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Hila Zaban
Franz Buhr *Editors*

Privilege in Migration

Mobilities, Inequalities,
and the Urban Context

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Editors

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and the Urban Context



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Chapter 1

Privilege in Migration: Mobilities, Inequalities, and the Urban Context



Franz Buhr and Hila Zaban

1.1 Introduction

Imagine a person glancing at a *mappa mundi*, selecting a destination of their liking, and effortlessly materialising a migration plan. Visas may not be required, perhaps a relocation company handles the logistics. Once settled in the new place, they begin enjoying the lifestyle they had envisioned. This scenario could describe a case of retirement migration, residential tourism, gap-year mobility, job relocation, or digital nomadism, among others. In all these cases, this hypothetical person embodies a specific positionality shaped by global asymmetries – privileges that allow some people to view the world as a portfolio of endless possibilities, while others see it as a landscape of closed borders and barriers – and fold the map away.

Privilege only exists where there is inequality. Having privileges means holding advantages that others lack. The very concept of privilege only makes sense *in comparison*. Understanding privilege in migration enables us to recognise differences between more and less privileged migrants not merely as variations, but as inequalities – enacted, sustained, and producing distinct consequences. This book takes on privilege as a powerful analytical tool, one that helps expose hidden injustices and challenges normalised inequalities within migration processes.

While privilege often exists prior to migration, migration may produce additional benefits or enhance existing ones. The ability to migrate may be facilitated by the advantages some individuals possess. Privilege is historically rooted and context-dependent – it can be activated or mobilised, be invisible, or be impossible to hide. It translates unequal power structures, but it also reflects individual agency in securing

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‘special treatment’. Examining privilege in migration means scrutinising how global inequalities are played out, perpetuated, but also resented and contested.

This volume employs privilege as a *lens* to critically assess various forms of contemporary migration, in which migrants’ bodies, actions, or resources position them advantageously relative to other migrants or native populations in receiving contexts. The chapters here illustrate, among other topics, how these relative privileges are taken for granted by certain migrants, producing a particular sense of entitlement; how migration policy plays a role in sustaining privileged ways of life; how recognising privilege may also become a sensitive topic for self-reflection by migrants themselves; as well as the ways migrants’ privileges take material urban shape in the places where they decide to settle. The book joins recent efforts in migration studies that explore how privilege underpins particular migration experiences (Leonard & Walsh, 2019) and the power structures and infrastructures that shape them (Cranston & Duplan, 2022). By bringing together a range of migration experiences – from digital nomads and ‘trailing spouses’ to corporate ‘expatriates’ and migrant entrepreneurs – this volume also demonstrates the broad analytical potential of thinking migration through privilege.

1.2 Privilege in Migration Studies

Migration experiences have always been unequal. Scholarship on migration, however, has predominantly revolved around a partial understanding of who migrants are. While ‘migrants’ are commonly understood as racialised, underprivileged, and often non-western individuals fleeing their countries in search of better livelihood conditions, white, western and relatively privileged people moving within the Global North or North-to-South are rather approached as ‘expatriates’, corporate executives, mobile knowledge workers – among other categories (Leonard, 2010). As Sarah Kunz (2016, 2020) argues, privileged migrants, including those labelled as ‘expatriates’, have been largely absent from mainstream migration research, reinforcing a limited and uneven conceptualisation of migration. She further argues (2016) that ‘expatriate’ is an ambiguous category deeply entangled with racialisation, gender, class, and nationality, often reproducing problematic aspects of the colonial past.

Despite the widespread use of such dual terminology that frames migrants and ‘expats’ as distinct categories, various migration scholars have called for a broadening of perspective beyond precarious forms of migration to encompass the transnational movement of relatively affluent individuals. Sheila Croucher’s early appeal for moving the study of international migration beyond its focus on marginalisation ‘is not intended to downplay the significance of global inequalities, but rather to use the case of privileged mobility as a way to better highlight the nature and implications of global inequality’ (2012, p. 2). Along the same lines, Pauline Leonard claimed that migration studies should also acknowledge the experiences of migrants from the industrialised West, ‘traditionally a somewhat invisible category’ (2010, p. 2).

The fundamental claim here is not to look at ‘the white side of migration’ (Lundström, 2014, 2017) just because affluent migrants are underrepresented in scholarship, but to look at them *as migrants* – which they are – as a strategy to not naturalise the inequalities and differential treatment experienced by them and by those traditionally called ‘migrants’. It is only by acknowledging that they are all migrants that we can grasp the ways privilege works to ease migration processes for some and not for others.

Scholarly work on lifestyle migration, residential tourism, retirement migration, and other lifestyle-oriented mobilities has long pointed to the role of privilege within migration processes. The debate around the notion of privilege has gained momentum in the past decade, and researchers have identified key dimensions for the study of privilege in migration:

- *Privilege is relational.* As we have stated before, thinking about privilege only makes sense when in comparison. Privilege depends on (perceived) existing inequalities between individuals or groups of people, and it is as much a consequence of these inequalities as it is a way to reproduce them. When some migrants are characterised as privileged, it is because they are being implicitly or explicitly contrasted to other migrant groups or native populations, whether in terms of their ease of movement (McGarrigle, 2022), purchasing power (Zaban, 2016), fiscal benefits, or social status, among other power differentials. A helpful illustration of the relationality of privilege is provided by Matthew Hayes’s study on the migration strategies of North American retirees to Cuenca, Ecuador (2018). The migrants studied by Hayes could not afford the increasingly expensive USA-based healthcare service with their retirement income. They decided to counter that relative precarity by moving to South America, where their pensions could allow them a more comfortable later-age livelihood.
- *Privilege is contextual.* What privilege affords in one place may differ from what it affords somewhere else. Migration may maximise the benefits linked to privilege, as well as ‘downgrade’ migrants within existing social hierarchies. Viktoria Adler (2022), for example, describes how white, upper-class Colombian women face their racial and class-based privileges turned on their heads once they move to Australia. Likewise, Hiroki Igarashi (this volume) exposes how the migration of middle-class Japanese families within Southeast Asia grants them a privileged status within global hierarchies of race in contrast to the perceived anti-Asian discrimination they attribute to Western Anglophone countries. The place-contingency of privilege may also be visible in terms of its spatial effects. From earlier colonial settlements to the ‘expatriate bubble’, privilege often crystallises in specific urban formations that sustain privileged ways of living (Croucher, 2012). Karen O’Reilly’s (2000) classic description of the British on the Costa del Sol exposes their similarities with the lifestyle enjoyed by the British in earlier colonial enclaves.
- *Privilege is often structural,* but migration also involves individuals’ *agency*, as migrants actively shape their trajectories to secure advantages. While certain privileges stem from deep-rooted histories of colonialism, extractivism, and racism,

migrants do not simply inherit or receive privilege – they strategically mobilise it. Through bold decision-making, they seek opportunities, navigate global inequalities, and leverage their advantages to improve their lives elsewhere (e.g., Bell, 2017; Scuzzarello, 2021). In this volume, Anna Spiegel builds on Edward Morris's (2007) claim that privilege is not solely something one 'has' but rather something one 'does', highlighting how privilege is negotiated, produced, and contested in everyday migration experiences.

- *Privilege is embodied.* It is bodies who migrate, with their colours, attire, performance, accents, and identity markers, which are read differently depending on where they go – or try to go. In this volume, Cranston brings forth Peggy McIntosh's (1988) notion of privilege as wearing an 'invisible backpack'. These privileges, attached to the body as a backpack, open particular doors or speed up certain processes in ways that are taken for granted by privileged migrants. Yet, sometimes this 'backpack' is invisible only to those who embody it, while being blatantly noticeable to those whose bodies are not afforded the same special treatment. The body is the locus of multiplicity, where constellations of privilege (Benson, 2019) intersect and afford variegated benefits. An intersectional stance over the migrant body allows us to critically account for situations in which migrants simultaneously face privilege and precarity, as we have learned from Kate Botterill's (2017) account of British lifestyle migrants in Southeast Asia, for whom financial insecurity coexists with special treatment and a comfortable style of life.

1.3 Gradients of Privilege

Privilege has a complex and multi-layered makeup. It entails various elements embedded in local and global histories of inequality, including race, gender, sexuality, national origin, and socioeconomic class. These elements are not merely additive but intersect in ways that produce differentiated access to rights, resources, and recognition. As such, privilege cannot be reduced to a single attribute; rather, it emerges through combinations of positionalities that are unevenly valued across contexts. When looking at these interacting components, Michaela Benson (2019) proposed the notion of 'constellations of privilege', which highlights the various aspects through which privilege comes into being, shifting 'the focus from absolute understandings towards the recognition that privilege is constituted through a range of characteristics' (2019, p. 36).

Building on this insight, this volume argues that, in addition to an understanding of the multiple constituent elements shaping privilege, we should also consider the ways migration may shift these elements' relevance, intensity, and effectiveness – as gradients varying across time and space. Beyond recognising its multiplicity, we must attend to the advantages privilege confers in place- and time-specific migration contexts. We therefore propose the notion of *gradients of privilege* to capture the fact that migrants do not simply occupy positions of privilege or precarity; instead,

they move along shifting gradients in which advantages are amplified, diminished, or transformed depending on the specific migration context.

This perspective foregrounds the relational nature of privilege. What counts as advantageous is always defined in relation to others and to particular socio-spatial configurations. A migrant may be highly privileged in terms of citizenship or economic capital, yet experience marginalisation along other axes such as language, race, or professional recognition. Conversely, individuals who are not conventionally understood as 'elite' may still possess forms of privilege – legal, cultural, or temporal – that allow them to exercise a degree of agency and choice unavailable to others. In this sense, examining the gradients of privilege helps draw attention to the uneven distribution of mobility capacities and life chances across different groups of migrants.

Importantly, these gradients are not static; they are actively navigated, negotiated, and produced through migration. As the contributions to this volume demonstrate, privilege is not simply something migrants 'have' or embody, but something they *do* (Cosquer et al., 2024). It is enacted through practices such as choosing when and where to move, leveraging institutional frameworks, mobilising transnational networks, or converting different forms of capital across contexts. This aligns with the broader argument that privilege is 'perennially in the making' (see KC, Triandafyllidou & Dreher, this volume), emerging at the intersection of structural conditions – such as migration regimes, labour markets, and global inequalities – and individual strategies of adaptation and optimisation.

