



The Interviews

'Hafu' / Half Japanese

An exhibition about appearance, identity and sense of belonging

****Please note that this is a sample document with two cases out of the current collection of nine individuals.****

Introduction

As part of the photographic exhibition "*Hafu / Half Japanese*", nine half Japanese individuals were interviewed to explore the issues of ethnic identity and sense of belonging. The same set of questions was asked with regards to their ethnic identity. However the themes covered in the interviews are diverse. In that sense, this serves as a domain to allow *Hafus* to define their ethnic identity and recognise their own diversity.

People always ask the question – where are you from? This is often a tricky question for people like the *Hafus* for they were born to parents from different cultures and raised in certain places. Ethnic identity is of a complex, ever-changing and negotiated nature.

Hafus or any mixed 'race' individuals may feel they have a connection to one, two or even more places and nations. On the other hand, some may choose not to be affiliated to a particular country. Others may choose their identity to suit their needs in different circumstances. 'Racial' make up is not everything yet it affects us all.

There are various factors that affect a *Hafu*'s sense of belonging and identity assertion; relationship to family and friends, education, social class, where and how they were raised, personal characteristics and very importantly the public racial discourse, in other words the ways in which different societies see *Hafus*, which is often based on physical qualities.

Interviews

What follows is based on the interview transcripts. They are an illustration of how the nine half Japanese individuals portrayed construct their identities and create their sense of belonging being in between two different cultures.

It is not the aim of this project to make generalisations. Experiences of and lines of thoughts carried by *Hafus* show similarities and differences which adds to the diversity of this mixed ethnic group itself.

Although the researcher's conceptual lens acts as a filter, it is the deliberate intension of the author to allow its readers to interpret the words of the nine individuals themselves in order to 'see' the worlds as they are perceived by them.

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Sample Interview 1

Mother: Japanese
Father: British
Born in: UK
Raised in: UK

I was born in a place called Harlow in Essex. My mum is Japanese and my dad is English. I actually met my dad just very recently for the first time. So I've been brought up by my mum. My whole life has just been me, my mum and what you see in this country.

I'm half Japanese but very English because of my upbringing. I'm pretty much English through and through. Although I've got a Japanese side to myself which I feel a little bit confused about because I don't really understand my Japanese side. But I've got it. England made me who I am and this is my home. I don't see Japan as home but I'm going to go to Japan to see what it's like.

I don't have a very strong connection with my English family because I have no contact with them. The only person I've met is my dad. Also, I never really felt the need to be accepted as English. I never actually ever felt the need to be accepted by English people.

I have a much stronger connection with my Japanese family. My uncle really likes me and he loves hanging out with me so he is like a father to me. I feel very accepted over there in my Japanese family. So that's a relief for me. At least I'm accepted somewhere.

My mum is very reserved about her feelings. It's hard if I want to talk about how I feel about something. I think maybe it's a Japanese thing. You don't really express your feelings or your opinions or anything.

London is my home. It's so diverse. You don't stick out much. But if you go, say to an English pub in the middle of the countryside everyone looks at you if you don't come from the area so I feel more conscious of my half Japanese-ness.

I went to a state school and then my secondary school was a private school. There were a lot of Essex boy types. At school I hung out with outsider-ish, sidelined people. I felt most comfortable around them. When I was younger I did feel really out of place. My memories at high school aren't that good. I never really felt a sense of belonging because of my identity. It's always played on my mind a bit.

I went to Saturday Japanese school as a child. It wasn't for very long cause I didn't like it. I think the Japanese kids saw me as different. Then again, nowadays, Japanese people are intrigued by me. They tend to see me as an English guy rather than half Japanese though. I'm automatically a foreigner. Just the way I look, my body is English.

I went to Japan Society at university and it was amazing. I met all these Japanese people for the first time and felt really comfortable. It was just part of exploring myself.

I think I've got a slightly different personality when I speak in Japanese, which is strange. A different side of me comes out. Maybe I'm a bit friendlier when I speak in Japanese.

Some people won't believe me if I say I'm half Japanese. I don't look too Japanese. Maybe my eyes are probably the most Japanese thing about my face and facial structure? In fact I went through most of high school with no one actually knowing that I was half Japanese, just assuming I was English because I think I looked very English when I was younger.

I met a Turkish guy once and he was like "Oooooohh HELLOOOOO ... you're from Turkey!!!" If I go to a Spanish party or an Italian party people think I'm Italian or Spanish.

