



Imagining global work: Producing understandings of difference in ‘easy Asia’

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I advance debates that argue that we need to reconceptualise global work from a mobilities perspective by looking how the representation of movement connects with the experience of movement. By looking at the imaginative geographies of Singapore for the British corporate expatriate, I explore how the qualitative representation of place is changing within managerial discourses from a hardship to an opportunity. In doing so, the paper argues that we need to combine understandings of the global economic flows that move some transnational migrants with their everyday lived experiences in order to explore what qualitatively makes work global. This allows us to highlight the multiplicity of ways in which transnational migrants can be understood rather than trying to impose singularity.

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1. Introduction

‘Global work’ a thesis developed by Jones argues that ‘contemporary globalisation has, and is continuing, to transform radically the nature of work as a practice’ (Jones, 2008, p. 13). Through this, he highlights a need to pay ‘theoretical attention to the multiple contexts that constitute work itself. These include virtual, organisational and social spaces that shape the outcomes produced by work practices’ (2008, p. 17). This emphasises, first, a need to understand how work as a practice is going global and second, how the wider practices we associate with globalisation are changing the way in which work is understood. For Jones then, what makes this work global is how it is transformed by distanced relations. However, in this paper, I argue that we need to extend this thesis by drawing upon research from cultural geographies in order to consider what the ‘global’ in global work means. Utilising a mobilities approach, I draw upon the example of British corporate expatriates in Singapore, exploring both the imaginative geographies of the abroad in international human resource management (IHRM) and the geographical imagination of Singapore for the British corporate expatriate. Through this, the paper develops two key arguments.

First, in exploring understandings of global work, I contribute to, and advance, debates that argue that we should understand

migration from a mobilities perspective. As Schapendonk and Steel (2014) argue, research in transnationalism utilises a ‘linear and bipolar logic’ (p. 267), viewing migration from A, the place of origin and B, the destination. Developing this argument, I argue that mobilities as a field can contribute more to understandings of transnational migration by exploring how migrants are produced relationally through their mobility, challenging sedentary ideas that place is the organising unit of the social (Sheller and Urry, 2006). Cresswell (2006) suggests that what distinguishes research on mobilities is the focus on the line in-between of A → B. For studies of migration, this means not just looking at the migrant from the perspective of the sending ‘A,’ or receiving ‘B’ country, but looking at the practices and processes which inform their move. Through this, Cresswell (2010, p. 19) suggests that there are three aspects to mobility—the fact of physical movement, the representation of movement that gives it shared meaning and the experienced and embodied practice of movement. In this paper, I argue that these three aspects can help us develop our understanding of global work.

Through looking these three aspects of mobility, I develop the second key contribution of the paper—highlighting the messy ways in which ‘global’ work is produced and practised. By messy, I mean interrupting narratives of global and local that see these in binary opposition to one another, to look at the ways in which the global and local are produced and practised simultaneously. One way that globalisation affects work is through the physical locations of careers with overseas secondments becoming increasingly formalised as an expected part of training (Jones, 2008). This type

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of globalisation of work means that corporate expatriation is becoming more ordinary, with management consultants [PriceWaterhouseCoopers \(2010\)](#) arguing that it will become the 'new normal' by 2020. Therefore, one way in which we can understand 'global' work is through thinking about how careers practised globally. The mobility of British corporate expatriates to Singapore is an example of this, being a way in which global work as a physical movement is enacted (cf. [Cresswell, 2010](#)).

The 'expatriate' denotes a skilled international migrant who lives abroad for a short period of time, with a corporate expatriate highlighting an individual who is moved and supported by the transnational organisation that he or she works for. Academic research on mobility that can be considered expatriation is an increasingly burgeoning field, though this work in general tends to focus on understandings of expatriates from the perspective of home and social lives (see for example [Butcher, 2010](#); [Fechter, 2007](#); [Fechter and Walsh, 2010](#); [Walsh, 2006](#); [Yeoh and Willis, 2005](#)) rather than connecting these to work (with [Beaverstock, 2002, 2005](#); [Leonard, 2010](#) as the exception). As part of research on transnational migration, this research on expatriates focuses on how this category of migrant lives plays out abroad, predominantly from two perspectives: global flows and local grounded identities. For example, expatriates are often seen as being symbolic of the global flows of capital that we associate with transnational capital and organisations ([Findlay et al., 1996](#)). This type of research develops our understandings of the ways in which global work is produced through global flows of capitalism.

Research looking at expatriates as part of global flows has been criticised by those advocating that we look at how migrant lives are grounded in the local ([Conradson and Latham, 2005](#)). Within this, researchers explore how global, national and local identities are produced on the ground with, for example [Beaverstock](#) exploring how British expatriates in Singapore (2002) and New York (2005) have a cosmopolitan outlook that is symptomatic of their international careers in the corporate sphere, but are disembedded from the local in their private lives. This research therefore begins to question the ways in which people who move for expatriate assignments perform global identities. However, this previous research, in focusing almost exclusively on how identity is negotiated in situ—the place of stay abroad—separates understandings of global flows and groundedness, that are mutually constitutive in producing migrant subjects. That is, this research that looks at how expatriate identity is produced through encounter misses an understanding of how expatriate mobility is produced, in part, before they go abroad through the global flows by which they move ([Cranston, 2016](#)).

