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Article (Submitted Version)

Fechter, Anne-Meike (2016) Mobility, white bodies and desire: Euro-American women in Jakarta. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 27 (1). pp. 66-83. ISSN 1035-8811

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Mobility, White Bodies and Desire: Euro-American Women in Jakarta

[Running title: Mobility, White Bodies and Desire]

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Abstract

This paper illustrates how cultural logics of desire are being transformed in the context of the global economy refashioning intimate lives. Exploring the experiences of Euro-American female professionals in Jakarta, it suggests that they become uncomfortably visible as ‘white bodies’; their desirability appears compromised, especially given Orientalist discourses which valorise Asian women’s bodies. At the same time, women’s position as well-paid employees generates a contradictory logic of desire: the ‘ego-boost’ they experience at work may intensify their demands on the masculinity and enlightened views of potential partners, thus rendering Indonesian men, with their perceived bodily effeminacy and ‘traditional values’ unattractive. As one response to the lack of desirability, some women engage in a moral discourse that casts Indonesian women whom they consider ‘bargirls’, as well as the Euro-American men they attract, as morally deficient. The paper thus provides an alternative perspective on reconfigurations of desire in the context of global gendered mobility.

Keywords

[Mobility, Desire, Race, Bodies, Whiteness, Expatriates, Indonesia]

Mobility, White Bodies and Desire: Euro-American Women in Jakarta

'If Asian women are centrefolds for the imperial voyeur, European women often appear in male colonial writings only as a reverse image (...) whether portrayed as paragons of morality or as parasitic or passive actors on the imperial stage, they are rarely the object of European male desire' (Stoler 2002:44).

Euro-American women living and working in Jakarta, Indonesia, frequently make comments such as: *'The Asian bug only bites men.'* What they hint at is their dissatisfaction with their position in the historically and discursively charged field of gender relations between Euro-American and Asian women and men in Asia. In this paper, I aim to explore a dimension of transnational mobility that has not received much attention, namely the transformation of gendered identities experienced by mostly white, professional women as a result of relocating to Southeast Asia. I suggest that 'Orientalist' discourses (Said 1978), colonial continuities, women's bodily experiences of race and gender, and a culture of corporate capitalism all play a role in bringing about such changes, as well as shaping women's responses to them.

More generally, this paper offers a further complication of the understanding of different emerging geographies and cultural logics of desire, specifically in the context of how processes of global capitalism refashion intimate lives. This relates to the broader notion of desire as not being 'natural', but shaped by social, economic and historical forces. As Wilson emphasizes in her ethnography of the 'intimate economies' of Bangkok, it is crucial to 'situate the construction of gender and sexual identities in relation to systems of power that govern work, resources, mobility, authority' (Wilson 2004:21). The present paper contributes to these debates through the perspective of Euro-American women who figure in such scenarios in unexpected ways. I suggest that most notably, these women's mobility has contradictory effects. While they experience accelerated career advancement abroad, as well as a privileged racialised status as whites, they are contending with a loss

of sexual desirability among male expatriates as potential partners, and a fundamental unsettling of their feminine identities.

Aihwa Ong (1999) and Nicole Constable (2003), among others, have highlighted the relevance of what they call 'cultural logics of desire' and the role it plays in men's and women's transnational mobility. Constable, in her study of pen pals and 'mail-order' marriages between Asian women and US-American men, explores how the global political economy and flows of capital generate specific gendered geographies of desire (2003:145). I draw on the notion of 'cultural logics of desire' here because it captures the malleability of desire, and draws attention to the economic, social and cultural forces in which desire is implicated. These implications may emerge, or become especially visible, as part of global mobilities. These, and related issues have been discussed through the lens of the 'global economy of desire' (Nagel 2003), the 'political economy of sexual capital' (Farrer 2010:76), and the 'political economy of love' (Padilla et al 2007), all of which refer to aspects of the interplay of economy, gender, race and desire.

Significantly, the main actors in these scenarios are often men residing in Western, or comparatively affluent countries such as Japan, who seek to become involved with women from less well-off, low-income countries. This can take a variety of forms, such as Filipina women working in Japan as entertainers, who subsequently marry Japanese men (Faier 2009); migrant women who become sex workers (Agustín 2006) or male sex tourism (Brennan 2004). Within these gendered geographies, therefore, the political economy often plays out in such a way that men capitalise on their residential, national or financial status to attract, or engage with women who are looking to improve their lives in terms of economic or social opportunities (e.g. Constable 2003:116-174).

