



THINK PIECE: The “Human Duty” to Deracialize Nationality

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Abstract:

Advocating “human rights” regarding racio-ethnic identity is not enough. Freedom of identification is not possible without a climate of social civility based on “human duties.” Racio-ethnic civility begins with the deracialization of racialized nationalities like “Japanese.”

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In Japan, people who “look” like they might have a “foreign” parent or grandparent are called *haafu* (half foreign blood) or *kuootaa* (quarter foreign blood). They may or may not be Japanese. If Japanese, their family histories may or may not include ancestors from other parts of the world, and might not even include anyone born in Japan. Japan’s nationality is raceless, there are no “race boxes” to check in Japan, and no law has ever racialized Japanese nationals. Yet *Nihonjin* or Japanese – the most common word for “the people of Japan” (*kokumin*) – is so widely racialized in Japanese society, and overseas, that people in Japan who “look” as though they might not be Japanese commonly find themselves the objects of attention, usually just simple curiosity, but sometimes discomfort or hostility, in extreme cases shunning or bullying. And those who are Japanese constantly encounter categorical exclusion from “Japanese” of the kind found in *haafu-gao* (half-face) fetishism (see my article, “The Language of ‘Racial Mixture’ in Japan,” elsewhere in this issue). Reflexive, habitual, and thoughtlessly racist language in mass media and academia rings harshly in the ears of people who feel themselves excluded or are otherwise upset by such language. In this article, I reflect on my own experiences and advocate some “human duties” to deracialize nationality.

My own journey through the “identity” maze

I was born in 1978 in Kyoto to a German mother and a Japanese father. I was raised in Kyoto prefecture, educated at local Japanese schools, and all my undergraduate and graduate education has been in Japanese universities. I have visited Germany a few times and the United Kingdom for a month or so. Otherwise, I have spent my entire life in Japan.

Some children and adults have called me *gaijin*. The word means “outsider” but is short for *gaikokujin*, which means “outlander” or “foreigner.” When referring to legal status, these words mean someone who does not possess Japanese nationality. On the street, though, they are commonly used to label someone who doesn’t “look” Japanese in the eyes of people who think Japanese is a race. In my generation, people like me have usually been labeled *haafu*. Though *gaijin* and *haafu* may be just words to the people who reflexively use them, they are generally used as racist labels. This makes them negative to individuals who don’t wish to be racialized. I hear *gaijin* as “You’re not Japanese,” and I hear *haafu* as “You’re not fully Japanese.”

When I was a child I would protest. “I’m not a *gaijin*. I’m Japanese.” Even today I have to correct some people’s impressions that I’m a foreigner. I first criticized the word *gaijin* when I was thirteen, in a middle school speech contest. My teachers usually paid attention to me and so I didn’t have to fight a lot of name-calling at school. In this sense I was lucky. Most kids like me experience curiosity but are accepted. A few face hostility alone and lack self-protective social skills. I survived. While I didn’t particularly like *haafu*, it didn’t sound as harsh as *gaijin*, and I got used to it.

As a teenager I thought about my identity – Am I Japanese or am I German? Where is my home? Where do I belong? While I thought about this, it was not my main concern at the time. I focused mostly on studying for university entrance exams and hanging out with friends. By 2002, at age 24, I wasn’t thinking much about my identity. I had come to the conclusion that I was Japanese. After reading the writings of people like Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu and Hirano Imao, however, I began thinking of my own experiences as part of a larger social issue. I felt that they had spoken to

people like me, and I realized that the “What am I?” question was still deep inside me.

In September 2002, I started a website called “Die Kreuzungsstelle” (www.kreuzungsstelle.com), which means “crossroads,” with the handle name Nikolaus, after St. Nikolaus of Santa Claus fame. The site consisted of a BBS (Bulletin Board System) and some columns. The BBS no longer exists, but its contents, representing many people, have been posted under “Voices” on the main page. Among the many columns, about one-third are by other contributors. The topics range from identity, dual nationality, and bilingual-ness, to labels like *haafu* (half) and *daburu* (double), school and other social experiences, and questions that people often ask – Where are you from? What languages do you speak? Which country do you like best or feel loyalty toward?