In this paper, in looking at expatriation from a mobilities perspective, I connect understandings of flows and groundedness to look at how the 'global' of global work is understood from two 'contexts that constitute work itself' ([Jones, 2008, p. 17](#)). The first context looks at one representation of mobility of that gives it a shared meaning (cf. [Cresswell, 2010](#)), exploring how global work is represented in the imaginative geographies of the abroad in IHRM. In the paper I explore the ways in which IHRM produces an imagining of global space, one where 'space acquires emotional or even rational sense by a kind of poetic process whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here' ([Said, 2003, p. 55](#)). Through this, I explore two ways in which the 'global' is imagined: as a hardship and as an opportunity, showing how changes in globalisation since the 1990s are changing the way in which expatriation is understood in transnational organisations, which alter the 'socio-material relations in which workers are entangled' ([Jones, 2008, p. 14](#)).

The second context is the embodied practice of movement, looking at how these managerial discourses about global work play out in place—geographical imaginations of a location. Although

[Jones \(2008\)](#) critiques the way in which work has been conceived 'as a local practice,' I argue that we need to think about the locations in which global work is practised, as it is itself a practice that has a socio-material spatiality. The paper explores the ways in which narratives about global work sit uneasily and ambivalently through the ways in which British migrants make sense of their 'local world' of Singapore. I do this by providing a series of portraits of the way in which Singapore as a destination is imagined for and experienced by expatriates, ones that illustrate the multiplicity and contradictions within and between these local geographies.

Therefore the paper looks at how the abroad is imagined within managerial discourses about the expatriate (Section 3, numbered) and how Singapore is contextualised (Section 4, unnumbered). This then does not separate understandings of the act, representations and practices of global work. I argue that in looking at mobility as $A \rightarrow B$ we see accounts of expatriates that are simultaneously multiple, contradictory, complimentary and ambiguous. This can be seen as mess ([Law, 2004](#)), that there is no smooth narrative that can be used to explain the often conflicting ways in which the 'abroad' is represented in managerial discourses and Singapore is experienced by the migrant. This is something I enact in my writing with Sections 3 and 4 running alongside one another, illustrating the ways in which the local and global, representations and practices, grounded and flows, play out simultaneously without privileging either—that these narratives work alongside and belong-side one another. Their use simultaneously is a way in which we can understand 'what it means to live in an interconnected, topologically complex world' ([Conradson and Latham, 2005, p. 227](#)) and interrogate the meanings and practices of global work.

2. Methods

The paper utilises a 'following' approach to understand global work from a mobilities perspective. Following as a method involves tracing an object through space and time, bringing together the different voices that are involved in its production ([Cook, 2004](#)). As [Cook \(2004\)](#) illustrates it is usually used to look at commodities, looking to explore commodity fetish by tracing the social relations of production. I use following in my research to conceptually explore the expatriate, following the expatriate assignment cycle that looks at the different stages involved in their management (see [Brewster et al., 2007, p. 242](#)). This means looking at the expatriate as category of knowledge, the work that is involved in producing the expatriate in management discourses, as well as how the expatriate is a lived experience in Singapore. The research draws upon multi-sited ethnographic methods ([Marcus, 1995](#)), which are characterised by a 'methodological openness' ([McCann and Ward, 2012](#)) where I sought to 'gather' ([Law, 2004](#)) a mixture of voices, experiences, readings and interpretations of the expatriate. This research was carried out between October 2011 and September 2012 in the UK and Singapore. All participants are given pseudonyms, and minimal information is provided about organisations who participated, in order to preserve their anonymity.

Section 3 which explores the imaginative geographies of the abroad for the British corporate expatriate draws upon the parts of this research that looked at the production and circulation of knowledge about the expatriate. It looked at how this knowledge was produced through practice: 'the stabilized, routinized, or improvised social actions that ... organize materials, produce, consume, and/or derive meaning from the economic world' ([Jones and Murphy, 2011, p. 363](#)). This involved looking at the different forms that this knowledge took: first, in terms of texts. These texts looked at IHRM as an academic discipline, such as textbooks, as well as

how this became practised in British IHRM circles, through surveys, management reports and policy documents which were both provided to me by transnational organisations that I carried out research with, or as respondents referred me to the sources that they were utilising. Second, participant observation at nine global mobility conferences and events both in the UK and Singapore which were designed to highlight key global mobility issues in these contexts (Cranston, 2014). Third, I carried out 8 semi-structured interviews with individuals who worked as IHR managers or global mobility managers in transnational organisations, as well as with 15 global mobility service providers that looked at contemporary expatriate management practices.

Section 4 which looks at the geographical imaginations of Singapore rather than looking at the production and circulation of knowledge about the expatriate in expatriate management, focuses more closely at the consumption and reproduction of this knowledge in a specific context, Singapore. Some of the same methodology as above was utilised, for example, looking at texts about Singapore as a destination for migrants, both in terms of management and popular texts which were referred to me by respondents as texts that they used. In terms of researching the British migrant in Singapore directly, this included participant observation and 36 semi-structured interviews with 39 British migrants in Singapore, looking to understand how British migrants make sense of their worlds. Part of this involved talking to British migrants about their experiences and practices in Singapore, from a work and career perspective.

3. Imaginative geographies of the abroad

In this section, I look at representations of distance between 'home' and 'host' countries in international human resource management (IHRM), looking at the way in which individuals and organisations understand expatriates as a global workforce as a representation of movement that gives mobility meaning. Through this, I examine different spatialisations (Gregory, 2004) in British-practised expatriate management discourses, the ways in which distinctions are made between the UK and 'abroad.' As Said (2003) highlights in his conceptualisation of imaginative geography, we can see the ways in which spatialisations are produced as being hierarchical, framing the Orient in binary terms by opposing the imagined positives of the West with the corresponding deficiencies of the East; for example, rational to irrational, progressive to backwards, modern to archaic. It is in this way we can see the relationship between knowledge and power, specifically the power to represent difference which becomes real through the ways in which imaginative geographies are practised. In thinking about the global for the corporate expatriate, we need to pay attention to the context in which it is produced.

