

The Hafu Project: Graphic Design I Case Study

Gail Mitchell, Assistant Professor  
Kennedy-King College  
City Colleges of Chicago

During the Spring 2020 semester, Kennedy-King College students in the Communication Design department studied the plight of hafu people in Japan. This was a unique journey. The class used to study this phenomenon was COM DSGN Graphic Design I, with a total of 5 students. During this semester, Kennedy-King College classes were moved to remote learning, due to campus closures during the coronavirus pandemic. Student access to technology was also an issue during this semester. Despite these challenges, students created pieces to construct a dialogue on different aspects of the topic.

In 2015, the most prominent person in this Japanese phenomenon was thrust onto the global stage. Ariana Miyamoto, a biracial woman of Japanese and African American descent, won the crown of Miss Universe Japan. Upon the announcement, social media erupted with comments questioning her fitness to represent Japan due to her ethnicity (Wingfield-Hayes, 2015). The debate was not new to Miss Miyamoto, who has struggled to assert her Japanese identity throughout childhood and as a young adult. Globally, her dilemma made headlines, but in Japan, it was a quiet revolution.

Hafu is a Japanese term to denote a person born of one Japanese and one non Japanese parent. In 2015, it is estimated that approximately 36,000 children were born every year with one non-Japanese parent in Japan. With the rise of intermarriages over the past 20 years, one in 30 births are born of mixed Japanese parents (Saber, 2015). Life for hafu individuals has been difficult, even though hafus are popular in Japanese media. They are viewed as foreigners in their own homeland, despite being fluent in Japanese for some and being born and raised in Japan for others. Physical appearance, personal comportment, and knowledge (or lack thereof) of cultural mores makes hafu people stand out in a country where homogeneity is considered the norm.

The class used graphic design principles to explore the many aspects of the struggles hafu people face, such as life experiences, assumptions, and finally a manifesto that places incorrect and unwanted notions aside. Some of the assignments came from the book for the course, *Graphic Design: The New Basics* by Ellen Lupton and Jennifer Cole Phillips. The book had an accompanying website with assignments (which is no longer found on the Internet). Others were created by the instructor (Assignment 3: Color, Assignment 4: Hafu Movie Logo and Poster, and Assignment 6: Grid and the Hafu Manifesto). All the assignments were adapted to fit the Hafu Project.

### **Assignment 1**

#### **Point, Line, and Plane: Making Connections**

For the first assignment, students were introduced to fundamental elements of design: point, line, and plane. These are the most basic elements of design, according to the book, *Graphic Design: The New Basics* by Ellen Lupton and Jennifer Phillips, the textbook for the class. A point marks a position in space. In geometry, it is x and y coordinates. Graphically, a point takes on a visible mark of a dot. A mass of points becomes texture, shapes, or a plane. Small points of varying sizes become shades of gray, and diagrams build relationships between points, lines and planes to map and connect data (Lupton & Phillips, 2015, 33-34). Lines are an infinite series of points, and are the connection between two points. It can have several thicknesses and weights. They can be straight, curved, or visually broken. When a line reaches a certain thickness, it becomes a plane. A plane can recede into the background or reach forward towards the viewer (Lupton & Phillips, pp. 36-38).

To “connect the dots” so to speak, students were asked to do a timeline of the life of Ariana Miyamoto, using watershed moments in her life: when she was called *kurumbo* as a young child in Japanese school (the equivalent of the n-word), her move to the United States to

live with her father as a teen, her decision to move back to Japan, when a close friend of hers who is also hafu commits suicide, and her ascent to the crown. The class as a group crystallized the moments after they read articles about Miss Miyamoto [ (Fackler, 2015, 4), (Wofford, 2015), and (Wesby, 2015)]. Then they designed timelines that conveyed the moments of her life. Appendix A shows the results of this assignment. The class learned more about Miss Miyamoto's experiences and what some hafu people face all in the name of racial identity in Japan.

## **Assignment 2**

### **Rhythm and Balance: Found Rhythms**

The second assignment students received was to make an accordion-fold brochure to illustrate the design elements of rhythm and balance. Rhythm is a regular, repeating pattern: the beats of drums, the patter of rain, or the falling of footsteps. In design, it is used to pace books and magazines through the placement of image and text throughout the publication. In motion graphics, static and moving pieces are placed for a duration and sequence. (Lupton & Phillips, p. 49). Balance is crucial in human development. We are symmetrical human beings with two arms, two legs, two feet. This affects our movement, our balance. In design, it is the placement of elements on a page or on a screen that affects what we look at first or look at the longest. Does a page have a large element cropped off on the right side? Is it asymmetrical? Balance anchors elements in space (Lupton & Phillips, p. 49).

