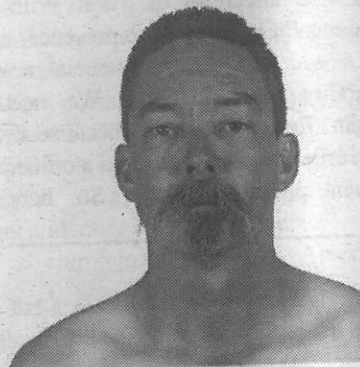
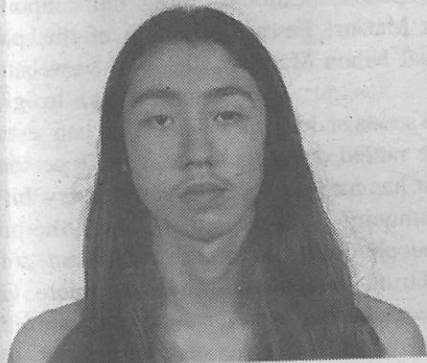
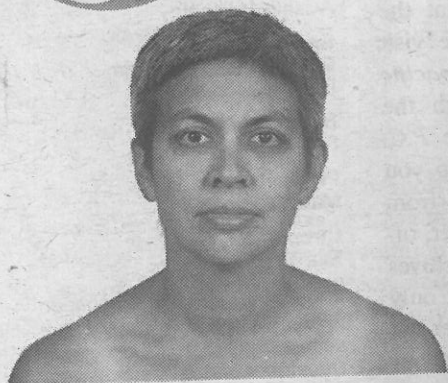


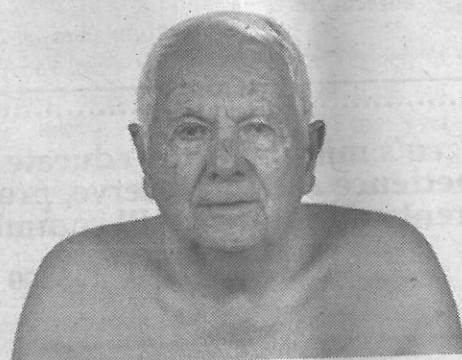
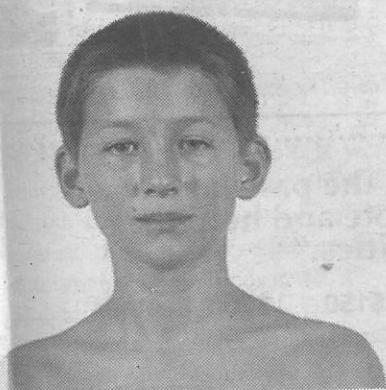
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HAPA DAYS ARE HERE AGAIN

Artist Kip Fulbeck and JANM reconnect and revisit in a groundbreaking exhibition in Los Angeles.

By George Toshio Johnston,
Senior Editor, Digital & Social Media

Just after the turn of the 21st century, a man with many identities — artist, surfer, photographer, college professor, author, filmmaker — modestly launched an exercise in photographic documentation.

It was simple conceptually: color photos of different people looking straight into the camera, shot bare-skinned from the shoulders up, unadorned by eyeglasses, hats, jewelry or other accoutrements, with but one overriding commonality: They all self-identified as being part-Asian or Pacific Islander and something else, be it white, black, Latino, Jewish, Middle Eastern and so on.

They were all Hapa, in other words, using the Hawaiian-derived word that has come to describe people of mixed racial heritage, when one of those “races” is, generally speaking, Asian and, as it turned out, more often than not, Japanese. Hence, the name of the undertaking: the Hapa Project.

The man who initiated it was Kip Fulbeck, an art professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

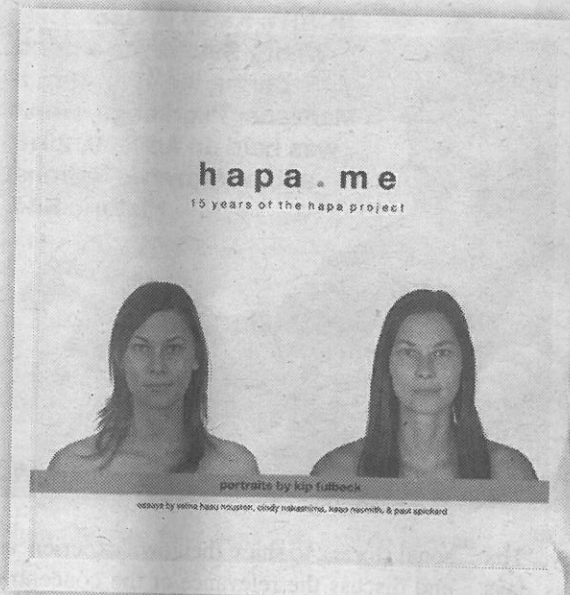
Fulbeck, who hails from Covina, Calif., in Los Angeles County's San Gabriel Valley, would by 2006 morph the Hapa Project into a book titled “Part Asian, 100% Hapa.”