IHRM as an academic discipline highlights a growing complexity of expatriate management (IHRM textbook, Collings et al., 2007). We can see this in terms of assignment types, from the 3–5 year secondment to short-term, commuter, rotational, travel and virtual assignments; to the different roles that expatriates are seen to fulfil: position filling, management development and organizational development (IHRM textbook, Dowling et al., 2008, p. 89); to the diversification of compensation models. As a way through this complexity, I focus on two ways in which secondments have been understood, focusing on two 'eras' of corporate assignments outlined by PriceWaterhouseCooper (2010): the 'traditional' expatriate, one whose role is to train or manage the subsidiary and is paid through a balance sheet approach, and the 'global worker' who uses an international assignment to develop a global mindset and is paid using the going rate approach.

This section will argue that these two ways in which expatriates are understood act as spatialisations through which the relationship between the 'self'—the expatriate workforce—and the 'Other' are produced which have implications for how global work is understood. In particular, I highlight that although we see changing ways in which the global becomes imagined, both the 'traditional expatriate' and 'global worker' imagine distance as difference, as imaginative geographies work by dramatizing the distance between what is close and what is far away. We can clearly see how this is produced through managerial discourses, where the non-specific geographical 'home' and 'abroad' are produced as different, as 'cross-cultural obstacles that every expatriate must confront' (IHRM article, Mendenhall et al., 1987, p. 331). Within this early, but seminal IHRM text, every aspect of life abroad is set up as being different and becomes framed in war-like terms. Distance therefore becomes dramatized and practised as difference within IHRM, that although imaginative geographies are fictionalised, they become real through their enactment. These interpretations of the 'abroad' work to produce difference. They can be seen as the representations of mobility that make the migrant subject, in that they become felt in the encounters that the migrant has with the abroad. While not trying to ascribe linearity, for corporate expatriates we can see these as imaginative geographies of the abroad that can inform the way through the mechanism in which they move, representations that help them understand the embodied practices of their lives abroad (cf. Cresswell, 2006). Working practices of organisations, from recruitment processes, to expected ways of entertaining clients, actively shape working identities (see also McDowell, 1997). For the corporate expatriate, this includes 'how expatriates understand themselves in their new lives—who they will be' (Leonard, 2010, p. 3). It is practices such as those surrounding role types and compensation from IHRM that illustrate a way in which the global and local are produced through the representations of expatriate mobility that gives it meaning.

4. Geographical imaginations of easy Asia

Imaginative geographies shape interactions that British migrants have with Singapore in that they produce notions of 'self' and 'Other,' ways in which Said (2003) suggests imaginative geographies become self-enforcing. Yet, as Coles and Walsh (2010) illustrate in the case of Dubai, these geographies are always ambiguous, 'produced in dialogue with the materialities of specific concerns' (p. 1319). In utilising portraits of Singapore for the British migrants, I explore the geographical imaginations of Singapore as 'easy Asia,' the ways in which the materiality of imaginative geographies of 'global work' play out within the specific location of Singapore. These highlight how mobility acts as an embodied and experienced practice. As I will illustrate, these imaginations sit uncomfortably and uneasily alongside both one another and global discourses, illustrating how embodied practices of mobility play out in a messy way on the ground.

3.1. Traditional expatriate

The first era of international assignments PriceWaterhouseCooper's describes is between 1970–1990, when assignments are driven by large multinationals in Europe and the US (Management report, PriceWaterhouseCooper, 2010). Although they suggest 1990–2010 marks another era, this model of expatriation is seen to continue 'alongside' that of the traditional expatriate. There are three key characteristics of the traditional expatriate in IHRM: they are on a 3–5 year assignment, their role is both to transfer corporate culture and manage and train the 'local' population, and they are paid using the balance sheet approach

(IHRM textbook, [Tayeb, 2005](#)). Through these characteristics the abroad is imagined as a hardship.

One way in which this spatialisation works is through boundary making. This can be seen through the roles that the expatriate is seen to fulfil, where 'The traditional role of expatriates ... would convey HQ's policies to the subsidiaries and show the locals how to do things' (IHRM textbook, [Tayeb, 2005, p. 181](#)). Although we see other motivations for the use of secondments, these remain reasons why transnational organisations utilise assignments, as one HR manager highlighted: 'the first thing is to send people to new offices to build teams who have the knowledge and skills from within here to disseminate in and train up people being hired locally ... And secondly really, to culturally maintain the cultural identity of [company] so have people instil the right values, the right behaviours in new teams' (Maria, Interview, October 2011). This highlights first, an assumed superiority of the headquarter culture in that it needs to be transferred to the overseas subsidiary. The expatriate should 'instil' as Maria suggests, or 'embed' (Rebecca, Global Mobility Manager, Interview, August 2012) their home office culture, transplanting the home work culture overseas. Second, the perceived role of the expatriate is to impart skills and knowledge to the local—their role is to train locals, meaning that they are not imagined as being equal. This idea that the role of the expatriate is to train the local in the assumed 'superior' culture of the home office, in order that the local will be able to run the office themselves, is something which we can see as drawing upon imperial rhetoric such as that of the civilizing mission in colonial India ([Mehta, 1999](#)). Milly, an intercultural trainer articulates this as: 'a latter day colonialism we are living where they think that we should be grateful for their presence' (Interview, March 2012). This works to conceptually draw boundaries around the expatriate, so that they replicate their home office culture abroad.

