

On the Road to Being White: The Construction of Whiteness in the Everyday Life of Expatriate German High Flyers in Singapore and London

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Based on ethnographic field studies of the everyday life of German professionals working in the financial sector in London and Singapore, I describe the construction of whiteness as an everyday process in interaction with the specific city. The article shows that even the everyday life of the so-called global elite is strongly bound to particular structures and to their images of the city and the “other,” brought in as part of the expatriates’ travel baggage.

Introduction

Ethnicity should not only be seen as a system that socially classifies the non-white and that is in consequence a powerful system of social subordination. It is also, in the case of whiteness, a system which inscribes social privileges, privileges which are constructed and reproduced in the everyday practices of “white people” and in the everyday construction of self and otherness.

The aim of my article is to make visible the continuous construction of whiteness in interaction with each specific city and, subsequently, to oppose naturalization of whiteness as the norm by denying its validity as an attribute of social classification. “As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named,

they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people” (Dyer 2001: 1).

Postcolonial studies show that the durable colonial discourse defined the “others” culture and geography as primitive or as a stereotypical Orient (cf. Said 1978; Fanon 1967). The colonial division of the “West and the Rest” (cf. Hall 1994) neglects internal differences and divides the world into two homogeneous blocks: “The West” is imaged as modern, developed, civilised and central. “The Rest” on the other hand is imaged as a premodern, undeveloped, and uncivilised periphery. In the meaning of “the West and the Rest,” the Orient is not just “there,” it is part of the “here”; it is part of the European imagination (cf. Said 1978). The imagination of the “other” and the construction of white identity are historically based (cf. Lambert 2005; Bonnett 2000) and continually produced/reproduced in current everyday action. Thus, being white is a result of learning to be white and to image the other (cf. Frankenberg 1993; Thandeka 1999). Part of learning to be white is to learn the specific places of the whites (cf. Frankenberg 1993). The inscription of meaning in places is intertwined with identities: one’s own place and own identity or the foreign place and the foreign identity are bounded concepts. Identities and meanings are socially constructed; this applies to social groups just as it does to the inscription of meanings in places and landscapes (cf. Said 1978, Duncan/Duncan 1988).

By conceptualizing the finance milieu as a travelling culture (cf. Clifford 1997), this article will analyse everyday life not only at a fixed, local level. Following the routes, different places and travel between these places come into the focus of the analysis.

The everyday action of expatriates is conceptualised as a wider activity; it is also fed by practices, assumptions, and images that are learned in distant places, such as in Germany. Limiting the analysis of everyday life to the local level loses the importance of images for local everyday action. I argue that German professionals bring their learned images into Singapore and London and reproduce them in their specific everyday action. Images are part of their travel baggage, which has been packed in distant places and times. Part of this baggage is the construction of whiteness.¹

My paper is based on ethnographic field studies of the everyday life of the so-called global or transnational elite (cf. Sklair 2001, Castells 1996, Beaverstock 2001), taking the example of German employees in the financial sector of two major international financial centres, London and Singapore. By locat-

1 In this article I focus on the identity formation of whiteness. Other identities, such as gender (cf. Frankenberg 1993) and class/milieu identities (cf. Roediger 1992), shine through the construction of whiteness; but they will not be explicitly discussed here.

ing the research project in the same milieu in two cities, it is possible to analyse the construction of whiteness in dependence on the structures of the specific city. Following Anthony King (cf. King 1990), I situate the cities in continuity with their past: On the one hand, London as the former core metropolis of the British Empire (or “The Imperial City”), in which whiteness has its origin. On the other hand, Singapore as a former British-colonized city (or “The Colonial City”), in which whiteness is a category connected with the traveller, the businessman, and the colonizer. I will look into the effects of their histories as Colonial or Imperial cities regarding the contemporary everyday behaviour of white finance employees. My focus is mainly on the construction of whiteness in Singapore, but at the end of my paper I will contrast some of the central findings with my findings on the construction of whiteness in London.