To further their understanding on the topic, students were given the reading, "Negotiating Space And Identity: The Experiences Of Hafu Children In Japanese Early Childhood Education," by Rachael S. Burke (Burke, 2016).

In the brochure, students illustrated pacing using rhythm and balance to create relationships between words and images, carrying the viewer throughout the piece. The images were derived by cutting a 0.5 inch square through a Japanese magazine (Vogue Japan and Men's Non-no) and selecting images (and text as image) for the pages of the brochure. Students then paced the following words page-by-page as the storyline for brochure:

What does it mean to be hafu?  
What does it mean to be Japanese?  
This is my culture.  
This is me.  
This is my life.  
Why am I considered other?

Students could use shapes to bound the images and lines to connect words and images. Appendix B shows the results of the projects. One of the students previously learned Japanese and was somewhat well-versed in translating some of the words and used the Japanese characters in the storyline.

### **Assignment 3** **Scale, Depth, and Motion**

For this assignment, students illustrated the dichotomy of two words from a list of words with opposite meanings (with the words tailored to fit the topic): half/full, mixed/pure, insider/outsider, native/other, and included/other. Students designed each pair of words to illustrate their meanings and the relationship of being opposite using scale (size), depth (dealing with planes of background, middle-ground, and foreground), and motion (repetition to invoke movement). Appendix C shows the results of the students' explorations and designs. There was no reading for this assignment.

## Assignment 4 Color

For this assignment, students were given the reading, “Perception of *Hafu* or Mixed-race People in Japan: Group-session Studies Among *Hafu* Students at a Japanese University,” by Kimie Oshima. In the study, Oshima conducted interviews with thirteen mixed-race university students in Tokyo through group sessions. The purpose of the group sessions was to understand the difficulties that the students face due to their multi-ethnicity, to share their experiences of being perceived differently, and to recognize how Japanese society treats them as a whole (Oshima, 2014, 22-34). This reading helped provide more background for the fourth assignment.

Students were given a choice of several different statistics (and one proverb) about hafu people in Japan. From their chosen statistic, students had to create three different infographic posters that used color to illustrate the information. One poster should use analogous colors in the color scheme (three colors that are next to each other on the color wheel that are related like red, red orange and orange) (Lupton & Phillips, p. 83), another monochromatic colors (varying shades of one hue), and complementary colors (colors opposite each other on the color wheel) (Lupton & Phillips, p. 83). The following are the statistics given to the students (In the interest of time, students were given the statistics as information on hafus in Japan are difficult to find.):

- One in every 50 babies born in Japan is a hāfu—having one parent from a foreign country—amounting to 20,000 children every year.  
Yoshitaka, S. L. (2018, November 13). What’s in a Name? Mixed Race and Identity in Japan. Nippon.com. Retrieved from <https://www.nippon.com/en/currents/d00443/what’s-in-A-name-mixed-race-and-identity-in-japan.html>

- We should expect around 7.64 percent of Japan to have at least one foreign parent by 2039, almost 9.21 percent to have one foreign parent or grandparent, and about 9.66 percent to have one foreign parent, grandparent, or great grandparent. Hassett, M. (2017, April 5). How many Japanese are a bit of something else? The Japan Times. Retrieved from <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2017/04/05/issues/many-japanese-bit-something-else/#.XkR72xNKj5Y>
- 30% to 40% of runway models in Japanese fashion shows now identify as hafu. Chung, S., Ogura, J., Moussa, M., & Umewaka, N. (2018, October 25). What it means to be a mixed-race model in Japan. CNN. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/style/article/rina-fukushi-japanese-hafu-models/index.html>
- One out of every 50 babies born in 2012 had one non-Japanese parent. Burke, R. (2016, December). Negotiating Space and Identity: The Experiences of Hafu Children in Japanese Early Childhood Education. *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, 18(2), 57–70. Retrieved from <https://www.nippon.com/en/currents/d00443/what's-in-a-name-mixed-race-and-identity-in-japan.htm>
- For the past two decades, roughly one in 50 children born in Japan each year have had one foreign parent. Rich, B. M. (2018, October 6). Naomi Osaka, a New Governor and Me. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/06/sunday-review/naomi-osaka-mixed-Race-japan.html>
- The nail that sticks out gets hammered down. (Japanese proverb)

Students learned the color wheel and studied some color psychology (how colors create moods, invoke passion, stimulate the appetite, calm the senses, and others) to inform their color choices. Appendix D shows the results of the student work.

