White Western Male Teachers Constructing Academic Identities in Japanese Higher Education

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**Abstract**

In research on gender and teaching in higher education, the experiences of male teachers *as* *men*, and of whiteness in a *non*-majority-white context have received little attention. As one step towards addressing this gap in the literature, this paper analyses interview accounts of white Western men working as English language teachers in Japanese higher education. The paper demonstrates, first, ways in which disembodied academic identities are constructed by erasing the men’s racialised gender and sexuality. Second, it shows how favourable images of white Western male teachers are produced through a series of negative contrasts based on gender and race. Third, it suggests that men’s homosocial networks may serve to facilitate male predominance in the Japanese university system. The analysis contributes to current understandings about the construction of white Western masculinities in academic institutions, in international education, and in English language teaching as a globalised industry.

**Keywords**: gender, masculinity, sexuality, whiteness, higher education, Japan, English language teaching, homosociality

Introduction

Rick: *The cultural landscape in Japan makes life very easy if you’re a man. I think that’s why many men stay. You don’t have to think about things. You just relax and revert to automatic macho mode and bingo, life’s sweet.*

In this opening quotation, Rick is reflecting on his past experience of living and working in Japan as an English language teacher. As a British man in Japan, a native speaker of English, and the husband of a Japanese woman, he had enjoyed the privileges of employment in a Japanese university. He had also observed, and resisted, the social and professional practices of various male colleagues, and concluded that for Western men life in Japan offered certain advantages. Rick’s summation raises a number of issues about the positioning of white Western men in the ‘cultural landscape of Japan’, and points to further questions that to date have remained largely unexplored in research on gender and international higher education. These are questions about the experiences of gender amongst *men* in higher education; about the experiences of *whiteness* in a non-majority-white society; and about the ways in which discursive and material practices in a transnational context may privilege white Western masculinities, while masking such privileges from critical scrutiny. As a field of education that has, from its very beginning, been transnational, the teaching of English as a foreign language provides a fruitful site for such studies of men as racialised and gendered identities in an era of globalised higher education.

In this article, I draw on data generated in my interviews with Rick and nine other white Western men, and explore their accounts of working as English language teachers in Japan’s higher education system. Through this exploration, I seek to broaden current understandings about the experience and significance of white masculinity in higher education as a globalised industry.

A note on terminology

In writing this paper, I recognise that terms such as ‘white’ and ‘Western’ are contentious, and have been extensively problematized in critical whiteness and race studies. In line with contemporary scholarship, I see both ‘whiteness’ and ‘Western’ (as well as ‘masculinity’ and ‘heterosexuality) as discursive constructions and ascribed identity markers that are relational, contextually contingent, and have significant material and structural consequences. In particular, in a world of globalised education, the construction of whiteness is related to its local geographic context. The terms white and Western are used in this paper to denote English language teachers who are ‘native speakers’ of English from what is considered to be the ‘Inner Circle’ Anglophone countries (Kachru 1997); that is, the USA, UK, Canada, Ireland, Australia or New Zealand, where English is regarded as the dominant first language. Whiteness is commonly understood as a characteristic of English native-speaker teachers from Anglophone countries (Kubota 2002), but the commonplace assumption that native speakers are the best teachers of English has been vigorously contested in critical studies of global English language teaching (see, for example, Braine 2010).

Contradictory positioning of white Western male teachers in Japanese higher education

English language learning has long been an important feature in Japan’s formal and informal education system. English is taught from elementary school through to higher education, and written English forms an important element in the examination system for university entrance. English is also the basis for an extensive network commercial ‘conversation schools’ that offer oral language tuition for a variety of interest groups. However, the exclusive role of English as *the* international language, and the value of native speaker teachers of English within the education system, have been widely debated (see, for example, Kubota 1998, 2002). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to canvass those debates in detail, it is important to note that the position of ‘foreign’ native speaker teachers is complex and contradictory. As English language assistants (in schools) or instructors (in higher education) they are, in many respects, marginal to the mainstream work of Japanese teachers and students. At the same time, *white* native speaker teachers enjoy certain privileges that flow from their status as ‘the genuine article, the authentic embodiment of the standard [English] language’ (Kramsch 1998, in Seargeant 2005, 332).

It is not surprising, then, that the literature pertaining to white Western English teachers in Japan, discussed in more detail below, presents a complex and contradictory account of *male* teachers’ positioning in this context. On the one hand, the majority of literature published by Western teachers points to their marginalisation as non-Japanese ‘outsiders’ in Japanese institutions. On the other hand, a smaller group of studies indicates that marginalisation (and privilege) is gender specific, with female teachers being disadvantaged in a male-dominated workplace by the work/home gendered division of labour. These latter studies reflect the findings of a broader literature in *Gender and Education* on the challenges facing women in higher education around the world (see, for example, Acker & Dillabough 2007). However, there is very little published research on what gender issues mean to *men* higher education (Keamy, 2008, is a rare exception), particularly when working in a transnational location in which they are a white racialised minority.