At the time, SNS (Social Network Service) websites had not yet taken root in Japan, but some people who had shared similar experiences visited my site and expressed their opinions. Many appreciated my work and wanted to hold meetings. Some had not had social contacts with others like themselves, or had only a brother or a sister to talk with about their experiences. *Die Kreuzungsstele* offered a place to discuss topics of mutual interest in Japanese. It was the first website of its kind in Japan to facilitate such a community.

In 2004 I organized a small meeting of interested participants in Yokohama. Fifteen such meetings were held between 2004 and 2006 in Yokohama, Kyoto, Tokyo, Kobe and Osaka. But I am not very good at organizing people and it was stressful. So I stopped the meetings, and *Die Kreuzungsstelle* resumed being just a web forum.

From about this time I began the research that led to some of the findings I have reported mostly in Japanese and now in English. I began to meet other researchers, Japanese and foreigners. Some researchers identified as *haafu*, and some researchers, including a few *haafu*, regarded *haafu* as objects of their research. I was frequently urged and pressed by some of my academic supervisors to conduct field work that would have required me to target *haafu*. At times I felt that some of my colleagues regarded me as a “specimen” in their “globalization” studies. However, in principle I am opposed to invading anyone’s private space in the name of “research” which, in my view, only deepens the “Japanese” racialization that created the racialized *gaijin* and racialized *haafu* labels to begin with. Hence all of my research has focused on the social history of racialization, in language and media representations. My object has been to demonstrate the pathology of racialization in the manner in which people are “objectified” for racial reasons in the marketplace of ordinary commodities like makeup, or in fashionable notions like “identity” based on racialized ancestry.

Human duties

As I demonstrate at the end of my article (in this issue) on the emergence of *haafu* in Japan, *haafu-sa* (half-ness) has become an object of admiration and envy in the entertainment and fashion worlds. I ask myself the question – Should *haafu* feel happy about the apparent fetishization of their faces and figures in mass media representations? This is a difficult question to answer. You could ask the same question about anyone who has traits that are praised or seen as “desirable” or “valuable” – athletic prowess, math skills, an ability to sing, play an instrument or write novels, make people laugh or cry.

I can’t blame those who make a living off their real *haafu-sa*, or off features that pass for *haafu-ppoi* (half-like). But what about the subtle and blatant racialization and commercialization of *haafu-gao*? Should the people who come up with such marketing schemes be allowed to racialize people without objection?

How does the fetishization of *haafu* affect the hundreds of thousands of Japanese and foreigners in Japan who are “seen” as *haafu* – and have to deal with people who gaze at them as they would an

animal in a zoo? As though to wonder why they don't look and act like the beautiful or handsome *haafu* models and assorted entertainers who sing, laugh, or primp for a living? Or why they are not multilingual like some *haafu* radio DJs and TV newscasters who switch languages on demand? And how does the racialization of "Japanese" affect Japanese who, though having no "foreign blood" in their family histories, are taken for *haafu* because they naturally look like they might be "mixed" in the eyes of people who racialize how "typical" Japanese are supposed to look?

Living as a *haafu* in Japan is heaven for some, a test of patience for many, and a few harbor serious stigmas about their appearance, partly nourished by unwanted racist attention. If you don't look too "outlandish" (*gaijin-poi*) and speak a couple of useful languages, you might represent Japan at an international event. But some employers and landlords balk at hiring or renting to people who look more like "outsiders" (*gaijin*). I myself have been in the position of having to "grin and bear it" when confronted by treatment I don't welcome. Getting along and survival often trump fighting discrimination.

As someone born and raised in Japan, who happens to have parents who represent different "races" in the eyes of many people, I have trouble accepting the idea that "race" (whatever it is) or "racial mixture" (whatever that is) define a person. Thanks to my research, I now know exactly what I am. I am my parents' son and my big sister's not-so-little brother. If it's anyone's business, I'm Japanese, and I have a family register and passport to prove it. I want only to live an ordinary life without having other people question "what" I am, or "where" I came from, as though I don't belong where I am.