As soon as I reveal I'm half Japanese, they go "oh yeah I can see it now" - that's always the reply. Then they start seeing me as Japanese, especially English people. It's a bit weird really because had I not revealed I was half Japanese they'd be treating me slightly different. So in some cases I just won't bother to say I'm half Japanese.

Meeting my dad for the first time was possibly one of the happiest moments in my life because I finally felt comfortable with a part of my identity. I've been very confused about my identity for a very long period of my life. I didn't know my dad and also felt conscious of my Japanese side. Being brought up by mum who is Japanese in England was another source of confusion. I've been going through a bit of an identity crisis but I have come out of that now. I imagined my dad to be almost godly before I met him. But when I met him I realised that he's just human and it brought me down a little.

Sample Interview 2

Mother: Swedish
Father: Japanese
Born in: Japan
Raised in: Japan

I was born in Tokyo in Japan and I was raised there. My father is from Japan and my mother is from Sweden. They met in London when they were working there and they moved to Japan like in the 1970s. My mother was modelling in London and Paris and my dad had just started working as a photographer.

My mentality and behaviour is really Japanese. But there's something comfortable about speaking in English and to be with people from Europe so I can't really say I'm totally Japanese. I feel different from Japanese people.

It's so weird. If I'm with Swedish, I don't feel Swedish at all. But if I'm with my mum, I feel quite Swedish because we're quite similar. My Swedish heritage is probably to do with my mum and small experiences here and there.

One day I was talking to my friend and suddenly I notice there's a mirror behind so I was looking at myself speaking Japanese. I felt so weird like 'Who is this foreigner?' 'Oh, this foreigner's speaking Japanese.' And like I thought to myself 'Oh, now I understand why people think I look a bit different'. I saw that I looked different.

Because I have a lot of experience of people treating me as non-Japanese part of me wants to be treated like Japanese - that used to be my wish since I was young. When suddenly somebody treats me as Japanese, although I wanted it like that before or even now, just because I'm not used to it I feel awkward. I probably don't want to be totally Japanese. That kind of treatment became part of me.

In Japan people have more tolerance to me because I have a different culture within me, so even though I do something a little bit weird they would tolerate it. Because I look a bit different, people allow me to be a little bit different.

I've been treated differently constantly by Japanese people and I feel like I have some resistance to belonging to somewhere. I feel like I belong to my family. I don't feel like I belong to Japan or to Sweden.

I never felt a hundred percent sense of belonging because I always felt one foot away or not belonging totally. I feel a part of Japanese people and I don't at the same time.

In terms of how I look I think when I'm out of Japan I look more Japanese and when I'm in Japan I look non Japanese.

I've had people say I'm Spanish, Brazilian, Turkish, Italian, British, maybe Iranian, Asian, Japanese and Korean.

Being half Japanese didn't matter so much in primary school although it was a little bit like an army. Very strict and you're not really allowed to do anything different.

In Junior high school, people started to become really self-conscious... Before I entered school the teacher gathered all the school children and said, 'Tomorrow there's somebody different coming so don't treat him like he's different'. But it worked the opposite way. Everybody would come to the classroom to look at me.

In high school, some people still said 'Oh, you're a foreigner' or 'you look different' but I was getting more positive about being half Japanese. I felt like I already grew through the difficulty I had in junior high school.

I joined a modelling agency when I was at university in Japan. They had thirty male models and I think half of them or so were half Japanese. So we met at work, hang around together and we became quite close, especially because we felt like there's something similar between us all. We spoke in English and Japanese.

I met other half Japanese people who grew up all over the places, everybody had the same experience. So in that way it really made me happy.

I recently met a Swedish Japanese guy. I felt close to him because we share some kind of history that not everybody else shares. It makes us united.

I don't like the label 'Hafu'. I prefer 'mixed' because I don't have any prejudice against the word. 'Hafu' is related to something I don't really like remembering about. It relates to me as I'm half not-Japanese so it reminds me that I'm not totally Japanese.

I moved to London in 2006. People here don't ask me where I'm from so I can just be myself and it's quite comfortable. I feel much more relaxed about being half or mixed here than in Japan. People don't remind me about my background. Since I moved to London I think less about being mixed Japanese. I focus more on how I can develop myself a bit more.

Exhibition: 'Hafu' / Half Japanese

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More information:

www.hafujapanese.org

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