First, then, it should be noted that non-Japanese teachers represent only 3.8% of full-time teaching staff in Japanese universities and colleges (MEXT 2012a, 2012b), with Western teachers of English language representing approximately a quarter of those positions (based on Hayes 2013). In research literature and anecdotal accounts, this small minority of teachers – both female and male – are self-represented as marginalised outsiders who are unable to attain the prestige, privileges, and protections accorded to Japanese academics in the higher education system (see, for example, Bueno & Caesar 2003; Burrows 2007; Hall 1994, 1998; Houghton & Rivers 2013; Kiernan 2010; McVeigh 2002, 2003; Poole 2005; Seargeant 2005, 2011; Stewart 2006; Whitsed & Volet 2011; Whitsed & Wright 2011). In this literature, discourses of ‘Japanese nationalism’ and ‘Japanese uniqueness’ are said to draw ‘a very thick line … between Japanese and non-Japanese faculty and students’ (McVeigh 2003, 144), creating ‘lines of exclusion and opposition’ in which the foreign teacher is always automatically positioned as ‘the outsider’ (Kiernan, 2010, 173).

The exclusion and marginalisation reported by this group of teachers is said to rest on practices of essentialisation that reduce foreign teachers to an embodied identity by focusing on whiteness, Western (mostly North American) cultural origin, native speaker ability in English, and a ‘fun and games’ pedagogical style little suited to serious academic work (Rivers 2011). Whereas Japanese teachers of English are mostly employed to teach the grammar and written language that form the basis of formal examinations, native speakers of English are generally engaged to teach spoken language and conversation, which are generally accorded little importance in the traditional examination system. Marked as a racialised minority, and confined to a teaching area with little academic status, their experience and positioning is quite different to that of white Western teachers who enjoy racialised privilege in white-dominant societies, a situation which has to date been the focus of most research and in critical race and whiteness studies.

In these chronicles of Western teacher marginalisation in Japan, acknowledgement of gendered differences has been, at best, only partial; yet women occupy just 21.2% of full-time Japanese university teaching positions and 25.7% of full-time non-Japanese positions (MEXT 2012a). Extrapolating from various sources, Hayes (2013) estimates that only approximately 20% of non-Japanese in full-time English teaching related positions are women. A small group of studies focusing on gendered differences between Western men and women employed in Japanese higher education argues that the challenges women face in pursuing an academic career in this context are exacerbated by institutionalised male privilege, and by traditional cultural expectations that continue to assume a gendered division of labour between workplace and home (Hayes 2013; Hicks 2013; McMahill 1998; Simon-Maeda 2004). As such, these studies mirror the ongoing discussions in *Gender and Education* about formal and informal barriers to women’s participation in academic life and academic leadership despite the introduction of initiatives designed to promote gender equality (Acker & Dillabough 2007; Grummell, Devine & Lynch 2009; Morley 2013). In common with most studies of gender differentiation in the academy, however, Japan-based research has been concerned almost exclusively with the experiences of *women* as a marginalised minority, rather than with the experiences of *men* as the potential recipients of gender privileges. As a result, the experiences and positioning of white Western male teachers *as men* in Japan and other contexts of higher education have remained largely unexplored.

A third group of studies, focusing on Japanese female learners of English, also has relevance for the positioning of white Western men in Japan. These studies present an account of the desire expressed by some Japanese women for the West, for English language, and for Western men (Bailey 2006, 2007; Piller & Takahashi 2006; Takahashi 2012). These studies build on research that has traced an historical tradition of intimacy between Japanese women and Western men, in which the latter are idealised as Hollywood-handsome, ‘ladies-first’ gentlemen who can offer an alternative to the traditional gender regimes said to oppress women in Japan (for example, Kelsky 2001; Ma 1996). Bailey (2006, 106) argues that Japanese women’s Occidentalist desires have, in turn, been harnessed by English language conversation schools that market the activity of English language learning as an ‘eroticised, consumptive practice’ through the pairing of Japanese women students with white male teachers (see, also, Piller & Takahashi, 2006, for examples of advertising material). Reflecting this pattern of racialised erotic desire, statistics for international marriages in Japan show that for every one woman from the USA or the UK who marries a Japanese man, nine men from the USA or UK marry a Japanese woman (MHLW 2012). This pattern of desire is also evident in a range of cultural texts dating back as far as Madame Butterfly. In contemporary Japan interracial desire has been widely discussed on internet forums, has spawned English language textbooks that teach the language of dating, and has been lampooned in the comic strip series *Charisma Man* ([www.charismaman.com](http://www.charismaman.com)). Yet there has been very little scholarly focus the experiences of men as the purported object of desire in this context, and little discussion of the consequences for gender and education more broadly.

