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THE HAFU PROJECT

Exploring the question of what it means to be Japanese

BY JESSICA OCHELTREE

Japan has long been regarded as a homogenous culture: to look Japanese and to speak the language was to *be* Japanese. However, with one in 30 babies here now being born to mixed-race couples, these concepts are starting to change. It's an issue that's particularly pertinent for the children of such couples, who have been dealing with questions of national identity for their whole lives, and now a group of young *hafu* are exploring what their experiences mean for the future of Japan.

The Hafu Project began back in 2008 as a collaboration between social researcher Marcia Lise, who was compiling interviews with groups of half-Japanese people, and German-Japanese photographer Natalie Willer, who was shooting portraits of them. The pair held an exhibition in London at the end of that year which enjoyed the support of the Japanese Embassy and other cultural organizations.

"The project itself is an inquiry into the half-Japanese experience," says Lise. "As you can probably imagine, it's really diverse. Some people have been raised in Japan, others outside. So we're trying to get our stories out... We want people to know what it is to be half-Japanese—*hafu*—in Japan and outside of Japan."

To date, the project has collected 130 portraits and 65 in-depth interviews, exploring everything from the subjects' backgrounds and upbringing to their sexuality, religion and social experiences. In addition to showing their work in exhibitions, Lise and Willer are also compiling a book in Japanese and English.

"Personally, I want people in Japan to read it," says Lise. "I think it's really important that Japanese speakers are able to get to know the experience of half-Japanese people, and question their own identity too."

Two of the interviewees, both Tokyo-based filmmakers, have joined forces and struck out on a related project of their own: a documentary, called simply *Hafu*, about five people dealing



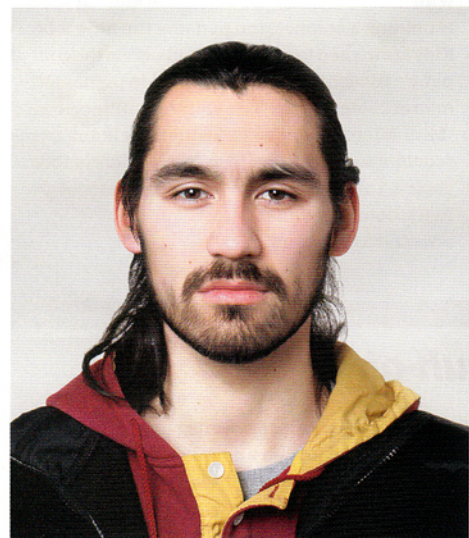
with issues common among biracial Japanese. Says Megumi Nishikura, one of the directors: "We all feel that Japan is changing and that we—as the people making the film, and the people who are in the film—all identify [ourselves] as kind of an emerging community of Japanese people. [We want] to start that dialogue: what does this change mean for Japan?"

One of their subjects is David Yano, a half-Ghanaian who has lived in Japan since he was six. Like an increasing number of mixed-race Japanese, he has a successful career as a model and TV presenter, but the movie focuses on his efforts to raise money to build a school back in Ghana.

Meanwhile, the Oi family—a Japanese father, Mexican mother and their two children—show how the *hafu* community often has to balance different linguistic and cultural influences. "Most international couples with children have to consider at some point what education system they are going to put their children in," says Nishikura. "So we were looking for someone who was going through that."

The filmmakers are still choosing their other three subjects. One person will be debating the issue of whether to naturalize or not, and another will represent the most common demographic for *hafu*, an Asian mix, exploring what the issue of identity is like for someone who, on a superficial level at least, blends easily into Japanese society.

The final subject will be like co-director Lara Perez Takagi, who grew up overseas but returned to Japan to get in touch with her Japanese heritage. "We're showing something that is happening every day, and that there are people



with these experiences," Takagi says.

Nishikura is aware of the contradictions in trying to define what it means to be Japanese: "Somehow the Japanese people have agreed that there is a definition, but no one has actually discussed what that definition is... One of my motivations for making this film is that I want to help expand that definition, whatever it may be, to include people like us."

See www.hafujapanese.org and www.hafufilm.com for more information.

The Hafu Project's first Japanese exhibition runs at 3331 Arts Chiyoda until Aug 29. See exhibition listings (other areas) for details.