While they present a significant set of social realities, I suggest that such accounts are limiting insofar as they further entrench the notion of women's mobility being predicated on catering, in some form, to men's desires (Constable 2003:173, Ong 1999:157). They emphasise women's involvement in processes of globalisation such that, as in Ong's study of transnational Chinese, it 'defines men to be in charge of both wealth and

mobility, while women are localized in domestic situations or workplaces' (1999:157). Recent studies have been critical of narratives which present transnationally mobile women as either victims or self-interested agents, such as Patico's work on the Russian-American match-making industry (Patico 2009). However, moving beyond a dualistic emphasis either on women's oppression or agency is made more difficult by the consistent attention paid to relations between economically advantaged men and disadvantaged women. A notable exception is Kelsky's (2001) exploration of Japanese women's fascination with, among other things, Euro-American men, giving a voice to their 'occidental longings' and portraying them as agents, rather than mere objects of desire. Within these scenarios of global desiring, however, it becomes clear that the experiences and perspectives of Euro-American women have been missing (Dahles 2009:222). I suggest that in order to gain a more comprehensive perspective, it is important to consider Euro-American professional women, who have moved abroad as part of their transnationally mobile careers. This paper thus asks what shape gendered geographies of desire take that involve Western, comparatively privileged women who are living in Asia for limited periods of time. In particular, my aim is to disentangle some of the complexities of the cultural logics of desire as it unfolds for these women, and examine how they relate to Euro-American and Asian women and men.

While there exist increasingly nuanced accounts of the options that the political economy affords less privileged women who want to move, and of the particular cultural logics of desire that are generated by such 'power geometry' (Massey 1994:149), far less is known of how the workings of global capitalism affect privileged mobile women and how they fare in such economies of desire. Although their particular situation has been noted, such as by Farrer (2011), it has yet to be discussed in more depth. I suggest that while some economically disadvantaged women are able to capitalise on their 'femininities', however they are imagined or performed, on a more affluent tier, women's involvement in global capitalism can challenge their femininities, and give rise to a discrepant, contradictory logics of desire.

One might argue that one way in which Euro-American women are implicated in global economies of desire is through practices that appear symmetrical to those of Euro-American men, that is, engaging in sex tourism to low-income countries. Female sex tourism has become prominent in relation to the Caribbean (Frohlick 2008; O'Connell Davidson and Sánchez Taylor 2005); The Gambia and Kenya (Kibicho 2003, Nyanzi et al 2005); as well as Egypt (Jacobs 2010), but also in relation to Southeast Asia (Dahles 2009, Malam 2008). In these cases, women's involvement in the global economy does not so much undermine their femininities, but rather afford them with the social and economic capital to pursue their romantic or sexual desires in exotic locations. I argue, though, that when Euro-American women feature not as leisured individuals, but as salaried actors in transnational corporate work settings, the contrasting implications of a highly skilled, male-dominated workplace on the one hand, and post/colonial imaginings of desire and desirability on the other throw Euro-American women's gendered identities into sharp relief and reveal some fundamental contradictions.

In particular, I argue that their embeddedness in both of these social and discursive contexts significantly shapes whom these women are sexually or romantically attracted to, and who they attract. The cultural logics of desire in effect here is characterised by several diverging processes: in the first instance, women's relevance as sexual objects to Euro-American men is compromised or reduced through being successful actors in a male-oriented corporate workplace. As I discuss below, to the extent that women become 'one of the boys' at work, their attractiveness to their Euro-American male colleagues may diminish, a situation which is much bemoaned by the women. This is compounded by the fact that in a predominantly Asian environment, the women feel racialised as white female bodies, and being compared unfavourably to Asian women. The emerging logics of desire is fundamentally structured by discourses which present Asian women as prime objects of desire for Euro-American men, such as being 'pliable and submissive yet sexually skilful and experienced, contradictorily submissive yet manipulative' (Manderson and Jolly 1997:17). Such Orientalist imaginings more generally feminise both Asian men and women, and in turn also feature in economies of Euro-American women's desires. Precisely because of becoming 'one of the boys' at work, and changed

perceptions of their own bodies, women become disinterested in Indonesian men, as they are considered, as too bodily effeminate, while also holding insufficiently enlightened views on equal gender relationships.

Constable has argued, with regard to relationships between US men and Asian women, that ‘political economy is implicated in the production and reproduction of desire and is implicated in even the most minute and intimate levels of interaction’ (2003:143). In the relationships that Constable is discussing, as indeed for many others in a similar vein, the global political economy positions men and women in rather specific and predictable ways (though see Hill-Maher 2014 and Lan 2011 for more complex accounts highlighting Western men’s fragile masculinities in these contexts). In contrast, the case of Euro-American professional women living in Asia demonstrates that such economy also generates an entirely different, and perhaps unexpected logic of desire, where women do not employ their femininities in order to improve their life circumstances, but where women’s very success in a professional context can undermine their sexual attractiveness, unsettle their feminine identities, and shape their desires such that the chances for their fulfilment become more elusive.

