Swiss Migration and the Privilege of ›Otherness‹

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Abstract: This essay expands on the migration of Swiss nationality holders to Peru and how their quest for a better life is shaped by global racial hierarchies. Despite its historical dimension the mobility of Swiss nationality holders is rarely framed as migration as the notion of such is still associated to economic need while Swiss mobility is discursively associated with success stories and the Swiss as being beneficial for respective host countries. Peru as a destination of travel represents a place where the legacy of colonialism has a big impact on the privileges experienced by new arrivals from Switzerland, who predominantly are racialized ›white‹. Becoming a migrant in Peru is not tied to assimilatory demands on the part of the host country. On the contrary, becoming racialized ›white‹ and being labelled ›gring@s‹ facilitates Swiss migrants a social upward mobility within the highly stratified Peruvian society. Being racialized ›white‹ and therefor associated to a distinct class represents a new experience for Swiss people, who in Switzerland took up the ›invisible‹ position of whiteness. The essay addresses the question how Swiss migrants adapt to positions of racial privilege.

Keywords: transnational migration, whiteness, coloniality, lifestyle migration, postcolonialism

> »I always had this picture in front of me of a farmer who walked with his llamas through the Andes [...] this freedom, this space, this contentment, I always wanted to experience that.«[1] With these words Charlotte, a Swiss hotel manager in Cusco, explains her original motive to travel to South America. Also Ralph, living in Lima and working as an expedition leader in the Amazon region admits, that from an early age, the adventurous about the rainforest has interested him: »As a little boy, these were my favourite stories, stories from the jungle with Indians, not with North American Indians, not with Winnetou, but the jungle Indians, that fascinated me.«

This essay draws attention to the question how global racial hierarchies shaped and continue to shape Swiss migration to Peru. I conceptualise Swiss nationality holders'

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1 | Interview with Charlotte, Cusco May 2012.

mobility as a transnational migration within an imagined and geographical space characterised by historic entanglements, trans/national ties, professional and familial mobility patterns, de-territorialised identity constructions, circulating imaginations as well as persisting colonialities of power (Quijano 2000).

Swiss migrants' imaginations revolving around Peru, its ›exotic‹ landscape and indigenous people, reveal in myriad ways postcolonial resonances and ideas of a ›better‹ or more ›authentic‹ life somewhere else. Their aspirations to travel to Peru correspond with circulating touristic imaginaries of indigenous culture, Machu Picchu and Peru's ›living past‹, a theme, which is strongly promoted by Peru's national branding agency PromPeru. Their campaign called ›Hidden Treasures‹ released a promotional video starting with the question »Have you ever felt that you're missing something?« Subsequently images of American and European people trapped in a daily routine and stressful modes of life, pass by until the solution is found to the ›ills of modernity‹; a flight to Peru.[2] The camera glides over the spectacular Peruvian landscape showing happy tourists and the voice-over states that Peru is not a place to discover, but a place where people discover themselves. The video ends with the slogan; »Discover the you you never knew. Discover yourself in Peru« (PromPeru 2015).

Their latest campaign called »Peru, the richest country in the world« (PromPeru 2017) capitalises on the idea »that being rich isn't about having the most« but about experiences, including travelling, and about time and happiness, values that anyone aspires to but are usually hard to obtain. Although tourists are addressed in the first place, PromPeru's campaigns nurture underlying desires to escape to the ›good life‹; to Peru's unpolluted nature, a promising land which offers opportunities for self-realization.

With almost four million visitors per year, tourism represents the main purpose for people travelling to Peru and provides an important engine for Peru's economic growth (Seco 2017)[3]. The ›imagineering‹ of locations through tourism development, or in other words the social construction of Peru as a destination to attract certain people, is an important practice within a phenomenon that Karen O'Reilly and Michaela Benson have termed ›lifestyle migration‹; the temporary or long-term voluntary migration of relatively affluent individuals to places which seem to promise »something loosely defined as quality of life« (Benson/O'Reilly 2009; Benson/O'Reilly 2018: 28, 81ff., 264ff.).