By interviewing employees of the financial sector and investigating the places which they use, I had the opportunity to observe the everyday life of white Germans and their interaction with specific places in each specific city. My research project is based on 19 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with German employees working in the financial sector in London, as well as on 19 interviews with the same social group working in Singapore. In addition to the interviews, I was able to make field notes on participant observations by joining my interviewees in restaurants, cafes, or bars, visiting their homes, meeting them in their workplace, or simply joining them in driving or walking around the city. Investigations of the places in which my interviewees live, work, or engage in leisure activities contributed to the empirical basis of my investigation.

I will follow two lines of argument: First, I will argue that the production of whiteness is not a universal experience. Whiteness has to be created in everyday life in dependence on specific structures of the particular city and on specific images brought in from Germany. Second, I will show that the production of whiteness in each city does not take place only in segregated quarters of the city. It is also produced on the everyday level in small spatial interactions between self and others in a seemingly homogenous city quarter.

Becoming White in Singapore

After an interview with a male German banker who has been living in Asia for more than 15 years, I had the opportunity to see where he lives in Singapore. The field notes from our travel through “his” Singapore will illustrate my central line of argument.

By following me and my interviewee travelling around “his” Singapore, it is possible to learn something about the construction of whiteness in Singa-

pore. But the reader should be aware: Actively reading and following his route means following one's own route. Beyond seeing the process of being white for the German finance employee, a white reader will find some of his or her own images. Non-whites considering that "the subaltern cannot speak" (cf. Spivak 1988) are also part and reproducers alike of this powerful discourse.

At several points I will interrupt this example by examining central findings with the help of passages from other interviews. To avoid confusion, these interruptions are marked in front of the sequence by assigned codes for different interviewees (e.g. S 5).

We start at my interviewee's workplace, in an aluminium-faced building. Entering the building one feels the comfortable air-conditioned coolness. Behind the information desk in the entrance hall stands a dark-skinned man (perhaps, according to Singaporean categories, a Malay) with a dark blue suit, who shows me the entrance to the bank institute.

Ethnic division of labour in which the employed whites are always in top positions

There is an omnipresent ethnic division of labour in Singapore. Essentially all employed whites in Singapore always work as "foreign talents" in qualified work in the developed service sector. My interviewees find themselves to be desired and required by Singaporean society as highly qualified personnel. One mentioned that even the president of Singapore remarked that Singaporean society depends on the knowledge of the expatriates. My interviewees explain this by associating whiteness with creativity, informality, and independence, and contrasting this with an ascription of Singaporeans as uncreative and dependent.

S10: "The people here are so obsessed by what they are fed three or four times every day by the newspapers, the government and so on. This makes them mostly dependent. They cannot do anything on their own. Everything is orderly."

After a short wait, my interviewee welcomes me and invites me into his office. He is in his fifties, has a fit figure with short-cut grey hair and is wearing black trousers, a lilac shirt and a lilac tie, but no suit.

Following my former experiences with the well-dressed German finance employees in London, I had prepared myself to enter the world of the finance employees in Singapore by changing my usual clothing style to wearing black shoes, an ironed long-sleeve shirt, and a suit for the interviews. But after entering the field in Singapore I changed this style, because my interviewees, wearing polo-shirts without jacket or tie, were—to my surprise—mostly dressed more casually than I was.

Differentiation and group formation is based on whiteness, not on clothes

Usually, special clothes are a form of everyday differentiation from the other (cf. Bourdieu 1987). For the German finance employees in Singapore there is less need to differentiate by clothes, as the difference through their whiteness is so obvious and equivalent to the distinction by clothes. The two following interview sequences underline this argument:

S6: "I must say that here in Singapore you don't wear a collar, a tie, and a suit every day like in Germany, the demand is not strong like it is in Germany. I wear casual clothes, with the exception of when there is something special like a ceremony, then I will wear collar and tie, but there is normally no need for a jacket."

S10: "If I am leaving for home after work, then I take off the tie and put it there into the drawer [he opens the drawer with different ties in it]. I have five others there and tomorrow morning I'll choose one for wearing. In the evening I don't go home with a tie, there is nobody who knows me outside and if there was somebody who knows me, it would be all the same to me (he laughs)."