We can see this boundary making in a second way—through compensation. The balance sheet approach is described as the 'traditional' way of compensating expatriates (Global mobility report, [Forum for Expatriate Management, 2010](#)). Within this approach, the wage of the expatriate is supplemented with a myriad of benefits, for example: housing, a car, servants, schools for children and club membership. The main objective for this package is 'to keep the assignee whole when compared to home (Global mobility report, [Forum for Expatriate Management, 2010, p. 4](#)), that is keep the expatriate on their 'home' salary and provide an adjustment to living in the 'host' country if it is more expensive. This imagines two things.

First, it portrays the difference of the abroad in terms of negativity. Within the package there are 'incentives to offset the qualitative differences between assignment locations' (IHRM textbook, [Dowling et al., 2008, p. 167](#)). The packages can therefore be seen as an incentive for the expatriate to move abroad, 'framing the move in terms of loss' with the financial package 'trying to make a bad situation good' ([Leonard, 2010, p. 67](#)). Going abroad becomes seen as a difficult situation that the expatriate and their family are placing themselves in. The portrayal of difference as a threat to the well-being of the expatriate draws upon a representation of difference as 'insinuating danger' ([Said, 2003, p. 57](#)). As distance becomes seen as difference, the expatriate must be compensated for the danger that they are putting themselves in. This is given its clearest expression in the hardship differential, compensation for being in a place that is 'unpleasant, where you can't live a normal family life' (Evan, Relocation Management, Interview, October 2011) or as a commentator on the expatriate management website Expatica highlights the 'stress, frustration, anxiety, and considerable disturbance' of being on assignment (Global mobility website, [Smith, 2008](#)). This figure is worked out based on the level of difference between the home and host country. It is in this way that the difference between home and host countries is produced, quantified and

ultimately compensated for. This works to create difference as difficulty, folding understandings of difficulty into distance.

Singapore as easy Asia: order

In thinking about what type of compensation packages to offer their employees, Singapore is seen as a place where transnational organisations do not offer the 'full bells and whistles' package (Evan, Relocation Management, Interview, October 2011). This is primarily due to two, overlapping, reasons. First, as Singapore is seen as a desirable location, organisations do not need to offer the financial incentives for their employees to go as 'they self-initiate their careers globally' (Lara, Relocation Management, Interview, March 2012). Second, Singapore is seen as 'a very easy posting actually' (Elise, Destination Services, Interview, March 2012). The ease of Singapore as a posting is linked to its perceived similarity to Europe, described in terms of its modernity. This is something Maria, a Senior HR Manager suggested: 'it's incredible, it's like the Switzerland of the Far East, it's so efficient and organised and clean and everything works exactly as it should' (Interview, October 2011). For her, this means that the geographical imagining of Singapore is less like Asia, but more like Europe: 'it is part of Asia, it's just a very well orderly part of Asia.' Singapore as a place is perceived as being modern, ordered, and Westernised, which does not fit with Orientalist imaginings of Asia as being disordered and chaotic ([Said, 2003](#)): 'Sometimes you wish was a bit more different, sort of Asian. But it is um, it's a very easy place to come, I think from the West anyway' (Ross, British Migrant, Interview, February 2012). In IHRM practices, the distance between home and abroad is collapsed, with the hardship differential, the level of compensation paid for the difficulty of living in Singapore compared to the UK, being 0% (Evan, Relocation Management Company, Interview, October 2011). Through this, we can see that there is no perceived distance between the UK and Singapore in this management practice, it is seen as a different type of difference—like home. This becomes naturalised in expatriate management with the hardship package as being 'obviously not for Singapore' (Evan, Relocation Management, Interview, October 2011).

Singapore as easy Asia: familiar

Smiths 'Authentic British Fish and Chips' is a restaurant on Boat Quay. A few metres up the street is The Penny Black, 'Your quintessential Victorian Public House with hearty London pub meals & a wide variety of beer on-tap, in a cosy English setting' (Advertising Brochure, Field Notes, April 2012). It is a place, that despite the heat, contributes to feelings of Singapore as being similar to home: 'you could be in a British bar practically' (Maria, Senior HR Manager, Interview, October 2011). The familiarity, built into the landscape of Singapore helps contribute to feelings of it as being similar to home, one which again contributes to a geographical imagining of Singapore as 'easy': Singapore is 'Asia for dummies' because it is 'familiar enough, that you have so much, Western influence' (Hannah, British migrant, Interview, April 2012). The availability of the familiar, means that migrants can actively not engage with Singapore: 'I think many expats live in a bubble here ... I watch basically British comedy, never watch TV here, read British newspapers' (Connor, British migrant, Interview, April 2012). For example, Boat Quay is a place where you can actively practice a 'British' identity, eating 'British' food and going to an 'English' pub. This lack of engagement is actively produced as a coping strategy if the migrant is feeling frustrated by difference, as Elise, a destination service provider highlights: 'all you do is go to Cold Storage [a supermarket that stocks products such as those

from the UK supermarket Waitrose], directing them to a place where they will feel something that is actually quite familiar to them' (Interview, March 2012). In Singapore, it is possible then to feel as if you are at 'home' even if you physically abroad. Singapore as 'easy Asia' in terms of familiarity works to buffer against the supposed disorder of the abroad.