“I really pushed to get Tiger Woods into the original series,” he laughed, noting that his attempts to include the self-described “Cablinasian” golf legend ended in the rough. “I’m thankful now. What if I had him on the cover of the book?” It would nevertheless go on to sell some 25,000 copies.

The year 2006 was also when Little Tokyo's Japanese American National Museum hosted an exhibition that was also titled “Part Asian, 100% Hapa” — and it would prove to be, up to that point, one of its most popular productions. (The museum's “Hello Kitty” exhibition would top it and remains JANM's most popular exhibition to date.)

Little did Fulbeck, who is of European American (English and Irish) background on his father's side and Cantonese origin on his mother's side, know that more than a decade and a half later, the Hapa Project would still be a big part of his life, now under the moniker Hapa.Me.

Just like being Hapa can mean being many



things at once, “Hapa.Me” (or just hapa.me) is a URL, the title of a new book of portraits and the name of JANM's newest exploration of the themes that began in the first iteration of Fulbeck's Hapa Project.

The description on JANM's website reads: “In the new exhibition, the original photographs and statements from the 2006 exhibition are paired with contemporary portraits of the same individuals and newly written statements, showing not only their physical changes over 15 years, but also their changes in perspective and outlook on the world.”

Going back to its origins, the Hapa Project, Fulbeck says, was not mainly about Hapa-related issues — multiraciality, multiethnicity and so on — so much as it was about “doing work about identity.”

“I was always doing autobiographical work,” Fulbeck told the *Pacific Citizen*. “People can agree or disagree, but I've never done that sort of old-school, *National Geographic*-kind of mentality of going and documenting and studying ‘Other,’ capital ‘o’ other. I think it would be weird doing Hapa work if I wasn't Hapa. There are plenty of people who do that stuff, and that's fine.”

Nevertheless, Fulbeck says he had an awareness going back to preschool of his own “otherness” from both sides of his heritage. His mother, who was widowed in China, was a Chinese immigrant. “So, my siblings and cousins are full-blooded Chinese from China and Hong Kong, and Taiwan,” he said. “I was the kid who didn't

WHAT: ‘Hapa.Me — 15 Years of the Hapa Project’

WHEN: April 7-Oct. 28

WHERE: Japanese American National Museum, 100 N. Central Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90012, (213) 625-0414

URLS: janm.org/exhibits/hapa-me/ and hapa.me



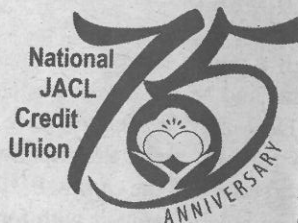
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Kip Fulbeck

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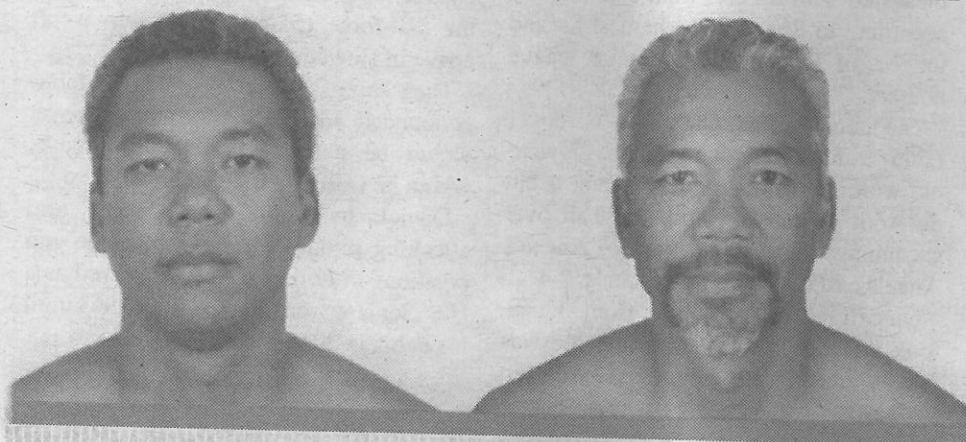


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speak the language, didn't get the culture, didn't like the food."

Meantime, at his elementary school where there were no Asian kids, he still recalls the pretty white girl who told him, "I know you like me, but why would I like you? You're brown."

Fulbeck says that the outgrowth of those kinds of experiences led to the Hapa Project and, later, the book "Part Asian, 100% Hapa" and were really motivated by "trying to make the book that I wish I'd had when I was a little kid."

The Hapa Project and book were, therefore, an important form of representation in which people could, accompanied by a photo, tell who they were in their own words. Fulbeck says he has had several people tell him the result changed their lives.

"You forget how much these things mean in your formative years and you haven't had anyone ever reach out and tell your story," he said.

Curtiss Rooks, himself a professor (at Loyola Marymount University) who was photographed for the original and current exhibitions (*see photo on page 6 bottom*), recalls participating in various panel discussions and JACL chapter meetings on the topic of mixed-race identity in the years before Fulbeck's project and had his own reasons for being part of the original photo sessions.

