

“It is a heartfelt and deeply human effort to encourage Japan to be an openly multicultural society.”

ROB SCHWARZ, METROPOLIS



Third World Newsreel
545 8th Ave, Suite 550, New York, NY 10018
(212) 947-9277, distribution@twon.org, www.twn.org

HAFU THE MIXED-RACE EXPERIENCE IN JAPAN

A FILM BY MEGUMI NISHIKURA & LARA PEREZ TAKAGI

HAFU, winner of the Best Documentary Award at the Philadelphia Asian American Film Festival, is the unfolding journey of discovery into the intricacies of mixed-race Japanese and their multicultural experience in modern day Japan. The film follows the lives of five “hafus”-the Japanese term for people who are half-Japanese-as they explore what it means to be multiracial and multicultural in a nation that once proudly proclaimed itself as the mono-ethnic nation. For some of these hafus Japan is the only home they know, for some living in Japan is an entirely new experience, and others are caught somewhere between two different worlds.

According to the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, one in forty-nine babies born in Japan today are born into families with one non-Japanese parent. This newly emerging minority in Japan is under-documented and under-explored in both literature and media. HAFU - THE MIXED-RACE EXPERIENCE IN JAPAN seeks to open this increasingly important dialogue. The film explores race, diversity, multiculturalism, nationality, and identity within the mixed-race community of Japan. And through this exploration, it seeks to answer the following questions: What does it mean to be hafu?; What does it mean to be Japanese?; and ultimately, What does all of this mean for Japan? (2013, 85 min, Japan, Japanese, English & Spanish with English & Japanese Subtitles)



Megumi Nishikura is passionate about documentary storytelling. A graduate of New York University’s Tisch School of Arts Film and Television program, she works as a freelance documentary producer and director. Most of her recent documentaries have been for the United Nations and various foundations and NGOs on global and social issues. Her passion is to use the medium of film to remind people of our common humanity.

Lara Perez Takagi was born in Tokyo, and raised in various cities around the world. Her father is Spanish and her mother is Japanese. She graduated with a degree in Audiovisual Communications and Multimedia Science at the Francisco de Vitoria University in Madrid, in 2005. She worked as a freelance production assistant in various Japanese production companies while she completed a MA in the Multimedia Science and Arts area in Waseda University’s Graduate School of GITS. Here she directed and produced her first art-documentary *Madrid x Tokyo* that portrayed the vision of a person who grew up between two different countries and cultures.



“An intelligent and insightful exploration of five stories of “hafus” living in Japan... Each story quietly delivers keen observation on identity, relationships, and the changing nature of the mixed race experience in Japan... This film is a welcome addition to teaching materials about contemporary Japanese culture, cultural identity, and global culture...”

ELIZABETH OYLER, ASIAN

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Third World Newsreel
545 8th Avenue, Suite 550
New York, NY 10018
E: tw@tw.org
T: (212) 947-9277 x 10
F: (212) 594-6417

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HAFU

THE MIXED-RACE EXPERIENCE IN JAPAN

Awards

Best Documentary, Philadelphia Asian American Film Festival

Screenings

World Premiere, Hapa Japan Festival, Los Angeles

Los Angeles Asian Pacific American Film Festival

The New Orleans Loving Festival

Asian American International Film Festival, New York

DC Asia Pacific Film

Japan Film Festival, Irvine

San Diego Asian Film Festival

Vancouver Asian Film Festival

Philadelphia Asian American Film Festival

Amnesty International Film Festival, Japan

Screening formats: HDCAM, DVCAM, DVD, mp4

HAFU

THE MIXED-RACE EXPERIENCE
IN JAPAN

CREDITS & TECHNICAL INFORMATION

A film by
Megumi Nishikura & Lara Pérez

Takagi
Writer & Researcher
Marcia Yumi Lise
Executive Producer

Jilann Spitzmiller
Edited by
Aika Miyake
Original Music by
Winton Yuichiro White
Infographic Animation by
Ken Tanabe

Featuring
David Mitsuaki Yano
Sophia Fukunishi
Tetsuya Oi
Gabriela Oi
Alex Oi
Sara Oi
Edward Yutaka Sumoto
Fusae Miyako

