

Mia Saidel  
American University Class of 2017  
Waseda University 2015-2016

My time as an exchange student at Waseda University was not my first visit to Japan. In fact, it was close to my twentieth time. I have been fortunate enough to visit Japan most summers to see my grandparents in Osaka, where my mother grew up. On most occasions we would stop in Tokyo for a few nights, on others, we would venture to the lavender fields of Hokkaido or the hot spring resorts in Hakone. Each visit made me swell with pride to be half Japanese, but with each passing summer, I was not satisfied with only knowing Japan as a visitor. My motivation to live in Japan for a year as a student rose from two reasons. The first was to become a true citizen of Tokyo. I wanted to know the hidden gems dotted from Daikanyama to Ueno. I wanted to be able to live and breathe the language of the metropolis as a student. The second was to traverse through a country of dual truths, a beautiful part of the culture studied meticulously by academics but its meaning only truly known by people who experience it firsthand. I realized that this fascination intersected with my own personal dual truth: being half Japanese and half Caucasian. In recent years, being 'hafu' has become a subject of much contention in modern Japanese culture. This study abroad opportunity was my chance to reconcile both parts of my identity, and a test to how Japan would accept me.

A huge component of my learning experience from my year in Japan came from the lucky chance that Japan was amidst confronting many challenges, and as an East Asian studies minor, it was gripping to witness. The open conversation of the plight of salarymen and work-life balance was prevalent in the news and in the classroom at Waseda. The disgraced Tokyo governor Yoichi Masuzoe shed light on the lack of oversight in the accountability of Japanese public officials. The G7 summit in Ise-shima was perhaps the most significant event in 2016 regarding Japan's foreign policy. The Article 9 debate was constantly on the radar; sirens blared in Shibuya admonishing Prime Minister Abe's stance, and defenders of the post-war Japanese constitution would march through the streets of Jingumae. Of utmost relevance to the U.S.-Japan relationship was the 70th anniversary of Hiroshima, and the image of President Obama hugging the atomic bomb survivor was plastered across newspapers all over Japan. It was invaluable for my experience to see these events unfold in real time, and to apply what I knew about these social issues simultaneously from an academic and citizen's perspective.

On the extracurricular level, I am astounded at how much I was able to accomplish in the city. I felt that Tokyo magnified me, and everything I desired was attainable. I realized by pleasant surprise that the prerequisite for much of Tokyo's social scene is simply showing up. I was able to explore one particular interest of mine, fashion, extensively. I attended Tokyo Fashion's Night Out in Omotesando during my first week, a dream of mine since early adolescence. I was able to work my way into bustling fashion shows at Tokyo Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week in Shibuya Hikarie, and chatted with media personnel before scoring a few minutes with a handful of designers post-showtime. My magazine-intern friend and fellow Waseda study abroad counterpart and I undertook a project of interviewing several prominent Tokyo fashion designers, including those behind the labels Divka, ZIN Kato, and Tenbo. We went so far as staging a photo shoot with clothes from the designers we interviewed, racing from station to station on the Yamanote Line while lugging clothes and accessories. My yearning of becoming a

confident local was also secured. I knew the ins and outs of Shimo-kitazawa and befriended people at the farmer's market held weekly at the UN University in Aoyama. I attribute this to my willingness to confront strangers and strike conversations outside of *conbini*. To be young and curious was the advantage to cracking the vernacular of Tokyo's most interesting and exclusive happenings.

Yet while I was comfortable and at ease with my abilities to navigate Tokyo, I was confronted with a discriminatory and oblivious Japan that would often make me uncomfortable. There was a clear racial and ethnic hierarchy that garnered positive or negative attention from Japanese people, and was evident even among the Waseda student body. Western exchange students were often given adoration and looks of awe, while the Asian exchange students were largely ignored or were given passive treatment. Upon joining a circle at Waseda called The Guardian, the sole English-running publication by students on campus, I was appalled at the members' lack of knowledge of current events. The Syrian refugee crisis and Black Lives Matter movement did not seem to be within their frame of understanding. Even on Japanese television, anchors on major broadcast networks covering the G7 summit were more concerned about whether or not President Obama would try Ise's famous oysters. Although I have always been quick to love and praise Japan in more ways than one, I was interested in confronting a side of Japan that I did not observe or had chosen to overlook in the past.

I cannot deny that perhaps some of my luck in my endeavors was granted to me because of my biracial makeup, something that made me feel vexed. However, I also realized that the superficiality that came my way with regards to how Japanese people interacted with me as warned by the *Hafu* documentary released in 2013 was something that was hard to escape, but would only disappear after I asserted to Japanese people in a one-liner that the world is diverse and dual identity is possible. My search for this reconciliation of my dual identity in Japan was found in the countless occasions of stating my case to my Japanese counterparts that I could maneuver through Japan and America with equal fluency. In fact, I felt that this explanation of my identity that I offered to others only strengthened how equally Japanese and American I felt. In some ways, I sensed that this justification of myself was an example of the reality Japan is now waking up to: a country coming to terms with the rest of the diversifying world.

I can say with confidence that Tokyo has become another home to me, a familiar and safe guardian. I hope to return to Tokyo in time for the 2020 Olympics, a time of great patriotism, and with hope, a time for newly created job opportunities. I foresee that when I return, I will still be able to hum along to the Lawson and 7-11 chimes while I pick out my daily *onigiri*, and that *Kin no kura* will still be my poison of choice among the sea of *izakaya* available after midnight. I will still remember the thrill of Shinjuku, and still be aggravated at the early closing hours of public gardens while simultaneously amused at the passive 'please leave' music the staff turns on as cue to depart. I will still appreciate the grandeur of the Imperial gardens and will still recall the memories of the breathtaking cherry blossoms of Chidorigafuchi. Above all, I will still be proud of calling Tokyo my friend.