In addition, I suggest that considering the logics of desire that matter for transnational professional women makes visible the links between two fields which are often discussed separately, but in fact overlap substantially. The study of sexuality in a migration context may have taken shape only in the last decade because ‘the development of contemporary research on sexuality and migration reflects the complicated tensions between gender and sexuality’ (Manalansan 2006:227). The interplay of gender, sexuality and migration is therefore just emerging as an object of systematic inquiry (Mai and King 2009, Walsh, Shen and Willis 2008, Walsh 2009) despite a wealth of literature on gender and migration. This scarcity contrasts with a more substantial body of research on related themes, which are variously described as alien romance (Tsing 1993:213), global desires (Constable 2003), or cross-cultural bodily encounters, including their historical dimensions (Jolly 1996). As Manderson and Jolly note, ‘the fluid and contested terrain of sexualities emerging from racial, class and sexual difference is not just characteristic of

the colonial period. Such fluidity is perhaps most obvious today in the context of migration, travel, and sexual tourism' (1997:12). While those accounts *de facto* discuss the entanglements of mobility and sexuality, they are primarily couched in the paradigm of cross-cultural desire, which foregrounds gender and sexuality rather than mobility. It would thus be useful for migration studies to draw on this material, even though it is not explicitly framed in terms of the mobilities that it is enabled by, or that it enables.

Research Context

The material on which this chapter is based was gathered during two periods of fieldwork in Yogyakarta and Jakarta, Indonesia, from 9/1999 to 9/2000 and in 2002. It was part of a broader research project on Euro-American corporate expatriates living in Jakarta, which considered how their transnational lives were characterised by boundaries of race and gender (Fechter 2007). The main research methods used included participant observation and informal conversations with just over 50 individuals, and, for this particular aspect of the project, interviews conducted with 18 European, American, Australian and Indonesian women and men. These were selected through informal contacts, snowballing, and the Forum for Executive Women (FEW), which organized social activities for professional women in Jakarta. They also included two women who were married to Indonesians. In addition, this paper draws on sources such as an internet discussion forum used by expatriates living in Indonesia.

Although my informants of the broader project included expatriates from a range of nationalities, professions and age groups, I focus here on the experiences of unattached white European and North American women between 25 and 39 years. All of them moved to Jakarta for work-related reasons, and most of them stayed there for periods between one and three years. They usually held university degrees and work in a variety of sectors, such as development, education, accounting, banking, management consultancy, hospitality, logistics or manufacturing. The fact that they came to Jakarta voluntarily, in pursuit of employment opportunities abroad, sets them apart from the older generation of 'family expatriates' who often moved to Jakarta as part of a long-term career with a multinational company. These expatriates were mostly male, and were often

accompanied by their non-working wives and children. In contrast, the younger women moved independently and tended to receive less generous pay packages. They often emphatically distanced themselves from the older group of expatriates, and especially their wives, whom they perceived as being occupied with the social life within expatriate communities, charity work, or leisure activities.

Being Invisible?

As much as these young women relish the professional opportunities available to them in Jakarta, a recurring irritant is their perceived lack of attractiveness to Euro-American men, and their reduced chances of finding a suitable partner while in Southeast Asia. This is exemplified by Francesca, a Canadian working for an accounting firm, who complained that she was used to getting a minimum amount of attention when entering a bar in Canada, while in Jakarta, she felt she was invisible to Euro-American men: *'they completely ignore me!'* These sentiments were echoed by her friends; such as this comment by her friend Laurie: *'not many Western women date Indonesian men - there is this sense of loneliness as a Western woman!'* Other responses included, *'you will find that in Asian countries, it's part of the landscape here, the bottom line is that dating is not easy'* and *'it is not a happy life for a single woman here'*.

As these remarks indicate, in Jakarta single Euro-American men appear to have more romantic or sexual encounters with Indonesian women than with Euro-American ones, while Euro-American women, in turn, rarely date Indonesian men. Also, it seemed that few Euro-American women entered into long-term relationships with Euro-American men while abroad, occasional affairs and brief relationships notwithstanding. The following posting describes the prevailing mood among expatriate men as follows:

'the vast majority of expat men in Jakarta take advantage of the frank interest shown in them [by Indonesian women] on a fairly regular commercial or social basis. Certainly I have met very few bule [white] men who state categorically that they have never 'strayed' (posted on the Living in Indonesia forum by Paul, 1/03/01).

This situation affects Euro-American women insofar as some find that their ‘invisibility’ to Euro-American men undermines their feminine identity, as Francesca explains:

‘this is where your confidence gets destroyed, ‘cos you stand in this bar, and you have a group of men who are not particularly attractive, but they still ignore you. And it gets depressing when you see them, pursuing what you know is a bargirl ... and you ask- what does she have that I don’t have- and that really, really hurts.’

Such narratives were aired quite frequently in conversations with young women; their key elements included the complaint of being sexually irrelevant for Euro-American men; men’s abiding interest in Indonesian women; Euro-American women’s loss of confidence; and their reduced chances of finding a long-term partner while abroad. Especially the latter is sometimes cited as a trigger to leave an overseas career and return to work in their home countries. Arguably, such feelings are not unique to women in Jakarta, but resonate more broadly with single Euro-American female migrants across Southeast and East Asia; for example, Farrer describes similar experiences of Euro-American women in Shanghai (2011:759-760), and Willis and Yeoh in mainland China (2007:222-225).