With
Takara Kenza Allal
Ndi Charles Ngoh
Gifty Yano
Alexis Wuillaume
Sue Conolly
Sachina Hobo
Amy Hobo
Judie Clark
Michael Lindstrom
Sterling Asaomi Carbin
Yusuke Yokota
Chris Rheyndolds
Lynete Rheyndolds
Kayoko Ishii
Katsuhiko Watanabe
Junko Kawagishi
Hiroaki Watanabe
Junko Kusano

Opening Cast
Robert Purss
Noriko Purss
Leo Purss
Lilico Purss
Paul Thompson
Yoko Thompson
Kaidi Thompson
Mala Thompson
Makito Miyashita
Teruaki Ito
Carla Ito

Maika Ito
Jun Ito
Albert Ryan Kowalchuk
Mai Kowalchuk
Akinyele Brandley
Tamaki Brandey
Akinyele Yoshizumi Brandley
William Yoshizumi Brandley
David Rubenstein
Megumi Rubenstein
Ty Rubenstein

Opening Narration
Lara Pérez Takagi

Production
Producer Megumi Nishikura
Co-producer Lara Pérez Takagi
Associate Producer
Ken Graves
Duncan Ryuken Williams

Camera
Lara Pérez Takagi
Megumi Nishikura
Additional Camera
Ryu Kodama
Joe Sacco
James Okubo

Production Assistance
Sara Ai Coe
Cherry Mio Rhodes
Emma Tsuji Harrison
Maura Deignan

Sound Consultant
Michael Komagata

Interns
Lisa Hayamizu
Andres Ooshiro

Post-Production
Editorial Facilities
Cutters Tokyo
Colorist
Peter Majtan
Sound Mixer
Takayoshi Watanabe
Additional Mixers
Jeffrey Jousan
Jeff Ruiz
Maps & Retouching
Massashi L Hosono
Editing consultant
Lise Angelica Johnson
Dan Morita
Story consultants
Natalie Maya Willer
Ivy Yukiko Ishihara Oldford
Deborah DeSnoo
Luis Patron
Joe Sacco

Transcribers
Lisa Hansen
Virginia Vaughn
Lenna Stites
Emi Ota
Rachel Satoh
Cynthia Shibata
Michael Boyd
April Moreno
Rino Koshimizu
Subtitles by
J.MaXwell Powers
Ivy Yukiko Ishihara Oldford
Mika Tanaya (Soli Consultants, Inc.)
Stock footage
AQUA Geo Graphic
IT consultant
Jeff Wentworth

Development, Outreach & Research
Crowd Funding Coordinator
Erika Tsunozumi Wiseberg
Australia Coordinator
Tony Fry
Distribution Consultant
Eiji Kamada
Translation
John Knieriem
Yukali Armstrong
Hiromi Yoshida
Chika Watanabe
Javier Fernández Pello
Miki Katharina Rammelmayr
Japanisch-Deutsches Zentrum Berlin

Géraldine Oudin
Roberto Maxwell
Silvia Telloni
Elen Faustinelli
Graphic Designer
Erika Nishizato
Web Designer
Steve Farrugia
Copy Editor
Steve Nishiida
Photographers
Ryu Kodama
Michael Connolly
Ikon Chiba
Carpenter
Albert Siegel
Achim Runnebaum
Alexis Wuillaume

Music
Original Score
Winton Yuichiro White
Music Supervisor
Dominique Preyer
Music Consultant
Sara Ai Coe

“Dreams”
Written and Performed by David Yano

“Tetes Groove”
Written by Winchester Niitete Boye
Performed by Niitete
“White Weekends”
Written and Performed by Justin
North

“Evidence”
Written and Performed by David Yano

“Now is the point at which I touch
eternity”
Written by Emi Evans, Hiroyuki
Muneta
Performed by freesscape
Under license from freesscape

“Afa”
Traditional

“The Windmill”
Performed by Polymath
Written by Justin North

“Von”
Written and Performed by Polymath

Genre: Documentary
Running Time: 85 minutes
Shooting Format: HD, 1920 x 1080
Language: Japanese, English &
Spanish
Subtitles: English & Japanese
Production: 2010-2013
Release year: 2013
Country of Production: Japan

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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.

Elizabeth Oyler is an Associate Professor of Japanese at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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

Last Updated: September 11, 2014