Representing Identity:

Students’ Homepages in Japan

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This study examines students’ homepages in Japan and illustrates their representation of identity. The sites raise a number of complex questions. They are fashioned by young adults of Japanese ancestry who enrolled in an undergraduate program at a Japanese university. For the first time in their lives, many of them have come to the home country of their maternal grandparents. The participants’ sites must thus be read in a larger context. At the same time, the distinct subculture of the university, which houses the students and their projections both figuratively and literally, also strongly influences modes of representation. Technical aspects further define the relation between these authors and their readers. A close reading of the pages reveals that the constructed identities are subject to specific national and corporate interests.

Initially, the participants of this study use their homepages to write themselves into existence and to broadcast to their peers on their local Intranet. The paper focuses specifically on a small group of students from abroad who share Asian ancestry and have come to Japan to complete an undergraduate degree. Many of them find themselves living in Japan for the first time in their lives. This textual analysis of posted homepages sets out to explore some of the complexities that accompany attempts at self-representation of this international group of students. Ideally, intercultural language communication serves to negotiate notions of identity within a multicultural campus microcosm. In many ways, the students’ computer aided self-representations are comments on the surrounding physical context. The Internet, which is widely used on campus, has had a large impact on notions of identity and the self. In chat-rooms, online discussions, and on individual homepages an author’s identity is purely based on self-perception instead of action, appearance or other extrinsic factors. Cyberspace apparently allows the freedom to explore an unlimited range of identities. The electronic projections are only subject to basic rules of interaction that have evolved from a common consensus. Ultimately, such representations have transcendental overtones since “the body” is left at the keyboard. Given this complete freedom to recreate the self, the students’ persistent use of national, ethnic, and corporate signifiers is striking.

Notwithstanding the ultimate impossibility of representing the hybridity of the “third space” Homi Bhabha refers to (Bhabha, 1994), students of Asian ancestry offer some insights into inherent complexities as they create personal homepages during their university years in Japan to reach out to their friends and family in Canada and the United States. The homepages are composed of building blocks such as texts, videos, music files, photos, cartoons, and other

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images and signs. The students face a fundamental choice to either create anew or copy these elements from elsewhere. Thus, students’ original texts and photos describe their sense of self and describe individual experiences. Copied elements and texts also convey a sense of students’ interests but in choosing readily available graphics from the Web, a fundamental shift occurs: Every copied building block of visual language—every sign on the Web—is corporately owned. Students who try to position themselves in relation to fashionable trends represent corporate marketing strategies instead of genuine experience. Thus students unwittingly create an interchangeable consumer identity that does little justice to the complexities of their lives lived at the intersection of cultures.

The five selected examples in this study share the same basic design with the majority of other Anglophone or international student homepages. This may be explained by an initial assignment in a prerequisite introductory computer science class in which every incoming group of students is asked to construct a homepage. The students borrow templates from each other and this, in turn, leads to a certain standardization of form and content. Thus many students follow a rather limiting design because the initial templates for their sites are readily available. As a result, each homepage typically consists of four components: a self-introduction or personal profile; a “home” section about the country of origin; a page about the university; and a special interest page for hobbies and extracurricular activities. Since the homepages function primarily as a means of introduction to other students and as a link to friends and family at home, all pages include an invitation to mail to the students’ accounts. Incidentally, the often very detailed personal information of these students is open to anyone browsing the Web.

Self-imposed standardization also occurs within the group of Japanese speaking students. The examined homepages differ in many ways from those of Japanese students at the same university for a variety of reasons such as timetable choices, available software, and instructors. In the end, most first-year Japanese undergraduate students appear less computer literate than many of their foreign peers. Typically, the Japanese students limit their site to a single simple page of personal information and cultural specific items such as their blood type. Ostensibly, these students are communicating to all other students, of which fifty percent are Japanese. Both foreign and Japanese students devote most of their time during the first two years at school to studying the target language, and both groups broadcast in a Japanese environment. Given these similarities, it is surprising to find that students from abroad do not use Japanese on their pages. The use of English on their Japanese peers’ pages is likewise very limited. The university’s policy regarding the distribution of strictly segregated software may well reinforce the two solitudes. Still, students could link English and Japanese pages, though they would need to author these pages separately.