Not everybody agreed with these portrayals, in particular some of my male informants. Daniel for example pointed out that one of his acquaintances, who often expressed her dismay of men’s alleged focus on Indonesian women, had been having affairs with several expatriate men. Martin, a young Canadian, also disagreed: *‘it is not true that Western women do not get enough attention - they really like to whinge! And I’m not particularly interested in Indonesian women - I like Western women, and lots of my friends here are female expats’*. It is not easily possible, or perhaps necessary to verify to what extent the narratives of single women correspond to social realities. Even if it was true that Euro-American women simply liked to ‘whinge’, the question I want to pursue what significance these discourses have here.

‘Jersey Cows’: becoming a white body

One of the more unsettling experiences for Euro-American expatriates who first live in Asia is their racialisation as whites. From the comfortable racial invisibility that a predominantly white environment affords them in their home countries, they are inserted into an Asian public space where they become the object of stares and comments by passers-by. Although both male and female expatriates find this unsettling, this racialisation has a gendered dimension, as becoming a white female body in a Southeast Asian environment has different implications from becoming a white male body. This is because in certain post/colonial discourses, an idealised Asian female body is portrayed as graceful and sexually desirable. Such ideas are for example expressed in a metaphor employed by Euro-American men, that ‘*Asian women are tigers in bed*’. Being confronted with such discourses, many Euro-American women become uncomfortably aware of their body size and general appearance which may not match the exotic femininity attributed to Asian women. Rather, may begin to feel oversized, overweight, and lacking sexual attractiveness. While white female sex tourists travelling to the Caribbean experience being ‘more sexy here’ (Frohlick 2008), Euro-American women might be described as feeling distinctly ‘less sexy’ in Indonesia.

These perceptions surface in everyday situations, such as buying clothes in department stores. While international retailers are present in Jakarta malls, they mainly stock average Indonesian women’s dress sizes. This message on the Internet discussion forum describes one such experience by an Australian expatriate:

‘Went to Pondok Indah mall yesterday to look for some clothes for myself. Shock, horror - everything I saw that I liked was TINY. I am not huge (size 12 Aussie), but I’m sure Barbie would have trouble getting into some of the little numbers on the racks. Do they keep bigger sizes out the back, or am I doomed?’ (posted on the *Living in Indonesia* forum by Rebecca, 08/02/01).

Although many women adopt a humorous perspective, some of their remarks carry an undertone of offence, as exemplified by Michelle: ‘*Why should I go shopping? I can’t*

buy any clothes because nothing would fit me.' Women's physical features also appear in a posting where a woman complained that her domestic worker kept shrinking her bras in the laundry: *'I know Indonesian ladies are perhaps not as well endowed as their western counterparts, but ... is she trying to hint I should have a reduction?'* (Maggie, posted on the *Living in Indonesia* forum, 19/01/01). If this was a disingenuous posting, where the expatriate Maggie might have been looking for assurance that she need not look for a 'reduction', this was not rewarded. Instead, a male contributor to the forum responded tartly: *'Maggie, I thought most of you Brit women were like a couple of Jersey cows walking around, 44D's'* (posted on the *Living in Indonesia* forum by Black Adder, 19/01/01).

It is worth considering that Euro-American women's sense of injustice may be due, at least in part, to their experience of whiteness, as they find themselves labelled not only as racial Other, but also as being inferior in terms of a racialised femininity. Their exasperation may be fuelled by being unfavourably compared with Indonesian women to whom they may consider themselves, in some ways, socially, economically or racially superior. This is a reminder not only that gender identities are relational, but specifically how a form of Euro-American femininity can be unsettled through comparison with a racial Other. This also becomes visible as Euro-American women's attempts to revalue their bodies are predicated on denigrating those of Indonesian women. The process of Euro-American Women becoming unflatteringly visible as white bodies starkly contrasts with being invisible to Euro-American men as objects of desire. More generally, these processes demonstrate how central the dimension of embodiment is to the experience of migration, as embodied sentiments and practices are involved not only in shaping economies of sexual desire and desirability, but how Euro-American expatriates relate to Indonesian men and women in social and cultural ways.

Professional women as 'one of the boys'?

Living in Jakarta as well-paid expatriates, many young professionals experience an 'ego-boost' at work. Brenda, an American employed by a multinational construction company, comments that *'working abroad gives you a certain buzz - because here in Jakarta, I'm*

running the show, I'm basically doing what I want to do'. This 'buzz' is not unique to women; their male colleagues similarly state that being seen as an 'expatriate expert' by Indonesians and having greater responsibilities fuels a sense of greater self-confidence. The buzz affects women differently than men, however; while women may feel empowered due to their jobs, this contrasts with their sense of being devalued with regard to their bodies. The discrepancy between women's increased sense of professional worth, and decreased sense of femininity might represent a key challenge to their identities as women. Such transformations are complicated by other shifts in their gendered identities. Euro-American female professionals, especially but not exclusively those in corporate environments, are sometimes regarded as honorary males by their Euro-American colleagues. Kirsten for example, a German working in the international education sector, found that: *'there are excellent working conditions in Asia because, when you're working, you belong to the scene, and you are, whether you like it or not, treated like a man - people negotiate with you'*.

