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# Whiteness discourse in Japan: The construction of ideal beauty and racial Others in cosmetic surgery advertisements

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I still remember the excitement of opening a Barbie doll box on my sixth birthday. It was a gift from my mother, who was tired of me begging her to buy me one because every girl in my neighborhood had one. My Barbie was wearing a long pink sateen gown, and she had a tall, slender body, long, lean legs and arms, huge sparkling blue eyes, and long shining blond hair. As most little girls do, I admired her beauty. At the same time, even at the age of six, I already knew that I was not as pretty as Barbie. Looking at the reflection of my sun-tanned olive skin, almond-shaped dark brown eyes, thick black hair, and chubby legs in the mirror, I wished I could look like Barbie.

In addition to Barbie dolls, the media images of “beautiful women” that I have been exposed to since I was a child have informed me what beautiful women should look like. Japanese media have saturated me with images of young white females as the standard of beauty. Television commercials and print advertisements of beauty products or clothing in Japan in the 1980s and the 1990s frequently used foreign models, and they were almost exclusively white women. Though it seems that recent TV commercials in Japan less frequently use foreign models, print ads of high-end fashion brands or cosmetic brands still have a tendency to use white models.

Because it is a typical marketing strategy to portray models in the beauty ads as the ideal of beauty or as desirable in order to sell products, the Japanese media have presented “white beauty” as the standard to Japanese

audiences, who are not primarily white. However, this practice has rarely been questioned or challenged because it is normal for Japanese people to see white models on print advertisements or on TV commercials. Being exposed to these media images, Japanese people have unconsciously adopted and internalized the white standard of beauty (Darling-Wolf, 2003; Fujimoto, 2002). Such normativity and invisibility is the essence of whiteness (Moon, 2009; Martin & Nakayama, 1999), and it means that whiteness discourse is pervasive in Japan.

Whiteness refers to the historically and socially constructed positionality of whites, that privileges white racial groups over non-whites (Mills, 1997). Although the concept of a white race and white identities and positions are socially constructed entities, whiteness also holds a material aspect because it determines the distribution of wealth and rewards (e.g., higher educational levels and lower rejection rates for loan applications) according to the racial category or positioning (Bonilla-Silva, 1996, 2001, 2006; Mills, 1997). Once the superiority of whiteness is established, it then justifies and legitimates whites' privileges and non-whites' subordination in a hegemonic way (Mills, 1997; Moon, 2009). This system is hegemonic because whiteness is invisible and normative: White people are usually less aware of their racial identities and racial disparities than non-whites because they are constructed as the standard (Moon, 2009), and non-white groups also internalize this racialized system as the societal standard (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Dyer, 1988; Gabriel, 1998; McIntosh, 1988; Shome, 2000a, 2000b). Therefore, whiteness and its mechanisms remain unquestioned and unchallenged, and the system of whiteness reproduces itself.

Does the concept of whiteness apply to Japan, where most residents are non-white? Critical race scholars would say it does. Mills (1997) contends that whiteness is not an actual color but a relation of power. His arguments suggest that whiteness functions at two levels: a global white supremacist

system and a local racialized system (Mills, 1997). According to his argument, Japanese people are of a non-white race in a global white supremacist system that benefits white racial groups globally. At the same time, Japanese are “white” in the Japanese locally racialized system that privileges Japanese over non-Japanese. Therefore, the configuration and discourse of whiteness in the West and those in Japan should look different, but this area is still understudied.

Since media discourse is considered to be an elite discourse in which dominant racial ideologies and racialized social systems are produced and reproduced (van Dijk, 2000), the globalization of the media is surely responsible for spreading global whiteness in Japan (Fujimoto, 2002). However, Japanese media discourses have not merely duplicated whiteness in the West. Although white models tend to be portrayed as the standard or ideal of beauty in Japan (Darling-Wolf, 2003; Fujimoto, 2002), white people are not necessarily accepted as “us.” Instead, there is a clear demarcation between Japanese and non-Japanese people in Japanese society. Visually recognizable foreigners, including whites, are regarded as “*Gaijin*.” This is a commonly used derogative term for foreigners, and it literally means “outsiders.” On the one hand, whites in Japan are “white,” yet on the other hand, they are racial “Others”<sup>1</sup>.