The selection of participants grew out of e-mail exchanges in which descriptors also gradually evolved. Thus, the use of the label “Asian Canadian,” for example, was suggested by one of the participants who responded to an initial inquiry:

About Asian Canadians at APU, I think it would be a big difficulty to get enough people. As you know, there are not too many Canadians at APU, and Asian Canadians are even more rare. I can only think of three people, including myself, which fit into the category at APU. Student A is a Japanese who was born and raised in Canada. I think you can go to his homepage and check out his e-mail. Another guy...
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In the end, peers and instructors nominated five undergraduate participants:

1) Participant “A”—A Japanese Canadian man from Vancouver.
2) Participant “B”—A Japanese Iranian woman who sees herself as “half Japanese and half Iranian.”
3) Participant “C”—A Japanese Iranian man, the brother of the female participant above.
4) Participant “D”—A Japanese American man from Hawaii who was born on the island.
5) Participant “E”—A second Japanese American man from Hawaii who was also born and raised on the island.

An interesting commonality is the stress on the home region in all five cases, though the emphasis is more striking among the participants from Hawaii. The students do not foreground their Japanese background and three of the five sites give no clue to the Japanese origins of their authors. Living in Japan, it seems, has prompted all students to showcase their place of birth instead. On the remaining sites, only sparse visual and textual references to Japan are found. Student “A” includes a photo of himself. All other visuals such as animated cartoon pictures of Garfield are from American sources. Student “D” has no reference to Japan at all. Student “E” includes graphics, links to anime, J-pop, and a photo of himself.

The representations on the students’ homepages are limited by several factors: as mentioned, technical expertise and access to software result in similar layout and design features. All identity markers and icons of identity have to be either designed or copied from other sites. Most students who make their own homepages can rarely take the time to design complex original graphics that require more sophisticated software and access to it. Thus, they heavily rely on graphics and information provided by government agencies and corporations. Ultimately, they often reproduce and re-present corporate messages as they try to project a sense of self through the homepage. This leads to oversimplification. Throughout, it is very difficult for the students to articulate a message through the homepage that is not simplistic and commercial. The following quick overview of the sites’ contents demonstrates how many of the displayed images are instantly traced and often directly linked to commercial ventures or corporate sites:

1) Participant “A” populates his site with animated Garfield, Simpson’s and Looney Tunes’ characters. Large portions of TourismVancouver.com are reproduced faithfully, featuring privately managed tourist destinations such as Grouse Mountain. Several linked ads and industry labels for aspiring DJ’s, and maximOnline.com are included.
2) Participant “B” incorporates six photos of state owned tourist sites as well as cartoon characters.
4) Participant “D” copies eight images from tourist promotions.
5) Participant “E” shows ads for Compaq, anime, and some 50 links to Japanese and Korean pop record labels. In addition, all students also include either links to or copies from the official university Web site along with the university’s mission statement and public relations announcements.

While the above list highlights a certain type of content and meaning that is rooted in corporate agendas, one should neither underestimate nor belittle the importance of the role of each participating author and their relation with the reader or visitor to their site. Throughout, all these homepages communicate in many ways through language, images, colors, spatial
and sequential configurations, sound, and even video. Hence, a student’s page may be read as an act of self-expression. They stand as a snapshot in time, framed on the computer screen of the viewer or visitor. Every author of a homepage needs to address certain basic problems of architecture, navigation, and other acts of ordering. Even on a seemingly simple site, hundreds of small decisions have been made to call it into being. The act of reading any text as well as a hypertext is a progression through time in which the reader creates meaning. Every reader is limited by personal experience and therefore takes away only aspects of a text and never a complete comprehensive whole. The primary intended readership of these authors consists of their friends and family.

