

# In Los Angeles, a Festival of Love and Hapa-ness

By [LAWRENCE DOWNES](#) MARCH 11, 2017



Portraits from Hāfu2Hāfu, an ongoing photographic project which investigates what it means to be half Japanese and how this defines identity. Tetsuro Miyazaki

Los Angeles — The current political moment, with its upwelling of nationalism and xenophobia, has a repellent taste, like a mouthful of citrus pith, all bitter and white.

How bracing, then, to escape in late February to Los Angeles, city of the future, for something called the Hapa Japan Festival, a “celebration of mixed-race and mixed-roots Japanese people and culture.”

“Hapa” means “half” in Hawaiian pidgin English, and can be used to denote a variety of mixed-race or ethnic combinations, but in this context it meant half Japanese and half something else. In Hawaii, where I grew up Okinawan-Irish, hapa status is unremarkable, a matter-of-fact part of life, like daily sunshine. In the mainland United States, the word is used more assertively, if not defiantly — as a declaration of an identity that many people overlook or dismiss.

The story of growing up hapa — or “hafu,” in Japan — has been told and

retold, often as melodrama or tragedy, in tales of abandoned Amerasian orphans in former war zones, or of more contemporary misfits struggling with confusion and rejection.

But as Duncan Ryuken Williams, a [professor](#) of religion and East Asian languages and cultures at the University of Southern California, who organized the festival, explained, it's more complicated than that, a subject worthy of deep — and optimistic — exploration. The festival coincided with a conference at the University of Southern California on critical mixed-race studies, and the publication of “Hapa Japan,” a two-part volume of essays that Professor Williams edited.

The scholars, artists and musicians I met over four days embodied that complexity. They all shared some version of the same story: of boundary crossing, first by their parents, then by themselves, in lives that unavoidably tested rigid racial assumptions and expectations. For all that, they seemed comfortable in their skins, and strikingly creative: A singer-songwriter, Kat McDowell, of New Zealand and Japan, trying to make it in Los Angeles. A pop and hip-hop trio, the Yano Brothers, who were born in Ghana, grew up in Japan, and rapped smoothly in Japanese. Tetsuro Miyazaki, a Belgian-Japanese photographer. Jeff Chiba Stearns, a Japanese-Canadian filmmaker whose documentaries include “One Big Hapa Family.”

If you gaze at the many [portraits](#) of half-Japanese, half-Dutch subjects photographed by Mr. Miyazaki, you can see the searching in their faces, the puzzling out of what hapa means. But you can also gain the sense that there are deep currents, forces old and powerful, in opposition to wall-building and racial hunkering.

Mixing is happening all around, and the results can be surprising, wondrous, and unstoppable: Who knew that there were so many hapas in Holland? Yet in the hapa world, anxiety about breeding and bloodlines is never far from the surface. An essay in “Hapa Japan” recounts the paroxysms felt by some Japanese-Americans in California in the late 1970s, when the Japanese American Citizens League warned that interracial

marriage was a threat “worse than a hundred million Manzanars, Tule Lakes, or Pearl Harbors.”

Young couples, thankfully, did not heed that panicky call to preserve issei purity. As Professor Williams told me, Japanese-Americans “marry out” far more than other Asian-Americans. In the 2010 census, more than 460,000 of 1.3 million Japanese-Americans identified themselves as multiracial. The trend puts Japanese-Americans on the brink of becoming the first Asian-American group that is mostly racially mixed.

Being hapa, or hafu, is a journey that can unfold in a million different ways. A film shown at the festival showed how Japanese “war brides” struggled to adjust to life in the United States. I heard of the difficulty of being half-black in places like Okinawa, where after generations of oppression from Japan and occupation by the United States military, biracial status is haunted by a long history of colonialism and stories of rape and abandonment.

But even so, as Mitzi Uehara Carter, who teaches at Florida International University and is the daughter of an Okinawan mother and an African-American father, explained, hāfus in Okinawa, like those anywhere, often balk at having their lives stuffed into narrative boxes. They don’t like being saddled with identity crises they don’t necessarily have.

A recent [essay](#) in The Times described the creativity and mental flexibility of biracial people; critics took issue with it, arguing that race-blending is not the antidote to white supremacy, that hapas won’t save the world.

To which hapas would probably say: That’s not our job. And if anybody ever said saving the world was as simple as filling it with green-eyed, mocha-skinned babies, it wasn’t us.

Still, in attending my first hapafest, wandering among people with whom I had nothing, and everything, in common, I got a jolt of a phenomenon that Dr. Uehara Carter writes about: a sense of what she calls the flux of being hapa, the ability to hack the system, to rewrite the rules of the game of

identity and belonging. That sense that you are not bound to a static identity someone else chooses for you.