Affluent positive images of white people in Japanese media, thus, cannot simply be considered a manifestation of and construction of global whiteness; what is constructed in media representations of whites is uniquely conflated “whiteness” in Japan. As Shome (2000a), a postcolonial/feminist scholar, argues, whiteness is contextual: it is imperative to take historical and geopolitical aspects and other intersecting aspects such as age, gender, nationality and class into account in understanding whiteness. Given these assumptions, the primary purpose of this study is to contextualize whiteness in Japan, thus revealing the discursive construction of whiteness and

“Otherness” in the Japanese media representation of white women. Among various types of media representations, I specifically examine online Japanese cosmetic surgery advertisements. I selected these ads as this study’s analytical texts because I believe them to be discursive sites where young white women are clearly portrayed as the standard of beauty, desirability and attractiveness.

Print versions of cosmetic surgery ads are commonly seen in women’s fashion magazines or in free local papers. They usually introduce surgical procedures that transform one’s eyes to look larger or one’s nose to be thinner and higher, along with breast implants and slimming treatments. Although the target audience is supposedly Japanese women, the models in these ads are often young white women. When I went online to look for cosmetic surgery clinics, as people who consider cosmetic surgery would normally do, I found the same trend. Not surprisingly, among 40 cosmetic surgery websites, only four websites used Japanese models exclusively.

Such overrepresentation of white women in cosmetic surgery ads in Japan portrays and constructs young white women as the standard of beauty. Moreover, these advertisements are meant to encourage their audience’s desire to look more beautiful and more attractive in order to persuade them to buy the products (cosmetic surgery in this case) (Schimara & Miller, 2006). To achieve the ad’s marketing goals, the models are usually portrayed as perfect or as a more attractive “future you.” However, these observations do not explain why Japanese cosmetic surgery clinics use white models. After all, cosmetic surgery cannot turn Japanese women into Caucasian women.

Portraying white women as the standard of beauty is considered to be an example of the discursive construction of whiteness (Fujimoto, 2002). Given the historical relationships between Japan and the U.S., one can easily apply a postcolonial perspective to this issue, positioning Japanese people as the “colonized” who are eager to look like the colonizers Americans who are

frequently equated with whiteness in Japan. However, it is hasty to claim that these cosmetic surgery ads with white women are the manifestation of Japanese women's desire to become white. Japan and the Western societies differ vastly in terms of their racial/ethnic demographics. Moreover, the underlying ideologies of Japanese racial/ethnic homogeneity and purity play a significant role in the construction of Japanese whiteness. Therefore, I believe that analyzing Japanese cosmetic surgery advertisements reveals how whiteness is discursively constructed in different contexts as well as how it functions outside the U.S. and European countries, where scholars of whiteness and critical race theory have tended to conduct their research.

The uniqueness of this study thus lies in the exploration of the construction and perpetuation of whiteness in the country where whites are not numerically, politically, or socially dominant. I believe that this study provides insight into whiteness theory and critical race studies. Past research on race and racism has primarily been conducted in racially diverse societies, such as the U.S. On the other hand, Japan has been considered a "race-less" or racially and ethnically homogeneous society, and its racialized aspects have been largely ignored. Demonstrating how white women are racialized and "Othered" in the Japanese media may reveal how whiteness functions outside of the U.S. and the degree of racialization in Japanese society. This discussion may also begin to challenge the dominant discourse of Japanese racial/ethnic homogeneity.

In the following section, I first summarize the literature on the Japanese media and representations of white people. Second, I review the literature on racial representations and the construction of people of color in the media. Finally, I explain the relationship between whiteness and the media in greater detail.

## **The Japanese Media's Representation of Whites**

Perceptions of social realities are influenced more by indirect experience than by direct experiences (Bandura, 1994; Lee, 2009), and the media plays an important role in constructing social realities regarding race and racial categories. Hagiwara (2004) insists that Japanese perceptions of foreign countries and foreigners continue to rely on the media rather than direct contact even in the era of globalization. His research illustrates that the Japanese media have made a significant contribution in constructing the image of whites (Hagiwara, 2004).

