a black–white dichotomy.

When I was growing up in white-dominated Spokane, Washington, I spent most of my childhood, like most children, trying to fit in. My racial identity would raise its head occasionally, but most of the time I did not consider race. However, I did spend a great deal of energy rejecting my Chinese heritage, which I thought would certainly differentiate me from my white classmates. I would not allow my mother to teach me Chinese, which she attempted to do; I made fun of the Chinese food in the restaurants where she would take us; and I identified more and more with my father, whose side I would take when he belittled my mother’s culture and “superstitions.” I thought that if I did not speak Chinese then I could use that as proof that I really was white like everyone else. However, when we did end up in Seattle’s Chinatown on vacation, I was secretly proud and impressed that my mother could speak in Chinese to the waitresses and would beg her to do so.

When my racial identity was used against me by my peers in school, it was an upsetting experience. One day in my grade school the other children began teasing me and a classmate, Michael, who was Chinese. Based on our racial similarities, they joked that we were dating. I was horrified to have my classmates group me with this Chinese boy. I took offense, and from that moment on I tried to distance myself from Michael. I thought that if I were friends with him then the Chinese in me would be brought to the surface—made more obvious—and that would be the reason we were friends. There were only three Asians in my grade school, and we were two of them; the only other was my best friend, Cassie, who was also hapa, or of mixed Asian/Pacific Islander descent. Cassie had a white mother and a Japanese father who owned a Japanese restaurant downtown and was therefore never around her house at the same time as any of her friends. She passed as white and, without her father around to connote her Japanese ancestry, her identity was never at issue. Curiously, never once in my eight-year friendship with her did we ever discuss our similar racial identities.

When a few years later I began reading feminist books, I developed a feminist consciousness that consumed all aspects of my life. It fundamentally changed the way I understood myself and the world around me. I was ignited and passionate, seeking out feminist organizations where I could take part in concrete
actions around my political philosophy. Yet the literature I read lacked a racial analysis, and this carried over into my developing consciousness. I had moved to Seattle to attend college, and I became active with NOW, Clinic Defense Project, a youth socialist organization, and a queer youth group based in Spokane. I traveled between Seattle and Spokane a great deal and was politically active in both cities. I began to meet many people whose politics and sexual orientation were diverse, and I questioned my own long-held beliefs. My new roommate came out as a lesbian, and we learned a great deal about each other through that experience. She was also a hapa—mixed Hawaiian, Filipina, and white—and she would attempt to engage in racial identity conversations, but that topic did not hold me as much as discussions of politics and sexuality. I had begun to question my sexual orientation: I no longer proclaimed myself heterosexual, yet neither did I adopt a lesbian identity.

As I had years earlier agonized between the choice of seeing myself as Chinese or white, I now agonized between the choice of lesbian or straight. I knew that neither choice represented my feelings, yet I could not comprehend another option. The messages that I received from both the lesbian community and dominant straight society was the same: choose. When I was in college, at around the age of seventeen, I realized that bisexuality existed as an option, and immediately I knew that was the identity that most accurately described who I felt I was. But I also knew that claiming a bisexual identity would be a hardship because others would analyze me through their monosexual template of understanding. Indeed I ran across many people who demanded to know, “Which do you really like better, boys or girls?” This question reminded me of how my ethnic identity had often elicited the query, “What are you?” People were again confused. Now both my racial and sexual identity crossed lines of demarcation, enacting border-crossings that people have assumed are unnatural and problematic.