3.1. *Traditional Expatriate Continued*

Second, one of the purposes of the balance sheet approach is that it works on the assumption that the expatriate will replicate as lifestyle as similar as possible to that at home, what is called 'comparable position levels' (IHRM textbook, Dowling et al., 2008, p. 167). For example, Heather Hindman (2007) illustrates how American expatriates in Kathmandu would receive a cost of living adjustment based on the price of pop-tarts in Nepal opposed to the USA, working on the assumption that expatriates would eat pop-tarts both at home and abroad. As a buffer against the dangers of difference for the expatriate, conceptual boundaries would be drawn around them in order to keep them at 'home.' By being expected to replicate 'home,' the expatriate would be protected from the dangers of the abroad by being provided with the means, and being encouraged not to, engage with the local. As the expatriate is positioned as different, this means they are given the justification not to engage with Singaporeans: 'a boundary between distance is drawn which become[s] relevant in individual's negotiations between the self and the outside world' (Fechter, 2007, p. 25). The expatriate then would effectively be parachuted into the abroad and expected to live a bubble-like existence. As a buffer against the dangers of difference for the expatriate, conceptual boundaries would be drawn around them in order to keep them at 'home.'

We can therefore see the ways in which the 'abroad' is represented as a hardship with traditional models of expatriates. This representation of hardship manifests itself within the policies and procedures outlined to the corporate expatriate such as the hardship differential, club membership and compensation policies. It is in this way that the 'abroad' is given meaning for the corporate expatriate, through the representations of mobility that move them abroad. Through practices such as these, the landscape in which global work is itself practised becomes seen as a hardship. A boundary is drawn around the expatriate, one where they are positioned both as being superior and needing to replicate their 'home' identities. This is a replication of local work, carried out on a global scale.

Singapore as easy Asia: culture

In the portrayal of Singapore as 'easy Asia,' the city-state is seen to lack culture: 'It's a safe place, its good place to make a living and to raise children. But it lacks soul. They are trying to create a culture here, but culture creates itself' (Alex, British Migrant, Interview, March 2012). This is articulated on the assumption that culture is something that Others have, and there is the expectation that this will be different. Dyer suggests this in the context of race: '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' (1997, p. 1).

Singapore, then, is portrayed as lacking what can be described as an 'authentic' experience of difference. As the tourist gaze (Urry and Larsen, 2011) highlights, an 'authentic' experience is seen as an extraordinary experience, a departure from everyday life. With the tourist gaze, the 'authentic' is produced for the benefit of the tourist. However, for the migrant, the place of Singapore is still perceived by many to be 'boring': 'People have this image of

Singapore as being boring and over-regulated, but it is predictable, consistent' (Colin, British migrant, Interview, February 2012). We can suggest that this may be, in part, due to the sanitized modernity in Singapore. For example, one of the perceived 'authentic' experiences of Asia can be argued to be street food, that is food purchased from stalls at the side of the road. In Singapore, these stalls have been moved to purposefully designed hawker centres or food courts in shopping malls where hygiene levels are rigorously enforced. Going for street food in Singapore is an experience that becomes intertwined with modernity, it is an experience that Alex might describe as being 'produced.' This means that Singapore is described as being 'tame' and 'lacking adventure: 'I could do with going somewhere more adventurous honestly. Singapore is a bit tame, if one enjoys being an expat for the adventure of the whole thing then this is not it, yeah? I'd rather be in somewhere a bit more basic' (Andrew, British migrant, Interview, March 2012). Therefore, here the authentic difference required for an adventure is seen as being non-modern, the search for the 'basic' which is different from the assumed modernity of the UK (Korpela, 2010). Authentic in this sense means different, backward, of which the sanitized familiarity of Singapore does not fit.

3.2. *Global worker*

The traditional expatriate model, presented above, is argued to be one that is being increasingly replaced with other models. As highlighted, the type of mobility we associate with expatriation is argued to become the 'new normal' by 2020 (Management report, PriceWaterhouseCooper, 2010). This is because expatriation is increasingly seen as training tool, a career-stepping stone to becoming a future global leader.

By looking at an expatriate assignment as a form of training, there is a qualitatively different response to difference as an opportunity rather than a hardship. We can see this again in practices associated with compensation. For example, rather than a package with extra benefits, the expatriate receives the 'going-rate.' This form of compensation is also called the 'local' package, whereby the expatriate receives the same amount of pay as a local employee doing the same position (IHRM textbook, Dowling et al., 2008). With the 'local plus' package the expatriate is paid the same wage as the local employee, but with negotiated extra benefits such as tax assistance and housing subsidies. Although many people describe this change in compensation package as a cost-cutting exercise associated with the recession (Field Notes from GMI Event, May 2011), others link this to expatriate assignments being part of a training exercise: 'I think a lot of these local plus type moves, they are kind of, they're a hybrid approach in that it's good for the organisation to move these people around, but it's also good for the individual's career for them to have, you know, an international assignment and for them to progress their career further' (Beth, Global Mobility Manager, February 2012). Through this, rather than producing distance between the expatriate and the local, they are placed on equal terms. Within it then, the conceptual distance between the expatriate and the local is collapsed. Rather than drawing boundaries around the expatriate's culture and placing it as being superior, the global becomes something to engage with.

The local then becomes something to learn from. We can see this articulated through the development of a global mindset. Increasingly seen as a desirable skill for workers to develop, the global mindset speaks to the ability to transcend cultural differences when working transnationally. As Josie, a Global Mobility Manager highlights, having a global mindset means the expatriate can recognize and understand cultural differences: 'it is an awareness of how individuals and organisations work and factors that influence decision making around the world ... So it's that phrase,

you know, work global and think local, so being aware of the differences that exist between people' (Interview, August 2012). Once these cultural differences are recognised, the expatriate adapts to this different way of doing business, 'they can't just export, they have to adapt, rather than just seeing everything from their own perspective' (Field Notes from GMI Event, May 2012). Importantly, this is not about trying to become like the different culture, but being aware of the impact of your own cultural values on the way in which you understand work: 'you say ok these are the pillars of Western thinking, maybe you are not aware of this and you have taken this for granted. Maybe we should now think of what other ways of thinking exists, other people who are not necessarily from a Western background' (Luca, Intercultural Management, Interview, February 2012).