Femininities may, of course, be reconfigured in multiple ways, including through women's participation as successful actors in male-dominated work environments. McDowell describes how women working in the city of London carefully convey a muted femininity through dress, while frequently being subject to sexual harassment (McDowell 1997). In a different vein, Miller discusses female engineers working in Canadian oilfields, who strive to become part of a prevailing 'frontier masculinity', de-emphasising any gender differences, while foregrounding the desire 'to get the job done' that unites them with their male colleagues (Miller 2004). While business studies literature on female expatriate managers has long debated the influence of their gender on their work (Hartl 2003, Tung 2004), it has rather neglected the non-work related aspects of their lives. I argue that such generalising concepts obscure rather than enlighten the particular situation of expatriate women in Southeast Asia. Instead, I suggest that the double shift that many experience is the result of contrasting effects of race and gender. In Jakarta, women share the professional bonus of being a Westerner with their male colleagues, while their white female bodies become devalued in comparison with Asian ones. However, the production of desires is not just a matter of physical bodies, but also

of the imaginaries associated with them. Consequently, the ‘ego-boost’ the women receive at work may further reduce their attractiveness to Euro-American men.

‘Bargirls’ and Others

As feminine identities and body images are as much shaped by other women’s views and behaviour as by men’s, one might ask how Euro-American and Indonesian women relate. It is important to note that the image of the ‘bargirl’ which emerges from Euro-American women’s narratives does not capture the wider issues surrounding gender and identity in contemporary Indonesia (e.g. Jones 2010). Contrary to the impressions one might gain from these representations, most Indonesian women do not socialize in bars or feel they are competing with Euro-American women. Rather, young Indonesian women and men are often highly aware of modesty and sexual propriety, alongside local discourses which casts Western sexual morality as unacceptably ‘loose’. The following account thus arises from a limited set of encounters between Euro-American and Indonesian women. The views of this selective group of informants vary significantly from broadly middle-class Indonesian concepts of appropriate gendered and sexual behavior. One might thus argue that the stereotype of the ‘bargirl’ illustrates how global capitalisms can transform intimate relationships such as to deviate from locally dominant sexual norms.

I suggest that attitudes of some Euro-American women are ambivalent, as there is a sense of solidarity, and also friendship, with Indonesian women who hold similar professional and socio-economic positions. Women whom they consider as ‘bargirls’, though, are viewed with suspicion or hostility, which may be reciprocal. Farrer recognizes similar sentiments between Western and Chinese women in transnational Shanghai (2010: 759). Iris recalled an encounter with a young Indonesian woman at a party, who confronted her with the statement, ‘*maybe you are rich, but we are good looking*’. Rachel had a related experience at the Jakarta Hard Rock Café, a well-known pick-up place. As she approached the bar with her European male friend, an Indonesian woman was gesticulating at her companion; pointing towards Rachel, she was giving her the thumbs-down, then waving her hand at him and herself, pointing her thumbs up. While such encounters are comparatively rare, they reinforce the notion of some Indonesian women

being ‘bargirls’, that is, keen to establish relationships with Western men, involving exchanges of sex, emotions, money, gifts and perhaps a visa, marriage, and life in a Western country. These have been discussed extensively, in relation to Southeast Asia and elsewhere (Brennan 2004, Esara 2009, Law 2000). Euro-American women’s contempt for those whom they consider ‘bargirls’ may be fuelled not just by a sense of competition, but also because these women’s bodily appearances may undermine the sense of their own attractiveness. In spite of such persistent stereotypes, there is also solidarity between Euro-American and Indonesian women who share their contempt for Euro-American men chasing ‘bargirls’, as illustrated in an event told by Francesca:

Francesca: *Once, we went to the bar at the Shangri-La with a friend, Tuti, she’s brilliant, she speaks five languages, and she had an Indonesian friend with her, who’s got a doctorate and this and that, so they’re sitting at the bar, and these slimy, sleazy, fat, ugly expats start chatting them up, and they’re like, no thank you, we’re enjoying our own company, and there was this interesting setup, the guys got quite shirty, because the girls weren’t playing ball ... and I said to them, it’s quite hysterical, you speak like five languages, and the guy is probably thick as shit, doesn’t know his arse from his elbow, and is really ugly... what an interesting contrast, because this guy has all that money and power. Whereas when I go to the Shangri-La, I never get anything!’*

This ‘interesting setup’ outlines a particular cartography of desirability, featuring Euro-American men pursuing Indonesian women, whom they perceive as uniformly available, as well as Euro-American women despising the men for their behaviour, yet being unhappy with their own invisibility in these scenarios.