The perpetuation of global whiteness in Japan has been fostered by the Japanese media's representations of foreigners. As mentioned above, it is common to see foreign models in Japanese advertisements. The first Japanese advertisement that employed a foreign model was the TV commercial of *Shiseido's* beauty products for men in 1969 (Yasutake, 1983). An American actor, Charles Bronson, was portrayed in the TV commercial, and its success led to an explosive trend of using foreign models and foreign elements (e.g., landscape, language, music) in Japanese advertisements. Yasutake (1983) analyzed 1,171 TV commercials aired between 7pm and 10pm on the five major Japanese TV networks. The results demonstrated that 46.3% of the commercials contain foreign elements, including foreign models (Yasutake, 1983).

In her article on Japanese whiteness, Fujimoto (2002) argues that the Japanese media have internalized and reproduced U.S. media discourse on race relations, which are characterized by an overrepresentation of whites and an underrepresentation of people of color. In accord with Fujimoto's study (2002), some research findings on the Japanese media indicate the Japanese media's tendency to use white models over non-white models. For example, FCT's (Forum for Citizen's Television) (1991) research reveals that among 2,219 TV commercials that were aired between 7pm and 9pm in 1991,

19% used foreign models. More than 80% of the foreign models in these commercials were white (FCT, 1991). A similar study conducted 10 years later found nearly the same results. Out of 2,578 TV commercials, 21.1% used foreign models, and more than 70% were white models (Hiyoshi, 2001).

Not only TV commercials but also Japanese print media have displayed a similar tendency to use white models. For instance, Darling-Wolf (2003) conducted an ethnographic study on white representations in Japanese fashion magazines and Japanese women's reactions to them. Her study illuminates the overrepresentation of whites in Japanese print media, and she claims that the omnipresence of white representations position white females as the standard or ideal of beauty in Japan (Darling-Wolf, 2003). In addition to the overrepresentation of whites, such a positive construction of white people in the Japanese media is also considered to be the reflection and reproduction of the representation of whites in the U.S. media (Fujimoto, 2002).

The discursive construction of whites simultaneously constructs non-whites, i.e., racial Others. In the global white supremacist racial system, Caucasians are “whites” and Asians are racial Others (Mills, 1997). On the contrary, in Japanese localized racial systems, in which Japanese are the dominant racial/ethnic group, Japanese people are “whites” and Caucasian people are racial “Others.” As mentioned previously, I believe that Japanese whiteness is built upon these two conflicting systems. Thus, whites are “whites” as well as racial “Others” in the Japanese context. Because few studies have been conducted on how white people are Othered in Japan through media representations, I review several studies conducted in the U.S. and Canada on media representations and constructions of people of color.

## **Media Representations and the Construction of Racial Others**

Numerous studies have explored media representations of different racial groups in the U.S. and Canada. One of the common results of these studies is



the overrepresentation of white racial groups over people of color. For example, Sengputa's (2006) examined the representations of blacks, East Asians, and white women in the advertisements of Canadian teen fashion magazines. Of the 194 print ads, 79.9% depicted white models, while 11.3% depicted black women and 1.5% depicted East Asian models (Sengputa, 2006). In a similar vein, Mastro and Stern (2003) analyzed prime time TV commercials and found that 83.3% of the commercials uses white models, while 12.4% used blacks, 2.3% used Asians, 1% used Latinos, and 0.4% used Native Americans. As these studies indicate, white people are obviously overrepresented in the media compared with people of color.

Of greater importance than the frequency of representation is how different racial groups are discursively constructed in the media, as well as how this representation reproduces and sustains whiteness. For example, studies on TV commercials in the U.S. indicate that people of color are more likely to be portrayed in the background or given minor and peripheral roles than white models (Henderson & Baldsty, 2003; Mastro & Stern, 2003). In addition to the overrepresentation of white and underrepresentation of people of color, the contrast between the positive representations of whites and negative or stereotypical representations of non-whites is another media discourse that sustains whiteness. For instance, studies demonstrate that Asians are employed almost exclusively in advertisements for electronic or technology-related products because of the stereotypical image of Asians in the U.S. (Mastro & Stern, 2003; Sengupta, 2006; Taylor et al. 1995).

