

## Hafu: The Mixed Race Experience in Japan

A film by Megumi Nishikura and Lara Perez Takagi. 2013. 87 minutes. In Japanese and English. Subtitled.

*Study Areas: cultural identity, immigration, Japanese culture, race.*



*Hafu: the Mixed Race Experience in Japan* is an intelligent and insightful exploration of five stories of "hafus" living in Japan. "Hafu," the Japanese rendering of the English word "half," is a long-standing but debated identity category in Japan, referring to children born to one Japanese parent and one of a different origin. The term "hafu" gained currency in the waning decades of the twentieth century as the number of mixed-race children growing up in Japan began to skyrocket, and has been used ever since to segregate or to empower the mixed-race individuals it describes. As the film's concluding image suggests, the number of "hafus" in Japan continues to rise precipitously today, a trend that, as this film illuminates, suggests the importance for better understanding of mixed-race people and families in Japan.

Filed in the early years of this decade, *Hafu* provides, through interviews and footage of their everyday lives, nuanced portraits of people representing the breadth of "hafu" identity and experience. David, the son of a Japanese father and Ghanaian mother, was raised primarily in an orphanage in Japan, where he continues to make his home as he raises money to support the building of schools near his mother's home in Ghana. Sophia, the daughter of a Japanese father and an Australian mother, was raised in Australia with a number of visits to her paternal relatives in Japan during early childhood. She decides as a young woman to move to Tokyo to study Japanese and get in touch with her Japanese roots. Gabriela, from Mexico, met her husband Tetsuya Oi in the US when both were students; they now are raising their children, Alex and Sara, in Nagoya. Alex struggles between cultures and languages as the family tries to find a school where he can be himself. Edward is Venezuelan-Japanese raised by his Japanese mother and maternal grandmother in Nishinomiya. Educated in the US and having spent significant time abroad, he has chosen to return to the Kansai region, close to his aging mother. As a driving force of "Mixed Roots Kansai," he creates opportunities for the issue of mixed-race identity to be considered, debated, and celebrated. Fusae is the daughter of a Korean father and Japanese mother. She lives in her native Kobe with her husband, a transplant from Cameroon. "Mixed Roots Kansai" has played an important role in providing a community in which she can embrace her own, less physically obvious "halves."

*Hafu's* great success stems from producers Lara Perez Takagi and Megumi Nishikura's thoughtful reframing of what it means to be "half-Japanese." None of these "hafus" is half-American, and only one speaks English as a native language. One is an "invisible hafu." Some hafus have Japanese mothers, while others have Japanese fathers. They

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were raised in a wide variety of circumstances: by both parents, by one, by extended families, in an orphanage. What they share is an experience of living each day between cultures while striving to live lives that allow them to embrace the rich complexity their status implies. This is a diverse group that cannot be easily characterized beyond their bi- or multi-cultural backgrounds. The diversity of understandings among mixed-race individuals of their experience is evident in each individual narrative, and nicely summarized in a scene where Edward leads a symposium attended by a group comprised of mixed-race individuals, long-term foreign nationals, and Japanese. In discussing the usefulness of "hafu" to describe mixed-race individuals, members express a wide range of opinions about the term and its alternatives: on the one hand, it is disparaging; on another, it is empowering; on still another, it is useful in some contexts and not in others. "Mixed roots" is an alternative, but as the lively discussion suggests, the issues involved are as complicated and personal as the unique individuals that make up the category by any name.

The general constructiveness, and even optimism, of the mixed-race characters as they work to embrace their identities in Japan is another important theme in the film. The struggles faced by characters never feature a clear "right" answer, and embracing one "half" of an identity over another does not provide clear resolution. To cite just a few examples: worried over Alex's difficulties at school, including bullying, Gabriela and Tetsuya first send him to live with relatives in Mexico to finish out a school year, then enroll him in an international school in Nagoya the next, and he is immediately faced with English punctuation and math problems featuring American money and inches and feet. The touching scene of Gabriela with Alex in his bunk bed helping him read aloud in English in preparation for the move to the international school brings home how complicated their situation is: Gabriela, native speaker of Spanish, works in one of her two other languages to help her son find an English voice in which he can be himself in Japan, the country that is "home."

David's childhood in Japan was clearly extremely difficult, but his experiences moving between Japan and Ghana as he works to build a school in his mother's home town lead him to recognize how "Japanese" he really feels, despite constant reminders from people around him that he looks like he's from somewhere else. In one telling scene, he is interviewed by a Japanese reporter, who has trouble figuring out how to write David's family name, "Yano." As David patiently explains the Chinese characters used to write this very common family name, the reporter assumes that David's connection to Japan is through marriage to a Japanese woman.

Edward remembers having to return from abroad every three years during his college years to renew his Japanese visa: despite being raised in Japan by his Japanese mother and having no contact with his father, he was loath to give up his Venezuelan passport even though it meant being treated as a foreigner in the country where he was raised.

Ultimately, we leave these "hafus" mid-story, but with insight into how closely tied identity is to a feeling of "home." At the film's conclusion, we find David short of his financial goals for building a middle school, but still working to accomplish this dream. Sophia returns to Australia, having gained insight into her mixed-race identity while deciding she is more at home in the country where she was raised. Edward and Fusae continue their dedication to "Mixed Race Kansai" as they help create a community and a context in which to support mixed-race families, including their own (both are newly married). Alex Oi begins to find his way in the American school. Who they are as "hafus" – the languages they speak, the places they have lived, the relationships they value – shapes and is given shape by the journey to find, or to create, that place.

This 87-minute-long documentary is completely absorbing – the narratives weave together and diverge effortlessly, and the camerawork captures in turn isolation, intimacy, and community. Each story quietly delivers keen observation on identity, relationships, and the changing nature of the mixed race experience in Japan. In addition to its inherent interest for general audiences, this film is a welcome addition to teaching materials about contemporary Japanese culture, cultural identity, and global culture for high school and college classrooms.

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For more information about *Hafu*, visit the filmmaker's [website](#).

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