



SPECIAL ISSUE:
AUTHENTICITY IN NARRATIVE CONTEXTS

The Beauty of the Gods: Engagement with Laura Mark’s “Authenticating *Hafu* Identities on Instagram”¹

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I would like to begin by thanking Laura Mark (2025) for her thoughtful and provocative research on *hafugods*—an Instagram account for persons claiming half-Japanese identities. In her article, Mark convincingly employs the frame of small stories research in order to examine the interactional dynamics of moderating, bio-posting, commenting, and liking on *hafugods*.

Mark’s analysis displays the dynamics of sculpting and authenticating *hafu* identities according to the “affordances” and “constraints” provided by the digital platform. At the center of this analysis is a rich description of “alignment strategies,” described by Georgakopoulou (2016) as “ritual appreciation” and “knowing participation,” where community membership and identity is ratified with comments by the moderator and other group members as well as likes. Mark is also convincing that something resembling the give and take of face-to-face interaction is happening in these online environments—enough to label such spaces as interactions or conversations and enough to apply similar analytic strategies for describing meaning making in these contexts.

¹ Mark, L. (2025). Authenticating *Hafu* Identities on Instagram: A Small Stories Analysis of Interactions on *Hafugods Narrative Works*, 13(2): 116-148.

In my short response to Mark's article, I want to reflect just a bit on the paradox of social media platforms, such as this one, as fora for the production of narrative identities. I'll do my best to avoid value judgements. I am not an expert or a committed social media user. But, I think that it is important to comment on the semiotic qualities of these platforms and their potentialities for negotiating and maintaining identities.

The possible interactions and identity constructions allowed by the Instagram platform, as described by Mark, are, in my estimation, both thinner but also, potentially, cut deeper, they're "stickier," than the ones that we can observe in non-mediated social spaces.

Although there are additional complexities, as Mark describes, the template for interaction on *hafugods* is rather basic: a stylized picture, a name, hashtags, an identity label (e.g., half-Japanese, half-American), and potentially some comments or likes. One should note that in Mark's 190 bio-post data set, 47 had only one comment and 64 had no comments. Mark notes that this level of interaction is higher than Instagram as a whole. Still, it sounds fairly empty to me.

The result looks like a postcard stamped with addendums that are the postmarks of conversational turns. As the postcard metaphor might indicate, interventions into the accessible space of the *hafugods* account, seem to me, semiotically sparse. Principally, there are faces and identity labels. Certainly, the moderator or others might comment on or like the post. But, it is a rather bare thread for an identity to hang onto. The bio-posts are, perhaps, the beginnings of a conversation that are, mostly, not continued.

If this was a face-to-face conversation, additional relevant questions and interactions might come into play. We might wonder: Is their mother or father Japanese? What culture do they feel closer to? Have they experienced discrimination or not? How do people see them or react to their identity? How do they describe themselves in various situations? Where did they grow up? What culture do they feel closer to?

Some of these questions do become the object of interactional play on *hafugods* as evidenced in some bio-post, a short biography might be included, and in code switching, a second language such as Japanese might be interspersed with English. Once again Mark documents all of this. Still, it feels as though these identity constructions barely scratch the surface, leaving me to wonder about their deep reflections.

One might rightly answer, Instagram isn't the space for this kind of self-analysis. And they would be right. But that's also the point. There is a sense in which the platform seems to flatten identity. We ritually appreciate, venerate, the

beauty of a god, as the moderator and commentators do. But we don't have the ability to create an identity, or *to be*, beyond a one dimensional caricature.

Furthermore, I believe that there is a synergy between the heavily visual representation of identity on *hafugods*, usually in the form of a close up or stylized three-quarter body shot of the kind that one might send to a modeling agency, and one of the primary stereotypes of half-Asians—their beauty. Mark documents the emphasis on ritually appreciating beauty in the prevalence of comments and emojis that evoke the stereotype of attractiveness. She also documents bio-posts that attempt to subvert the language of the account by posting goofy pictures of themselves or ones where they are doing unglamorous activities such as washing their hands. Still, as she writes, notions of attractiveness are so common that we should consider beauty “an emblem of *hafu*-ness.”

There is something of a circle, similar to what Hacking (1995) has called a “looping effect.” I am not sure where the circle begins or even if it has a beginning. But the motion includes stereotypes of the beauty of half-Japanese persons and their representation on the platform which has the potential to strengthen the stereotype which then can be represented on the platform and so on. In some ways, the platform insures the maintenance of the stereotype.

However, and this is where I will end, there is also a strange and problematic way that the platform holds persons in these superficial renderings of identity. In a sense, thinness is grasped and fastened upon. In face to face conversation, even when we make fools of ourselves, we can be held accountable only by the ability of another person to remember the substance of the conversation. And, any social sanctions would require that person to tell another person about it. Of course, there are multiple ways to soften the blow of an outrageous or insensitive posture by claiming misremembering, exaggeration, and so on. On Instagram and other digital platforms, the spread and ability to circulate what appear to be exact replicas of the originals increase the repercussions from any given intervention. Our options to counter the spread and circulation of these digital representations are more limited and less effective. Digital memory appears to be etched not in wax but in stone.

References

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