Another important point in understanding whiteness and its systemic functions is that whiteness does not consist solely of race. Media representations of different racial groups also demonstrate that race and gender are closely linked. As Shome (2000a, 200b) argues, race and gender cannot exist as isolated elements; rather they exist in relation to each other. Research on racial and gender representation in media indicates the

contrasting discursive construction of white women positively and women of color negatively. Poran (2002) insists that female beauty should be regarded as a racialized commodity that naturalizes whiteness and white women's physical characteristics, such as blond hair, fair skin, and blue eyes. Collins (2000) also asserts that in the U.S., white women are commonly represented as the standard of not only beauty but also femininity.

White women are more likely to be perceived as better mannered and sexually attractive, while black women are more likely to be portrayed as loud and more antagonistic on TV or in movies (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000). Feminist scholars also note that white women are likely to be portrayed as asexual or pure, while women of color are represented as exotic or objects of desire in the media (e.g., Shome, 2000a). Such stereotypical representations of women of color are another discursive construction of racial Others. For example, Asian women are often described as exotic and sensual beauty, as manifested in Geisha girls or China dolls (Suki, 2005; Wilson II, Gutierrez & Chao, 2003). Alternatively, they are portrayed as passive and submissive women (Mastro & Stern, 2003). Latinas are often depicted as fiery, passionate, and sexual figures by emphasizing their physical appearance, or they are depicted as domestic help (Mastro & Stern, 2003; Wilson II, et al., 2003). Black women are likely to be shown in explicit sexual poses or attire, and their bodies are also emphasized and sexualized (Collins, 2000; Coltrane & Messineo, 2000). As these studies show, the bodies of racial Others are likely to be stereotypically constructed, objectified, and sexualized, while the invisibility and normativity of white female bodies are unquestioned in this media discourse. Whiteness and Otherness, thus, are constructed and maintained through media representations.

## **Whiteness and the Media**

Whiteness theory has captured critical race researchers' attention for

decades. Theorizing whiteness has been developed as a counter movement against traditional race scholarship that has a tendency to study “non-white” from a “white” perspective, which maintains whites’ positionality as the norm (Shome, 1996, 2000). Whiteness theory focuses on how whites are socially constructed and maintained as “white” (Shome, 1996). Whiteness “theory,” thus, is more an approach to studying race than a theory that explains relationships between or among factors or phenomena (Moon, 2009).

As I briefly mentioned earlier, whiteness should be regarded not only as a fixed racial/ethnic physical characteristic but also as a socially and historically constructed process of social practices that keep white racial groups in a dominant, privileged, and normative position in a social system, which tends to remain unnamed and unquestioned (Fiske, 1994; Gabriel, 1998; Moon, 2009; Shome, 1996, 2000). Although whiteness is strongly related to enduring racism in the aftermath of slavery and apartheid, contemporary whiteness does not manifest itself through explicitly hostile attitudes or discriminatory behaviors against groups of color (Lipsitz, 2006). Conversely, whiteness and its mechanisms are largely invisible and hidden in “everydayness.” Whiteness emerges as a color-blind ideology, which denies the existence and significance of race and justifies racial inequalities by providing race-neutral and liberalistic discourse. Ultimately, this ideology maintains whites’ privileged positions. To maintain whites’ unnamed position, whiteness defines “non-whites” as racial Others instead of defining whites. Fiske (1994) names the power to be invisible as *exnomination* and the discursive techniques that construct whites as the norm by defining racial Others as *naturalization*.