Looking beyond Japan, the experiences of Western male teachers have been the focus of a handful of studies located elsewhere in North East Asia, for example in China, Korea, and Taiwan, where ‘ordinary’ Western men may be marked as the ‘superior other’ (Lan 2011, 1669), and attain an elevated sense of masculine power and sexual potency not experienced in their home countries (Cho 2012; Stanley 2012, 2013). These studies of heightened status and pleasure in transnational contexts of education provide a marked contrast to the literature that chronicles white Western male teachers’ experience of marginalisation in Japan.

Given these contradictions, this study aims to shed further light on the complex experience and positioning of white Western men working as educators in non-majority-white Japanese higher education and, in so doing, seeks to contribute to a growing body of research on masculinities and whiteness in an era of transnational higher education.

The context of this study

This paper arises from a larger research project conducted over a period of five years (2009-2013) that focused on the effects of gender in the experiences of men and women from Anglophone countries working as English language teachers in Japan (Appleby 2013a, 2013b, forthcoming 2014). During that time, I travelled from Australia (my home country) to Japan on four occasions for ethnographic field work, visiting educational institutions and conducting interviews with teachers. In this particular paper I focus specifically on the interview accounts of ten male English language teachers who work, or have previously worked, in Japanese higher education. Of the ten participants, six were of Australian origin, three were from North America (Aaron, Grant and Sam), and one was from Britain (Rick). All were in the 35 to 55 year age group at the time of interview, all had tertiary qualifications, and had taught in Japan for between six and twenty-two years. Eight were married to Japanese women (including one in a long term *defacto* relationship), and one to an Australian woman. At the time of interview, seven were working in Japanese universities, and three (Luke, Matt, and Rick) had left Japan and returned to academic work in their home countries. Brief background information on participants is given in the table below; however, the imperative to maintain participant anonymity means this information is necessarily limited.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Interviewees were selected using a snowballing technique, drawing from my professional networks in Australia and Japan. Three of the interviews were conducted in person, and seven were conducted via Skype (from Australia), a medium that offers both advantages and disadvantages. In the conduct of international research, Skype offers easy access across distance, and preserves many features of face-to-face interviews such as allowing participants to share their views, emotions, and feelings with immediate visual and verbal feedback (Hanna 2012; Irvine 2011). In practice, however, communication via Skype can be impeded by technical hitches, and some researchers have suggested that the medium may lack the warmth of personal contact and may therefore limit the sharing of delicate intimate details (Sedgwick & Speers 2009). In my own experience with Skype, the difficulties posed by occasional technical hitches were far outweighed by the ability to communicate with participants in real time across continents, and the degree of ‘warmth’ in communication was not dissimilar to that experienced in face-to-face interviews.

Each interview was followed up by a brief email, thanking participants and inviting them to submit further comments if they wished to do so. Three participants (Tim, Joel, and David) responded to this invitation and sent further comments to me by email. Eventually, during my periods of field work in Japan, I met nine of the ten participants in person either before, during, or after their interviews.

The interviews lasted between 1 and 1½ hours, were semi-structured according to a set of guiding questions, but were also collaboratively constructed to maximise opportunities for discussion of issues and topics raised by participants. Interviewees were first asked to sketch their qualifications and work history, including the reasons for their travel to Japan. Participants were then asked about their personal and professional experiences and relationships (with Japanese and Western men, and with Japanese women and Western women) in the context of their work in Japan; and their views on whether being a white Western man in Japan afforded advantages or disadvantages in comparison with Western women. They were also asked about their perception of the gender ratio amongst Western teachers of English in higher education institutions, and invited to offer an explanation for their observations that Western men far outnumbered Western women, particularly in tenured positions. In this paper, I focus on three themes that emerged in our interview conversations about Western teachers in Japanese higher education:

* the construction of teaching in higher education as a *disembodied* practice, achieved through the erasure of gender, sexuality, and race
* the justification of male predominance in higher education, achieved through the construction of racialised and gendered ‘others’
* the role of homosociality in sustaining male predominance in higher education

My own positioning in relation to this study is important to explain. As an Australian academic with extensive experience in English language teaching and international education, I share a similar professional background to most of the participants in this study. However, as a white female researcher, I expected I would be viewed by my interlocutors with some degree of caution. Moreover, although I have travelled in Japan, participated in conferences, and visited universities there on several occasions, I have not lived and worked in Japan: my decidedly etic view of this particular context is, as one participant observed, from ‘outside the fishbowl’. For a researcher, this position has obvious limitations; and yet being an outsider also allowed me to identify patterns that may remain naturalised, and therefore invisible, to those on the inside. My assumptions in this regard are borne out in the data I present, where those teachers who have returned to their country of origin – and hence taken up etic positions – sometimes articulate a different, and perhaps in some ways clearer, perspective on the Japanese experience of English language teaching than those who still live and work there.