The temporal and spatial dimensions of these gradients are particularly significant. Zaban's notion of 'temporal privilege-manoeuvring' (Zaban, this volume) highlights how migrants strategically time their mobility to take advantage of windows of opportunity, while Hayes's concept of 'geoarbitrage' (Hayes, 2014) underscores how spatial differentials in cost of living, income, and opportunity are exploited to maximise quality of life. Together, these perspectives show that privilege operates not only through who migrants are, but also through when and where they move. Migration thus becomes a process through which existing advantages are recalibrated, allowing migrants to reposition themselves within global hierarchies.

Another key aspect of privileged migration is the role of work, which, for many migrants, is embedded in their chosen lifestyle. Unlike traditional labour migration, where work is the primary driver, privileged migrants often integrate their work into their mobility strategies, facilitated by remote employment, entrepreneurship (Buhr, this volume), and flexible career paths. Concepts such as digital nomadism (KC et al., this volume) and workation exemplify how working from anywhere has become a privilege today. This mobility is further enabled by employability, educational background, entrepreneurial capacity, and translatable skills, which serve as key assets for privileged migrants navigating global labour markets (Cohen & Gold, this volume; Hof, this volume). The ability to sustain one's mobility through work reinforces existing advantages, positioning these migrants within a distinct socioeconomic stratum in their destination societies.

At the same time, the concept of gradients highlights the fragility and contingency of privilege. Not all forms of privilege travel equally well, and some may lose

value or become irrelevant in new settings. Migrants may experience the devaluation of their professional qualifications, encounter unfamiliar racial hierarchies, or face bureaucratic barriers that disrupt previously taken-for-granted advantages. These shifts reveal that privilege is always context-dependent and subject to reconfiguration. Rather than a stable resource, it is a relational position that must be continuously maintained and negotiated.

Examining gradients of privilege, therefore, means tracing how different forms of advantage intersect, fluctuate, and sometimes contradict one another within specific migration trajectories. It involves asking not only who is privileged, but how, where, and to what extent. This approach allows us to move beyond simplified distinctions between ‘privileged’ and ‘non-privileged’ migrants, highlighting instead a spectrum of positions that cut across conventional categories.

Ultimately, thinking in terms of gradients enables a more nuanced understanding of how global inequalities are reproduced through mobility. It reveals how certain migrants are able to convert their advantages into improved life chances, while others remain constrained by structural barriers. By focusing on the fluidity, relationality, and contextuality of privilege, this perspective provides a critical tool for analysing the uneven geographies of migration and the differentiated experiences of those who move within them.

1.4 Privileged Migration in the City

Lifestyle migration scholarship has predominantly focused on rural idylls and coastal destinations as primary sites for those seeking alternative lifestyles (Benson & Osbaldiston, 2014; O'Reilly & Benson, 2009). Studies often examined the motivations and characteristics of migrants in these settings, such as the British in coastal Spain (O'Reilly, 2000) or rural France (Benson, 2013), and the appeal of ‘authentic’ rural places in Australia (Gurran, 2008), Portugal (Sardinha, 2013) or Sweden (Eimermann, 2015). The rural has frequently been framed as a social construct, with migrants drawn to its cultural values and sense of community (Benson & Osbaldiston, 2014; Halfacree, 2014; Sardinha, 2013). Similarly, coastal destinations have been depicted as spaces of leisure, pleasure, and escape, shaping expectations of post-migration lifestyles (Jaisuekun & Sunanta, 2016; O'Reilly & Benson, 2009). The pursuit of self-authenticity is often central to this migration, as individuals seek environments aligned with their core values (Benson & Osbaldiston, 2014; Korpela, 2012).

While this volume foregrounds the urban as a key site where privilege is materialised and contested, it is not exclusively about cities. Rather, it responds to a recognised gap in migration research, where urban contexts have remained comparatively underexplored in studies of lifestyle and privileged mobility (Hayes & Zaban, 2020). By engaging with urban processes alongside broader institutional, temporal, and biographical dimensions of migration, the book contributes to a more balanced understanding of how gradients of privilege operate across different spatial contexts.

As lifestyle migration studies primarily focused on rural and coastal settings, cities are often framed as impersonal spaces to escape, reinforcing a dichotomy between urban and rural life (Gurran, 2008; Zollet & Qu, 2023). However, some research on lifestyle and privileged migration highlights the appeal of urban environments, where cultural amenities and opportunities for self-development attract individuals seeking individuality, freedom, and independence (Griffiths & Maile, 2014; Ingellis & Stornaiuolo, 2022; Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2023; Sequera & Nofre, 2018). For example, Berlin is depicted as a city that fosters self-discovery and creative expression (Griffiths & Maile, 2014). The appeal of urban life lies in its creative and cultural opportunities, modern bohemianism, and potential for work-life balance (Griffiths & Maile, 2014; Ingellis & Stornaiuolo, 2022; O'Reilly, 2014), to which young, working-aged migrants are particularly drawn (Cocola-Gant & Lopez-Gay, 2020; Molina Caminero & McGarrigle, 2023).

Some studies have examined the impact of privileged migration on urban spaces, particularly concerning gentrification and spatial transformation (Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2023; Sequera & Nofre, 2018; van Noorloos & Steel, 2016; Zaban, 2015, 2017; Zhao, 2025). As demonstrated by the aforementioned authors, the influx of privileged migrants can contribute to rising real estate prices, increased costs of living, and changes in the character of neighbourhoods (Cocola-Gant & Lopez-Gay, 2020; Montezuma & McGarrigle, 2019). This can lead to social injustice and the displacement of long-term residents (Cocola-Gant & Lopez-Gay, 2020). Some research has focused on social and spatial segregation in urban areas, including the emergence of exclusive enclaves and the potential for increased disparities between social groups (Zaban, 2017).

The concept of 'transnational gentrification' (Hayes & Zaban, 2020; Sigler & Wachsmuth, 2016) bridges privileged mobility scholarship and urban studies. Hayes and Zaban (2020), in a special issue of *Urban Studies*, examine how global social relations shape mobility and migration, creating spatial inequalities in cities. Transnational gentrification refers to how increased transnational mobility drives the globalisation of rent gaps. As higher-income groups – often from higher 'latitudes' in the global division of labour – relocate to lower-income urban areas, they reshape these spaces, increasing demand and displacement pressures. Local and international real estate interests further attract affluent lifestyle migrants and tourists, raising exchange value while diminishing use value for long-term residents.

Privileged migrants and tourists arriving in urban locales bring distinct tastes, preferences, and lifestyle expectations. Their purchasing power drives various urban transformations, including shifts in housing, commercial activity, and neighbourhood dynamics. In many places worldwide, privileged mobility has profoundly affected housing markets, as these groups' tastes and financial advantage create competition with locals over this valuable and finite resource (Zaban, 2017).

The short-term rental market, for instance, has become a key factor in housing transformations, removing rentals from the local market to cater to higher-paying tourists, thereby accelerating gentrification and displacement (Katsinas, 2021; Mermet, 2022; Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018; Yrigoy, 2016). Additionally, foreign

property demand has surged in recent decades, driven both by investors seeking profitable opportunities and by individuals looking for meaningful locations where they may spend time, retire, or establish a foothold (Kim, 2018; Kutz & Lenhardt, 2016; McGregor, 2014; Montezuma & McGarrigle, 2019; Shmuel et al., 2024; Zaban, 2020). In some cases, this demand extends to heritage properties, contributing to heritage-led gentrification (Navarrete Escobedo, 2020). At the same time, wealthy migrants – often identifying as ‘expats’ – tend to self-segregate in exclusive housing, such as expat condos, luxury urban districts, or gated communities (Maslova & Chiodelli, 2018; Pow, 2011; van Noorloos & Steel, 2016). This spatial separation reinforces socio-economic divides and further reshapes urban housing markets, as demand for high-end developments can drive up property values and intensify displacement pressures on longer-term residents (Zaban, 2017, 2020).

Commercial change and neighbourhood dynamics are increasingly shaped by the consumption patterns of a globally mobile class, driving gentrification processes beyond residential displacement. The expansion of tourism, lifestyle migration, and temporary work-related mobilities has transformed urban retail landscapes, with businesses adapting to meet the preferences of affluent newcomers rather than the needs of long-term residents (Barata Salgueiro et al., 2017; Guimarães, 2021; Jung & Buhr, 2022). The rise of ‘consumptionscapes’ – trendy cafés, artisanal bakeries, boutique hotels, and co-working spaces – illustrates the extent to which commercial change aligns with the tastes and expectations of privileged, mobile populations, reinforcing socio-economic divides (Bantman-Masum, 2020; Cocola-Gant, 2015; Zukin et al., 2015). In cities like Lisbon, Barcelona, and Paris, these shifts are particularly evident in historic neighbourhoods, where foreign property investment and tourist-oriented retail have led to the displacement of local businesses and the erosion of everyday urban life for long-standing residents (Buhr, this volume; McElroy, 2020; Navarrete Escobedo, 2020; Sequera & Nofre, 2020; Cocola-Gant & Lopez-Gay, 2020). Taste, class, and mobility converge in this transformation, as ‘expats’ and digital nomads selectively consume urban space, reshaping neighbourhoods through their preference for global aesthetics and exclusive social spaces (Buhr & Cocola-Gant, 2024; van Eck et al., 2020). This intersection of tourism, gentrification, and transnational mobility underscores the role of commercial transformation in reinforcing class privilege and spatial inequality, with local populations increasingly excluded from spaces that were once integral to their daily lives.

1.5 This Book

This edited volume examines the transnational mobility of privileged migrants, critically interrogating privilege as an analytical lens to understand migration among middle- and high-income groups. Rather than treating privilege as a static advantage, the book explores its relational, contextual, structural, and embodied nature, positioning it in contrast to precarity and vulnerability. It examines how privilege constructs certain migrants as more welcome than others and how it manifests

in everyday migration practices. Challenging assumptions about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ migrants, deservingness, and hierarchical distinctions based on class, skill, race, or nationality, the volume combines theoretical and empirical analyses to deconstruct binaries and explore how privilege is transported, negotiated, and performed across diverse contexts. It highlights the intersectionality of privilege along the lines of citizenship, race, economic capital, and historical or colonial ties while expanding the geography of privileged migration beyond North-South trajectories and urban centres typically examined in previous privileged migration studies. Bringing the field into the post-pandemic era, the book also addresses emerging forms of privileged mobility, including remote work and digital nomadism.

The book is structured into three parts, each contributing to the reconceptualising of privilege in migration. The ten chapters are divided thematically as follows:

The first part, *Conceptualising/Representations of Privilege*, critically examines privilege through class, race, and postcolonialism.