Root suggests that the “racially mixed woman may be more open to exploring sexual orientation” because of their lived experience of understanding racial identity as complex. Therefore, this understanding of racial identity may “transfer over to viewing sexual orientation as flexible and sexual identity as mutable.” Throughout my life I have had to explain my racial identity instead of having an easy and ready-made label like most monoracials. Yet, besides the occasional difficulty of explaining my race, I also enjoyed being more than one, having more options, and enjoying the benefit of traveling in more than one group. Now with my emerging sexuality, bisexuality seemed the natural conclusion. Already I was racially mixed and therefore I could understand the meaning of a bisexual identity in my own life. Somehow it all came together in a complementary fashion.
After I had come out as bisexual I began to embrace my Asian heritage and accept it back into my life. I was in my senior year at Eastern Washington University, and I began to focus my research on Asian American women and their history. Yet, it was not until I went to graduate school in women’s studies at San Diego State University that I gained greater exposure to Asian American culture and history. It was an awakening that I compare to the development of my feminist consciousness. I was both excited to find the material and angered that it had taken so long to discover Asian American history. I wrote on the Japanese internment, studied Chinese American history, and read every Asian American studies book I could find.

Slowly I discovered that, although I could relate to some of the issues and material, my reality as a young bisexual hapa woman was not being addressed. I began to question the place of the multiracial Asian in the academic fields of ethnic studies and women’s studies. Ethnic studies seemed to focus overwhelmingly on families that fit a specific model—namely, a heterosexual family made up of two immigrant parents of the same ethnicity and the conflicts their children face negotiating between their Asian parents and Anglo society. In women’s studies, there was an awareness and commentary on race and difference among women, but that usually focused on the black–white racial dichotomy; Asian American women were rarely mentioned. Where was I to find myself represented in academic theory that claimed to represent women and racial minorities? As I studied further, however, I became aware that I was not the only one grappling with these issues: There were hapa groups forming around the country as well as magazines and books that were addressing this issue and demanding acceptance within the Asian American community and academy.

My challenge in graduate school, as I saw it, was to explore where I could find myself reflected, with all my complexity, in the literature of ethnic studies and women’s studies. As Dana Y. Takagi suggests, it is crucial to recognize “different sexual practices and identities that also claim the label Asian American” in order to begin to challenge notions of identity that have, in the past, been accepted “unproblematically and uncritically in Asian American Studies.” Within the “Asian American experience” there is a great deal of diversity that has thus far remained underexplored. Issues of interracial relationships, transracial adoption, biracial identity, and queer identity have remained marginalized and considered exceptions to an unspoken norm of Asian American identity. David Eng and Alice Hom believe it is imperative “to recognize that Asian Americans are never purely, or merely, racial subjects” and to dissolve any rigid or monolithic definitions. Once monolithic norms are instituted, diversity and complexity are shut out and remain excluded.
I have seen these norms instituted in a variety of ways within identity base groups in my experiences. Organizations and literature on identity de-emphasize aspects that are not considered directly related to the main unifying force they address. I have found myself continuing this silence when in group situations because of the offhanded manner in which comments regarding these other aspects are received. For example, I have usually found myself to be the only Asian American in queer organizations; therefore I feel uncomfortable bringing attention to racial issues because this would presumably turn me into both an object of curiosity and an educator. I prefer to discuss racial issues with others who have similar experiences so that we can share on an equal basis and validate each other in respectful and mutual ways. At the same time, when I am in organizations that focus on racial identity, I also feel silence around sexual identity because, again, I do not want to position myself as an object or educator. In other words, I do not want to detract from my connection with others. Unfortunately, connection is usually based on one issue with other aspects of identity being minimized instead of validated.

Segregating multiple identities in theories of race and gender results in fracturing self-understanding—separating one’s gender from race and sexuality. This segregation is also an impossibility: At any moment we inhabit all of our identities and may face discrimination on any or all levels. It is a painful experience to seek out a community based on race, gender, or sexuality only to have other identities denied and rejected. As Karen Maeda Allman reasons, “Mixed-race lesbians may be suspicious of any kind of identity politics based on single-group membership, whether based on race, gender, or sexual orientation. Too many opportunities exist to exclude us, to declare us as suspect others.” When people of color come out as queer, race is an important consideration. Rejection from one’s racial/ethnic community based on homophobia, and from the queer community based on racism, is a very real consequence that may bar individuals from true acceptance in any specific community. As a hapa bisexual, I am constantly seeking out inclusion and acceptance of my sexuality in the Asian American community as well as acceptance of my racial identity in the bisexual and queer community.