Data analysis framework

The interviews in this paper represent a qualitative case study that aims to illuminate the field of white Western masculinity and heterosexuality in some sections of Japanese higher education, rather than seeking to represent a wider population. My analysis focuses on individual accounts, and considers how gender, sexuality, and race are realised in these accounts through the citation of discourses and the construction of social hierarchies (cf Kumashiro 2000). It is not intended as a critique of particular individuals, nor is it intended to diminish men’s individual struggles to achieve academic status in Japan. Rather, it seeks to identify some of the broader patterns and gender regimes that shape the working lives of white Western teachers in Japan.

The analytical framework I adopt has been informed by several strands of gender theory. The first is concerned with understandings of how embodied hegemonic and subordinated masculinities organise gender hierarchies between men and women, and amongst men (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Taking into account the dynamics of power, hegemonic masculinity defines, at a particular time and in a particular context, the most successful, exalted or desirable ways of ‘being a man’, and by doing so simultaneously defines other masculine styles as inadequate or inferior. As noted by Connell and Messerschmidt, developing an understanding of masculinities in a globalised world necessitates interrogation of the ways in which local, institutional, national/cultural, and global discourses and practices of masculinity interact. The present study carries this relational, globalised focus into English language teaching as a transnational industry characterised by gendered, racialised and intercultural dynamics.

Second, my approach responds to Beasley’s (2008) call for a *discursive* analysis of transnational hegemonic masculinity. This approach is framed within a poststructuralist understanding of gender as a discursive achievement, a ‘repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame’ (Butler 1990, 32), rather than a fixed, pre-given entity. Accordingly, men’s narratives are taken as discursive practices that produce and project the subject as a particular type of masculine self (Cameron 2001; Edley 2001; Speer 2005), through talk that entails each interviewee’s ‘social positioning of self and other’ (Bucholtz & Hall 2005, 586), and that naturalises the hierarchical relationships in which men participate. In taking seriously the insights gained through an examination of men’s talk, this study also adopts the approach taken by Kjeldal, Rindfleish and Sheridan (2005) whereby ‘underground’ discourses of behaviour and talk are seen to perpetuate gender inequalities despite the introduction of policy initiatives designed to prohibit discrimination on these grounds.

Third, my approach is informed by research that examines the difficult relationship between embodiment, sexuality, and education. As hooks (1994) observes, the structuring effect of a Cartesian mind/body split has meant that the ‘public world of institutional learning’ is conceived as a site ‘where the body ha[s] to be erased, go unnoticed’. As a consequence, ‘teachers are not supposed to have bodies, let alone sexually functioning ones’ (Johnson 2006, 255), and ‘professors rarely speak of the place of eros or the erotic in [their] classrooms’ (hooks 1994, 191). However, critical research on education and sexuality also suggests that the frisson of eroticised attraction can emerge within the pedagogical relationship as a significant and sometimes positive experience for some teachers and students (see, for example, Bellas & Gossett 2001; Gallop 1997; Johnson 2006; Jones 1996; McWilliam 1999; Sikes 2006, 2010). While much of the research that celebrates the embodied erotic pleasures of teaching has been written by feminist educators, it is notable that for *male* teachers, sexual intimacy with female students continues to be framed as predatory sexual harassment and, as such, is inclined to generate moral panic (Gallop 1995; Jones 1996; Sikes 2008, 2010). For male teachers, then, the traditional construction of education as a *dis*embodied, *un*erotic practice may serve as a convenience that masks any undercurrent of sexuality, while preserving education as a domain of work in which men are the legitimate participants. The negotiation of this delicate area is central to the accounts of the men in this study.

Constructing an academic identity in Japanese higher education

The discursive analysis in the following sections is divided into three parts. The first deals with the ways in which embodiment – in terms of gender, sexuality and race – is erased or denied in the men’s accounts of teaching in higher education by projecting onto others *outside* the institution. The second demonstrates the ways in which inappropriate embodiment is projected onto others *within* higher education, in particular Western women and Japanese men. The third examines accounts of how gender and sexuality re-emerge in the discursive construction of homosocial networks that appear to support the reproduction of male privilege in this higher education context.

Higher education and the erasure of male embodiment

In this section I consider the ways in which the possibility of masculine embodiment was erased or suppressed in the men’s interview accounts of teaching higher education. I argue that this erasure was achieved by projecting discourses of racialised desire and sexuality onto the realm of informal education *outside* the university sector. This informal education sector comprises theEnglish language conversation school industry which employs many thousands of unqualified white Westerners as teachers of English and which, according to scholarly research, ‘commodifies and exploits whiteness and native speakers’ by catering to the desires of certain learners for romantic, exotic ‘pleasure and fantasy’ (Kubota 2011, 482) rather than ‘linguistic skills to increase cultural capital’ (p. 480).