Exnomination and naturalization are practiced in daily discourses, of which media discourse is one. The realities and cultural/social identities of the audience are based on the selective visions of social reality that the media produce and provide (Gabriel, 1998; Lind, 2004). In terms of race relations, the

media not only reflect the society's racial hierarchy but also construct and maintain it. Consequently, through media discourse, whites unconsciously learn their normativity and invisibility, and people of color unconsciously internalize their position as racial Others in society (Shome, 2000a, 2000b). The media thereby construct and sustain the power of whiteness.

Therefore, the primary objective of media studies from a perspective of whiteness theory is to make the invisible and naturalized whiteness constructed by the media visible and challenged. This study also pursues this goal. This study attempts to reveal the existence of whiteness in Japan and investigate how whiteness in Japan is constructed and sustained by analyzing the media discourse on white women in Japanese cosmetic surgery advertisements.

## Method

### Data Collection and Texts

Forty cosmetic surgery clinics' websites were selected for this study.<sup>2</sup> Various forms of advertisements exist, including print ads in the magazines, newspapers, and billboards. However, I believe that online advertisements are most appropriate to explore everyday discourse of whiteness, as the Internet is one of the most accessible resources for people interested in cosmetic surgery. As they would do, I searched "cosmetic surgery clinic" (*Biyo seikei geka* in Japanese) on Google.

Of the hundreds of resulting websites, I selected the top forty hits. I printed out the top pages of each website, and all images of women on these pages were analyzed. When more than one woman was portrayed in one frame, and when the same woman was portrayed in different frames, I counted each image as a different text. These images of female models added up to 269. Of these images, 227 portrayed white female models, and 27 of them portrayed Japanese models.

## **Analysis**

My analysis of the texts is based on tenets of discourse analysis from a critical perspective. Although “discourse” is usually defined as a specific way of speaking, it has a more specific definition in discourse analysis. Discourse is a set of texts (including images), as well as the processes of producing and consuming them, that construct social reality and positionings (Phillips & Hardy, 2002; Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002; Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001). Due to its interdisciplinary origins, there are various approaches to discourse analysis; some may take rather strictly constructivist approach that emphasizes the specific language use in generating intersubjective meanings, while others may take a radical critical perspective that focuses exclusively on the dynamics of power relations in macro contexts, such as ideologies, exploitation, and domination (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Martin & Nakayama, 2004). This study focuses both on specific discursive strategies that construct whiteness through the media’s representation of white models and the ideological functions of these discourses.

First, I cut out each image from the web pages and separated them into the piles of white model images and Japanese model images. I looked through the images of white models multiple times to grasp general patterns in the text. Though the number was small, I also examined how Japanese models were described in these advertisements, given the assumption that the construction of Japanese (“white” in local racialized system) would help to understand how racial “Others” (i.e., white women) are constructed. Then, I analyzed each image in greater detail to explore specific discursive strategies that construct and sustain the underlying whiteness ideology in Japan.

## **Results**

I argued earlier that Japanese whiteness consists of two conflicting and conflated ideologies: traditional global whiteness, which is a white supremacist

system, and local whiteness, which is a Japanese supremacist system. In analyzing how female models were represented in cosmetic surgery clinics' online advertisements, the following five discursive strategies emerged: 1) standardization, 2) fragmentation, 3) sexualization, 4) distancing, and 5) fixation of stereotypical images.

### **Standardization**

Standardization here refers to the discursive practice that establishes the white female as the standard of beauty in Japan. As studies have demonstrated (e.g. Collins, 2000; Fiske, 1994; Gabriel, 1998; Shome, 1996, 2000a), the media in general have had a tendency to portray whites as positive, desirable, and attractive. The tendency of whiteness to be represented as the positive standard of beauty was salient in the texts analyzed in this study.

Standardization in these cosmetic surgery advertisements is performed primarily through the overrepresentation of white female models. Among 40 websites, 32 used white models exclusively. Only four of them portrayed Japanese models exclusively, and five websites employed both Japanese models and white models. In terms of images, 227 of 269 depicted white models, and 27 depicted Japanese models.