"It seemed, to me, real important to be able to help families understand the various identity issues and what it was like to grow up mixed," said Rooks, who is of African-American and Japanese heritage, "and the importance of the support of the community in that process, if for no other reason that you didn't get any shade thrown your way."

"If it was that mixed-race kids were choosing not to spend time in the community, it was probably because it wasn't comfortable," Rooks continued. "There was this huge assumption then that mixed-race kids,

particularly mixed-white kids, would prefer to be with the non-Japanese side of them. That seems to not ever have been really the case, but why would you go to some place that made you feel uncomfortable?"

Rooks recalled that there were instances many years ago when the rhetoric at times seemed hostile toward Hapas. Corroborating that, Fulbeck said during the first show in 2006, "there was a hate letter written to the museum from an adult JA woman who said, 'This is unforgivable that you're showing this work, these Hapas are not part of our community, you should not be encouraging this.' It was a pretty scathing letter." He did note that "we don't get much of that anymore."

For Rooks, his participation was "really about being able to be a voice in the community and say, 'No, we feel every bit as much a part of the community as anyone else, if given half a chance.'"

Last year, Fulbeck said his first Hapa book went out of print and the rights reverted to him — it was the perfect opportunity for a revisitation, since that was the book by him people always wanted more of.

"I thought, 'How cool would it be if I went back and found the people in the original series?' which was not that easy to do, actually. You're talking 15, 16, 17, 18 years for some," he said. Phone numbers and email addresses changed, people moved, married and, in some cases, died.

Fulbeck said that while there were exceptions, most people he was able to find were happy to participate again. One of them was businesswoman Ellen Endo.

"Fortunately, my contact information didn't change, so he was able to call me and email me and ask me if I'd take part in this once more," Endo said.

Referring to part-Japanese Hapas, Endo, whose Japanese American father met his native-Italian wife while he was serving in the 442nd during World War II, said, "I feel

like this exhibition is timely because it's the only part of the community that's growing."

She cited figures from the last census, saying there are about 1.3 million people of Japanese ancestry in the U.S., but about 500,000 are mixed, so that means that "the Japanese population is actually shrinking in the United States, but the Hapa population is growing. So, it's a group we have to pay attention to."

Fulbeck says that when he put the word out about the new photo shoots, the response among Japanese Hapas was huge.

"The JA population was off the charts in terms of how big they were," he said. "I photographed 2,000 people, and 1,500 were JA." To Fulbeck, the awareness of Hapa issues in the Japanese American community seems to be further along than other Asian American groups on the mainland, no doubt due to trends that began after the Japanese American incarceration that took a few decades to manifest.

For instance, a 1984 article written by Harry H. L. Kitano, Wai-Tsang Yeung, Lynn Chai and Herbert Hatanaka had in 1979 for Los Angeles, Japanese rates of outmarriage at 60.6 percent vs. 41.2 percent for Chinese and 27.6 percent for Koreans.

"I grew up in a Chinese family. It was just never talked about, it was never discussed because we didn't have to, because we were first generation, whereas after the camps, it was like people were talking about these things left and right, if you're talking about [eligibility for] the Nisei Week beauty pageant or who qualifies for the Tomodachi Basketball League, who gets to be in Nikkei Student Union — these issues have all been upfront and talked about in the JA community, where it hasn't been done in the CA community," Fulbeck said.

"I think I've been making work for 25 years as a fairly well-known artist before the first Chinese American organization asked me to show my work. That was in

New York. It's telling that my shows are at the JA National Museum. It's an audience that understands that if they don't reach out to the Hapa generation, they have no more core members."

Fulbeck's new book, also titled "Hapa. Me," and only for sale at JANM is, at 11 inches by 11 inches, much larger than his first Hapa book. It also contains essays by Velina Hasu Houston, Cindy Nakashima, Keao NeSmith and Paul Spickard, is in color and has more than 200 pages for just \$20.

"I wanted to keep it affordable," said Fulbeck. "This project has never been about making money for me. It's been losing me money (*laughs*). I'm sure it'll go really quick." Only 1,000 copies have been printed.

While one should never say never again, Fulbeck says that after this exhibition at JANM, he is closing the Hapa Project because there are newer generations of Hapas coming behind him that are "doing better work than I could ever do, in video and film, that is off the hook."

"I feel like if I've helped in some ways open this door, if I've helped inspire someone, then take it and run. That's what happening with guns right now. They're going more than our generation ever did," Fulbeck said.

"Sometimes, people come up to me and say, 'Hey, this book ('Part Asian, 100% Hapa') meant a great deal to me.' That's a big responsibility. That's why we make art, and that's why I did this. Somewhere out there is that 'me' kid at 7 years old that's dealing with something similar. It's a different generation, but maybe there's something that's parallel, and I feel that that's a really important aspect of why I make art."

"That's why I'm so grateful that so many people participated in the project to begin with because if they weren't there to tell their stories, it wouldn't exist," said Fulbeck. "That's been my main takeaway from doing this." ■