In terms of relevant personal history, the five featured authors have left the parental home to spend the last of their formative teen years and the first years of adulthood in a sort of limbo where supervision, freedom, dependence, and independence are redefined but still very structured. On the one hand, they are going forward, as they are repeatedly told, into a bright future to take on leadership roles in the Asia Pacific. On the other hand, they also go back in family history to spend vacations visiting Japanese grandparents to rediscover aspects of their childhood during which more time was spent with their Japanese mothers. Regressing and drawing attention to a childhood that is merely seven years in the past is certainly the last thing these single young adults want to draw attention to at their current stage. Whatever it is that signifies Japanese culture for these students, it must necessarily be a very private notion that is tied to family and close friends and was never shared by the public around them. Living in Japan reverses this condition but at the same time the surrounding culture may not be recognizable as significantly different from the consumer societies in which they grew up.

During their childhood abroad these students’ mothers may “represent access to an imagined ethnicity, that of being Japanese as well as Japanese-Canadian at a certain fraught historical juncture” (Gunew, 184). Being Japanese for these students is always “being Japanese” in a non-Japanese context. The Net mirrors this experience to some extent as long as English continues to be the most widely used language. Within this context the students create a visual and textual representation and extension of themselves. Unlike the borrowed graphics, the original compositions of their English texts open up rare opportunities for self-expression. Participant “B”, for example, repeatedly inserts strands of narrative into her site: “I have been thinking of some sweet thing to start but you know … so just a sweet little ‘hi.’” The ellipsis is necessarily intriguing because readers are left guessing about the “sweet thing” that was to take the place of the greeting. A series of frank disclosures follows: “As you may know, I’m half Japanese and half Iranian. I was born in Iran, and I always came to Japan for visits. Now my parents are in Iran and I really miss them. Some good news for me or maybe good for you guys is that my best friend is coming next semester, and she is really pretty. OK, that’s enough information.” Together, the statements invoke a sense of a well-adjusted individual with a support network of friends and family members ready to face new challenges. The tone of the site then changes to echo information provided by Iran’s ministry of tourism: “One of the famous bridges in the biggest city of Iran (Esfahan) is called Thirty Three Bridge.” Three more photos are linked on a following page.

The references to geography are followed by a humorous intercultural language lesson entitled: “Want To Learn Persian?” Seven phrases are listed that conjure up escalating degrees of intimacy:
1) Hello.: Salam
2) How are you?: Hale shoma chetore?
3) I’m fine.: Khoob hastam
4) Thank you.: Motshakera
5) You are so beautiful.: Shoma besiyar ziba hastid
6) Can I invite you for coffee?: Mitoonam shoma ra baraye ghahve davat konam?
7) I love you.: Asheghetam

This sequence of “survival phrases” is followed by a number of subtitled photos taken for the university’s public relations office during an entrance ceremony. The first subtitle asks: “Do you think anyone will be here after four years?” The question is underlined for emphasis and followed by twenty-seven question marks. Most students at the university are expected to graduate after four years and so the line would seem commonplace if the photo were not of the governing board instead.

Another photo from the university’s original promotional campaign similarly gains new meaning from its subtitle: “Do you think the old lady wearing a kimono is a student? No. She is my grandmother. I love her. She is so cool. Everybody was happy…” Thus the subtitles help reclaim photos taken during moments of personal celebration that went on to advertise the educational enterprise as a whole. In it, the Japanese grandmother in her festive kimono poses amongst a group of students along with her granddaughter. In the university brochure the woman in her kimono may come to represent the Japanese heritage of the university. To foreign spectators she may seem a student or a faculty member. To the granddaughter, however, she is above all a very respected and loved family member and not a mere model for recruitment. Only the juxtaposition of subtitle and photo remakes the commercial statement into a deeply personal one that hints at the many complexities an international student of Japanese descent may encounter in Japan.