After the interview we go to the underground car park and get into a large, immaculate, silver-coloured Mercedes Benz. On starting the engine, the air-conditioning and the radio are automatically turned on. While he shows me his Singapore through the car window, we drive through the streets to the sound of pop music.



Figure 1: On the road with a view of the central business district (Photo: © Lars Meier)

Being an observer from a separate viewpoint and being a brave explorer

Detachment from the outside world of the city is a constant experience for the expatriates. Working in an isolated business park or in an office building with controlled access, driving

in a car, living in a separated condominium, or spending leisure time in clubs: all these places have formal entrance controls. The smell of the city, its sounds, and its climate are outside the window. From the inside it is possible to discover the outside. The inside is associated with relaxation and socialising with peers.

Being an observer from a distant standpoint is bounded by its converse, being a brave discoverer of the foreign world. Part of constructing whiteness entails having no fear of entering a foreign world, and considering the foreign as a noble challenge that confers prestige. The whites differentiate themselves from the locals by describing them as anxious. The locals do not play the role of observer, the whites describe them as being tied up in their families and disconnected from the outer world. For the whites, exploring the foreign is described as a strenuous activity that must be planned in advance. But it promises fine rewards of honour.

This is shown in the following interview sequence, in which one of my interviewees describes the difference between the white expatriates and the Singaporeans in the case of Little India, a Singapore city-quarter with a large proportion of Indian workers.

S5: "The expats have little fear of contact with Little India. The Singaporeans don't go to Little India. It is different for the expats..."

LM: "They go there?"

S5: "Yes, of course they go there, but the Singaporeans see it as very dangerous."

For another interviewee the Singaporeans have a lack of interest in contacting different cultures. He contrasted this with his self-description of being interested in foreign cultures, e.g. in eating experiences at local food vendors in the so-called hawker stalls.

LM: "How would you describe your contact with the Singaporeans?"

S10: (Laughing) "It is practically non-existent. [...] It is complicated. For example, when we are having an annual dinner, there is a raffle after the lunch or some nonsense like that, and after that they are gone. Then there is one table where the expatriates sit."

LM: "Why?"

S10: "It is a typical Chinese thing: they sit the whole evening and eat. The food is already three days old, but they continue eating it and drinking tea. And if they don't, they want to be amongst themselves, they don't feel comfortable. I feel comfortable when I am going to a restaurant or sometimes to a hawker stall."

Returning now to our car drive around Singapore, we arrive after 15 minutes of driving down a road near Holland Village. The interviewee shows me his former home, where he lived with his children and his former wife some years ago.

Durability of colonial city structures constructs whiteness

Holland Village is a green residential district and a traditional expatriate area. Since it was established in the late 1930s as a British military village, it has been defined as a classical city quarter for Europeans. At that time special shops were installed to serve the needs of the British military personnel (cf. Chuang 1995). The contemporary expatriates' decision to live in Holland Village underlines the durability of colonial structures and their importance for contemporary everyday life in Singapore.

This durability is grounded on inscribed images of Holland Village as an expatriate quarter in the context of the concentration of special places that are seen as specifically expatriate, such as restaurants, boutiques, and particular shops. These images are spread by expatriate social networks. The social networks of colleagues and employers are quite important for gathering initial information about Singapore shortly after or even before arrival in the city. Expatriates' use of these places in their everyday life is inscribed as the norm. The use of other places that do not have the inscription of being expatriate is described as something special, which is sometimes possible, but is necessarily bound to an active decision to avoid the usual expatriate places.



Figure 2: Villa in a preferred expatriate residential district (Photo: © Lars Meier)

He shows me the sign of his former street and says that he is responsible for it. He sent a letter of complaint to the minister because nobody could find the small street since it had the same name as the main road. After that the minister changed the street sign.

Making geography and bringing order to a previously disordered area

Like the structuring of the city into ethnic clusters by the British colonizer Sir Stamford Raffles (cf. Perry/Kong/Yeoh 1997: 25–30), creating order is still part of whiteness.