I take comfort in knowing that most people like me have had similar experiences, long before me, throughout Japan's history. And it has been exhilarating to discover the writings of people who have had similar experiences, and others, whose words have inspired people to be proud but not arrogant about who they are, and who in their own ways have advocated an end to racism.



Figure 1. Caricature of stereotypical "half" in weekly magazine *Shukan hōseki*, 7 March 1991. The article, in a column called "Old-man's news," is titled "Nostalgic half talents." (Collection of the author)

But how can racism end if racialization runs amok? As it does in U.S.-style race "boxes"? As it does in Japan, in "*haafu mania*" and *haafu-gao* phenomena? And in the stereotyping of *haafu* as "half-white, big-eyed, light-haired Americans" and "half-yellow, almond-eyed, black-haired Japanese"?¹ (Figure 1)

At the social level, a lot can be done. Most importantly, journalists, educators, and academics for whom the shoe fits need to stop racializing people. If you have an opportunity to talk about the population of Japan, you can point out that

Japanese are racially and ethnically diverse. You can add that hundreds of the world's local racio-ethnic populations are represented among Japanese, in increasing permutations and combinations that should not be forced into either conventional or designer identities. If an activist, you can write

letters to people and organizations you feel are nurturing the image of Japanese as a “pure” or “homogeneous” people – including magazine publishers, makeup artists, cosmetics makers, and plastic surgery clinics – asking them to portray Japan as a naturally diverse country, and then blog or otherwise publicize your protests. And all of us, including this writer, can work on ridding ourselves of our acquired habits of racializing others.

If I were to advocate some “human duties” to deracialize nationality in Japan, or anywhere for that matter, they might look like this.²

How you generally feel about race and ethnicity and identity is your business.

In public, however, be civil and respect the racio-ethnic privacy of others.

1. Avoid using “Japanese” as a label for race or racio-ethnicity.
 - Japanese represent people of all racial and ethnic descents.
 - In a civil society, there can be no “pure” or “half” Japanese.
2. Avoid using *gaikokujin* or *gaijin* with racial implications.
 - You cannot “see” or “hear” a person’s nationality or identity.
 - You might guess someone’s descent, but that’s their business.
3. Avoid labeling any individual or group of individuals racially.
 - Parents should think twice before labeling their children.
 - Teachers should not label their students racially or ethnically.
4. Avoid racially labeling yourself in public.
 - All individuals are “whole” and wholly whatever they are.
 - Labels like *haafu*, *daburu*, mixed, and hapa are racist.
5. Avoid engaging in activities that differentiate people racially.
 - If you racialize, you cannot complain about discrimination.
 - Accepting a job or an award with “racial” qualifications is racist.
6. Avoid taking pride in a nationality for racial or ethnic reasons.
 - If you must be proud, be proud of human qualities.
 - Don’t regard national cultures as racio-ethnic properties.

Racialization and racist acts have consequences. When someone accepts a teaching position or a modeling job on account of their race, someone somewhere is refused a job on account of their race. Whenever a beautician, journalist, or scholar anywhere in the world racializes Japanese (*Nihonjin*) – or regards someone as racially or ethnically “half” or “part” or “mixed” or “multi” or “bi” or anything other than just a whole human being, the biological offspring of two parents, whatever their respective racio-ethnic family histories – someone in Japan or elsewhere has to bear the anguish of being an object of crass public, commercial, or academic curiosity, of being treated according to one or another racist stereotype or expectation.

NOTES

1. *Shūkan hōseki*, “Ojisan shinbun: Natsukashi no haafu tarento” [Old man’s news: Nostalgic haafu talents], 7 March 1991, 112-115.
2. I was strongly moved by Maria Root’s “Bill of Rights of Racially Mixed People” when reading it – in Pearl Fuyo Gaskin, *What Are You?: Voices of Mixed-Race Young People* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999) – about the time I launched my website in 2002. Root now calls it “Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage” (<http://www.drmariaroot.com/doc/BillOfRights.pdf>), and she has also published what she calls a “Multiracial Oath of Social Responsibility” (<http://www.drmariaroot.com/doc/OathOfSocialResponsibility.pdf>, last viewed 27 January 2017). However, both lack encouragements to refrain from racializing civil nations and individuals.