Participant “B’s” brother participant “C” similarly divides his homepage into a private section and into one devoted to the country of birth. The introduction starts: “As I mentioned before, my mother is Japanese and my father is Iranian. My mother is working in a Japanese company in Tehran. My father is in charge dispatching electricity throughout Tehran. We are a great family with my sister who is also studying here. Here are some pictures of my family in Iran and Japan.” He then posts photos taken in 1989 at Tokyo Disneyland as well as “photos of my grandmother’s house in Kita-Kyushu-Moji, practicing tea-ceremony, photos of my mother at work in Iran,” along with a link to a site on Japanese tea ceremony. The reference to Japanese ceremony, the mother’s role as a foreign worker in Iran, and the family outing to one of the most prominent manifestations of globalization gives a sense of the cultural complexities the family experiences.

Student “C’s” national representation of Iran redirects the western gaze with humorous undertones. The section entitled “All the fun you can have in Iran” is devoted to pop culture: “After the revolution in Iran we were not allowed to listen to music which was considered a violation of religion. But all singers escaped to America and they broadcast in Los Angles to offer their songs to the world.” An extensive list of Iranian American labels and artists follows at this point. The second point of interest is soccer: “Iranians are fanatic when it comes to the game of football (i.e., soccer). As you are supposed to know, we defeated Australia in 1998 and it was like a big revolution in Iran. Everybody did whatever they wanted, like
dancing in front of police, or playing prohibited songs loudly.” This description is followed by pictures of carnivalesque street scenes. This representation of Iranian youth culture is concluded with a conservative reference to Persian heritage and the silk-road.

In contrast to the tone of the previous sites, student “A” from Vancouver begins by exclaiming: “Nationality: Canadian (Proud to be!” The reference here is to the ad campaign of a leading Canadian brewery: “Proud to be Canadian!” He then launches into a paragraph of street talk vaguely reminiscent of African-American youth-culture.

Anyways, in my spare time I usually hang out with my crew. A fair amount of my time is spent spinnin’ records. I love to party whenever possible, usually I hit up the nightclubs to chill with my boys. Livin’ in Vancity for 20 years, made me realize that I have lived in one of the greatest cities in the world. We got so much to offer for not only the locals but also the foreigners. Ya’ll should check it out!

Here, the use of slang reasserts an identity that allows this student an unexamined use of the term “foreigner.” The site then goes on to showcase “all that Vancouver has to offer” by copying both text and photos designed by the local chamber of commerce which reiterates: “Some come with families in tow excited about visiting the Vancouver Aquarium Marine Science Center, Science World and the Kids Only market. Still others come to enjoy world-class entertainment, fantastic cuisine and some of the finest and most eclectic shopping.” Similarly, a list of privately owned tourist spots is also included. Under personal interests this student adds a list of DJ’s and an extended reference to Maxim magazine under the heading: “This is my dedication to the sexiest ladies god created.” The site thus takes on a misogynist tone before concluding with the university’s mission statement and mantra of nurturing an elite that will manage global peace and development.

Participant “E” who shares a strong interest in music with the previous student offers a four hundred-word review of nearly fifty Websites, which lists a selection of Japanese and Korean pop artists and their labels. All these sites, however, are predominantly in English. Although this list is lovingly composed there seems to be an ambivalence towards Japanese and Korean language sites: A so-called “Morning Musume” pop site is described as “just another Morning Musume site that updates but it is all in Japanese.” The “Rising Network Official Site” is “all in Japanese, but a must see.” Similarly, “the official Baby V.O.X. Website … is all in Korean but it looks like a good place for Baby V.O.X. things if you can read Korean.” His review has a striking quality because the author, a Japanese Hawaiian in Japan, chose a quintessential Japanese form of American pop culture: J-pop. Although he lives and learns in Japan his audience is presumed non-Japanese. Rather than using the subject to bridge the language divide and to suggest intercultural communication through Japanese and Korean pop music, only English language sites receive an unqualified favorable mention. The same students lists his interests as “J-Pop, K-pop, C-pop, anime, manga, video games, Dance Revolution,” thereby reproducing commercial categories rather than creative ones such as “music, drawing, or dance.”