Paula C. Rust comments that “a positive integration of one’s racial, ethnic, or class identity with one’s sexual identity is greatly facilitated by support from others who share an individual’s particular constellation of identities.” The first time I experienced being around others with my “constellation of identities” was when I attended the second national conference of the Asian and Pacific-Islander Lesbian and Bisexual Women’s Network at UCLA in July of 1998. One of the workshops at this conference was titled “Mixed Girls in the Mix: Hapas, Mixed
Breeds, and Other Racial Misfits." Attending this session was a homecoming for me. Never before had I sat in a room filled with hapas who were both bisexual and lesbian. Of the twenty-plus attendees at the workshop, there was a vast array of racial and ethnic diversity. Half of the women were Asian and white, while the other half of the room represented a great diversity of mixed-race hapa women. We explored and discussed numerous issues, and for many of us it was an amazing and eye-opening experience merely to be around other women with whom we had so much in common—and yet still so much in difference. The workshop went overtime, making it very evident that this group needed more time together. Therefore the group decided to create a hapa caucus. Later that evening when the caucuses met, some of the women chose to go to the caucus groups of their ethnicities and some returned to the hapa caucuses; we again had to choose between identifying as hapa over our monoethnic options.

I met several women in this newly formed caucus who also identified as both biracial and bisexual. When I mentioned that I was doing research on biracial and bisexual Asian women, one of the women exclaimed, “The bi-bi girls!” and went on to explain that she herself was a “bi-bi girl” as were some of her friends. I was overflowing with excitement to meet someone who shared my same “constellation of identities” and had even coined a term for this identity.

Rust speaks to this topic of the “bi-bi” identity:

Many bisexuals of mixed race or ethnicity feel a comfortable resonance between their mixed heritage and their bisexuality. In a society where both racial-ethnic and sexual categories are highly elaborated, individuals of mixed heritage or who are bisexual find themselves straddling categories that are socially constructed as distinct from one another.11

Rust captures the ideological and theoretical similarities of bisexual and multiracial identities in this passage, echoing my own experiences of these two identities. Because of the exclusion bisexuals and biracials experience in monoracial and monosexual communities, different responses result when these mixed identities come together in the same individual. For some, this combination brings a sense of familiarity, of being once again outside of the box, of confusing people. Others, however, may be disappointed that they are again marginalized, unwilling to deal with further oppression.

When I think that I must choose between another set of boxes—straight or lesbian—I feel the same pressure and the same inability as I felt choosing between white and Chinese, between my mother and my father. My choice was made for me. It was written on my skin; my face and gestures reflect both parents who made me. And the choice of who I love is decided for me: I love both my
mother and my father and will never deny love and acceptance for someone based on their gender or race. Marian M. Sciachitano believes that “taking up a bicultural and biracial politics of difference” means accepting “the contradictions, the uneasiness, and the ambiguity” of such an identity, which may also apply to a bisexual label and the interaction of the two. Yet the contradictions, uneasiness, and ambiguity are imposed from the outside and arise when I must fit myself into the established mutually exclusive order. For myself, I find comfort in the middle ground, in the ability to transgress and question lines of demarcation and challenge systematic segregation.

I am hapa because I am the descendent of two cultures, two languages, and two people who came together across these boundaries. I am firmly located in the late twentieth century in the United States where interracial marriages have only been legal for a generation. I am one of many people who are hapa, Amerasian, mixed breeds, and mutts. I am constantly called Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Oriental. I am comfortable in other people’s discomfort. I am hurt that I denied my mother a proper place in my life. She has divorced my father and has gone to live with Chinese female friends from her childhood, her other life within which I will never be truly included. When I visit her I am left out of the conversation, but the sound of Cantonese soothes me. Sometimes when I pay attention I realize that I am able to follow their body language and remember some Chinese words, but it is the English phrases that are a part of their Chinese American vocabulary that always give me the final gist. I am loyal to my Chinese heritage, I am loyal to my white heritage, and I am loyal to my antiracist beliefs.