Sophie Cranston’s chapter, *‘The contours of privilege: Exploring narratives of privilege in globally mobile childhoods’*, adapts Worth’s (2021) framework of having, being, and doing privilege to examine how children of British migrants reflect on privilege while attending university in the UK. The chapter finds that while these young people recognise privileges related to mobility and lifestyle, they rarely frame privilege through identity markers such as gender or race. It argues that privilege is narrated as multiple, spatial, and temporal, emphasising its invisibility to the respondents themselves rather than to others, as well as the complexities of its articulation.

Hari KC, Anna Triandafyllidou, and Nick Dreher’s chapter, *‘Privilege in international migration – An analytical framework: Digital nomads as a case in point’*, develops a framework for understanding privilege in international migration by situating digital nomads at the intersection of individual and structural factors. It argues that privilege is relational and intersectional, shaped by the interplay between personal characteristics and broader structures, including mobility regimes, state policies, private services, and infrastructures. The study reframes privilege as a process, constructed through structural mobility regimes and individuals’ navigation of opportunities.

Raquel Huete and Alejandro Mantecón’s chapter, *‘Identity dynamics and social cohesion in privileged mobilities’*, examines privilege as a contested, evolving construct shaped by social interpretations, power relations, and political dynamics. It explores how certain mobilities are promoted while others are perceived as threats, highlighting tensions between mobility, privilege, identity, and social cohesion. The chapter addresses the political and ethical dimensions of categorisation (tourist, migrant, digital nomad) and the redefinition of privilege post-Brexit. Advocating for a cosmopolitan perspective, it calls for moving beyond simplistic dichotomies to critically engage with the politics of mobility in contemporary societies.

Hiroki Igarashi’s chapter, *‘Intra-racial privilege: Japanese migrant families negotiating global racial hierarchies in Malaysia’*, challenges whiteness as the default for North-South migration. It explores how Japanese families migrating to Malaysia for their children’s education navigate global power hierarchies, perceiving Malaysia as ‘safe’ due to their status as privileged Asians, highlighting non-Western gradients

of privilege. Privilege is analysed here through historical, economic, and political relationships, as well as racial and ethnic hierarchies.

Part 2, *Gradients of Privilege*, examines how privilege among highly skilled migrants is shaped by cultural capital, institutional practices, and migration contexts. It challenges fixed categories of privileged migration, highlighting how privilege is relational and negotiated through intersecting factors like class, race, and temporality.

Nir Cohen and Steven J. Gold's chapter, "*You zoom through border control*": *Narratives of privileged mobility among Israeli IT migrants*', explores how Israeli IT professionals in the United States and the Netherlands perceive and articulate their privilege, focusing on the role of cultural capital. Seeking to give voice to a group whose experience is sometimes ignored by migration scholars, the chapter argues that cultural capital facilitates these migrants' entry into labour and housing markets, allowing them a high degree of selectivity in their relocation decisions. Privilege is conceived here as rooted in cultural capital, including educational qualifications, professional skills, and the ability to navigate new environments.

Anna Spiegel's chapter, *Migration beyond marginality: Mobile managerial professionals negotiating privilege*, examines how privilege is enacted and negotiated among multinational American and German corporate managers relocating to China and the United States. It introduces a negotiated-order perspective, arguing that privilege is not simply possessed but performed through organisational and individual practices. Privilege is analysed here as something that is not only 'had', but also 'done', allowing for individual agency in its enactment.

Helena Hof's chapter, *São Paulo as a "second-best" option: Classed confidence and fear of failure in privileged migration*, analyses highly educated European migrants in São Paulo, Brazil, focusing on the role of class-specific self-confidence and coloniality in shaping their expectations. It argues that migrants' habitus and transnational human capital influence their decision to move, but they may face challenges and view Brazil as a second-best option. Privilege is examined through Bourdieu's theory of class and capital, revealing how these migrants, despite being capital-rich, may experience the devaluation of their capital.

Hila Zaban's chapter, *Privileged mobilities in hard times: The case of pandemic-years Jewish migration to Israel*, examines privileged mobilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on Jewish migration to Israel. It introduces the concept of 'temporal privilege-manoeuvring', highlighting the strategic use of exclusive migration pathways available despite global mobility restrictions. The study emphasises how privilege is context-dependent, allowing mobility for some amid a restrictive global climate, and contributes to understanding migration temporalities beyond moments of crisis.

Part 3, *Privileged Mobilities and Local Urban Settings*, explores how privileged migrants shape urban spaces through emplacement, creating exclusive spaces of sociability and consumption. As urban transformation processes like gentrification and segregation become increasingly politicised, the part examines how these migrants navigate, transform, and contribute to the cities where they settle.

Franz Buhr's chapter, *'Privileged mobilities and migrants' businesses in Lisbon: migrant entrepreneurship in a lifestyle destination'*, examines how relatively privileged migrants in Lisbon participate in urban change not only as consumers but also as producers through entrepreneurship. Establishing businesses that cater to a well-off, transnational clientele, they reinforce privilege and contribute to gentrification. The chapter highlights privilege as a resource that enables migrants to create exclusive spaces of sociability and consumption.

Finally, Tatiana Fogelman's chapter, *'From "trailing spouses" to top "expat" urban translators: Blogging for (self)integration in and through Copenhagen'*, explores the experiences of spouses of highly skilled workers in new international environments. While often seen as privileged because of their partners' status, these 'trailing spouses' can also experience precarity due to their mobility. The chapter examines how these spouses adapt and reinvent themselves in the urban setting of Copenhagen, focusing on their use of blogs to engage with their local environment. It highlights how these bloggers act as 'urban translators', helping newcomers navigate the city's social and cultural challenges while shaping their own local identities through digital platforms.

*

In conclusion, we propose a radical commitment to exploring privileged forms of migration, not with the intent of providing detailed descriptions of how these migrants achieve their desired lifestyle through mobility, but rather to view privilege as an analytical tool that helps denaturalise settled accounts that take for granted the benefits attributed to individuals such as white, highly skilled, strong passport holders.

We aim to examine privilege only insofar as it exposes inequalities by questioning the 'special' treatment some migrants receive in contrast to that afforded to the migrant other. Privilege is critical to understanding how global asymmetries have created a spectrum of mobility regimes that grant unequal and unfair treatment. Moreover, it is a powerful tool for understanding mobility justice (Sheller, 2018) and the production of local precarious ways of life by increasingly mobile global middle classes. Coloniality arises not only from nostalgic imaginings of remote locations to be discovered but also from the very structural geopolitical asymmetry that allows certain individuals to roam the world more or less freely while others do not. The reenactment of colonial inequalities is reproduced anew, albeit in different forms. Privilege (or the lack thereof) is a valuable analytical tool for examining precarious, controlled, and racialised migration patterns. While this has been explored previously, in this book, we aim to unpack the gradients that constitute privilege and show how they become salient in specific migration experiences.

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Part I
Conceptualising/Representations
of Privileges

Chapter 2

The Contours of Privilege: Exploring Narratives of Privilege in Globally Mobile Childhoods



Sophie Cranston

2.1 Introduction

Privilege in its most basic definition refers to an unearned advantage. Within the pursuit of exposing and understanding inequalities, scholars are increasingly drawing attention to the need to explore advantage as well as disadvantage in society. As a result, the case for exposing and understanding privilege as a means through which to understand inequalities in migration has been extensively made (Cranston & Duplan, 2023; Croucher, 2012; Duplan & Cranston, 2023; Kunz, 2016; Robertson & Roberts, 2022). There are burgeoning accounts of how different migrations can be conceptualised as privileged (including, but not limited to Benson, 2014; Botterill, 2017; Cranston & Lloyd, 2019; Croucher, 2012; Halvorsrud, 2019; Lan, 2011; Leonard & Walsh, 2019; Maher & Lafferty, 2014; Scuzzarello, 2020). At the centre of these accounts are different ways in which advantages are formed and conferred through systems of oppression and domination that produce and are produced by migration.

However, in accounts of migration privilege remains a ‘flexible concept’ (Winddance Twine & Gardener, 2013). A key aspect of privilege is that it is invisible (McIntosh, 1992) which can make its understanding nebulous. In migration research, scholars make privilege visible through discussions of mobility and lifestyles, capitals, categorisations, and identities. The different foci of privilege reflect discussions of migration within different contexts of power, including capitalism, patriarchy, and racial hierarchies. This means that there are multiple conceptual interpretations of privilege, which in many ways reflects the fact that there are multiple manifestations of privilege. This chapter does not try to define privilege and argue why this is essential for accounts of social inequality. Instead, it asks the question: how is privilege narrated by those who may possess it? This develops our conceptual understanding of privilege by exploring how different manifestations of privilege are understood by

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those who are seen to possess it. In so doing, it follows Worth's (2021) research on generational housing wealth which explores 'the contours of its [privilege] caveats' (Worth, 2021, p. 33). Worth's research, which looked at the co-residence of young adults with their parents, highlighted how privilege was an 'awkward' concept for her respondents to relate to. Instead, she looked at the multiple ways in which privilege manifests itself through social practices that confer unearned advantages. Therefore, as an analytical frame, Worth advocates for a lens that combines an analysis of having privilege (discussions of privilege as a resource), being privileged (how people related privilege to a sense of self) and the doing of privilege (discussions of reproduction of advantages). This chapter adapts Worth's framework. Combining a discussion of how migration scholars ascribe privilege to populations, the chapter analyses the absences and presences of privilege in how British mobile young people narrate their globally mobile childhoods in terms of having, being, and doing privilege. The rest of the chapter is structured as follows. The next section briefly outlines different foci in migration studies on privilege. The following section sets out the methodology employed to understand narratives of privilege amongst the children of British migrants. Afterwards, the paper explores having, being, and doing privilege through the discussions of my interlocutors. The discussion and conclusion section highlights how narrations of privilege are multiple, spatial, and temporal.

2.2 Framing Privilege

This section outlines ways migration scholars have conceptually framed privilege: in relation to mobilities and lifestyles, identity markers, categorisations, and cultural capitals. Where possible, the section makes specific reference to accounts of privilege in migration that focus on childhood or youth. However, research on privilege in relation to childhood migration, like that on privileged childhoods more generally remains a gap (Sparks, 2016). There is very little research on privileged migration that uses a youth voice (exceptions include Cranston, 2020; Korpela, 2016; Sander, 2016). The section will highlight that the different foci of privileged migration research reflect the different contours of privilege, in terms of having, being, and doing privilege.