Singapore as easy Asia: work travel

'I flew to Korea recently overnight and you know you get there, you get changed, you go into a whole series of meetings all day and then you fly back overnight and don't even stay in a hotel, or sometimes you stay overnight in a hotel but it is just meetings all the way through, you don't even get to eat any local food, it's like breakfast buffet in the hotel, sandwiches wheeled in at lunchtime and maybe dinner from the hotel room service, so you can be in a soulless hotel and when you walk out the airport there is a car there with you name, you know on a card, and it's like, you often don't even know what hotel you are staying in, it's all pre-arranged.'

[Nathan, British migrant, Interview, April 2012]

Nathan has a regional role. However, rather than speaking of Asia with an imaginary that portrays it as a form of dangerous difference compared to the safety of easy Singapore, Nathan speaks of a landscape of non-place (Auge, 2009). His business trip to Korea could be a business trip anywhere, one in which his engagement with the local was so minimal that he wasn't aware what hotel he was staying in. The trips local characteristics are absent, it was 'soulless.' These landscapes of non-place can be seen not to require a global mindset to navigate them, they are already global, and non-distinct. There is no difference present, even the food is sandwiches and room service. It is a landscape through which the expatriate can walk with ease.

3.2. Global worker continued

While the global mindset still presupposes difference, there is no affective response to this difference when the expatriate has developed a global mindset. It is in this way that a 'global mindset' speaks to debates about cosmopolitanism, and about how cosmopolitanism as a form of global citizenship can be nurtured, people who 'think globally, aim to exceed their own local specificities, welcome unfamiliar cultural encounters and express the wish to move toward a true humanity of equality and respect, free of racial, national and other prejudices' (Ley, 2004, p. 159). Here, we can see a conceptual collapsing of borders—they are no longer seen as being a hindrance or a difficulty to the expatriate, it becomes 'isotropic space' (Ley, 2010). However, I argue, that contained within the global mindset, we can still see the ways in which difference is produced through an imagining of the global.

Firstly, the development of a global mindset is part of talent management, a change in rhetoric in transnational organisations whereby attracting, training and retaining individuals is seen to be where the future success of organisations will lie (Michaels et al., 2001). Doing a secondment is seen as 'a key element in attracting, retaining, developing and engaging talent' (Management report, PriceWaterhouseCooper, 2010, p. 18). Within

the discourse of talent management there is the often cited idea that a global mindset is a pre-requisite for future leaders of transnational organisations, and this is developed through international experience. For example, a report based on the CEOs of the FTSE100 argues that 'in order to be a global leader you have to work abroad' (Management report, Marx, 2008, p. 4). In this way, doing an expatriate assignment becomes seen as a career stepping stone, a route to a management position within transnational organisations, to becoming a master of the globe: Global mobility is seen as a reflection of 'the need to develop well-rounded leaders of the future, with a truly international perspective' (Management report, PriceWaterhouseCooper, 2010, p. 11). Within the development of a global mindset, there is a spatialization that portrays distance as difference, but sees this difference as an opportunity to be learnt from.

However, the global mindset can be seen as the migrant conquering the affective response to difference, being able to cope with the demands of living in a different country. This is a form of tacit knowledge that needs to be learnt through experience. An expatriate assignment is seen as a form of training or learning 'it is one of the clearest ways to develop it [a global mindset], by working overseas' (Josie, Global Mobility Manager, Interview, August 2012). The global mindset is therefore seen as something that someone needs to go abroad to develop through experiencing difference. Developing a global mindset is imagined as being able to deal with culture shock, it is being able to develop skills to deal with stress and frustration of international work, transnational social skills and cross-cultural empathy and be able to move away from stereotypes and develop effective thinking (Management report, Marx, 2008, p. 4).

In comparisons to representations of the difference as being a danger, difference as an opportunity then presents a different understanding of the expatriate's relationship to the local population. Rather than boundaries to protect the expatriate from the dangers of difference, expatriates are encouraged to cross the boundary and engage with the Other. The global mindset suggests cosmopolitanism as perspective as a competence, 'a state of mind ... a mode of managing meaning' (Hannerz, 1996, p. 102). As a competence, interacting with other cultures is a skill that enables the migrant to effectively cope with situations that are deemed stressful due to cultural difference as Eve, who works in intercultural services suggests, it is about being able to 'adjust to different situations and deal with uncertainty,' (Interview, May 2012). In this way, we can see it as a 'skill developed and deployed ... to manage change and the necessary interactions with the with the unfamiliar and unexpected' (Butcher, 2011, p. 17).