Effeminate Oriental Men?

If Euro-American women remark that they ‘never get anything’ from Euro-American men, the question arises how Indonesian men feature in Euro-American women’s logics of desire. The following excerpt from an interview with Kelly and Francesca, though not representative, highlights views which surfaced repeatedly in conversations.

Me *What about Indonesian men then?*

Francesca *No.*

Me *Why not?*

Kelly *they're too small... they've got no confidence... they won't talk to you ...
they're just too...*

Francesca *We intimidate them. I personally don't find them attractive. They're too
small. It's a body thing, it's a confidence thing... they do nothing for me. I've got
a girlfriend of mine, who loves Indonesian men, she thinks they're great, but I
just...*

Kelly *they're a bit effeminate...*

Francesca *well, I never see an Indonesian man and go like, whoo! I don't know what it
is... it's my problem as well, I like a bit of a lad's lad, and they just don't fit that
model at all (laughs) not from my experience anyway.*

Kelly *I think it might come down to a biological thing, what you respond to to a
certain extent.*

Rather than being about biology, Stoler suggests, that 'sexual desires were structured by desires and discourses that were never about sex alone (...) sexual desire in colonial and postcolonial contexts has been a crucial transfer point of power, tangled with racial exclusions in complicated ways' (Stoler 2002:44). It is thus worth examining the perceptions that Euro-American women have of Indonesian men. While there is ample evidence of European male desires for 'Oriental women', much less has been written about discourses of 'Oriental men'. It has been suggested - somewhat simplistically- that colonisation implied a feminisation of the Orient, which casts both Asian men and women as feminine, while masculine qualities are attributed to Western males and females (Said 1978).

In the context of the Dutch East Indies, Frances Gouda writes that local men were seen as 'creatures who exuded (...) a soft and delicate sensuality', while their 'so-called effeminate and infantile behaviour contrasted starkly with grown-up Dutchmen, who

possessed the masculine energy and adult wisdom to rule the Indonesian archipelago' (2001:13). Contrasting Western and Javanese notions of masculinity, Atkinson and Errington observe that 'very high-status noble men and others regarded as 'powerful' in Javanese eyes, who may be graceful and slight of build, sometimes strike Westerners as effeminate' (1990:6). They suggest that the very attributes that make men appear powerful in Javanese terms, such as their refined demeanour, are read as effeminacy and powerlessness by Westerners.

What matters here is less the misreading of Indonesian men's physiques, but how Euro-American women's post/colonial ideas of Asian males are mapped onto men's bodies. Notions of bodily 'masculine' desirability, or lack thereof, are intricately intertwined with other beliefs about Indonesian men, notably the idea that they are 'backward' in their ideas of gender. Francesca explains this as follows:

'it's also their attitude towards women- I've had this conversation with a good friend of mine, Indonesian, educated in Australia, from a very wealthy family, Christian, so you don't have the whole Muslim hang-up, and he said to me flat out, there are some very attractive Western women, but I was raised in a society where women are subservient. I've seen my mother, my aunts, my sister, and I find you rude- you talk back to me, you question what I say. I have to deal with that in a working environment, but I don't wanna deal with that when I go home. I think it's what they're used to culturally.'

Working in a corporate environment abroad, especially in Southeast Asia, might thus shape women's desires in particular ways: Francesca prefers 'a lad's lad', someone who will not be intimidated by her physical appearance or confident demeanor, but who must also be open to an equal relationship. Indonesian men, it is implied, are too timid to be attractive. Such sentiments, however, are part of a more complicated picture. As many Indonesian men view Western women as sexually available, they may be the object of whistles or catcalls. Even though this rarely surfaces in women's narratives, they tend to find this not flattering, but demeaning. One reason may be that this attention is an effect

of their Whiteness, rather than individual attractiveness. Women's discontent is thus about loss of sexual visibility to the Euro-American men they desire, while gaining unwanted attention from local men, whom they are not attracted to. These women's preferences are thus racialized in the context of global mobility and inequality, as the political economic processes that may make them unattractive to white men, also make Indonesian men undesirable to these women. Imaginings of hyper-feminine Asian women, as well as of Asian men as both effeminate and uncomfortably masculine thus shape the cultural logics of desire that becomes apparent here. If their transnational situation shapes the particular desires of Euro-American women, while at the same time making their fulfilment more elusive, how do women react to this? I suggest that one response is the (re)production of a moral discourse which is critical of Western men, and casts Western women as bearers of moral virtue.

Morality Discourses

Lydia, an American working for an international NGO, had been engaged to a fellow American whom she had met while working in Asia. Their engagement broke up as it emerged that he had been seeing another, Asian, woman at the same time. Lydia was scathing about what she considered the typical behaviour of Euro-American men in Asia. Once, while on a girlfriends' evening out, she stated: *'All men turn into bastards here! How do they justify their behaviour? Because I believe that people are good, I don't understand when they stray like that'*. Although her verdict stems from her particular experience, it captures a sentiment recognised by her friends. Dinah summarises this view: *'your typical middle aged white man is dating a sweet young thing... Like, hey, my wife is away for two months- if they don't have any morals, they go for it!'* Related to personal experiences, shared tales and casual observation, a collective view converges that Western men become morally corrupted in Southeast Asia.