2.2.1 *Having Privilege: Mobilities and Lifestyles*

In the migration literature, one way in which privilege is defined is by having resources to draw upon. The ability to migrate in the first place is construed as a privilege because in global regimes of power, this is not open to all (Benson, 2014). Having privilege is therefore examined through the resources that enable mobility, including passports, skills, and financial capital. It is how these resources provide unequal or unearned advantages that become understood as privilege. Similarly, the

privilege of migrants is defined in relation to the advantages that they have over local populations, usually in terms of higher financial capital which enables the practice of comparatively higher-class lifestyles (Scuzzarello, 2020). However, as the literature highlights, privilege is contingent and has relational hierarchies (Botterill, 2017; Hof & Alloul, 2023). This is why privilege is often seen in a continuum with precarity, as migrants simultaneously negotiate both advantages and constraints in different aspects of their lives. In this respect, privilege is having resources that produce advantages in comparison to another group, but this does not necessarily extend to all aspects of migrants' lives.

2.2.2 *Having Privilege: Identity Markers*

Having privilege is also examined in the migration literature through discussions of identity markers of the privileged body. This literature focuses on privileged identities and how they manifest through whiteness, masculinity, and heteronormativity. Within this conceptualisation, privilege is located at the site of the body as a socio-spatial condition (Housel, 2009). Privilege is often defined as being associated with membership of an advantaged group in a particular location, cited as being akin to wearing a backpack (McIntosh, 1992). Three sets of discussions are pertinent: first, those relating to the privileges associated with whiteness (Halvorsrud, 2019; Lan, 2011; Lundström, 2014; Maher & Lafferty, 2014; van Riemsdijk, 2010). In reference to post-colonial racial hierarchies, this literature highlights how whiteness provides status in different geographical contexts and therefore can function as a resource in migration and lives abroad. The second set of pertinent literatures are those which emphasise the intersectionalities of privilege (Duplan & Cranston, 2023). This literature explores the intersections and unevenness of privilege between different identity markers, with a focus on race and gender. For example, within the context of patriarchy, research highlights the inequalities women face within privileged forms of family migration (Walsh, 2018). As a result, literature examines different gendered privileges between family members (Cranston & Tan, 2023). Third, although less well understood, research in queer migration highlights the contingencies of privilege within heteronormative spaces (Sólveigar- og Guðmundsdóttir, 2023). Therefore, in relation to identity, having privilege is seen as being advantaged within wider constellations of power, postcolonial racial hierarchies, patriarchy as well as heteronormativity. Privilege is produced as having advantages in relation to other groups, but this privilege varies depending on an individual's intersectional identity.

2.2.3 *Being Privileged: Categorisations*

In the migration literature, privilege is also ascribed through the distinctions made between types of migrants in their categorisation (Croucher, 2012). Literature in

migration studies has focused on an interrogation of the term expatriate as a mechanism through which (white) highly skilled and lifestyle migration is separated from other types of migration (Fechter & Walsh, 2010). This separation represents the privileged position of ‘expatriate’ migration (Kunz, 2016). There is less research on the Third Culture Kid (TCK) as a categorisation ascribed and practiced by affluent ‘privileged migrant children’ (Fechter & Korpela, 2016, p. 423). The TCK is an identity marker ascribed to someone who has spent part of their developmental years growing up in a different culture to that of their parents (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). While on the surface the term TCK can apply to the children of all types of migrants, its use in practice is primarily among the children of ‘expatriates’ and in international schools (Fechter & Korpela, 2016). As a result, as a term its use is analogous to that of a ‘child expatriate’ and it connotes privilege. For example, there is an extensive self-help industry attached to TCKs which is meant to help child migrants navigate issues associated with mobility and national identity (Cranston, 2017). The existence of the industry itself indicates the privileged position these child migrants are in as compared to others. Although the term TCK is subject to significant academic critique, like other migrant categorisations it remains a useful device to see how privilege is produced through migration (Désilets, 2016; Fechter, 2016; Fechter & Korpela, 2016; Korpela, 2016; Tanu, 2016). Like the expatriate, the TCK becomes a shorthand through which the advantages conferred by mobilities, lifestyles, and racial identities discussed above are ascribed and articulated. Categorisations are a means through which being privileged—both as ascribed and as personally identified—is narrated.

2.2.4 *Doing Privilege: Capitals and Privilege*

Research in migration studies broadly considers the role that class and capitals play in both shaping migrations, but also the outcomes of migration. Key here is the use of a Bourdieusian framework that explores the role of capitals in social reproduction and mobility. For example, Lan (2011) and Hof (2021) explore how whiteness becomes a form of cultural capital in the shaping of careers in Asia. In the youth mobility literature, there is an assumed relationship between global mobility, attending international schools and the accumulation of (a) cultural capital or the symbols and ideas that can be strategically used as resources and (b) mobility capital, enhanced intercultural competencies which benefit international employability (Cairns et al., 2021). Two sets of literature make important contributions to the discussions about privilege and capitals. First, in youth mobility, spending time abroad is framed both as a middle-class pursuit (social reproduction) and as an experience which can help an individual get ahead (social mobility) (Beech, 2019; Prazeres, 2018; Waters, 2012). While this literature is usually discussed in reference to motivations for independent mobility (e.g., backpacking, travel for study), the family migration literature emphasises that children’s acquisition of cultural capital is a motivation for parents deciding on whether or not to accept overseas work (Koh & Lin, 2023; Maxwell et al.,

2024). Second, capitals are examined in relation to elite schooling, including international schools (Howard & Maxwell, 2020; Weenink, 2008) and how these schools (re)produce and facilitate advantage. Capitals therefore provide a lens through which the maintenance and reproduction of privilege can be understood. Privilege can be understood in relation to having or acquiring capitals, but also in terms of what these capitals subsequently enable—the doing of privilege.

This section has shown that the different ways in which privilege is framed emphasise different aspects of privilege, which we can adapt into a conceptualisation of how those who possess privilege narrate it. *Having* privilege is associated with access to, or advantaged, mobilities, lifestyles and identity markers. This is construed relationally, however, the privileges need also to be seen as intersectional, as an individual may be privileged in one aspect of life and oppressed in another. It is through categorisations that *being* privileged can be explored. The reproduction or *doing* of privilege is emphasised through discussions of capitals, and what having privilege enables. This provides a framework through which to explore the presences and absences of privilege within my interlocutor's life narratives.

2.3 Methods

The interlocutors who inform the chapter were 18- to 21-year-old British passport holders who attended international schools in Europe and Asia before moving to the United Kingdom (UK) to attend university. In the popular, and academic, imagination there are different ways through which my interlocutors can be ascribed as having unearned advantages: having attended an international school; the perceptions of their lifestyle abroad; having a British passport and the relative ease of mobility this brings. However, instead of describing the privileges of this group, this chapter is focused on how privilege is narrated by those who had a globally mobile childhood.

To look at narrations of privilege, this chapter draws upon a wider research project that explored the categorisation and identities of British mobile young people in UK higher education. The project was based on interviews with creative life mapping or photo elicitation exercises which were used as interview prompts. This chapter includes the participants who were (a) attending a University in the United Kingdom (b) held a British passport (c) lived outside the UK whilst studying for school qualifications that would enable university entrance (A-levels or IB) and (d) attended an international school. This means that this chapter includes the voices of 20 of the participants in the wider research project. The research had institutional ethical approval, and all participants gave informed consent before participating. The interviews and associated exercises were carried out in-person in 2019 and online in 2020.

British national students from overseas are a population who are often invisible within universities and therefore it is difficult to determine their size and composition. There is no systematic data collected on British nationals who live abroad. Higher

Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data can provide statistics on UK national/non-UK domicile students; however, this depends on university applicants declaring a non-UK country as their permanent residence. Some British national student migrants will claim the UK is their permanent residence, and provide a UK address to the University, to try and qualify for home fee status (Cranston & Esson, 2024). As a result, my participants were recruited in two ways. For the pilot project, I recruited participants through contacts and subsequent snowballing. In the wider project, I used the HESA data to identify the Universities which had the largest numbers of British national/non-UK domicile undergraduate students. After identifying the universities which had the ten highest populations, I approached the moderators who ran university Facebook pages for students at these universities. When permission was given, I advertised the research in the Facebook group. Students from eight universities took part. They studied a variety of subjects. All names are pseudonyms in the paper and only relevant demographic information is provided to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

The interviews were semi-structured and followed a life narrative format which asked the respondent about their lives growing up, their time at university and their aspirations for the future. The interviews lasted between 45 min and an hour and a half. Questions relating to belonging, different identity markers (national, international, student) and friends were asked, but beyond this, the respondents directed the discussion through their own interpretation of their experiences. As a result, discussions of privilege were not the main focus of the interviews, and no direct questions were asked on this topic. The transcripts were coded through Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, which involves familiarisation, generation of initial codes, grouping and defining themes. Privilege emerged as a repeated theme at this analysis stage. Although a limitation of the research is that unless they offered it, my respondents did not directly explain their understanding of privilege, as Worth (2021) suggests, an analytical approach enables a 'messier' understanding of privilege than that which asks respondents to directly identify something that is often considered invisible. It allows for the interpretation of privilege as a theme within life narratives and to appreciate how this emerges as a theme. Indicative quotes from the interviews are used.

Because there are no official statistics on this population, the research makes no claim to being representative. Rather, by focusing on a mobility category, this chapter reflects the diversity of the British migrant population including children of settler migrants, temporary professional migrants, middling transnationals, and reverse migration (the out-migration of British nationals with diasporic heritage) (Leonard & Walsh, 2019). My respondents had moved to the UK from different countries in Europe and Asia and represented multiple mobility types: living abroad between 2 years and their whole lives; having lived in one location to five locations. The chapter includes discussions from respondents who were White, Asian, or mixed-race. 75% of the respondents are female and 25% male, which reflects wider observed trends in conducting research with student populations. While my respondents' parents could all be considered to have been employed in middle class professions, they occupied a variety of financial circumstances from oil executives,

hotel managers, and teachers. As the chapter will demonstrate, the diversity of my sample is important to note in the context of how privilege is narrated as both being in relation to other groups and spaces, but also in relation to others within the group.

2.4 Having Privilege

In this section, I explore how having a globally mobile childhood was narrated in relation to having privilege. The section explores first, how having privilege is associated with the resources that enabled global mobility and lifestyles abroad. Second, the section examines having privilege in relation to identity markers.

