

“We might get talked about, but no one ever shows us.”

Talking about *Privilege* with artist Gary McLeod

Thomas Amundrud

Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto

Keywords

Gary McLeod, *privilege*, non-native English teachers, photography

Gary McLeod は東京を拠点とする英語教師・写真家であり、デジタルアートの修士号をCamberwell College of Art in Londonで取得している。*Privilege* はGary が日本で撮影した英語教師の写真とインタビューをまとめたものであり、日本における英語媒体のメディア、例えば、Japan Times やJapanzine ではたいへんな関心が寄せられている。Gary の独特な観点から、日本人ではない英語教師がどのように生活し、自分たちの日本での役割をどう捉え、Gary の言うところの「自発的な国外放浪」を、なぜ歴史のこの時点での日本で選択したのかを写真を通して語る語り口には、一見の価値があると言える。

Gary McLeod is a Tokyo-based teacher of English and photographic artist with a Master's in Digital Art from Camberwell College of Art in London. *Privilege* is a collection of photographs and interviews by Gary of English teachers in Japan, and has attracted considerable attention from the English-language media in Japan, with articles in prominent magazines like *Japanzine* and *Metropolis*. What makes *Privilege* worth looking at is Gary's original perspective on how non-Japanese teachers of English live and view their roles in Japan, and moreover, what his photographs tell us about language teachers who have chosen what Gary calls “voluntary exile” in Japan at this moment in history.

Gary's work is also unique in its use of contemporary social networking to find subjects. I'd come across Gary's ad on Facebook and emailed him to volunteer for a shoot in Osaka in late March 2009. I found him a deeply engaging artist, as well as a thoughtful interviewer, and on the spot suggested doing an interview with him for *TLT*.

TA: So, what is *Privilege*?

GM: *Privilege* is a photographic collection of English teachers living and working in Japan in this era, a record of those people that existed in this moment of time. The main end-point is a

collection of prints that will go into the British Natural History Museum. So that is the ultimate aim, to build this collection of English teachers.

TA: And what was the initial inspiration for *Privilege*?

GM: One of the things that I've always been



interested in is voluntary exile, the decision to move from a familiar situation to a new one. That's something that was driving me to come to Japan originally.

The other major impetus was the *HMS Challenger* and its photographs of native races as it traveled around the world, which is where the actual format of the photographs comes.

TA: What was the *HMS Challenger*?

GM: It was a Royal Navy ship that sailed around the world in the 1870s. Its main objective was scientific research, but as a secondary mission, it took photos of "natives" in different parts of the world.

TA: How did they choose the people they photographed?

GM: It's interesting, when they came to Japan, they photographed a coolie, you know, someone

who pulled the things along, and they photographed a young girl wearing a kimono. That's all they photographed. But the coolie -- he had a shaved head, and tattoos as well. So they pretty much chose subjects they thought symbolized the culture.

But, I say that they *might* just be symbolic. There's no record of who they actually were. The same goes for my photos.

TA: So where do you situate yourself? As an artist? A researcher?

GM: I think they are very intermingled, and the "artist" would be generally how I see myself.

TA: As an artist, what are you coming at in this project?

GM: I'm coming at the pictures as being information I'm collecting. Visual information, that's what I'm seeking out, recording, and documenting. These pictures aren't aesthetic objects, and that's because I see them as information of these people in this moment in time in this century.

I guess you could say I'm coming at it from the point of view of an artist whose practice is based on collecting little pockets of information.

TA: By the way, you have a very unique camera. What makes it unique and how does it work?

GM: What makes it unique is the fact that it's combining an old eye--the Victorian-era brass



lens--with a new brain, a modern prosumer camera. The lens over time has become a metaphor for my eye, and the body of the camera has become a metaphor for my brain.

I'm taking a camera which is so familiar to a lot of people. They see a camera that they think probably, "oh that looks like my camera. Oh my god, they stuck it with an old lens like that. You can do that?"

TA: You're almost making the camera a foreign object again.

GM: (*Laughs*) It is *definitely* an object of interest! I've exhibited it before with the pictures, and it creates a lot of attention.

By fusing the current and the past, I'm trying to draw attention to what is missing.

TA: "Fusing the current and the past" ...I noticed on your website, you say we live in a "time-poor culture." Could you unpack that?

GM: Well, in terms of looking at it from the perspective of digital photography, how much time do people spend thinking about the photograph that they're gonna take? It's all just very quick, isn't it?

TA: So how do you bring time into the process of your shots?

GM: The process introduces time physically into the process--the whole procedure of taking the portrait takes anything between 15 and 25 minutes.

What happens when you take a series of photographs over that period of time is, time creeps in. Time is made apparent by change, slight movement, or anything like that.