It is in the conversation school industry that most Western men find their initial employments as English language teachers in Japan, but those who stay in Japan for several years often aspire to advance their careers by entering the university sector. By distancing themselves spatially and temporally from the eroticised practices of the conversation schools, the men take up for themselves a discursive position of the ideal, *dis*embodied, a-sexual university educator.

 In the interview accounts of most men in this study, the conversation schoolindustry was described as an erotically charged environment, where young unqualified Western men working as teachers enjoyed the opportunity for intimate relationships with Japanese female students. In their accounts, the discourses that the men articulated in relation to the conversation schools reflect those identified in the research literature (for example, Bailey 2006; Kubota 2011). In this environment, talk of ‘casual sex’ with Japanese women was said to be ‘omni-present’ [Aaron] amongst Western men. Female students were rarely seen as victims in these accounts, and were more often represented as agentive, sexually desiring adults. As a consequence, from Joel’s perspective Western men were at times ‘objectified’ and ‘sexualised by the women’, and ‘commodified’ by the commercial interests of a conversation school industry intent on attracting female students (cf. Appleby2013a; Bailey 2006, 2007; Kubota 2011; Piller & Takahashi 2006). In this sense, the hegemonic masculinity favoured in the conversation schools was white, Western, and heterosexually desirable.

 From the men’s perspective the gendered and sexualised identity imposed on conversation school teachers eventually diminished their own sense of agency, and prevented them from successfully adopting alternative discourses of professionalism and academic status. For these men, the opportunity to move into the university system, where academic qualifications were required, held the promise – however illusory – of allowing them to construct and perform a higher-status professional identity unencumbered by gendered, sexualised, and racialised embodiment. In this sense, Japanese higher education was constituted as a place where the traditional mind/body split could be safely re-imposed, and attention diverted away from the representation of the teacher as a gendered, sexualised being.

In the men’s accounts, the relationship between teachers and students in higher education was ‘a whole different dynamic’ to the eroticised relationships of the conversation school industry: Joel found that in the ‘universities it’s a very clear teacher-student relationship’ because ‘universities aren’t places where students come to find [Western] boyfriends’. Moreover, the men’s accounts frequently depicted university students as naïve, innocent, and child-like. In Luke’s words, whereas certain conversation schools were ‘renowned as a dating service for middle aged women to meet foreign males’, female university students were ‘17, 18 year old girls just fresh out of high school [who] are basically like 14 year old kids in Australian terms’. For Luke, the very idea of any sexual relationship with these young students was ‘bordering on child abuse, you know, cos of how those girls were so young’. Although young women were ‘the keenest students of English language’ at the university, Luke ‘didn’t have a sense that they were using it as a stepping-stone to meet and marry a foreign man’. The relationships in this site were represented as asexually pedagogical, more akin to a father-child relationship than one characterised by sexual desire. Although sexual relationships were acknowledged to occasionally occur between university teachers and students, they were universally denounced as unnatural and unethical, whereas the more commonplace dating relationships in the conversation schools, where many students were working-age adults or housewives, were often tolerated with implicit approval.

For some of the men, any evidence of university students’ misplaced erotic desire would soon be quashed. As Aaron explained, in the face of any female student’s flirtation, male teachers were inevitably ‘subject to animal instincts, but you suppress that, that’s what any professional does’. Similarly, Grant described his experience with freshman students at the beginning of the academic year as initially tinged with a spark of desire that could be quickly snuffed out:

I get goo-goo eyes from some of the girls, I'm like, ‘go away’, you know, I feel like a geezer nowadays, an 18 year old girl looking at me with goo-goo eyes. I'm 49, I'm like, ‘God, I could be your father!’

Grant’s aim was not to be ‘put on a pedestal’ as the embodiment of erotic white masculinity, but instead ‘to be respected’ for his academic status and seen as ‘equal to any other [Japanese] faculty member’.

The adopted identity of a respectable university teacher was further reinforced by the men’s marital status, which was frequently mentioned as a means of distancing the men from the promiscuous behaviour associated with younger, single Western men in Japan (Appleby, 2013b). The university then became a bastion of heternormativity, and the appropriate destination a reputable married man with academic status, as can be seen in Daniel’s insistent description of himself and his university colleagues:

They’re fathers, they’re husbands, they’re respected, and […] a lot of them have **tenured** positions in universities and they’re on **committees** […] They’re guys who have **worked hard** to make a place and make a life in very difficult culture. And **I’ve** worked hard too. So I guess if, you know I get hit with this stereotype that you might just be playing the field [with Japanese women] […] anyone’s going to be a bit offended by that.

In sum, the men in this study distanced themselves from an embodied, racialised sexuality that was projected onto the conversation school industry and onto the Western men and Japanese women who worked and studied there. By locating themselves within the higher education system, the men identified with an alternative hegemonic masculinity based on a disembodied, academic ideal. In doing so, the men’s accounts reproduced the normative discourse of the university ‘which traditionally places sexual desire and teaching in opposition’ (Jones 1996, 103), and maintains the mind/body split that feminist scholars have critiqued as enabling the privilege of white masculinity (for example, hooks 1994, and Acker 2012, on the problems of embodiment for women in higher education).