2.4.1 *Presence of Privilege in Discussions: Mobilities and Lifestyles*

Many of my interlocutors were aware of the privileges associated with their mobilities and their lifestyles abroad. My respondents recognised that having a British passport enabled their travel, for example, by comparing their experiences of travel through their international school with those from other nationalities who could not do the same. Emma compared her travel experiences with her Indian friends, highlighting how the British passport *'represents like, kind of, my Britishness! [...] where I'm allowed to travel freely.'* Others highlighted how having a British passport produced a relative advantage over friends in terms of moving to the UK for higher education where they were not required to undertake the English tests, chest x-rays and other *'extra processes involved'* (Elizabeth) for immigration. Both Elizabeth and Emma therefore exemplify discussions of privilege as the relative ease of mobility, in relation to others.

Equally, most of my respondents were aware of the privileges associated with their lifestyles abroad. Jenny discussed how she and her international school friends were segregated from the local community as the *'rich kids'*: *'And like the Swiss community didn't really like us very much, just because there was part, where that like we were the rich kids because like all our parents would work for like the big companies.'* Lisa compared her experiences to her university friends, by describing how she went to the best school in Malaysia, had domestic helpers, went on nice holidays, summing it up with *'So it was quite a privileged life I would say.'* However, other interlocutors reflected on their relative lack of financial advantage as compared to others in the international school. For example, some emphasised that their families could not afford the lavish lifestyles of some of their peers: *'But like towards the end of my time in Indonesia, my dad sold our family car and moved into a smaller house and it's ... if my like friends invited me somewhere for like going out or going to a restaurant, I would have to consider if I could be able to afford it'* (Aaron). Aaron,

Jenny, and Lisa all framed having or not having privilege as financial capital, how this compared to others, and what this afforded them in terms of lifestyle.

My interlocutors therefore clearly narrated having privilege in terms of passports and financial capital which enabled mobilities and lifestyles. This privilege was narrated relationally, where privilege was seen as having access to a resource which others did not have. This was a form of having privilege that was easily recognised by my respondents.

2.4.2 Absence of Privilege in Discussions: Identity Markers

While mobility and lifestyles were present in discussions of privilege, identity markers were largely absent. Gender and male privilege were not mentioned in any form, and neither was sexuality. Only one of my interlocutors directly discussed privilege in relation to being white. However, this does not mean that my white respondents were unaware of their racialisation as white. While not discussed at length, many white respondents made comments in passing about their racial identities. For example, in the context of the international school environment, Alice highlighted that she was *'the only white person in my friendship [group] but like that didn't really bother me at all'* or Lucy suggested that she couldn't be considered an international student in the UK because she *'didn't have a tan'* i.e. because she is white. In this respect, whiteness was not absent in my respondent's narratives, but whiteness was not framed as a resource. However, Lisa, was an exception: *'When I was in Hong Kong, my friends would ... if I did something, like for example, if I ever got a Starbucks, they're like oh you're so white, like such a white girl you know kind of thing?'* In this respect, whiteness itself was not seen as the resource, but as a descriptor of an advantaged luxury lifestyle.

However, Asian and mixed-raced respondents did allude to ways in which whiteness acted as a resource. Like Aaron above, these discussions were a means by which to refer to their relative lack of privilege as compared to others. These conversations highlighted how it felt to be Othered within spaces where whiteness was the norm. For example, Anya emphasised how whiteness was the norm in the international schools she attended: *'growing up, like I went to international schools [...] it's more Caucasian, like I'd be the one like brown kid and there'd be like maybe one other kid or something like that, so like I've always been different.'* For Anya, being of Asian ethnicity, she felt Othered due to being a 'brown kid.' Similarly, in the context of the space of her University town in the UK, Elizabeth described how her Asian ethnicity made her feel less comfortable navigating public spaces: *'I wouldn't say I'm as comfortable going out here compared to home [Hong Kong], ... for obvious reasons ... Yeah, I think ... yeah, that's pretty much it, just looking different, yeah. And ... I guess the fear of the, of having racial encounters.'* Anya and Elizabeth are therefore clearly articulating a racialisation of different spaces and highlighting the disadvantages (not feeling like they belong, fear of racism) of being racially

different within these spaces. While not directly discussing privilege, these discussions highlight the ways in which non-white respondents felt they did not have the same resources to navigate majority white spaces as their white peers. This reveals the comparative advantages that white British mobile young people had within these spaces of the international school or university town/city.

Worth (2021, p. 31) highlights how previous work on privilege shows how ‘the subjective experience of privilege is normalised, or made invisible through systems of power.’ While my interlocutors discussed how their mobilities and lifestyles were privileged, the ways in which identity markers acted as a resource were barely mentioned. Whiteness was a norm for most in both the international school attended and the space of the University. As a result, while race itself was not invisible, the absence of discussions of the advantages it conferred was not at the forefront of how my white respondents understood their lives. Similarly, inequalities associated with gender often become visible within careers, the workplace and within family decision-making processes. However, even though these discussions were largely absent from my respondents due to their stage of life, this does not mean my respondents did not have these advantages.

2.5 Being Privileged

While mobility, lifestyles, and identity markers can be understood as having privilege, in this section, I move to discuss how my respondents narrated *being* privileged in relation to a sense of self. To do this, I explore a categorisation of privileged migration: the Third Culture Kid (TCK). I use the discussions of whether my interlocutors described themselves as a TCK to see how having had a privileged upbringing is narrated in relation to a sense of self.

The interlocutors in this chapter had all heard the term TCK as part of their international schooling. Ed defined the TCK simply in relation to mobility: *‘I like to see it as like someone who’s been privileged enough to move around.’* The international school provided a space where most pupils had a shared background of global mobility. As a result, the presence of multiple nationalities within the school, or individuals having lived in multiple countries, was not a distinguishing factor. Holt and Bowlby (2019) argue that in a privileged school setting, a sense of normality can conceal privilege by rendering it invisible. In this respect, pupils at international schools were socialised into thinking that the co-presence of multiple nationalities was a ‘normal’ experience: *‘What I thought was normal was the diversity of people. And I just thought it was normal to... to like, just be around people with like many different nationalities because it was just... everybody’s nationality was just celebrated’* (Lisa). This experience became labelled as being a TCK. Linda for example discussed a school session when the term TCK was introduced in relation to the international school setting: *‘But it was so normalised to us that we all like kind of made fun of it, we all like ... well yeah, obviously but we don’t need to be told that.’*

The TCK was a term used as a descriptor to denote a globally mobile childhood, but in the space of the international school this was a shared experience.

However, moving from the space of the international school to the university meant that having had a globally mobile childhood was no longer considered normal amongst a cohort who primarily lived in one country. My respondents discussed different ways that they stood out, including through accent and cultural knowledge (Cranston, 2024). These signals of their globally mobile childhoods were a way through which the privileges associated with this experience became visible to others. As a result, many respondents sought to hide their childhood experiences from others: *'like I never really bring it up, just because I know it can come across as like very like privileged and stuff like that, so I kind of try and not to mention it'* (Rowan). While the TCK literature suggests that people in general are not interested in hearing experiences of globally mobile childhoods (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009), my interlocutors instead suggest that they don't want to share their experiences because they are uncomfortable about what they confer. Cara, for example, highlighted her concern that discussions of her childhood experience sounded 'stuck up': *'I hold back sometimes just because I'm worried that it will sound a bit stuck up and snobby [...] and it's not boasting, it's just the way I've been brought up.'* As a result, my respondents had a mixed relationship with identifying as being a TCK in the university setting. Alex, for example, identified being a TCK with being impressive: *'But I think it's quite something to be quite proud of and it just makes me a bit more interesting. So, I think I am a Third Culture Kid.'* Alex saw the TCK as a means through which to convey a sense of self, framing a globally mobile childhood as an achievement. However, others like Rowan and Cara above did not want to identify as a TCK because they do not want to identify or be identified as being privileged. Freya uses the phrase 'to a T' to discuss how she fits the description of a TCK exactly, but doesn't want to be associated with being exotic which in this context means luxury:

I pretty much fit it [TCK] to a T, my mum is from [the Caribbean] and my dad is from the UK and then I grew up in a different culture. But I don't like describe myself as a TCK because people think it's funny, they're like ooh you're so exotic, oh ...! So I just ... I don't usually...say. (Freya)

Therefore, as an identity marker the TCK was also a way through which globally mobile childhoods as being privileged in relation to others was articulated. By utilising it, the TCK became a descriptor for the lifestyle and mobility associated with a globally mobile childhood. The rejection of the category TCK was an attempt to hide their privileged childhood experiences from others. Through most of the discussions, this was an outcome of a desire to fit in with what they felt was the norm in the spaces of the university and for their childhood experiences to not stand out. This depended on context and who they were interacting with, for example, while some wanted to hide how their parents had the financial capital to send them to a (costly) international school, others discussed their embarrassment in terms of not knowing the hierarchies of British private schools. This speaks to wider points about the British class system. Nevertheless, the general conclusion most of my interlocutors came to was that they

did not want others to perceive them as being privileged. This was why they hid their experiences of childhood global mobility.

The TCK was a means by which the privileges associated with having had a globally mobile childhood, specifically the associated mobility and lifestyle, could be codified and explained to others. In the space of the international school, the privileges associated with a globally mobile childhood were invisible as a norm of experience. However, by moving to the space of the university, the TCK became a way through which having these privileges was made visible. As with Worth's (2021) research, the response amongst my interlocutor was mixed in relation to how they discussed being privileged in relation to a sense of self. However, regardless, the TCK was a mechanism through which being privileged was narrated.

2.6 Doing Privilege

In this section, I explore the doing of privilege through thinking about cultural and mobility capitals. As Worth (2021, p. 35) highlights, doing privilege focuses on action or what having advantages facilitates.