I am bisexual because I recognize that both women and men have contributed to my life and I want the freedom to choose a partner based on a person’s integrity rather than on genitalia. I am firmly located not only in a time when queer people are oppressed but also in a time when a vital queer community has developed that gives me the ability to understand what that identity means. I am one of many people who are bisexual, queer, fence-sitters, and switch hitters. I am called queer, dyke, straight. I am comfortable in other people’s discomfort. I am loyal to my love for women, I am loyal to my love for men, and I am loyal to my beliefs in feminism and antiheterosexism.

The question that still lingers in my mind is who will be loyal to me? Which group/community/movement(s) will claim me as their member and comrade? I want to see a movement against oppression that does not trivialize or deny me any aspect of my identity, that recognizes the interconnectedness of my sexuality, race, gender, and politics. I am one of many people whose fight against oppression does not end with their gender, race, or sexuality alone. I am reminded of the words of Teresa Kay Williams:

---

178
Beverly Yuen Thompson

One day, the debate on passing will become obsolete (will pass), when Asian-
descent multiracials can express the full range of their humanity in which
boundaries of race, ethnicity, nation, class, gender, sexuality, body, and lan-
guage can be crossed and transgressed without judgement, without scorn, and
without detriment.13

I find a great deal of comfort reading these words by authors whose identities are
similar to my own. I know that I am not alone in this world that consistently tries
to deny the existence of multiracials and bisexuals. Merely by existing I am chal-
lenging stereotypes and the status quo. This battle against racism, sexism, and bi/
homophobia is being fought on many fronts by people who are like me, people
who have my back.

Notes

1. Claire Huang Kinsley, “Questions People Have Asked Me. Questions I Have Asked
   Myself,” in Miscegenation Blues: Voices of Mixed Race Women, ed. Carol Camper
2. Maria P. P. Root, “Resolving ‘Other’ Status: Identity Development of Biracial Indi-
   viduals,” in Diversity and Complexity in Feminist Therapy, ed Laura S. Brown
   and Maria P. P. Root (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1990), 197, original emphasis.
3. A term of Hawaiian origin, *hapa haole* literally means “half outsider” or half white.
   Although it was originally used as an insult, it is currently being used on the main-
   land by Asian/Pacific Islanders as a positive term designating those who are mixed
   race of Asian/Pacific Islander descent.
4. Root, “Resolving ‘Other’ Status,” 185, original emphasis.
5. Overwhelmingly I find that Asian American literature does not mention nonheterosexual
   identities, which continues to promote invisibility for queer Asians. A few notable
   exceptions are Russel Leong, ed., Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay
   and Lesbian Experience (New York: Routledge, 1996); Sharon Lim-Hing, ed., The
   Very Inside: An Anthology of Writings by Asian and Pacific Islander Lesbian and Bisexual
   Women (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1994); and David L. Eng and Alice Y.
   Hom, eds., Q & A: Queer in Asian America (Philadelphia: Temple University Press,
   1998).
6. Dana Y. Takagi, “Maiden Voyage: Excursion into Sexuality and Identity Politics in
   America,” in Eng and Hom, Q & A, 3.
8. I did discover, however, an emerging discussion on multiple identities and their
   necessary inclusion in feminist research. Through such books as Gloria Anzaldúa,
   ed., Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by
   Feminists of Color (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1990); Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe
Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1981); and Asian Women United of California, ed., *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings By and About Asian American Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), the voices of women of color and lesbians are emerging. Indeed, the postmodern phase we are in has pushed the concept of difference to buzz word status. Yet, although frequently mentioned, difference is yet to be completely integrated.