The successful attainment of a disembodied academic identity was not, however, simply achieved by moving into university employment. Several of the men suggested that their own embodiment of *racialised* differences (and associated identity markers of whiteness and Anglophone national origin) set them apart as a distinguishable minority, and limited their academic career prospects. As ‘native speakers’ of English, they saw themselves pigeon-holed as ‘talking heads’ [Luke], employed in ‘grunt work’ positions [Aaron] as English language teachers, unable to achieve the full academic status and associated employment benefits enjoyed by their Japanese colleagues. Without legitimate academic status, they felt marginalised by university students who approached the compulsory study of English language with resentment and apathy, or with an expectation of ‘fun and games with the native speaker’ [Joel]. In these accounts, the men echoed the complaints of marginalisation that are evident in much of the research literature published by Western teachers working in Japanese universities, where racial and linguistic difference is said to perpetuate their ‘outsider’ status . Yet few acknowledged the ongoing effects of whiteness and native speaker privilege that assisted their initial appointments, and placed them at an advantage in the global industry of English language teaching.

Rationalising the predominance of white Western men amongst foreign teachers of English

The ideal of a rational, disembodied, academic identity that underpinned the men’s accounts provided a rationale for their predominance amongst the foreign teachers of English in the higher education system. In these explanations, a rational, disembodied academic identity was produced through a further set of ‘self and other’ distinctions (Bucholtz & Hall 2005): in this case, a contrast between white Western men, on the one hand, and stereotyped ‘others’ in the form of Western women and Japanese men. It should be emphasised that the men in this study all expressed positive views towards individual women and towards the principles of gender equality. Moreover, their views here are not interpreted as a window on some objective reality (about what women do, or don’t do), but in this instance are reflective of discursive stereotypes that circulate informally, and serve to legitimate Western men’s position ahead of Western women in a male-dominated university system. As Kumashiro (2001, 40) points out, the creation and iteration of such racialised and sexualised stereotypes ‘can cause harm’ by reconstituting a history of oppression, and reaffirming a social hierarchy that favours white Western men.

The first reason offered for the predominance of Western men was that Western women simply did not stay long in Japan because they were ‘frustrated’ [Luke] at being unable to find ‘a boyfriend or a husband’, either Western or Japanese [Aaron]. Although most of the men professed no personal antipathy towards Western women, and many had dated Western women, some asserted that Western women were unappealing – emotionally and physically – in comparison with Japanese women, who were said to display the hallmarks of a more traditional femininity in their petite stature and polite behaviour. Western women were often seen to be jealous, bitter, and angry as a consequence of their lovelorn status: ‘And the recipients of their disappointment and their anger is the white male’ [Daniel]. These sexist and racialised representations, articulated by a number of men, tended to reproduce discourses of Western women as both embodied and overly emotional, and Japanese women as hyperfeminine and submissive. In this sense, Western women were the repositories of (inappropriate) embodiment and emotion and, as a consequence, were ‘out of place’ in the academy (Acker 2012).

The second, related reason why Western women were said to leave Japan was that they were repelled by Japanese men, who were, in turn represented as physically unattractive and sexist. These representations, voiced by some Western men, reproduced racialised, sexualised, and sexist stereotypes that further favourably positioned Western men in an academic and social hierarchy. Tim, for example, claimed that Western women found Japanese men physically and attitudinally ‘offensive with their chainsmoking, snotting noises […] po-faced regimentation and ridiculous notions of cultural superiority’. Some surmised that Japanese men fetishised Western women as ‘turbocharged, highly sexualised things’, while others saw Japanese men as ‘inhibited’ and incapable of ‘expressing emotions’ [Aaron]. Several men also stated that Japanese men’s expectations of gender roles were unpalatable to Western women: Japan was described as ‘a very sexist society’ [Luke], ‘a prototypical patriarchy’ in which ‘institutions are run along very sexist lines’ [Rick], where married women were expected to ‘stop work and start raising those kids’ [Luke], and where Japanese employers made ‘jaw-dropping stone-age type comments’ about ‘not wanting a woman to work for you’ [Matt]. Iterating these stereotypes of a racialised and gendered ‘other’ implicitly positioned Western men as more civilised and less sexist than Japanese men and, by shifting responsibility for gender discrimination onto Japanese men, implicitly relieved Western men of responsibility for any consequences that might be experienced by Western or Japanese women.

In sum, these explanations for male predominance amongst the Western teachers in Japan’s higher education institutions projected inappropriate embodiment and emotions, racialisation and sexualisation onto others: primarily onto Western women and Japanese men. These damaging stereotypes further enhanced the status of white Western men and, in turn, implicitly positioned them as ideal candidates for university employment as a rational, disembodied academic activity.