Such obvious overrepresentation of white models in cosmetic surgery advertisements indicates that the ideal beauty naturally belongs to white women. Most beauty product advertisements portray their models in a way that urges consumers to buy their products by stirring their desire to look like these models (Kilbourne, 2003). What these cosmetic surgery ads tell their audiences is that they also can purchase beauty if they undergo cosmetic surgery. Therefore, these ads construct white females as the standard of beauty.

Though their number of images was small, the analysis of Japanese models in the ads indicates that white beauty is also constructed in the representation of Japanese models. All of these Japanese models have large

eyes with double eyelids, fair skin, light brown hair, and long arms and legs. In the beauty advertisements in the U.S., Asian models are often characterized with olive skin, black hair, almond shaped eyes, and petite figures. This characterization is the "Asian beauty" constructed in Western societies (consider how the actress Lucy Liu is typically represented in the U.S. media). However, Japanese beauty constructed in the cosmetic surgery advertisements is different from this Western standard of Asian beauty.

### **Fragmentation**

In her critical feminist analysis of films in the U.S., Shome (2000a) argues that fragmentation is one of the primary rhetorical strategies to represent the racial body of "Others." The images of women in the cosmetic surgery advertisements are frequently cut in parts such that certain parts of their bodies (e.g. eyes, lips, breasts, legs) are emphasized. Shome (2000a) contends that the bodies of South Indian men and women in the film *City of Joy* are more likely to be fragmented by camerawork than those of white actors. In the U.S. or Western contexts, fragmented racial Others tend to be people of color, not whites.

The textual analysis indicates, however, that the bodies of white female models are more likely to be fragmented than that of Japanese models. For example, among 227 images of white female models, there were only seven images that portrayed the entire body, while only ten out of 27 Japanese models are partially pictured. Because the sample size of white images and Japanese images is different, this may not be a valid comparison. However, it is still evident that the ads' audiences more frequently see fragmented bodies of white women than Japanese women.

Fragmentation of white female models' bodies can be interpreted to indicate that they are represented as objects or commodities. Although it is impossible for Japanese women to transform their race and become white by way of plastic surgery, these ads tell their audiences that they can at least

“purchase” white bodies. The message in these ads is that Japanese women are able to possess eyes that are as large as white women’s, lips that are as full as white women’s, and breasts that are as large as white women’s if they have cosmetic surgery.

Research indicates that it is common for the media to objectify, commodify, and appropriate racial Others. In the U.S., women and people of color are more likely to be objectified than men and white people in general (Shome, 1996; Wilson II, et al., 2003). However, white women seem to be more likely to be objectified than Japanese women in Japanese context. The objectification through fragmentation of white women’s bodies implies that the Japanese media construct white women as racialized Others in the same way that the U.S. media do with Asian women.

### **Sexualization**

What caught my attention in the early stages of textual analysis was that most white models appear naked or in their underwear, while Japanese models wear normal clothing. There was no single image of a Japanese woman who was completely naked. With regard to this portrayal, two possible interpretations arose: 1) emphasizing white women’s feminine bodies demonstrates Japanese women’s admiration for white beauty, and 2) emphasizing white women’s sexuality creates “morally good” Japanese women in contrast to sexually Others.

Although Japanese society has been Westernized for many years and increasingly more young women expose their skin in public, it is still considered inappropriate to reveal too much skin. The contrast between Japanese models that cover themselves and naked or scantily clad white models in these ads discursively produce a morally superior “us” in contrast to the sexualized “Others.”

As various studies have demonstrated, it is common in the U.S. media for women of color to be represented as exotic, sensual, sexual, and thus they



are “Othered” in the media (Frith, Cheng & Shaw, 2004; Shome, 1996, 2000a; Suki, 2005; Wilson II, et al, 2003). The representation of Asian women as Geishas or China dolls is an example of this. In Japanese texts, however, it is not Japanese women but white women whose sexuality is emphasized. This difference indicates that white women are discursively racialized as Others in the Japanese media.