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2 | To reach a European and American audience, the video was released in American and British English as well as in French, Spanish and German.

3 | Peru's growth relies on commodity exports while tourism accounts for 4 % of the GDP.

Swiss individuals' longing for a different life in Peru relates in many ways to the phenomenon of ›lifestyle migration‹, which describes a diverse field of migratory movements that prioritize cultural motifs of destinations and self-realization over purely economic interests (Benson/Osbaldiston 2014: 3). My research follows Swiss-Peruvian biographies over spatial and temporal borders, with the goal to relate the collected data to an analysis of the entangled Swiss-Peruvian history after World War II. My study builds on participatory observation and biographical interviews with migrating Swiss nationality holders including their spouses and descendants, the so called ›second‹ or ›third generation‹ of Swiss-Peruvian dual citizens, and assembles the experiences of people living from just a few years up to their whole lives in Peru.

Therefore, it is important to consider the historical dimension of their migration and quest for a ›better way life‹. Imaginings of ›adventure‹, ›freedom‹ or ›pristine environment‹ have long histories that can be traced in contemporary narratives of travel as well as in reasons, which led Swiss ›wanderers‹ in the post-war era to Peru, where they became migrants and improved their lifestyle *through* migration (Benson/Osbaldiston 2014: 5f.). To this day, migrations from the Global North to the Global South are made possible by a privileged position of these migrants in relation to the population within destinations (Benson/O'Reilly 2009; Benson/Osbaldiston 2014: 47). Peru as a travel destination represents a place where the legacy of colonialism has a big impact on the privileges and the social mobility experienced by new arrivals from Switzerland, who are predominantly racialized ›white‹.

A short review of the political attempts to name and frame Swiss mobility points to the hierarchical classification of Swiss mobile citizens, who appear ›desirable‹ and skilled.

›FIFTH SWITZERLAND‹: A DE-TERRITORIALIZED VISION OF ›SWISSNESS‹

The mobility of Swiss nationals is rarely framed as ›migration‹ nor do Swiss people living in Peru refer to themselves as ›migrants‹, as the notion of migration is perceived as ›problematic‹ and is often related to the emigration of impoverished Swiss in the 19th and early 20th Century.

Today, over a tenth of Switzerland's population lives beyond its national borders. Framed through a nation-based narrative, Swiss mobility is discursively associated with success stories while the Swiss are depicted as ›only living abroad‹ and as being beneficial to their respective host countries, specifically in terms of skills. Conceptualising the ›Swiss abroad‹ in an imagined fifth region and community – as symbolized

in the political term ›Fifth Switzerland‹ – the state-subsidised Organisation for the Swiss Abroad and the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs intend to strengthen national cohesion. This is also expressed via the financial support of Swiss schools and associations all over the world, in order to preserve Swiss culture and facilitate admission to Swiss universities for Swiss citizens living abroad (Organisation for the Swiss Abroad 2018).

This de-territorialized vision of ›Swissness‹ has its roots in the post-war era. With the expansion of Switzerland's export industry after World War II, the ›Swiss abroad‹ became idealized as ideological and economic outposts. This enabled Swiss agents to take influence in a ›new territory‹, for example in Peru, where the implementation of large-scale projects by Swiss enterprises was celebrated as a Swiss contribution to progress. Patriotic invocations along with a pro-active labour recruitment of Swiss workers culminated in a self-conception of a pioneering ›authentic Swiss colony‹ in Lima (Sanders 2015).

Although in terms of numbers the ›Swiss colony‹ has never been significant, it disposed over economic power and benefitted from a racial division of labour in Peru (Sanders 2019). Since the 1930s Peru's predominantly ›white elites‹ perceived progress as a project of ›racial whitening‹: the immigration of ›white‹ skilled Europeans along with the integration of the indigenous population in the labour market, would allow Peru to become a modern nation (Drinot 2011: 93f.).