Student “D” who grew up in Hawaii has an equally telling list of hobbies, which consist of “swimming, running, and shopping.” In that order, the three seem like evolutionary steps. There is little other personal information on the site. Instead shots aimed at potential tourists recreate a Hawaii the world knows and loves. These photos are entitled: “A Beautiful Hawaiian Sunset. The World Famous Aloha Tower, One of the Worlds Cleanest Oceans,
What’s Hawaii w/o Diamond Head? Another Spectacular Sunset, Hawaii’s Panoramic Mountains, Within the Forests of Nu’anu Valley.” The collection concludes with a snapshot: “A View from my Home” which features a swimming pool on a lovely view-lot. Here, again, geography is used as an identity marker that simplifies otherwise complex relations. Like his peers, student “D” posts a verbatim copy of his university’s mission statement, which includes the intention “to add a new dimension to Asia Pacific studies and foster global citizens who will contribute to sustainable development and peaceful coexistence in the Asia Pacific region and other parts of the world.” This student, too, concludes: “We believe that these students will play leading roles in the Asia Pacific region and around the world.”

For the most part, the material does not allow these students to author original presentations. Instead, commercial interests dictate how they can and, more accurately, cannot express their identity. Japanese elements are noticeably absent from these participants’ homepages posted in Japan. If they are capable of accessing the Japanese versions of the kind of commercial discourse they have internalized, they do not avail themselves of it. The relative lack of references to Japan may indicate an emotional ambiguity rooted not so much in the purpose of the student’s visit but in the necessity of it. An example from literary criticism may shed some light on this phenomenon.

In Sau-ling Cynthia Wong’s Reading Asian American Literature, the concept of mobility in Asian American writing is used to highlight the ways in which Americans of Asian descent have not been permitted to travel the literal and symbolic landscapes with the same freedom as the Caucasian mainstream. For the latter “horizontal movement across the North American continent regularly connotes independence, freedom, an opportunity for individual actualization and/or societal renewal—in short Extravagance.” For Asian Americans, mobility is “usually associated with subjugation, coercion, impossibility of fulfillment for self or community—in short, Necessity.” (Glenn, 121)

Similarly, these students have traveled to Japan for a purpose other than leisure. To complicate questions of identity further, the student’s legal status in Japan can be ambiguous from the outset. An identity crisis of sorts arises just around the time the students apply for admission to the Japanese university. Some of the applicants hold a passport from their country of birth as well as a Japanese passport. At age eighteen the status of dual citizenship usually lapses and a choice must be declared to the Japanese authorities. Meanwhile, most countries of birth allow for dual citizenship and multiple passports. The situation is further complicated by the university which gives generous scholarships to students classified as foreign but does not support Japanese students in the same way. In the course of their study, students thus need to document to the university that they are not Japanese. In order to qualify for the privileges accorded to citizens, on the other hand, the same group needs to prove and maintain Japanese citizenship. From one airport to another and from the initial application to continued tuition waivers a student may be forced to declare one identity after another. The homepage on the university server may simply emphasize the campus identity that is encouraged if not legislated by the university. The sites thus become a delicate performance that evades and eludes even while it wants to declare and express. Nation states and organizations under their direct supervision such as universities in Japan continue to force artificial and inadequate distinctions and restrictions that seem contrary to the propagandized spirit of globalization.