Therefore, distance as difference is still presupposed as a way in which a global mindset can be learnt. Comparing this to imperial travel literature, we can see the ways in which the experience of abroad is portrayed in terms of 'anti-conquest,' where: 'the itinerary itself becomes the occasion for a narrative of success, in which travel is a triumph in its own right. What are conquered are destinations, not kingdoms; what are overcome are not military challenges, but logistical ones. The travellers struggle in unequal battles against scarcity, inefficiency, laziness, discomfort, poor horses, bad roads, bad weather, delays' (Pratt, 2008, p. 145). A global mindset is therefore seen to require an experience of difference to be developed. However, drawing upon this idea of 'conquering' framing the global mindset as a skill that will get the expatriate ahead means the cosmopolitan orientation becomes commodified. As critiques of cosmopolitanism highlight, it is difficult to understand how it works in practice, often working to reproduce existing power structures (Kothari, 2008). Expatriates learning the business cultures of Others does not speak to a desire to learn or cross boundaries. Instead, it speaks to the idea of the consumption of Other cultures. In thinking about how cosmopolitanism becomes

codified, we can see that it is 'conceived largely as a matter of consumption, an acquired taste for cultural artefacts from around the world' (Vertovec and Cohen, 2002, p. 2). This means we can see a global mindset not in terms of skills such as reflexivity or empathy, but as an experience that can be collected, given a value and used as a form of advancement. Cosmopolitanism, and the engagement with the local, can be seen as a form of consumption, a tick-box experience, an experienced to be captured, rather than any meaningful cultural engagement. This is reflected in one of the ubiquitous advertising images of the global mobility industry of someone holding a globe in their hands. With a global mindset, the expatriate is not seen as needing to be protected from difference, but rather like the image of the globe in the hand they collect different places on a quest for mastery of the globe.

Singapore as easy Asia: Singaporeans

'I hate using we and they though, that sounds so bad ... but you know what I mean, it's, there are just cultural differences, if you look at my office, my office nearly all the advisers, all the advisers are expats ... all of our customer services and relations girls, they are Malay ... more chatty, more laid back, umm and you do notice ... they are a lazy bunch of sods, generally as a race, probably because, you know, pre- industrial times I don't think they had much to really, they were very chilled out and you know, they are just a very, very laid back people... And you just notice the difference'.

[Logan, British migrant, Interview, March 2012]

In management discourses, although expatriate roles are talked about in technical terms, the way in which British migrants describe their roles often draw upon racist understandings where one nationality is portrayed as being 'naturally' better at certain roles than others. For some, Singaporeans are seen as being unsuitable for jobs that require aggression and competitiveness, such as sales. By naturalizing roles that Singaporeans can't do, Logan is suggesting that it is normal or even required for companies to employ expatriates for sales—this is a skills gap that expatriates need to fill. As well as the creation of this stereotype of Singaporeans, this form of Othering works to position the expatriate as superior. For example, cultural stereotypes result in perceptions of racial hierarchies within offices in Singapore. Logan is providing an essentialist understanding of racialized skills, one that he argues is not racist because it is a natural reflection of roles. However, within this expatriates are placed on top, being the advisors, they are the bosses with the most well-paid roles. For some, like Lily, this meant that she infantilized her Singaporean colleagues as being like nursery school children, Othering them as being quiet and shy. She felt that the skills she could offer the role legitimised the fact that she received twice as much pay that she did: 'They are so, so shy. I felt like a teacher, had to learn how to motivate them ... But their mentality is so different. Back home if you were being made to work until 12 O'clock at night we would be more demanding, for example ask for money and taxi homes, etc. But all I had to do is order in a MacDonalds and they would be like [taps on table to indicate working harder]. I felt like a nursery school teacher' (Interview, March 2012). This type of hierarchy that Lily and Logan describe works to produce and naturalise distance between the expatriate and Singaporean.

3.2. Global worker continued

By mastering the global, the expatriate is not just performing a cosmopolitan or global identity, but is seen to be in control of globalisation. Corporate expatriates become depicted as what Leslie Sklair (2001) describes as a transnational capitalist class, those

who are the drivers and in control of a neoliberal global project. Sklair argues that this emergent class do not operate in the nation states' interest, rather act as the drivers of globalisation towards 'the establishment of a borderless global economy' (Sklair, 2001, p. 3). We can see this through how the worker with the global mindset is seen to travel the world with ease, experiencing the world as non-place. Marc Auge (2009) argues that non-places are not defined by a distinct culture, rather they are 'defined partly by the words and texts they offer us: 'their instructions for use' (page 96). His non-places, such as the hotel room, or the airport, are transient places that can be geographically anywhere, yet how they are used and experienced remains the same. While with a global mindset difference is still recognised, the expatriate is seen to experience the globe with the same ease—the British office, the Korean Hotel, the Hong Kong meeting room are all experienced through 'instructions for use.' Their local characteristics are either non-existent, or do not have an impact. Therefore, while transnational business people are often assumed to be cosmopolitan due to their frequent travel, we can question whether this reflects cosmopolitanism's elitist and Eurocentric tendencies (Kothari, 2008). The expatriate is once again positioned in terms of superiority, not in comparison to the local population, but to the globe. In this imagining of the global, the local does not feature.

The imaginative geography of the abroad for the global worker then qualitatively reimagines difference as an opportunity rather than a hardship. Through practices like the 'going-rate' approach to compensation the conceptual difference between home and host countries is collapsed—home and abroad get placed on equal terms. However, the expatriate is encouraged to engage with difference to overcome any future potential difficulties that cultural differences may pose to within a global workforce, more as a tick box exercise of consumption rather than an actual engagement with the abroad. This provides another example of the ways in which representations of mobility work to give it meaning. In this representation of global work, 'global' is imagined as an opportunity, however the focus is on getting ahead in a global labour market. In this way, the local becomes seen as an experience to be collected, again produced in opposition to the local, without any engagement being meaningfully encouraged.

Singapore as easy Asia?

The series of portraits of the geographical imaginings of Singapore for the British migrant highlights how Singapore sits uneasily and ambiguously among the generic managerial discourses of the abroad. Singapore, for instance, is compared on a scale which places the rest of Asia as a place for the expatriate to experience difference, yet when working abroad all you experience is a characterless hotel room. Singapore is compared to Switzerland, or the expatriate could be anywhere. The migrant in Singapore draws upon, experiences and creates geographical imaginations of Singapore that sit awkwardly aside, compliment and contradict one another. They illustrate the ambivalent ways in which representations of mobility play out in place, particularly in looking at the representation of difference.