The wealth generated in the post-war era represents the basis on which Swiss institutions in Lima were established and provides the foundation that privileged transnational lifestyles of many Swiss-Peruvian families are built on. In many ways this nation-based narrative glorifying the achievements of Switzerland worldwide dismisses that the ›success stories‹ were only made possible through the transformative power of migration and their interrelation with asymmetric power relations and low-cost labour.

GRING@S: BECOMING RACIALIZED ›WHITE‹

Against the backdrop of this historical account, this paper addresses the questions how Swiss migrants reflect on being racialized ›white‹ in Peruvian society and how they adapt to the privileges attached to these positions.

According to their family histories, social and financial conditions and their convictions, Swiss migrants may decide to position themselves along social norms of ›upper class lifestyles‹ or choose a neighbourhood far from upscale residential areas in Lima or prefer to live off the beaten track in a rural area. Nevertheless, being

given the possibility to realize their own lifestyle project through migration already represents a position of economic privilege (Benson/Osbaldiston, 2014: 3).

Tourism is a grey-zone of Swiss immigration and a field where the borders between the subject categories of the ›tourist‹ and the ›migrant‹ become porous. For a long time, Swiss migrants entered Peru as tourists and made use of ›border-hopping‹; upon expiry of their visa, they crossed the border and applied for a new tourist visa to re-enter Peru. This practice will now be fined as a result of Peru's new immigration law, which aims at attracting highly qualified migrants and supports the imagineering of Peru as a destination of manifold opportunities with visas specifically designed for ›privileged‹ migrants.[4] Visas called ›investor‹ or ›rentista‹ offer special advantages; rentiers are exempted from Peruvian income tax and investors spending six months per year in Peru receive a permanent residence permit after two years (Ministerio del Interior Perú 2015).

Regardless of whether Swiss travellers arrive in Peru as migrants or tourists, they are often equally addressed as ›gringos / gringas‹, a term, which is used for foreigners but might just as well refer to light-skinned Peruvians with a North-American or European background (Hayes 2015: 947). Hence, I view ›whiteness‹ according to Frankenberg as a »location of structural advantage, of race privilege« that is historically, socially, politically, and symbolically constructed and in the context of Peru associated with a distinct class (Frankenberg 1993: 1ff.; Lundström 2014: 12; Sanders 2019). Although the label ›gringo‹ just as ›whiteness‹ cannot be limited to physical characteristics, the practice of seeing a phenotype as a »sign for similarity or otherness« points to the ways that racism and the hegemonic position of ›whiteness‹ are maintained (Lavanchy 2015: 278). Becoming racialized ›white‹ and thereby ›classed‹ in the context of their migration to Peru represents a new experience for Swiss people, who in Switzerland accounted for the ›unmarked‹ or ›invisible‹ position of whiteness (Dyer 1997; Hayes 2015: 944f.).

My interview partner Jürg, who lives and works in Lima, talks about the preferential treatment he receives upon arrival at Lima airport: »Oh! Gringo, money, come on, taxi, and hopp! Where to? And then they carry suitcases and stuff like that. This is just something else, you are a bit further up, aren't you?« Meanwhile in Zurich, »nobody looks at you«, he concludes and compares Switzerland as an ›egalitarian‹ country with a Swiss railway compartment where people of »all social layers sit side by side«.[5]

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4 | See Benson and O'Reilly on the imagineering of Panama and Malaysia (2018: 93ff.).

5 | Interview by the author with Jürg, Lima, August 2012.