The re-emergence of gendered embodiment in male homosocial networks

Although few of the men in this study acknowledged that they experienced professional benefits as a result of their gender, several accounts nevertheless indicated their participation in male homosocial networks that appeared to secure their place within a male-dominated sector.

According to Usui, Rose and Kageyama (2003), success in appointments and promotion in Japanese workplaces depends, to a large extent, on making and using one’s connections; however, women are ‘outside the network’ of personal and professional relations that are often crucial to job attainment and promotion (p.114). The university context would appear to be no exception. In his account of English language teaching in Japanese universities, Poole (2005), for example, notes that ‘there is little time to properly advertise for part-time positions and full-time teachers use their networks to fill the vacancies’ (p. 255). For the men in this study, homosocial networking was a commonly mentioned practice that facilitated their initial part-time appointments and, in some cases, supported and advanced their professional careers. In the men’s accounts, these networks were not designed to explicitly exclude Western women, but nevertheless tended to be male-dominated.

Recruitment through the personal recommendation of male friends was, in Rick’s words, ‘very much the way it seems to work in Japan—it’s all about knowing people and having contacts’. Several men offered accounts of part-time teaching jobs handed on from one to another, as in Grant’s experience: ‘I had one of those special chance-up meetings where I met a fellow who was leaving a university and he offered me his part-time job and I stepped in, and that was my entrance into higher academia’:

I've known a number of people at other universities where ‘okay, I'm going to leave and I talked to the guys and I'd like to introduce you and if they're okay with you then you have the new job’. That makes everybody happy. It's a win-win because they don't have to do a whole lot of work in the search.

Grant saw this practice as gender neutral: ‘If I’d been a woman […] I don’t think it would have made a difference.’ And yet, at different points in our interview, Grant described formal and informal, personal and professional networks that were dominated by Western men in Japan, and in which job recommendations might be made. Typical of such networking events were meetings of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT), a professional organisation with a membership of 2,700 that focuses on English language teaching. Men outnumber women by three to one amongst non-Japanese JALT members (B. Green, Director of Membership, personal communication 28 April 2014), a ratio that stands in stark contrast to the highly feminised membership of equivalent English language teaching organisations in Anglophone countries. Grant described JALT events in the following way:

JALT for the most part, if you walk into a meeting or you go to the conference, you still see 70% of any meeting is white men. […] The guys go out drinking […] after work, there are certain bars where […] all the part time professors hang out and any job openings, any stuff comes up, it's over a pint of Guinness. There are no women in that situation so they don't have access to that information. I think that, you know, the networking is quite important.

Where Western men came together, two forms of masculinity and (hetero)sexuality were perceived to be on display. First, several men reported that Western men’s homosocial groups indulged in private discussions about ‘hot’ female students, an activity that undoes the erstwhile *a*sexual representation of university life. In Matt’s account, such gossip was seen as relatively benign because it was commonplace ‘around the world’:

Guys talk about that amongst themselves in private, you know. They'll never say it to you publicly, but two male teachers will say to each other ‘oh, you should see so-and-so’ and ‘so-and-so in my class, she's absolutely hot’. That kind of stuff. Once again, though, I'd say that probably happens in every classroom around the world, I'm sure.

Second, a more public performance of masculinity was narrated in Rick’s account of his university department, where ‘there were only two women teachers out of a total of 16 native speaker teachers’. The department was controlled by a Western man who was ‘stereotypically masculine in many ways’: he was ‘into martial arts and motorbikes’, and promoted ‘quasi-military’ physical displays and contests amongst his colleagues. According to Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) such displays represent ‘manhood acts’ that serve to secure male domination in the workplace. From Rick’s perspective, these displays were symptomatic of ‘the attitudes of lots of Western men in Japan’, and of a ‘cultural landscape’ in which a pronounced Western masculinity could flourish. The two women in his department were, in Rick’s opinion, ‘kind of invisible’: ‘it was difficult for both of them to establish a presence and find a position that was comfortable and work in that particular environment’. While traces of pronounced masculinity were evident in several of the men’s accounts, few apart from Rick acknowledged that Western men’s homosocial practices might produce a professional environment that was unwelcoming, and even hostile towards Western women.

In some circumstances, Western men also identified with the homosocial networks produced by Japanese male colleagues. Grant, for example, identified with a supportive group of Japanese colleagues in a university where he was the only full-time foreign teacher. His account of the support he received for his promotion from a part-time to a full-time position centred on notions of male-focused collegiality in which the discourse of the ‘male breadwinner’ was paramount:

The professors who supported my full-time position in the first place they made the position for me basically. […] They knew my [Japanese] fiancée at the time, they knew we were getting married and were going to have a family and settle down in Japan. Maybe […] they thought that me being on a part-time job situation was not optimal for being married. So if I'm going to get married then I should have a full-time job. […] That's why they made the job for me. […] As far as I know, the only reason they supported my full-time position was because I loved to drink beer with the guys.