## **Assignment 5**

### **Hafu Movie Logo and Poster**

To continue their studies in hafus in Japan, students viewed the documentary, *Hafu: The Mixed Race Experience in Japan*, by Lara Perez Takagi and Megumi Nishikura. In the film, five

people narrate their own stories of non-acceptance they felt growing up, how they connected with both sides of their ethnic identities, and their individual journeys. After viewing the film, students were to use gestalt principles of perception (figure/ground relationships) to create a logo for the film and finally a poster using the logo prominently. The gestalt principles of perception deal with how humans perceive forms. The figure/ground relationship is an important one. Positive space and negative space work together to achieve human cognition. As Lupton and Phillips state, “The ability to create and evaluate figure/ground tension is an essential skill for graphic designers. Train your eye to carve out white space as you compose with forms. Learn how to massage the positive and the negative areas as you adjust the scale of images and typography. Look at the shapes each element makes, and see if the edges frame a void that is visually appealing (Lupton and Phillips, p. 99).

As a whole, students struggled with this concept crucial to graphic designers. However, their work still had concrete figure/ground relationships. Creating logos is a challenge to even a seasoned graphic designer, so the instructor welcomed how students arrived at their solutions. One student repeated the *hinomaru* (or the circle of the sun on the Japanese flag) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, 2008) of the Japanese flag representing evolution. Another student is the image of a swing from a playground because as the student said, “Bullying begins in childhood.” Another student used a clenched fist urging hafus to “fight on” for acceptance, and also evoking the Russian Revolution posters of the 1917. Their posters use their logos prominently (Appendix E).

## **Assignment 6**

### **Grid and The Hafu Manifesto**

The final assignment summarized what students learned throughout the semester, and their suggestions for change. Students had to write a “Bill of Rights” for hafus that demanded



equality and acceptance in Japan from rights received at birth to participation in Japanese culture. Here is the manifesto as written by the students:

*The Hafu Manifesto*

- 1) Hafu people have the right to decide to choose which culture and citizenship they want to embrace.
- 2) There should be no discrimination towards persons of mixed Japanese ancestry based on race, religion, language, gender, or national origin.
- 3) There should be no discrimination against those of mixed Japanese ancestry who are adjusting to the Japanese ways of life.
- 4) All schools and cultural institutions in Japan are to accept all children regardless of ancestry to attend classes in an integrated and accepting environment.
- 5) There will be no discrimination of people in employment, including compensation and benefits, based on race, ancestry, or color.
- 6) Allow people of mixed Japanese ancestry are free to participate in cultural and institutional events in Japan with freedom of expression.
- 7) Non-native Japanese parents have the right to raise their Hafu children in Japan.
- 8) All businesses should give full service and entry to Hafu people.
- 9) Hafu people born in Japan should be allowed citizenship in Japan upon birth, allowing full rights as Japanese citizens.
- 10) All hafu citizens are entitled to the tenets of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of which Japan is a signatory.

Students would use the grid, a framework of design, to design a poster that listed all 10 of these rights with an image supporting it. A grid is a set of guidelines that allows a designer to align elements with each other. Grids set the margins, grids determine how typography will fit, and grids determine how images will scale. Students were introduced to two other films on hafus: one was a YouTube video on Jero, an American-born [enka](#) singer of African-American and

Japanese descent who is the first **black** enka singer in Japanese **music** history. Another was the second of a two-part series, *The Lives of Japanese War Brides in America*, which delved into the topic of biracial Japanese children. (Thanks to Ayako Yoshimura, Ph.D., Japanese Studies Librarian, at the Joseph Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago for his assistance in finding more resources.) Appendix F shows the work of the students.

### **Final Thoughts**

With student attrition (one student dropping due to lack of access to an internet connection, one with unsuccessful outcomes, and one unable to complete due to health concerns) the class battled on with video conferencing, text messages, frequent calls of support, and working one-on-one with students to finish the final project. The pandemic posed a challenge in completing The Hafu Project, but I believe that the students learned much about the power of using graphic design to communicate ideas, persuade minds, and affect change. It is my sincere hope that students learned more about the world around them and gain new perspectives about identity and race, even as they see some of the same issues they see in America across the globe.

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