### **Distancing**

Distancing here refers to discursive processes that create symbolic and psychological distance or immediacy between audiences and the models represented in the advertisements. The race of the models used in the ads is considered a distancing strategy. For example, David and her colleagues (2007) conducted a study on audience response toward the race of fashion models in magazines (David, Morrison, Johnson, & Ross, 2007). The results demonstrate that the advertisements have a greater effect when the models’ race is the same as the audience’s. The researchers argue that this is because the social distance between the models and the audience is less (David, et al., 2007). According to this argument, portraying white women in Japanese advertisements actually broadens the social distance between the models and their Japanese audience.

Another distancing strategy that emerged from the Japanese cosmetic surgery advertisements is the different portrayal of white models’ gaze from that of the Japanese models. The white models in these ads are less likely to look directly into the camera than the Japanese models. Nearly half of the white models in these ads avert their gaze, and others often close their eyes. On the contrary, Japanese models are more likely to look directly into the camera. This contrasting description of eye gaze was clear in one pair of cartoonish illustrations of girls. One depicts a Japanese girl in a pink shirt who has dark brown eyes and dark hair. She is facing forward. The other one is of a white girl who is naked with blond hair, and she has closed eyes.

On the basis of these portrayals of models' gaze, the symbolic distance between white models and Japanese audiences is greater than that between Japanese models and Japanese audiences. Having less direct eye contact with the audience means that white female models have less "interaction" with the audience, which leads to the construction as outsiders. White models are constructed as "the beauty" before their Japanese audiences, yet these models are not "one of us" because they are outsiders. With their eyes averted or closed, the white women in these ads are portrayed as if they are dolls in a showcase. The distancing strategy, thus, also objectifies white women as Others.

The distancing strategy seems to be a manifestation of Japanese people's (especially Japanese women's) ambivalent feelings toward whites (Fujimoto, 2002). The Japanese admire white beauty as an ideal, but at the same time, Japanese women are threatened and feel insecure about themselves because of the existence of the racial Others. Japanese women's conflicting feelings toward white women correspond with the "paradox of accepting different cultures" (Kosakai, 1996). This paradox refers to the tendency for Japanese people to admire Western elements as long as they are "outside" but to consider them harmful when they come too close. Japanese cosmetic surgery advertisements demonstrate that white women are constructed as the ideal beauty, but they are placed far enough away so as not to threaten Japanese audiences.

### **Fixation of Stereotypical Images**

In the U.S. media, women of color are commonly represented stereotypically, while white women are described in dynamic ways: submissive Asian women, passionate Latinas, and hypersexual black women are typical media representations. These imposed images construct a dynamic "us" and static "Others." In a similar way, white women in Japanese cosmetic surgery ads were portrayed in stereotypical ways with fair skin (i.e.,

not sun-tanned), a thin and high nose bridge, light-colored eyes, full breasts, and long legs and arms. These images demonstrate that white women are constructed in a fairly homogenous and fixed way. I refer to this strategy as the fixation of stereotypical images.

In addition to racial features, stereotypical gender images are also imposed to a greater extent on white female models than on the Japanese models in these ads. In his study on gender role stereotypes in advertisements, Goffman (1979) depicts four primarily stereotypes of women: 1) licensed withdrawal indicating the models' withdrawal from the immediate situation (e.g., covering her mouth with her hand), 2) ritualization of subordination depicting the models' subordinate status (e.g., reclining on a bed), 3) feminine touch portraying models' expressions of physical intimacy (e.g., caressing a candle with her fingers), and 4) body display, which is represented by models' overt sexuality (e.g., exposing skin). Although this study was conducted nearly 30 years ago, these stereotypical images of women are still present among the white female models portrayed in Japanese cosmetic surgery advertisements. Their averted gaze and closed eyes can be categorized as licensed withdrawal; models who are lying on a bed or covering their naked body with a blanket might indicate their subordinate status; caressing one's face is a typical pose expressing physical intimacy; and their exposed skin is an example of body display.

Compared with white models, Japanese models in these advertisements were constructed in a less stereotypical manner. They look directly into the camera and appear to be more confident than their white counterparts. White models are thus "feminized" in these ads, contributing to the construction and maintenance of racial and gender hierarchies that place Japanese women over white women.