Grant’s narrative offers an alternative perspective to the research literature that focuses on the barriers to Western men’s integration into Japanese academic life. His account of marriage and masculinity providing a means of integration into professional life was not uncommon (Appleby 2013b) and points to just one of the ways in which Western men may be incorporated into the gendered institutional systems the circulate within higher education, and extend beyond institutional boundaries by linking work, leisure, and home life. In common with similar accounts, however, it is cultural integration and collegiality that is foregrounded in this account: the ubiquity of men in this narrative of professional practice may, ironically, mean that gender remains invisible as a naturalised feature of the cultural landscape.

Observations such as those articulated in this section, and in other accounts of white Western men in Japan (Appleby 2013a, 2013b; Hicks 2013), have led Yoko Kobayashi (2014) to suggest that white male native speakers of English may not only be benefiting from ‘male-friendly hiring practices’ (p. 222), but also ‘tapping into a vein of masculinity in east Asia, which has long marginalized local women’ and been denounced in the West as ‘backward’ and ‘sexist’ (p. 220)

Conclusion

The accounts explored in this study contribute to a more nuanced and complex understanding of the place of white Western men working in a specific field of transnational higher education. Focusing on the context of Japan, it provides a counter to existing research literature that has, to date, been concerned with the marginalisation experienced by Western teachers and attends to the way that discourses of gender, sexuality, and race intersect to shape the experience and positioning of men in this transnational arena.

In this study, the construction of Western men’s academic identities were achieved through the erasure of their own embodiment, and the projection of inappropriate or excessive embodiment – in terms of race, gender and sexuality – onto a range of ‘others’: unqualified and promiscuous Western men *outside* the universities; Western and Japanese women; and Japanese men. In accounts of the men’s experience *within* higher education, Japanese female students were perceived as potentially displaying misplaced erotic desire for Western male teachers; Western women were constructed as emotionally unstable and sexually needy; and Japanese men were presented as sexist, and sexually repugnant. Although these projections were not consistently voiced in the participants’ talk, and often appeared as fleeting internal contradictions within otherwise culturally sensitive accounts, they nevertheless point to the reproduction of historical discourses that have traditionally privileged white Western men in higher education (Kumashiro 2000).

Through implicit and explicit contrasts, these problematic stereotypes produce an idealised Western masculinity most suited to traditional academic employment: a hegemonic masculinity that is rational and unemotional, educated and professional, socially progressive and open to gender equality, in control of sexual desires, and oriented to a mutually constitutive organisation of family and work. In other words, these constructions of white Western men in Japanese universities produced an ideal, academic version of ‘Mr Average’ (Edley 2001): neither too feminine and emotional, nor too masculine and patriarchal; a ‘normal’ family man, successfully integrated into a cross-cultural community, and committed to working hard in a professional academic career. Needless to say, this is also an ideal academic identity that has historically privileged white Western men.

Although few individual men in this study believed that they benefited from the overall predominance of men in higher education, many articulated a pattern of homosocial networks—or male bonding—that appeared to promote and maintain this predominance. These networks included both Western and Japanese men and functioned informally to facilitate men’s entry into, and subsequent progression through higher levels of university employment. In terms of supporting men’s academic promotion, these networks appeared to place value on a Western man’s marriage to a Japanese woman, a union that indicated long-term intentions and cultural integration, and also served to cement the bonds between Western men and Japanese men (cf. Flood 2008; Sedgwick 1985). Other patterns of homosocial activity were evident in situations where several Western men were employed together in the one institutional or geographical location. In accounts of male-only gossip, bonds between the men were cemented, for example, by talk about ‘hot’ Japanese women. In another example, a pronounced form of quasi-military masculinity, manifested in physical contests, was perceived as a means of establishing hierarchies within the workplace. In each of these networks women were positioned as outsiders.

It is no doubt difficult for white Western men in Japan to see the broader pattern of gendered and sexualised discourses and everyday practices that shape their own professional lives at the local level, and pose challenges for the professional aspirations of women in Japanese higher education. As Kimmel (1997, p. 181) notes, the ubiquity of men ‘in universities, in professional schools, and in the public sphere in general’ underpins the invisibility of gender, and more specifically masculinity, as an influential dynamic in all aspects of higher education. The predominance of men in Japanese university positions may, in itself, sustain masculinity and heterosexuality as an invisible norm, and limit men’s ability to see gender as a complicating factor in the perceived marginalisation of Western teachers that has been so readily identified in the literature to date. But in the absence of a more nuanced consideration and discussion of the complex constructions of masculinity in Japan, Western men risk being seen as complicit in, and beneficiaries of, forms of racialisation, sexism and patriarchy that they explicitly reject.

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