



**Megumi Nishikura and Lara Perez Takagi, Producers,
Directors, Videographers, *Hafu: The Mixed Race Experience
in Japan***

New York/Tokyo: Hafu Project, 2013. Jilann Spitzmiller, Executive Producer. 90 minutes, color. ¥30,000 (educational copy); \$29.99/¥4,000 (individuals).

THIS FILM examines issues related to community, identity, education, and belonging through the experiences of five *hafu* (“half-Japanese”) living in Japan. The participants’ narratives contain nuances and rich perspectives that have a powerful impact.

The film is in some ways an attempt to educate Japanese people about issues *hafu* face and their potential to make significant contributions to Japanese society, as the director explained in a TEDx talk she gave in Kyoto in 2013 (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lhqYBhLhIM> [“Explorations into being Hafu: Megumi Nishikura at TEDxKyoto 2013”]; accessed 3 May 2016).

The past thirty years has seen significant demographic changes in Japan, a country that was often claimed to be a mono-ethnic nation. One in forty-nine babies are now born to a family with a non-Japanese parent. It is difficult to ascertain how many *hafu* live in Japan because Japanese census data do not include ethnic or racial backgrounds, only nationalities. While *hafu* are becoming more prominent in Japanese media—including celebrities, newsreaders, and fashion models—this exposure tends to reinforce idealized images of *hafu* in Japan: exotic-looking people with English ability, access to “foreign” cultural experiences, and Western features. But this predominant image does not take into account the difficulties *hafu* may experience in local communities, schools, and within their own families.

School life and education play an important part in the film. The only child participant (Japanese father, Mexican mother) speaks of being bullied at his Japanese school simply because he spoke good English. While having English language ability is normally a highly desirable trait, in most Japanese schoolyards where conformity is paramount and non-English speakers the norm, this boy found it difficult to survive.

An Australian-Japanese woman speaks of the racist attitude of her primary school teacher in Australia which led her to reject her Japanese identity. She tries to reclaim it by visiting Japan later but struggles due to lack of Japanese language ability.

This issue of belonging is powerfully addressed through the experiences of a young man with a Ghanaian mother and a Japanese father, who felt for a long time he was not accepted in either Japan or Ghana. His description of childhood experiences is confronting, yet he appears to have reconciled within himself various conflicts concerning his identity and sense of place. Such conflicts are mirrored in the experience of another young man, whose father is Venezuelan and mother Japanese. His Venezuelan passport becomes crucial to his sense of identity, and his struggles with the Japanese authorities to keep the passport are quite disturbing as he faces the realities of not fitting into convenient categories.

A woman with a Korean mother and a Japanese father discusses the struggles her mother dealt with. Her mother chose to raise her and her brother “as 100 percent Japanese in order to protect us”—a decision that had devastating consequences when the woman was a young teenager and suddenly discovered through official records the true nature of her mixed roots. Nevertheless, she, as with the other subjects of the film, was faced with the issue of belonging: she spent much of her time wondering “which part is Japanese, which part is Korean.”

The filmmakers’ decision to privilege the experiences of five people rather than have a narrator guiding the audience or scholars discussing issues of mixed-race identity is understandable. As the experiences are vastly different, it is occasionally difficult to discern specific themes. Nevertheless, the film certainly succeeds in showing the depth and diversity of *hafu* identities. Although the messages from the *hafu* participants may well resonate with people of other mixed-race identities and those who seek to understand the associated issues, ultimately the film offers an intimate look at Japanese society. The film will be of primary interest to those who study Japan, but there are enough valuable insights in the narratives that would appeal to a broader audience.

As the non-Japanese father of a *hafu* living in Japan, I learned a great deal from the narratives. *Hafu* is a thought-provoking film that deserves multiple viewings in order to glean the varied perspectives and nuances the participants offer. And I would have liked to have watched it a number of times—over a reasonable period of time of my choosing without distraction—to consider the issues as I prepared this review. It is this issue that deserves criticism.

Asian Ethnology’s associate editor contacted a *Hafu* representative through the website (<http://hafufilm.com/>) and requested a DVD review copy. The response was that rather than shipping a DVD, they would provide a Vimeo link to the film for a limited period. The reality is that reviewers—myself included—do not always meet deadlines set for reviews. The link expired and our associate editor needed to ask for another password. Ultimately, we decided to have my institution purchase an educational copy which I used to complete this review.

In order for the journal to review material—whether they be books, films, or audio CDs—we believe hard copies should be made available to us. We publish reviews of material we feel deserves attention among the academic community.

Journals provide publishers or film producers with opportunities to publicize their work through channels they may not normally reach. We realize there is an increasing trend to send digital versions of material with limited-period access to journals but these methods place the onus on reviewers to complete reviews according to the demands of the publishers or producers. This is an unnecessary burden.

Apart from this issue, the filmmakers and participants are passionate about the subject and this translates onto the screen. *Hafu: The Mixed Race Experience in Japan* is a fascinating look into the changing nature of Japanese society and mixed-race identity.

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