Esperanza lived 30 years in Switzerland and just recently returned with her Swiss husband to Peru. She explains that her husband who was a »normal average person« in Switzerland, gets enmeshed in Peru with »Señor, here you have this, here you have that«. In Peruvian public and in middle and upper-class spaces of belonging the head of the household (›jefe de familia‹) is traditionally represented by men. But Esperanza's critique also underlines how white masculinity gets positioned at the top of the highly gendered and racialized social hierarchy in Peru: »his ego has risen, [. . .] he enters places where a Peruvian is not able to enter [. . .] the company does not receive a Peruvian sales man, but him yes, because he is white, blond and Swiss«.[6]

Although Swiss migrants rarely make reference to their (mainly) light skin colour, several mentions in the narratives point to the hegemonic position of ›whiteness‹ in Peru, which – along with the meaning of the label ›gringo / gringa‹ – is tied to wealth (Hayes 2015: 948; Sanders 2019). Jürg believes he gets cheated at the local markets and came to the conclusion that »if they see that one is white, then it's just another price. If you want to buy a kilo, they give you 900 grams«. Also expedition leader Ralph explains that at first everybody wanted to borrow money from him: »In the beginning the ›gringo‹ is the gold treasure that came«.[7]

Nevertheless, Swiss migrants' status of ›otherness‹ gives them more benefits than downsides. As shown elsewhere (Sanders 2019), being classified as ›white‹ and ›Swiss‹ represents an exclusive category of belonging and facilitates a social upward mobility which provides more convenience in family life and is reflected in the professional field as a better position than in Switzerland. Claire works as a manager and has lived in Lima for six years. She explains that they now have a »quality of life«, living in a big house and having two domestic workers helping with the cleaning and the children, while in Switzerland they »would struggle to stay in a small apartment«.[8]

When Ralph employed a ›domestic worker‹, he felt discomfort in the beginning. But today it's something completely natural to him, as »a job is created this way«. Self-critically he adds: »If I had to pay her a huge wage, I wouldn't do it [. . .] here you certainly take advantage of the economic divide«. For Ralph, as well as for other Swiss migrants, it is important to distinguish themselves from Peruvian employers, who often »order their employees around«. Ralph doesn't want to »play the big boss« and demonstrates this by »doing everything« his employees do as well, »loading the material« to the truck, »helping here and there«. Being »hands on« becomes an im-

6 | Interview by the author with Esperanza, Lima, March 2012.

7 | Interview by the author with Ralph, Lima, February 2012.

8 | Interview by the author with Claire, Lima, March 2012.

portant practice to position oneself within a society marked by the perpetuation of social, racial and socio-economic inequalities.

According to Ralph though »you have to become a Latino« too, in terms of surviving as a business man and being »more flexible« and »opportunistic«: Regardless if »you are a specialist or not [...] in Peru everyone does everything.« Thinking about his career as a consultant for companies, Ralph realises: »In Switzerland I wouldn't have taken the step to found this company. [...] I'm not a specialist, I'm a mechanic!« According to Ralph assuming the attitude of a Latino means: »*They* think I can do it [...] then *why* not, right?«

Ralph's situation matches very well with the promise made by the Peruvian branding agency that Peru offers a place to ›discover yourself‹; becoming an entrepreneur and his own boss, or achieving a different lifestyle associated with amenities represent opportunities that were not available in Switzerland.

PromPeru's statement that Peru is not ›a place to discover‹ anymore, insinuating that colonial times belong to the past, applies though only partially as the extraction of natural resources in the Amazon and Andean regions by multinational corporations goes hand in hand with the neo-colonial appropriation of land, violence and the exploitation of cheap labour. Raw material exportation is the engine for the economic boom in Peru. Nevertheless, its revenues and subsequent improvements of infrastructure are mainly beneficial for the upper and middle classes living in urban places or in Lima.

In this sense, the imagineering of Peru as a natural paradise drawing from a ›living past‹ and as a destination where travellers and migrants find the freedom to ›develop themselves‹ and to enjoy upper-class lifestyles must be viewed critically as these places are framed by asymmetric power relations. An analysis of Swiss migration through a postcolonial lens helps us deconstruct privileged transnational lifestyles and set the social mobility of Swiss migrants in relation to their privilege of ›white otherness‹ and to the impact of Swiss nationality and the associated conveniences.

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