We continue the ride to the German supermarket and he tells me that he will visit his girlfriend in another Asian country and has to bring some German groceries, like “Prinzenrolle” and “Schwarzbrot.” In the small market there are five other white customers and a Chinese saleswoman. After carrying the shopping items to the car, we drive to the Swiss butcher, “a gold mine,” says the banker. After entering the butchers, he greets the butcher in German and speaks to a Chinese customer in Mandarin. He tells me that this woman calls herself a banana because she has lived in the USA for a couple of years: yellow on the outside and inside she is white. He claims that he is an egg, the outside is white and the inside is yellow.

The mark of whiteness is seen as durable. Whites have a consciousness of their whiteness and construct this as solid and unchangeable

The following interview sequence with a white woman, talking to me about a weekend trip with friends, underlines this claim.

S5: “A short time ago, when I was trekking on Lombok, there was also an expat there, whom I didn’t know, but the others were all South-Koreans. In this context I was not conscious of being an expatriate or that I am a Westerner, that I am not an Asian. I have been living here too long for that and I have too much contact with locals. In that moment I was not thinking that I was different in some way.”

LM: “Okay.”

S5: “Maybe later on, just on the photographs or so [...]. You always play a different role, I think, you can’t escape it.”



Figure 3: The German supermarket (Photo: © Lars Meier)

Continuing the drive through Singapore, he tells me that the wives of the male expatriates will not leave Singapore, because for them it is such an easy and pleasant life here. Singapore is a golden cage for expatriate women and they become little princesses, according to my interviewee.

There is a special gendered division of labour for the white expatriate couples, which is different from their German home

The white women mostly do not do household work in Singapore. They more often take the role of an employer instructing the maid. Most of the expatriate families have a maid (a woman from Southeast Asia), who organizes the household and looks after the children. The expatriate women organize the cultural affairs and social contacts of the expatriate family in Singapore and with friends and family in Germany. The women are also committed to welfare organizations and to the German school in Singapore.

Continuing on in the car, we pass an Asian woman wearing short trousers. He points at her through the car window and says: “Look, that’s the style here and nobody thinks anything of it, they are so naïve here. In Europe everybody would think: ‘Oh, hot pants!’ But here they don’t think about it and simply wear it, because it is comfortable.” He said that many expatriates think that they can take them and go to bed with them, but that is not always the case.

The whites contrast the other, the Asian women, as naïve and incapable of judging the effect of their body presentation

He stops at a gate, which is controlled by a Malay guard. The guard opens the gate by remote control. The living area of my interviewee is surrounded by a wall and a metal gate. He lives in a so-called condominium near the central shopping street in Singapore. A condominium is an area with several high rise flats, often with other white expatriate people living there. It usually has a swimming pool, a gym, a barbeque area, sometimes tennis courts, and a small supermarket, which are used communally by the residents of the condominium.

Separation is ubiquitous: The whites live, work, and spend their leisure time in separated and guarded areas (bank buildings, condominiums, and clubs)

Living in clearly separated places is part of the everyday experience of the white expats. The following interview sequence confirms that whiteness is often an entrance ticket to these separated areas.

S2: “It is guarded by official security, there are guards walking around and there is a fence in front. But if you want to enter the area—if you have white skin and if you are a European—the guard will let you in. Then you can drive in, that is not a problem.”



Figure 4: Gate of a condominium (Photo: © Lars Meier)

After parking his car in the condominium, we take the escalator to the 6th floor and enter his apartment. In his apartment there are many articles of antique Asian and German furniture and sculptures, which he brought from his previous stays abroad. Hanging on the apartment wall is a picture of his grandfather and a family tree.

The antiques recall the history of the whites. The whites have their own history, which is cultivated by gathering antiques and history-related artefacts such as books on German history.

After entering the main living room he calls for the maid: “Hello, hello!” The maid lives behind the kitchen in a so-called maid quarter, which contains a small sleeping room, a corridor, and a bathroom. While showing me this he mentions the air-conditioning in the maid quarter and tells me that he installed it just for his maid and that this is an unusual service for maids here in Singapore. By this he indicates that the Chinese normally treat their maids less well than the Europeans do.