I like to think that this camera is actually introducing a trip -- a journey to the arrival point, as opposed to just getting at the arrival point instantly. That's what I mean by "time-poor culture." It's only when you invest effort and time that something becomes more rewarding.

TA: How you get the mosaic pattern in your photos?

GM: That's because of the automatic process I've used, leaving it to a computer to determine the information in one particular frame, where

it has no relation to any others. So, basically, all the pictures of each subject are taken separately. When they're processed, they're all judged with the same criteria by the software, and it auto-adjusts everything. It looks at one image, determines how many darker and lighter pixels, and adjusts accordingly. But it doesn't know whether a part of one image is a part of another image, so actually, it only looks at the images piece by piece, and yet it's still judging by the same criteria. Therefore the result is that they all slightly change in tones and brightness.

TA: I have to say, I definitely felt specimenized when you took my picture (G chuckles) How do you do that? I certainly got the sense of being *measured*.

GM: Yeah. Well I think that comes from the actual format I brought in from the *Challenger* photographs. It's funny, when people look at the old ones and they look at the teachers, they often laugh because of the similarities between the two -- it's quite striking.

It's partly to do with the lens itself being from that era. Photography was different; it was a way of collecting evidence back then.

TA: Anyway, what do you mean by "privilege"?

GM: (*laughs*)

The dictionary always seems to come up with two different definitions; one that it is a lucky opportunity, the other is when people are granted something they don't deserve. Of course, your own experience of that word pretty much posits which side you fall on.

TA: How many photos have you shot so far?

GM: I've actually done 84, but the goal now is 100.

TA: You said it's more men than women?

GM: Generally it's more men than women, but not by a large amount.

TA: As far as nationality and ethnicity goes...I noticed in the collection online that you've got a very wide range.

GM: Actually, I'm surprised by how wide it's gotten.

TA: Are they all native speakers?

GM: There are three who aren't native speakers, but they do teach English, and they're classed as native speakers. They've all had education in Australia, England, or something like that.

TA: And as far as people's field within the English teaching industry, mostly *eikaiwa*?

GM: Actually no. There's a good balance between *eikaiwa* and ALTs, I think, with some university teachers too.

TA: Speaking very generally, how are the answers different between...women versus men, different sorts of native speakers, people from different countries. Does "privilege" apply to all of them?

GM: It's interesting, I photographed a Jamaican guy yesterday, and he couldn't stress enough how much of a privilege it was to be here, coming from Jamaica where, he said, the opportunity for Jamaicans to travel just doesn't exist. Everyone just travels to Jamaica.

Obviously it does vary from person to person. There is a general pattern I've found for some questions, though. For example, "Have you ever felt uncomfortable or threatened in some way?" More often than not, women will say they have more than guys.

It also depends on how long the teachers have been here too. One person today was here for three months, and the longest was actually 22 years. So it's quite a wide range. Plus, what kind of person are they? Are they more positive or more negative? Also, what time did they come, after work, or on a weekend? But overall, I find people are generally positive about their experience here.

TA: So what you're saying is, your subjects usually say living and teaching in Japan is a privilege. "Privilege" being the first definition, that it's a chance, a good opportunity

GM: Yeah, I think the teachers do generally feel that way.

TA: How about the number two, then? That they don't really deserve it.

GM: It's interesting. If you look at the question where I ask people if they feel like they're paid deservedly for what they do, a lot of them say

they're overpaid, particularly ALTs. Even some *eikaiwa* teachers have said they're overpaid for what they do, in terms of work-to-money ratio.

Now, I don't know if they are or not. I've never been an ALT, but going on from what some people have said, some ALTs are glorified voice recorders. I've heard that a lot. But I guess it depends on the year and the ages they're teaching.

TA: Do people describe much of a sense of alienation?

GM: Well, someone today felt that she was giving suggestions but wasn't being listened to. She perhaps realized that what she's doing is just reading out from a book, and she makes suggestions, and gets shot down for it, you know, "That's fine thank you," but no one's listening. So I guess there, people can feel alienated.

But, at the same time, I've had a lot of ALTs who've said they do a lot of lesson planning.

I think it also depends on who's employing them, which prefecture. Some of the feedback I get is that, some prefectures have more money than others, and – there's more opportunity for ALTs than in others.

TA: You asked questions like, "How do you see your role in Japanese society?" "Would you say that native speaking English teachers were necessary or a luxury for the study of English?" or "Do you agree that learning English is a necessary skill for Japanese people?" or "Would you consider yourself a good teacher?" What are some things you often hear about the experience of teaching English in Japan?

GM: Some of the responses vary to, "How do you see your role?" Some of them are "entertainer" to "cultural ambassador" to "cultural conduit", those kinds of things, plus actually, "voice recorder" as well.