The place of Singapore does not fit with assumptions of Asia as being chaotic disordered, backwards, or different, meaning that it becomes ascribed as being 'easy.' With this imagining, the conceptual distance between 'home' and 'abroad' is collapsed, which means for the expatriate Singapore is seen in terms of similarity rather than difference. However, Singapore as 'easy Asia' is, I argue, articulated on a lack of engagement with Singaporeans. While Singapore as a place is imagined as easy, there remains a difference between expatriates and Singaporeans. It is in this way that the imagining of Singapore as easy Asia provides a representation of

Singapore without Singaporeans. The Othering of Singaporeans works to set up encounters by legitimizing the distance from the local population for the expatriate (Fechter, 2007). Singaporeans are kept separate, often largely absent from expatriate's general talk. For example, the majority of my British migrant respondents in Singapore did not have local friends. This lack of engagement with Singaporeans can be seen to act as a buffer against these perceived threats to their well-being, and potentially, a buffer against a development of a global mindset.

5. Conclusion

How we understand expatriation as global work can be argued to be changing, with talent management being seen to present a change in the way in which expatriation is understood as a different 'era' in global mobility (PriceWaterhouseCooper, 2010)—one which embraces difference and diversity. This, then, is seen to be a movement away from the 'traditional' forms of expatriation—the exclusivity of the balance sheet compensation packages, the technical, knowledge or training roles and the long-term assignments—towards expatriation becoming the 'new normal' (PriceWaterhouseCooper, 2010). However, this 'sea-change' still relies on underlying assumptions of difference, although this difference varies qualitatively as opportunity rather than a hardship. As a hardship, difference is threatening; as an opportunity experiencing difference is seen as a way to get ahead in a globalising work market. Within them remains the expectation of difference, that 'home' is the norm to which the 'abroad' functions as its often polar opposite. Home is portrayed as safety, as modernity, as similarity to which 'abroad' is seen as danger, backward and the unknown. Through the different ways in which difference is interpreted, these themes remain. Distance becomes known as difference. Therefore, we can begin to question whether this work is qualitatively 'global,' or whether the discourses we associate with it can be seen as a form of 'globe talk' (Ley, 2004), producing binaries of global and local that place the global as being progressive and the local as being backwards, something that needs to be experienced and collected.

Returning to Said (2003), the imaginative geographies in Orientalism are shown to have a materiality, in that they are made real and naturalised through practices. By looking at the imaginative geographies of the abroad in IHRM we can see how this works to discipline the expatriate workforce. As Said illustrates, the identity of the West is produced through the representation of the East, 'the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience' (Said, 2003, pp. 1–2). The discourses that surround the abroad for an expatriate workforce do not solely fashion imaginaries of global work, but also contribute to fixing and naturalising the expatriate's role and understanding in/of the 'abroad.' The representations of expatriate movement in expatriate management, work to shape the expatriate as a subject, that is, through management discourses, the expatriate is normalised as being different from the local, in terms of superiority to the local or as part of the global. Upsetting a linear writing technique in this paper has allowed these entanglements and contradictions in the way in which Singapore is imagined and experience to be highlighted. None of the understandings of global–local in global work presented in this paper are the 'most important of a definite process' (Law, 2004, p. 6), they are complex and contradictory and can be experienced and practised at the same time. Therefore, in order to understand what qualitatively constitutes global work, I argue that we need to adopt a mobilities perspective to examine global work as an act of physical movement, a representation of movement and an embodied practice (cf. Cresswell, 2010). I argue that this helps us to understand

expatriation, as a form of global work, as not just being 'local' or 'global,' 'cosmopolitan' or 'diasporic,' 'grounded' or a 'flow,' but how these simultaneously interact.

This means that looking at global work from a mobilities perspective highlights the way in which these global discourses manifest itself on the ground in Singapore as not being singular, but rather multiple, messy, complimentary and contradictory. In eschewing understandings of place as the organising unit of the social (Sheller and Urry, 2006) and looking at how meaning is made through movement, the goal of the research becomes to understand the ways in which ideas and bodies are produced on the move, instead of comparing this between places. Singapore as a place for British corporate expatriates is difficult to compare to other places due to its perceived easiness (see for example Beaverstock, 2002), although we can see connections with Hong Kong, and Dubai in terms of its transient workforce. However, we can see Singapore as having a particular (geographical histories) (Pred, 1995, p. 24) as a location in which global work is practised, one that means comparison becomes different to contextualise among the mess of different experiences. This acts as a call to further explore the ways in which the global, of global work, is relationally produced with different locals, how these interact and (dis)agree with one another.

Therefore, while Jones's thesis on global work argues that 'it is no longer adequate to conceptualise work as being located in physical local places ... or as a purely social practice unaffected by the materiality of the world' (2008, p. 24), we can argue that this needs to be extended in order to explore what 'global' qualitatively means. The example of British corporate expatriates in Singapore shows how we can reconceptualise our understandings of work as being something that is both produced and practised through distanced relationships. Yet, as the paper has shown, while this tells us about the changing nature of work, the ways in which this is 'global' are more messy and ambiguous, for example, involving just the replication of local working practices in a different location. Therefore, although 'global work' tells us about distanced relationships, we also need to think about the representations and experiences, produced and practised, that people have with the global, especially as we strive towards more cosmopolitan futures.

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