A similar finding is reported in the study on the representation of white women in Chinese women's fashion magazines (Johansson, 1999). Inter-

estingly, however, white female models are “masculinized” rather than “feminized” in the Chinese magazines. Johansson’s (1999) analysis indicates that white models stand with their legs wide apart, they look straight into the camera, and they do not cover their mouths when laughing (which is a faux pas in China according to Johansson). In contrast, Chinese models are often portrayed as feminine, submissive, docile, and childlike (Johansson, 1999). Although the way in which white models are described is different in the Chinese and Japanese media, white women in both contexts are discursively constructed as culturally and socially inferior “Others” by being described in a stereotypical way. This finding illustrates that whiteness in different contexts has different configurations.

## Conclusion

This study explored configurations of whiteness in Japan, where white racial groups are not dominant in society and examined the discursive strategies that construct and perpetuate whiteness ideology in Japan by analyzing representations of white female models in Japanese cosmetic surgery online advertisements. The analysis of these texts revealed that Japanese whiteness consists of two conflated types of whiteness: The traditional whiteness that positions white women as the standard of beauty and the local whiteness that constructs white women as racial Others in Japan. The emergent discursive strategies that produce and sustain this whiteness ideology were the following: standardization, fragmentation, sexualization, distancing, and fixation of stereotypical image.

The discursive strategies that emerged in the analyzed texts have commonalities with those frequently used in the U.S. and Canadian media, which racialize people of color. For example, it is common for women of color to be underrepresented, objectified, sexualized, and stereotypically portrayed. While white women are also overrepresented in Japan, they are objectified

and sexualized as racial Others in a similar manner.

Such representations of white women as racial Others not only reflect the racial status quo in Japanese society but also construct and perpetuate the hegemonic racial hierarchy behind the illusion of racelessness. As Fujimoto (2002) argues, the overrepresentation of white people in the Japanese media reproduces whiteness in the U.S. and other white-dominated cultures, but the myth of racial homogeneity in Japan constructs a racial ladder that places Japanese people on top. The Japanese media's representation of white women is the site where this conflated racialized system is discursively constructed and perpetuated.

Given the unique nature of whiteness in Japan, this study demonstrates the importance of understanding whiteness as contextual. As Shome (1996, 2000b) suggests, it is imperative to take macro-contexts into account in when analyzing whiteness and its ideological mechanisms. Whiteness is not a fixed state but a fluid process that historically, socially, culturally, and ideologically positions different racial groups in power relationships. Therefore, each society has its own whiteness system that should be studied as a dynamic process. I believe that further study outside of the U.S. is necessary to understand the mechanisms of whiteness and to elaborate whiteness theory in a global context.

Although this study contributes to the body of research on whiteness and critical race scholarship, it has some limitations. The primary limitation of this study is that the audience's responses toward the media representation of white female models in these advertisements are not included. Media representation is considered to have a strong effect on the construction of realities and audiences' cultural/social identities. Moreover, the consumption of certain discourse is an aim of discourse analysis. Therefore, it is important to investigate how female Japanese audiences perceive these representations and how they construct their realities and identities. Another limitation is

that the scope of this research was relatively narrow. Because I only focused on cosmetic surgery online advertisements, the results of this study might not be applicable to other media, such as TV commercials and print ads. Finally, no image of white males was analyzed in this study. Since this study demonstrated the intersection of gender and race, it would be interesting to further examine how similarly or differently white women and men are represented in contrast to Japanese women and men in the Japanese media. Such an analysis would help researchers to understand how racial and gender hierarchies are conflated as well as how Japanese people are constructed as “white” while whites are constructed as “non-white” in Japan.

### Notes

1. The capitalized term “Others” refers here to underrepresented racial groups that are systemically underprivileged and marginalized in relation to white dominant racial/ethnic group(s) in societies. In the same way, “to Other” refers to the act of marginalizing, dominating, and/or exploiting certain groups of people.
2. The texts were collected in 2007, and an earlier version of this manuscript was presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association in San Diego in 2008. Given the dynamic nature of whiteness, I may conduct a follow-up study on the same subject to investigate how media representations of white women have changed over recent years.

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