As regards to whether teaching English is necessary, a lot of people generally say "no", that learning English for Japanese people is *not* necessary. Occasionally someone says, "Yes, of course, it's vital for internationalization." But generally they say it depends on what students want to do.

Are native speakers necessary? Generally they will say, "yes," because of natural pronunciation

and familiarity with the language, especially in comparison to Japanese teachers of English, who, from what I hear, don't speak English very well. That again is case by case, just a generalization.

TA: So the majority have all generally said they believe the native speaker teachers *are* necessary.

GM: Yeah. I think generally that's the case, not a generalization, though interestingly enough, they say English is not necessary. That's why I asked that question in that way. I say, "Would you say that learning English is necessary for Japanese people?" Often the response is, "No it's not necessary. It depends on what they want to do with their lives." "Therefore, do you think native-speaking English teachers are necessary?" This asks them to think, should they be entitled to have this job or not?

TA: How many folks would you say are really into their profession? Versus, say, people who are just here for the ride?

GM: Well, no one's going to stick their hand up and say, "I'm here for a free ride," but they're all aware of certain people that do come here and free ride, so to speak. Someone drew attention to it today, actually.

TA: And about *teaching*...

GM: Do they consider themselves good teachers? A majority consider themselves at least to be acceptable. A few people have said, "outstanding."

TA: And how do they justify that?

GM: Some of them might justify it by how much they've come, how much they prepare outside of what they're supposed to be there for. You know, particularly with kids and things like that. Actually the ones that said "outstanding" might have been the kids' teachers. But again, this is a generalization.

TA: Of people who have seen these photos so far, what's been their reaction?

GM: Um, a lot of people have said to me, even today someone said to me, occasionally I ask you know, why did you volunteer for this thing? And they said, well you know, I've never seen anyone do this sort of thing about English teachers. You know, *we often get, we might get talked about, but*

no one ever shows us. They said that it was an amazingly new thing that they'd never seen before. So I mean there's that aspect to it. It is a new thing. In that sense, I kind of feel honored to be the one doing it I suppose. A lot of people have said to me, what you're doing is really interesting. I think it's because of how many levels there are to it.

TA: One other thing is, what's going to happen with the interviews? I mean the photos are your focus of course, but what are you doing with all this data?

GM: My intention is to transcribe them all. I believe the museum will accept the transcriptions, though I haven't thought about it much.



TA: Finally, what do you think might be some ripple effects of this project?

GM: Well this is one of the things the exhibitions will present the answer to. Let's not forget, this work is not necessarily completed until it's got an audience, right?

Also, bear in mind that when they go into the collection of the Natural History Museum, they won't be presented at all, because they're going

to be put in the repository and archived for the future. So the exhibitions are where the things are presented, and that's where the real feedback's going to come as to whether I'm actually adding something.

I guess I do sometimes wonder if it would have an effect on people coming here as English teachers or not. I wonder if it would increase it or decrease it. It would also be interesting to see if it humanizes us a bit more to some Japanese people. I guess it would also be good if it had an effect on society in terms of how English teachers are viewed here.

So, if it does have those ripples, then by all means, but I think by that time, the project's very much on its own. I've pushed it out the door, it's taking care of itself, and it just gets devoured by the machine that is culture. It's not my responsibility from that point—I just pushed the wheel.

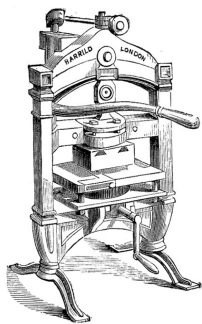
Postscript

I attended the official Osaka opening of *Privilege* on August 1, 2009. The exhibition consisted of two projectors displaying a slideshow of photos from the collection on two whiteboards in a dark room, accompanied by audio of four separate Japanese students of English reading from transcripts from four different interviews. I also spoke with a few patrons. Many commented on how interesting the concept was, and noted the novelty of Gary finding most of his subjects through Facebook. One audience member noted, however, that a more engaging exhibition might be a series of self-portraits taken by teachers themselves.

Thomas Amundrud has been teaching throughout the EFL industry in Japan for over eight years. He is currently a full-time foreign language lecturer at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto. His research interests include the socio-cultural aspects of language teaching, learner and teacher autonomy, and teaching intercultural critical thinking skills. <tat24292@fc.ritsumei.ac.jp>



The Language Teacher needs you!



If you are interested in writing and editing, have experience in language education in an Asian context, and are a JALT member, we need your help. *TLT* is currently recruiting proofreading and editorial staff.

Learn a new skill, help others, strengthen your résumé, and make a difference! If you would like to join our team, please contact the editors:

<tlt-editor@jalt-publications.org>