This discourse, which is expressed most vocally by young Euro-American women, portrays expatriate men as morally deficient: it suggests that even men who used to value egalitarian relationships, in this context prefer sexual liaisons with Asian women, despite their often flawed communicative interactions, but helped by the women pandering to the

men, and skillfully inflating their egos. This, in the view of some Euro-American women, amounts to a regression from some men's previous, enlightened beliefs. Such changes are denounced as a return to gender relations existent before the inception of feminism.

In contrast, it appears that Euro-American women become the repositories of particular gendered and sexual values while abroad. Significantly, presenting Western women as morally superior to men was also one of the prominent discourses of late colonialism: as Stoler notes, 'European women were positioned as the bearers of a redefined colonial morality' (2002:57). Although the respective values which are at stake differ - a bourgeois view of sexual morality then, a post-feminist view of relationships now - it makes for an intriguing continuity that Western women should again assume the role of moral guardians in a postcolonial expatriate context. One may also understand such discourses, perhaps ironically, as an attempt by Western women to reclaim their feminine identities, insofar as moral superiority in sexual matters has often been a key signifier of womanhood.

Importantly, such morality discourses tend to have racial subtexts. In the present case, it appears that Euro-American women do not object to Euro-American men having short-lived sexual liaisons as long as they involve Euro-American women; but if they are conducted with Indonesians, they become instantiations of men's corrupted gender values. Manifestly, some women also attempt to reassert their (Western) femininity with a recourse to racial devaluation: men are criticised for having sexual relations with Indonesian women, as they are uniformly suspected of being based on material interests on the women's side, and sexual interests on the men's. Due to the economic disparities between Westerners and Indonesians, the issue of moral decency therefore becomes a function of racial difference.

The Bachelor Auction

In addition to women's discursive responses, another reaction to their situation is their participation in the 'Bachelor Auction' organised by the Forum for Executive Women (FEW), an association set up to facilitate networking between Indonesian and expatriate

women in Jakarta. The auction is an annual event which aims to raise money for charity through ‘auctioning off’ single men. Kirsten, who is an enthusiastic member of FEW, gives the following account of one of these auctions:

‘The organisers had tried really hard to find bachelors, there was a Pakistani guy, one Indian, Australian, German and American each. They were auctioned off to the highest bidder, and they got about 4-5 million rupiah for them, that was for a dinner for two, but the whole thing was staged as this funny show. The bachelors had to answer questions or play charades, everybody was screaming with laughter. The businesswomen came into it, there was this guy from Munich who’s running a lingerie business, a very good-looking Bavarian, he was bought by an Indonesian consortium. The woman who got him was a drag king - with a brown cigarette holder, a girl in each arm, and she bought this guy for about one thousand German Marks. For her girls. It could have looked vulgar, but it didn’t’.

The fact that on this occasion, an attractive bachelor was won by an Indonesian woman in drag indicates that the auction cannot be read as a straight tale of Euro-American heterosexual women’s entertainment, but that it holds different meanings in a multi-ethnic and multi-gendered context. For the present purpose, I focus on its relevance for single Euro-American women. While bachelor auctions are not unique to the expatriate community in Jakarta, I suggest that they take on a specific significance in this context.

In the first instance, the auction appears as an ironic commentary on the scarcity of bachelors deemed eligible by Euro-American women. Francesca suggests that gathering enough ‘decent’ men can prove difficult. As she comments, *‘having the auction was a reflection of the fact that there are basically no decent single men in Jakarta- that was the rationale. And trust me, a couple of those guys that we were auctioning off were complete whores’*. The notion of eligibility refers to the ‘moral quality’ of the bachelors - that is, the extent to which they were known to engage in casual sexual relationships with Indonesian ‘bargirls’ or prostitutes, which would mark the men as ‘whores’ in Francesca’s terms, thus feeding into the moral disapproval of Euro-American men.

Secondly, the auction could be read as a symbolic action which expresses women's agency through money: the fact that the time and attention of the bachelors at the dinner are paid for, mimics the fact that men's relations with Indonesian women are often mediated by money. Many women feel, in Kelly's words, '*very empowered when you have auctioned for a bachelor*'. This also emerges from Francesca's comments: '*It's two different issues. It is a charity thing, it's a lot of fun. Why do we do it? You've got all these women, spilling a bit off the men, they're going to be for dinner*'. The ritual humiliation of the bachelors at the auction is arguably a key element of such empowerment. It is performed through men being put up for auction in the first place, and through tasks such as men playing charades, or taking some of their clothes off. In this context, Francesca comments with a note of empathy, '*the guys I know, they all said they've been nervous -it's because they worry, oh, they won't get a lot of money for us, because they're not attractive enough*'. The auction constitutes a reversed situation in terms of critical gendered attention: men's attractiveness is not taken for granted, but measured in monetary value. This contrasts with their everyday life in Jakarta, where they can be assured of their value as men, as many are effortlessly able to attract both Indonesian and Euro-American women.