My interlocutors framed their experiences of having had globally mobile childhoods or attending international schools in relation to the cultural capital this afforded them. The following quote highlights how Ed saw his childhood experiences as giving him a skill to relate to others: *'I feel like deep down, having these experiences of people from other countries means that it's a lot easier for me to relate to other people [...] because I've had experiences with many different types of people.'* Cosmopolitanism can be defined as global cultural capital, or the dispositions of openness to others and the competencies to enact this openness (Igarashi & Saito, 2014, p. 225). By highlighting his feelings of ease in relating to others, Ed is highlighting a form of embodied cosmopolitan capital (c.f. Maxwell et al., 2024). However, Ed did not discuss how this capital could be actioned as doing privilege, rather he was reflecting on differences between himself and friends who had only lived in the UK. Other respondents emphasised how they preferred to socialise with others who possessed similar global cultural capital to themselves: *'so when you meet somebody else who's had a similar experience, you instantly sort of feel that they get it, they understand it, they have a similar mindset to you, I feel that that forms quite strong bonds [...] having broadened horizons I guess.'* In this quote, Toby highlights how broadened horizons are a way in which to signal an individual's global cultural capital. Like Ed, Toby was not narrating the doing of privilege, instead he was reflecting on the friendships he made in his first year of university. However, the doing of privilege is still present within these discussions. First, in the context of TCKs, Fechter (2016, p. 493) outlines how the assumed relationship between global mobility and open-mindedness becomes 'laced with a sense of superiority.' Through Ed and Toby's discussions, they framed those who had not been globally mobile as parochial—the social differentiation and stratification associated with capitals. Second, the sense of ordering through cultural dispositions can be read through a lens of the (re)production

of global class position, or a means through which privileged positions reproduce themselves.

The absence of a direct discussion of reproducing privilege by my interlocutors reflects their status as university students. While a discussion of cultural capital was evident, the translation of this into economic capital or status would not be realised until later in their lifecourse. Maxwell and Aggleton (2014) in the context of private education define privilege as ‘surety,’ the confidence and expectation that future employment successes will be achieved. While many of my interlocutors did not have any fixed career aspirations and plans post university, discussions of future global mobility indicated a surety associated with mobility capitals. Alice, for example, discussed her plans for future global mobility: *‘But then I want to live in like Bangkok or Hong Kong, somewhere like that when I’m older for doing the classic expat [short term overseas postings] like 2-year thing in different cities, I think that would be really cool. Yeah, so I kind of short-term, I will definitely go back to Asia.’* Alice, who had lived in Singapore, suggests a confidence in her plans about returning to Asia. Mary, in her discussions of why she wanted to live abroad after graduating, highlighted how she wanted to provide her future children with the same advantages that she had: *‘I love what I’ve been given by my parents, you know, I’ve been given a great education overseas and I’ve like been given a lot of you know benefits that not necessarily stem from my parents but stem from like what they work in.’* As a result, Mary’s plans were to work for a company that provided international opportunities. Both Alice and Mary discussed how their experiences of global mobility as children would help them meet their aspirations i.e. that they have the mobility capital to do so. Their experiences gave them the confidence, or surety, that they would be able to succeed in their plans.

Through my interlocutors’ discussions, we can interpret different manifestations of cultural and mobility capital. This is evident in their framings of daily life, friendships and plans for the future. However, while these capitals were alluded to by respondents, the recognition of this as privilege that confers advantages, or the doing of privilege, was not directly discussed.

2.7 Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter has explored how a group that is commonly ascribed as privileged narrates privilege in relation to their lives. It has followed Worth’s (2021) call to explore the contours of privilege itself as a concept by looking at its different manifestations: having privilege, being privileged and doing privilege. This develops a conceptual perspective on privilege by exploring how those who are seen to possess privilege narrate privilege in relation to their lives. In so doing, the chapter has helped address a lacuna in research that specifically considers privilege in childhood migration by looking at a mobile group—young British passport holders who lived outside of the UK for at least 2 years prior to starting University. In most respects, privilege

functions the same way for this group as it does for those who migrated as adults, even though migration and financial advantages are derived from parents.

Pease (2021) notes how privilege is an unmarked, normalised and naturalised form of power. In this respect, the chapter has explored the various ways in which privilege is ascribed in migration studies (mobilities, lifestyle, identity markers, categorisations, and capitals) with my interlocutor's discussions of advantages. This framework enables an understanding of both the presences and the absences of privilege within how the globally mobile narrate their lives. The chapter has demonstrated how, for my respondents', having privilege is narrated in relation to having advantages that others do not. This develops the conceptual perspective of privilege as being relational in how privilege is narrated through comparisons with others. However, the resources understood as privilege focus on mobility and lifestyle, mostly derived through passport privilege and financial advantages. Identity markers, including whiteness, were not framed in terms of advantages. While the discussions of relationality in privileged migration highlight a critical need to adopt intersectional perspectives (Duplan & Cranston, 2023), the notable absence of the discussions of race and gender as advantages among my respondents may reflect the more invisible nature of racial and gendered privilege. While these points may have been raised if I had directly asked my respondents as to what they understood privilege to be, the fact that these were not discussed in the narration of their lives reflects that raced and gendered privileges are less transparent and more difficult to understand or articulate. However, the absence of narrating a privilege does not mean that my interlocutors did not have these advantages. Rather being more unmentioned or invisible, they become normalised and more powerful. This demonstrates how framings of privilege as relational need to examine how individuals narrate privilege, the comparisons that are articulated and those which are not.

In addition, in terms of visibility, through the discussions of being privileged, it was evident that most of my interlocutors did not want their privileges and backgrounds to be easily identified within spaces where this did not function as the norm. Again, this does not undo their privileges but instead tells us about how people relate privilege to their sense of self. Similarly, while my respondents highlighted capitals, these were not articulated in relation to the doing of privilege. One of the ways in which privilege operates is that 'people in privileged groups feel that their lives are normal' (Pease, 2021, p. 11). In the spaces of the international school, it was normal to be surrounded by others who shared similar backgrounds. This reflects existing literature on privileged childhoods which illustrates how schools act as a space of socialisation in privilege (Holt & Bowlby, 2019; Sparks, 2016). However, in the space of the University, this background marked someone as having privilege, which they only wanted to share in context-specific situations. As the discussions around being a TCK illustrated, there was an unease in the spaces of the University as being identified by others as being privileged, because the privileges associated with a globally mobile childhood were not seen as normal. Therefore, a geographical perspective is critical to understand in the context of how privilege is narrated, as the way in which privilege is understood changes between spaces. This focus on the geographical aspect of

privilege further develops how we can understand privilege, and how it is narrated, as being contextual.

As Winddance Twine and Gardener (2013) highlight, privilege is a flexible resource which mutates over time. While my interlocutors will always have had privilege in childhood, what this means over time and in their lifecourse will change. For example, although the embodied cultural capital of having had a globally mobile childhood was not easily recognised by peers in the spaces of the University, this could act as a form of cultural capital (embodied or institutional) within an international graduate labour market. In this respect, in exploring the narration of privilege we need to consider lifecourse perspectives to see the changing narrations of privilege relationally across time (Robertson & Roberts, 2022). These perspectives suggest that in order to understand the doing of privilege, or how privilege acts as a structural resource, we need to both understand the actual advantages conferred through migration as well as the aspirational.

Collectively, the presences and absences of privilege within the narratives of the children of British migrants, points to the invisibility of privilege: the way racialised and classed privileges operate, and the desire in any recognition of these privileges to make them invisible to others. However, it also points to a need to appreciate the articulation of privilege as being multiple. Privilege is powerful precisely because it manifests in different ways. Yet, privilege is also individual, intersectional and changes across time and space. Therefore, the chapter shows the need to combine analytical discussions of privilege with how those who may possess privilege narrate it. This develops conceptual perspectives on privilege through exploring how it is narrated relationally, contextually and structurally in people's lives. Outside of the academic sphere, the recognition of migrant's own privileges, is one way through which social inequalities in society can be more widely understood.

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Chapter 3

‘Privilege’ in International Migration – An Analytical Framework: Digital Nomads as a Case in Point



Hari KC, Anna Triandafyllidou, and Nick Dreher

3.1 Introduction

Remote work went mainstream during the CoronaVirus Disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and remains more common today than it was before 2020 (Johal, 2023; MBO Partners, 2024). Empowered by the possibilities that advanced digital technologies offer, people have been working remotely, through digital platforms and i-clouds, sometimes located in a different country than their place of work. The increase in transnational remote work arrangements has attracted some attention in the media and policy debates (KC & Triandafyllidou, 2025) bringing back to the surface the term ‘digital nomads’.

While the term is not new (it was coined by Makimoto and Manners in 1997), the phenomenon has, in recent years, significantly accelerated, along with the increased adoptions of digital technologies in work. Not all remote workers of course are digital nomads. Some people may work remotely from their home, in the same locality as their office. Others may relocate to another city or country while working from home. Digital nomads are a distinct category; they travel while working remotely, using digital technologies to connect with employers, co-workers or clients. They rarely remain at the same location more than a few months, thus practicing a special type of nomadic migration. In academic scholarship, digital nomads have been described as location-independent workers (Marx et al., 2023), voluntarily working from across international borders (Chevtueva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021; Hannonen,

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2020; Reichenberger, 2018), and particularly as workers pursuing a better work-life balance than a traditional office arrangement would offer. Typically represented as a privileged class of high skilled workers, digital nomads evoke images of people working on laptops from sunny beaches or beautiful, lush landscapes or from posh cafes in urban centres (Šímová, 2023).

Digital nomads have captured the attention of national governments since 2020. Since Estonia and Barbados, in 2020, pioneered digital nomad visa schemes, over 50 countries in Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean have reformed their legislative and immigration systems, aiming to attract and retain these high-skilled remote workers-travellers (Sánchez-Vergara et al., 2023; Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021; De Almeida et al., 2021; Hannonen, 2020; KC & Triandafyllidou, 2025; Hermann & Paris, 2020; KPMG, 2024). Such policy reforms range from launching brand new standalone digital nomad visas to adapting and retrofitting pre-existing visitor or investment/business visas (Dreher & Triandafyllidou, 2023; KC & Triandafyllidou, 2025). Though these visa programs differ from one another in terms of lengths of stay, eligibility criteria and documentation procedures (Koskela & Beckers, 2024), they create enhanced migration pathways for high earning individuals especially from affluent countries while simultaneously barring them from local employment, social protections and welfare programs of the host countries.

Digital nomads are thus a new distinct type of lifestyle migrants. Though most scholarly research on digital nomadism (see Dreher & Triandafyllidou, 2023) remains largely concentrated on leisure and tourism management perspectives (for exceptions, see Hannonen, 2024; Mancinelli & Germann Molz, 2024), the case of digital nomads illustrates how privilege in migration, rather than being a stable and fixed concept, is negotiated, at times constrained and ultimately materialised through an interplay between the digital nomads' individual agency within the available regimes of mobility. More recently, there have been attempts, including by the authors of this chapter, to theorise digital nomadism from a sociology of migration perspective relating it to lifestyle migration and examining the agency-structure interplay within digital nomadism (Zaban, 2022). This chapter further develops this line of research by engaging specifically the notion of privilege in relation to digital nomadism and explicates the relational and intersectional character of privilege in migration. We describe how privilege in migration is practiced through the ways in which the digital nomads actively interact with and navigate the macro and the meso level regimes of mobility.