The tangible policies of the nation state thus weigh heavily on this group of students, as
do cultural uncertainties, and in some cases history. Roy Miki identifies another potent influence:

What remains of concern at this moment, then, are the critical ramifications of global capital and its cult of commodification, specifically in relation to the changing cultural reception of “minority” works that have been contained—and identified—through processes of radicalization historically bound into “Canada” as a national identity. The question of “Asian Canadian” is thus situated at the intersection of history, the nation state, and cultural ambiguities. (Miki, 53)

Throughout, identity is fundamentally social. Actual and manufactured identities and desires merge while identity is documented, declared, or constructed by the consumption of mass-produced objects and images. As seen, students often echo the historical national identity projected by ministries of tourism. Today’s historic landmarks and national cliches distinguish one region from another and help tourists select backdrops while they stay in international hotel chains and eat and drink at the outlets of multinationals. It is not clear whether these students seek to reclaim these easily recognizable images and their often-problematic historic resonance to re-present a new outlook, or whether they simply see the image as a commodity that best expresses an important part of their identity. Similarly, the readily available icons of a globalized youth culture disseminated by the music industry are posted to signal a willingness to join in a mainstream movement as long as it is labeled alternative and radical. Such students strive to be “cool” and “hip” desirable friends.

All representations of identity are to some extent copied and simulated. One could thus argue that a student might use corporate signs subversively and juxtapose them in Dadaist designs to express a unique stance. Perhaps the corporate signs are words in an international language that is shared and understood by all members of the global middle classes. These signs may even ultimately foster the kind of peace and understanding the League of Nations envisioned generations ago. Inherently, allows for all of the above utopian scenarios. Actual visits to these sites reveal, however, that the students demonstrate a different tendency altogether. For the most part, they are operating under the real constraints of time, limited access to technology, and a relative lack of technical knowledge. Often, the sophistication required by a subversive strategy of representation is not yet within the grasp of first-year undergraduates. Neither is the postmodernist stance suggested above necessarily a widely shared value of the featured college population.

Instead, the homepages may be manifestations of a very different social trend: The global middle classes—those sufficiently integrated into the global economy so that they earn enough money to purchase the products and services they help create—and their offspring, both can superficially bridge generational and cultural divides by the ritualistic re-enactment of widely propagated patterns of consumerism. However, the ritual of purchasing and disposing further alienates the under-classes who contribute to the production of goods and services they cannot afford. Furthermore, the same display of consumerism is a blatant provocation to those excluded from the economic production cycle, thus once again making “personal safety and security” a sought after commodity for both individuals and nation states. Under these conditions, the homepage is a display of social status in a relatively safe online environment. The combined admission tickets of technology, knowledge and access ensure that only a privileged few will view the homepages that are theoretically open to the world.
At the same time, globalization is increasingly claiming the “third space” by intervening whenever cultures intersect. Efficiency dictates that transnational companies must strive to homogenize, simplify, if not stupefy, all commodified aspects of culture. Consumers are cultivated and conditioned to mistake the act of purchasing for self-expression and the gratification of basic needs.

Within this context, the function of the homepage as status symbol does not rely on specific content. Like a telephone call, the medium of the student homepage is the message that reassures friends and relatives through a system of signs that the status quo safely prevails despite enormous physical distance and potential disruptions from local “foreign” elements. The message is also that the sun never sets on an empire of fast-food outlets, cliched theme parks, and combinations thereof. After all, the students, like most travelers and tourists, have come to seek confirmation of certain aspects of their own identity rather than genuine change that would alienate them in any way from their peers. The voyage and often-prolonged stay in the ancestral country may be a cherished ritual shared by many if not most emigrants and their descendants because it holds the potential for self-discovery. Such a voyage is, however, potentially fraught with anxieties. Whereas the ancestral country often labels if not defines the individual in new surroundings, the adopted home tends to mark that same person upon re-entering “the old country.” The students’ homepages reflect this process by retaining qualities that can be ascribed to both “outsiders” and “insiders” of cultures.

In the end, the homepages herein discussed raise more questions than they answer. Constructed by young adults of Japanese ancestry who suddenly find themselves in the country of their maternal grandparents, the pages gain tremendous significance through context. At the same time, intercultural complexities must be read against the subculture of the university’s microcosm. Technical aspects further define author and reader relations. Throughout, nation states and corporate interests directly influence the participants’ representations of identity. Ultimately, the sites mirror not only the individuals who created them but also the culture that surrounds them.

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References