Notably, despite women's muted glee about men's humiliation, the organizers were keen to dissociate the event from any notions of sleaze or vulgarity. Kirsten insisted that all was conducted in a proper manner: '*it could have been vulgar, but it wasn't*'. Kelly and Francesca both stress that the purpose of the auction is raising money for charity. Hence, what appears as a redressing of power relations between Euro-American men and women is also claimed as a charitable and morally wholesome event. Insofar as charity activities in an expatriate context are often a predominantly female domain, the bachelors' auction provides women simultaneously with symbolic empowerment through their financial clout as professional women and with an enhanced moral standing, and thus affirmed identity as women.

Conclusion

Nicole Constable asks ‘how love and emotion are intertwined with political economy through cultural logics of desire’ (2003:119). I suggest that the situation of professional, predominantly white Euro-American women in Jakarta illustrates an overlooked reconfiguration of desire in the context of global gendered mobility. The experiences of these white female professionals are significant because they complement, and in some ways disrupt, established understandings of what kinds of ‘logics of desire’ are produced through the global interplay of gender, race, and mobility.

Assuming that sexual desire, to some extent, is not given but made, the aim of this paper has been to explore the particular cultural logics of desire which arise from, and structure the subjectivities and practices of these women. Returning to Stoler’s observation on European women, some continuities and discontinuities emerge. Asian women may still be centrefolds for expatriate voyeurs, while European women are rarely the objects of their desire; but the notion of the latter as passive or parasitic does not capture contemporary mobile professionals. In fact, women’s participation as well-paid actors in a global economy generates a somewhat contradictory logic of desire: partly enhanced through their status as white ‘experts’, women become more confident through working abroad: in their capacity as white female bodies, their sexual desirability appears compromised. The professional ‘ego-boost’ may intensify their demands on both the masculinity and the enlightened views of potential partners, thus rendering Indonesian men, with their perceived bodily effeminacy and ‘traditional values’ unattractive.

I argue that the case of these women provides a corrective to established narratives which foreground particular ways in which gender, race, mobility and desire interact. One of these narratives concerns the role of economic power or status. Even though, as Farrer points out, ‘sexual status is not simply a straightforward reflection of economic status’ (2010:74), a considerable amount of literature is dedicated to transnational exchanges between women who are materially disadvantaged, and men who are comparatively not. Work on white female sex tourism also emphasises how fulfilment of sexual desires is embedded in economic transactions. The desires and desirability of professional white women, however, are compromised not despite, but partly because of

their position as privileged economical actors. It is precisely their success at work, while living as white women in a Southeast Asian context, which makes their romantic and sexual fulfillment more elusive. This not only confirms the contingent links between economic and sexual status; in this case, it also suggests that professional and economic gains can translate into romantic or sexual loss – an outcome which tends to be much less prominently discussed in the literature.

A further paradigm which has shaped debates concerns the centrality of sexual or emotional labor. This is closely linked to the commodification of sexuality, when men or women are able to ‘purchase transnational intimacy’ (Shen 2008; Constable 2009; Howe and Rigi 2009). In order to contextualize and perhaps relativise this paradigm, it is instructive to consider women’s labor as well-paid actors in multinational organizations, as their financial prowess does not enable them to purchase the kind of intimacy they desire - except in symbolic transactions such as the ‘bachelor auction’ described above. It thus offers a further reminder that commodification is an important, but not all-encompassing feature of how desire becomes manifest in a transnational arena.

There are further implications with regard to how race matters within gendered mobility. As Farrer argues with regard to Shanghai, the power of whiteness in ‘ethnosexual contact zones’ (2011) can never be taken for granted, but is subject to historical and contextual changes. Similarly, as Euro-American women feel that their white bodies being devalued in a Southeast Asian setting, this indicates that this interplay of gender, race, and mobility may lead to a decrease of their sexual power. Even though there is clearly a sense of disempowerment, it would be inadequate to understand their experience as mainly one of loss. Perhaps incited by their feeling of injustice, some women attempt to restore racially and gendered privileged positions, such as through denigrating Indonesian ‘bargirls’ in terms of their morality. At the same time, they may gain solidarity with Indonesian women whom they regard as their friends, in their joint condemnation of what they see as white men’s ‘backward’ preferences. I therefore propose that much is to be gained from paying attention to women who appear to be successful transnational professional actors. As their case demonstrates, economic and professional power, as well as an expectation

of racial privilege may lead to profound transformations of desire, as well as of racial and gendered disempowerment in the Southeast Asian context. This provides an alternative perspective on how gendered mobility, economic power and race produce different and unexpected configurations of desires.

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