The chapter is organised in five sections. Section 3.2 below outlines our analytical framework discussing the notion of privilege in migration. Section 3.3 introduces the specific case of digital nomads, pointing to the ambivalent character of digital nomadism as a type of lifestyle and seemingly privileged migration that, nevertheless, may entail risks of precarity. Section 3.4 examines more specifically how privilege is negotiated and enacted in three domains, notably crossing borders, within the context of enhanced or restricted migration regimes; second, tax and welfare regimes in the context of transnational and mobile livelihoods of digital nomads; and third, the role of intermediaries and meso-structures in the actualisation of privilege. The

concluding section draws together insights into the relationship between privilege and migration.

3.2 Privilege and Migration in post-Industrial Societies

The Cambridge Dictionary defines privilege as an advantage that only one person or group of people has, usually because of their position or because they are rich. The term 'privilege' in academic scholarship has a long history, but the concept was developed in the eighties (Lenski, 1984; McIntosh, 1988). Lenski (1984) defines privilege as a special advantage or immunity granted to a person or group, often based on social status or position, that is not available to others. It logically follows that when we speak of 'privileged migrants', we are referring to a special group of migrants who are seen to enjoy some special rights or immunities afforded to them. Such rights may be related to a specific professional status – e.g., diplomatic privilege – but often privilege emanates from power differentials, historically ingrained in society.

Privilege in migration is defined both in terms of relative ease of access to migration itself and through the embodied and everyday practices of migration. Research that explicitly names privilege explores the manifestation and practice of privilege as a socio-spatial condition in migrants' lives by highlighting that transnational mobility is accessed depends on an individual's position within the matrix of power (Croucher, 2012; Kunz, 2016) and focusing on the experiences and practices of privilege in migrants' lives abroad (Lundström, 2014; Scuzzarello, 2020). Privilege in migration is not a given but a complex interaction and interplay between various individual and structural factors and how it is negotiated and mediated, augmented or reduced within the context of these regimes of mobilities.

In a world of nation states, migrants are not considered as privileged individuals. The very doctrine of nationalism sees migrants as an aberration in the international order – as Abdelmalek Sayad (2004) argues, migrants are absent from where they should be – their home country. And they are present where they should not be – a different country, where they do not belong. Thus, by definition, migrants are disadvantaged in the national order. And yet, there are individuals and groups that are seen as desirable and are afforded special rights or immunities compared to most other migrants.

The notion of a privileged migrant is relational – it refers to reasons why this migrant is seen as desirable at the destination country and hence is afforded 'privileges' compared to other migrants. As Franz Buhr and Hila Zaban in the Introduction of this book note, privilege in migration is also intersectional, contextual and embodied – contingent upon what nationality, ethnicity, religion, race and gender the migrant belongs to. Privilege in migration is intersectional in that it is the interplay of social identities and power structures, such as gender, race, class, and sexuality, rather than as a singular, isolated factor (Duplan & Cranston, 2023). While the ethnic and the economic are two main rationales for affording privileges to specific migrant groups, these rationales can be seen as interconnected and interdependent.

Other migrants may be afforded a privileged treatment because they are seen as creating economic value for the nation. Such value may relate to the class and economic capacity of a migrant. Migrants who are affluent and can mobilise significant financial resources may be afforded preferential treatment (see Buhr, 2026). The motivation for states can be seen as both negative (these migrants will neither be a burden on the state's welfare nor take away local jobs) and positive (they will consume and invest, thus creating more wealth and benefiting the nation). Typically this is the case of retirees, so-called sunset migrants (King et al., 2000), or other such affluent travelers – like Canadian ‘snowbirds’ spending the winter months in Mexico or the Caribbean (see Coates et al., 2002).

Within this same economic rationale, privilege may be afforded to migrants who are seen as desirable because they possess skills and talents that are beneficial for the national economy and society. This is typically the case of high-skilled migrants (Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020) in sectors of high demand like for instance health or information technologies (see Cohen & Gold, 2026). Skill is of course a constructed notion and not an intrinsic quality that a person possesses. Rather what constitutes a skill depends on the context of its use. It was already in the 1970s that researchers pointed out that class, gender and race affect how workers' skills were appreciated and remunerated (Braverman, 1998; Moss & Tilly, 2001).

The ways in which a given skill is identified and evaluated depend on the related social and economic structures notably the labour market, the education system and the migration system (Liu-Farrer et al., 2021; Rigby & Sanchis, 2006). Even though it may seem that tertiary education, or professional qualifications demonstrated through years of professional practice or experience (Wright et al., 2021) are objective indicators of skills, their interpretation and recognition at the destination country are highly contingent, for instance, upon the country's job classification systems, professional regulations, and credentialisation. In addition, such formal skills are mediated by the broader and more volatile notion of ‘soft’ skills that ultimately become the carriers of the ‘hard’ skills (Erel, 2010). The social and interpersonal skills, the ability to behave or sound in a certain way, the cultural skills may be equally or even more important than formal education or professional experience (Wang et al., 2018).

Thus, economically privileged migrants are also subject to intersectional classifications that relate to their ethnicity, race, religion and gender, informed by broader structures of inequality that temper the recognition of both hard and ‘soft’ skills (see Bauder, 2003; Kofman & Raghuram, 2006; van Riemsdijk & Axelsson, 2021). While the effects of race and ethnicity are complex and, for instance, young white Europeans (notably Germans) may find themselves racialised in the Japanese labour market, pigeonholed into specific labour categories with little prospects of career advancement, it is more often the case that whiteness and European background translate into privilege in international migration (see also Hof, 2026). Migrant skilled workers from South or Southeast Asia may find themselves confined into specific segments of the labour market shaped by post-colonial legacies of ethnic and gendered stereotypes despite possessing the right skills and being seen as desirable migrants (Friberg & Midtbøen, 2017).

Having discussed the relational and intersectional character of privilege in migration, two analytical reflections are in order here. First, just like other types of migrants, privileged migrants are neoliberal subjects with their subjectivities conditioned by neoliberalism (Mancinelli, 2020). In alignment with Bauman's concept of 'liquid modernity' (2007), these neoliberal individuals, bereft of old solidities and communities of earlier times, are held responsible for their own futures, creating their own, privatised 'good life' as self-entreprising individuals (Benson & O'Reilly, 2018). They are expected to 'maximise their quality of life through acts of choice, according their life a meaning and value to the extent that it can be rationalised as an outcome of choices made or choices to be made' (Rose, 1996, p. 57).

Second, this neoliberal rationality is inscribed in a broader postcolonial context that structures transnational and sub-national power and (in)equality. Among digital nomads, like among other types of privileged migrants, 'white prestige' (Lundström, 2014) persists as a cross-cutting racial hierarchy of power even after the end of formal colonisation and that demonstrates continuities between the colonial past and the 'free' present (Fechter & Walsh, 2010). Such entanglements in the social, cultural and economic realms extend even to people and places not directly involved in colonisation as perpetrators or victims (Benson & O'Reilly, 2018).

The reflections above point to the difficulties in both conceptualising privileged migration as a category of analysis and in operationalising it as a category of practice. How can we tell a privileged migrant when we see one? Are all high skilled migrants privileged? Are digital nomads privileged? How is privilege constructed at the interactional level between structure and agency?

In resolving this tension, we borrow from Benson and O'Reilly's (2018) book on lifestyle migration in which they identify five different levels of structures – high, intermediate or internal – which condition the interplay between the migrant's agency and the broader systems of neoliberalism, postcoloniality and globalisation. We adapt and simplify their approach (Benson & O'Reilly, 2018) by identifying three (rather than five) heuristic levels of interaction between agents and structures: macro-structures, which include both the wider global and historical systems (e.g., postcoloniality and neoliberalism) within which the agents' actions are inscribed; the meso-level relating to specific contingent structures (e.g., specific visa schemes or policies) within which privileged migration takes place aiming to attract desired migrants; and the micro-level individual agents and their own actions, narratives, and ways of imagining their lives.

Thus, we propose here an operational framework for analysing the interplay between structure and agency in privileged migration. In considering digital nomads as privileged migrants, we focus on their agency analysing how they practice their migration. What kind of human, material, or social (including ethnic or racial) resources do they mobilise and how? What are the broader structures of postcolonial interdependencies, regimes of 'weaker' and 'stronger' passports, and a globalised neoliberal economy that structure their mobility? It is worth noting that such structures are not necessarily to their detriment as the globalised neoliberal economy may privilege those with location independence, portable skills and entrepreneurial spirit. How do privileged migrants interact with meso-level infrastructures like travel or

employment agents, real estate agents, migration brokers, diasporic networks, social media groups and self-help communities of expats in order to achieve their aims.

In short, our approach focuses on (privileged) migrant agency, while acknowledging the role of macro structures and meso-level stakeholders and infrastructures. Analysing how different types of privileged migrants, and particularly in this chapter, digital nomads, mobilise their resources, navigate existing visa regimes, and relate to intermediaries is key in understanding how privilege can be constructed and reinforced, or can be lost and depleted. It is important to note that privilege in migration cannot exist in a static form, as the outcome of specific socio-demographic or economic features, or as the result of existing structures of power and inequality. Privilege is constructed relationally through the ways in which potentially privileged migrants navigate the terrain (Triandafyllidou, 2019).

3.3 Digital Nomads as a Case in Point

The concept of digital nomads emerged in the 1990s (Makimoto & Manners, 1997), with empirical scholarship on this niche community following the mid-2010s (e.g., Müller, 2016a, 2016b; Richards, 2015). Prior to the pandemic, workers who rejected the cultural expectation of physical presence in workplaces were viewed as outsiders. As Cook (2023, p. 257) notes, ‘the COVID-19 pandemic completely changed the narrative and discourse around remote work, and vis-à-vis digital nomadism.’ This mainstreaming of remote work and digital nomadism is reflected in global workforce statistics. Hooper and Benton (2022) document that the global remote workforce more than doubled from 7.9% pre-pandemic to 17.4% during the second quarter of 2020. The shift was even more dramatic in some countries – in Canada, remote work increased from 4% in 2016 to 40% in April 2020, falling to 25% by 2022 (Johal, 2023) and decreasing gradually further to this day (February 2026). While the number of remote workers has declined since the pandemic, these shifts nevertheless indicate a substantial and lasting change in work arrangements (Dreher & Triandafyllidou, 2023), facilitating the emergence of digital nomadism (Orel, 2023; Voll et al., 2023).