Being a benefactor is part of whiteness

The other, the Chinese upper class, is ascribed as being less cultivated and consequently not treating their maids with the respect that the Whites do.

He tells me that his maid is from the Philippines and explains that the maids from the Philippines are the most expensive, because they can speak English and they are relatively the most easy-going. He has his maid from an agency, they have pictures and biometrical data of the potential maids, and you choose between them. He says that it is a sort of meat market.

While showing me the apartment, he complains about the absence of the maid. He writes her a note and tells me that it’s good when she knows that he has been here and she has not. He says that his maid is certainly at her boyfriend’s and is sleeping there. To underline this he says that there is a box of contraceptive pills on the table in the maid’s quarter.

The white man has to control the wild and naïve maid. His control impinges on her time and intimate life.

Living in the same apartment with a maid is not a problem of privacy for the white man. The small-scale separation is regulated by the reserved behaviour of the maid, up to being invisible, and by strict time regulation of the maid’s presence in the main apartment.

We take the escalator down to the entrance of the condominium and leave by car. My interviewee drives back to his office and I take the bus back home. The ride is over.

Contrasting becoming White in London with becoming White in Singapore

To summarize my findings: Being white and producing whiteness in everyday practice is part of everyday segregation, which is, as I show for the Colonial City Singapore, produced in the direct interaction with the other, the non-White. Whiteness in Singapore is produced by inscribing it with creativity, being experienced, being brave as an observer, having a cultural history,

bringing order, and being a benefactor. Of course the other is described as having the opposite attributes.

Understanding the construction of whiteness as a permanent everyday process, I argue that there is a different significance to whiteness in London and in Singapore, mediated by different everyday activities and constructions of whiteness by the German professionals.

German expatriates come to Singapore and London with specific images of the city and the other in their baggage. These images are translated and reproduced in their everyday life. Place also matters for the mobile professionals, it matters in their actions and in their imaginations of the self and the other.

Following a white professional in the developed, modern urban centre of Singapore, I could demonstrate the durability of colonial images and their significance for contemporary everyday life. Everyday life in the international finance centre is strongly dependent on the historical routes which can now be experienced in specific structures and also in specific images of the city. These images are brought to the city, they are learned elsewhere in Germany, and they become lived reality in Singapore. Therefore, from this point of view, Singapore is still the colonial city.

In the case of Singapore, the ethnographic study could show that the other is often not clearly separated in apparently homogenous city quarters. In fact, segregation is produced also on a smaller scale inside the quarters: in the villa or apartment, in interactions with the other in the form of a maid, living door to door. In interactions in the workplace through contact with the other, as a consequence of the ethnic division of labour, with the Asian secretary, the Malay cleaner, and the highly qualified White. Or at places of leisure in contacts between the Indian or Bangladeshi waiter and the white customer.

In the Imperial City London, segregation on the small scale level is not as important as in Singapore; the white bank employees usually do not have maids living in their home. Whiteness in London is not synonymous with being rich and being part of the elite. The other in London is also the white worker or the white pauper. Segregation in London in the everyday life of the bank employees is more important on the scale of city quarters.

For that reason it is not surprising that in London it is far more important for the elite to differ by wearing fine clothes and carrying their entrance tickets to elite places directly on the body: the bank employees in London all wear formal black suits and ties. Achieving entrance to a golf club requires a specific dress code. In contrast to those in London, the white finance employees in Singapore wear less formal clothes, sometimes polo-shirts or short-sleeve shirts, and often no suits or ties. In Singapore being white, a synonym for being elite, is enough to obtain entrance to special places.

With my study I have pointed out that the global elite are not locating their everyday life in a uniform global space. Everyday life is strongly bounded by the specific city. Its history as a Colonial or an Imperial city can be found in images transmitted to the present day, with enduring consequences for contemporary constructions of identity and for everyday action, as demonstrated in the case of the experience of whiteness in Singapore.

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