The mainstreaming of remote work has complicated efforts to define and conceptualise digital nomadism. As Cook (2023, p. 257) observes, many more people have identified themselves as digital nomads, which ‘poses pressing questions about the difference between a digital nomad and a remote worker.’ However, this ambiguity extends beyond just the question of remote work, and in many ways is a central intellectual challenge in conceptualising the phenomenon. As Aroles et al. (2020, p. 126) argue, ‘there is a lack of clarity regarding what exactly constitutes digital nomadism. This ambiguity is in part connected to the variety of individuals who identify as digital nomads, ranging from freelancers to remote workers to independent entrepreneurs.’ They suggest that being a digital nomad might be better understood as a frame of mind rather than as a specific type of employment or travel experience. Indeed, in providing a detailed literature review on how digital nomads are conceptualised in

academic literature, Cook (2023, p. 259) finds that the label 'can be either aspirational, pejorative, or loosely applied' and often self-identification is central aspect, particularly in academic research on the topic (Cook, 2023, pp. 259–266). The ambiguity in conceptualising digital nomads has also led to challenges in quantifying the phenomenon (Dreher & Triandafyllidou, 2023).

Amidst this ambiguity in conceptualising the digital nomad, scholars have sought to characterise digital nomadism by looking at it as a combination of several interrelated aspects such as a combination of travel, work, and leisure (or a work/lifestyle) (e.g., Cook, 2023; Hannonen et al., 2023; Reichenberger, 2018; Thompson, 2021) and as 'lifestyle mobilities' (e.g., Cohen et al., 2015). Dreher and Triandafyllidou (2023, *forthcoming*) argue that who a digital nomad is can be understood through three aspects: digital nomads' relationship to space, time, and the scope of their activities.

Digital nomads' relationship to space concerns their transnational mobility between or among specific locations. While some scholars debate the necessity of transnational cross-border travel as an aspect of the digital nomad experience (see Cook, 2023, pp. 263–264; Matsushita, 2023), transnational travel is an important aspect from a migration studies perspective (Dreher & Triandafyllidou, *forthcoming*). Another key characteristic of digital nomadism's relationship to space is location independence, which describes a work-lifestyle that is not tied to a specific place of reference. Location independence is often described as a key motivation for digital nomads (Cook, 2023; Thompson, 2018) and other lifestyle migrants (Korpela, 2020). The concept of 'home base' (Cook, 2022, p. 316) in digital nomad terminology further reflects this detachment from traditional place-based ties.

Digital nomads' relationship to time reflects the frequency and duration of their mobility. Digital nomadism is transient in nature. As Hannonen (2020, p. 12) notes, digital nomads travel 'on a (semi)permanent basis,' and ethnographic research from various scholars (e.g., Cook, 2020; Green, 2020; Mancinelli, 2020; Thompson, 2021) suggests that some nomads change location every few weeks while others move every few months. Other scholars refer to the concept of slow travel, which implies spending extended periods of time in a single location before relocating again or returning to a homebase (Aroles et al., 2020; Mancinelli, 2020). The temporal dimension of digital nomadism refers not only to the length of each stay at a different destination but also the overall duration of this transient lifestyle. For now, digital nomadism is commonly associated with young single adults without family obligations, although some studies include participants outside of this norm including families and older adults (MBO Partners, 2024).

The scope of digital nomads' activities is centered around balancing work and lifestyle requirements. As such, employment is a crucial feature of digital nomadism that distinguishes them from other kinds of lifestyle migrants. Discussions of digital nomad employment consider both their profession and modality of employment. These work arrangements vary considerably: Aroles et al. (2020, p. 120) identify five distinct modalities: remote employment, entrepreneurship, freelancing, work-related travel, and multiple professional activities. Building on this understanding, Cook (2023, p. 259) develops a similar classification framework that differentiates

among freelance digital nomads, digital nomad business owners, salaried digital nomads, experimental digital nomads, and armchair digital nomads with the latter two categories describing those who are not yet fully engaged in the lifestyle.

Digital nomads' professions tend to be focused on sectors amenable to remote work, such as information technology, financial services, communications, and research (Hooper & Benton, 2022, p. 6). Some scholars categorise them as 'know-mads' – an emerging class of knowledge workers with technical and creative skills that enable greater agency in negotiating work mobility (Iliescu, 2021; Moravec, 2013). Others situate digital nomads within the gig economy (Thompson, 2018, 2019, 2021; Wang et al., 2018), where they operate as freelancers or entrepreneurs managing short-term contracts and personal brands.

Beyond the popular imagination of the young adult equipped with only a laptop and internet connection – whether a Berlin coworking space or a Chiang Mai café (Müller, 2016a, 2016b, p. 344) – this section has identified the digital nomad as an ambiguous category that has rapidly emerged into a new space in the post-pandemic period and that entertains particular relationships to time, space, and activities that include work, leisure, and travel. Returning to the theme of this chapter and book, it is now also important to reflect on digital nomad as a privileged class of migrants. To do so, we consider how the digital nomad is reflected in the literature of lifestyle migration.

Lifestyle migration has traditionally been associated with leisure, consumption and retirement rather than mobility in search of employment opportunities (Benson, 2013; Benson & O'Reilly, 2009). While the lack of focus on employment would seemingly distinguish lifestyle migrants from digital nomads, who by definition engage in employment, these two categories bear important similarities. As Aroles et al. (2020, p. 121) note, 'the motivations of digital nomads are particularly disparate, ranging from an attempt to explore one's inner self to a desperate escape from the corporate world' and in the literature that frames digital nomadism as mobility in search of freedom (e.g., Reichenberger, 2018). This mobility in pursuit of leisure, personal and professional freedom, positions both lifestyle migrants and digital nomads as inherently privileged in comparison to other categories of migrants who seek concrete improvements in working conditions, income, education, or health services.

One area in which digital nomads are generally privileged is in their identity. Despite anecdotal evidence of nomads from other parts of the world (e.g., Matsushita, 2023), they are generally young, white, male, highly educated, and from the Global North, particularly Europe and North America. The most discussed demographic feature of digital nomads is their country of origin, often referred to as 'strong passport countries' – those allowing visa-free travel to numerous destinations (Cook, 2020; Thompson, 2018; Wang et al., 2018). The reliance on strong passports to ensure largely visa-free mobility is despite the fact that many digital nomads reject national attachments and identify as 'citizens of the world' (Cook, 2020). Many of these privileges are also those reflected among lifestyle migrants.

Some digital nomads may be described as a new category of underclass/precariat in the face of global capitalism and neoliberalism lacking health and social security,

employment stability, family and home, and labour rights (Buhr & Zaban, 2026). The privilege of digital nomads is complicated by their position in the gig economy (Thompson, 2018, 2019, 2021; Wang et al., 2018). Rather than understanding digital nomadism as privileged knowmads, Thompson (2021) frames digital nomadism as an adaptive response to downward mobility and employment precarity in neoliberal Global North economies. From this perspective, digital nomads represent another precarious group of transnational migrants facing global capitalism – lacking social protection, health and social security, stable income, and social capital. As the authors note elsewhere (KC et al., 2026), digital nomads might best be understood as privileged precariat, using individual and structural advantages to navigate mobility more easily than other migrants while being pushed into mobility to maintain lifestyles threatened by neoliberal capitalism's downward trajectories.

Research on privilege in migration examines skilled workers, investors, students, lifestyle migrants, sojourners, and retirees (Croucher, 2012), but digital nomads give us a distinct way in which there is an interplay and interaction between the multiple levels of regimes of mobilities and the digital nomads. Digital nomads are portrayed as a type of privileged mobility in the media as something akin to a new creative class. They are neither migrants nor tourists; they transcend that dichotomy, more characteristic of the out-moded Fordist capitalism. Instead, they assert themselves as autonomous and flexible individuals who choose to pursue happiness through the freedom offered by technocapitalism (Suarez-Villa, 2009). Privilege in digital nomadism is indeed negotiated, constructed and materialised through a dynamic interplay between the regimes of mobilities and the digital nomads' individual agency as discussed below.

3.4 Mobility Regimes and 'Privilege' in Digital Nomadism

Migrants move across international borders, but their mobilities may be obstructed or facilitated by various infrastructures (Lindquist et al., 2012). Migration is a heavily mediated process, involving orchestration among an array of actors and systems that enable, channel, and manage mobilities across borders (Lin et al., 2017; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). Such an approach which is described as the 'infrastructure turn' in migration research focuses on how mobility is both facilitated and prevented at meso and macro-scales rather than the micro individual experiences of migrants (Collins, 2021; Lindquist et al., 2012). Infrastructures are thus conceptualised as the 'physical and organisational architectures, responsible for structuring, mobilising and giving meaning to movements through their particular arrangements' (Lin et al., 2017, p. 169). The migration infrastructures include not only state regulations and their material expression in passports and visas (Lin et al., 2017) but also commercial intermediaries, socio-technological platforms, and humanitarian organisations (Pascucci, 2017), migrant social networks (Boost & Oosterlynck, 2019; Hillmann et al., 2022) and 'migration industries' (Cohen et al., 2022). The migration infrastructures framework focuses on the physical and organisational structures that either

facilitate or stand as barriers to international migration but it does not encompass the broader historical and structural systems and processes like globalisation, lingering legacies of colonialism and neoliberalism which deeply shape international human mobilities.

When it comes to digital nomadic mobilities, we find the mobility regimes framework useful. The mobility regimes determine who can move, under what conditions and with what rights and restrictions. The concept mobility regime also stresses the importance of policies and institutions that are not related to migration in themselves such as tax systems in the case of digital nomads. Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013) conceptualise the mobility regimes as a constellation of state policies, international agreements, economic structures, social hierarchies and historical contexts and networks including social and economic factors that condition, constrain or facilitate migration. They also encompass relationships between mobilities and immobilities, and the experiences and imaginaries of migration.

There are three mobility regimes which are pertinent to discuss about digital nomadism that include: (1) the digital nomad visa schemes introduced by over fifty countries around the world; (2) the tax and welfare regimes of the host countries; and (3) the newly burgeoning private intermediary agencies such as companies, digital platforms, housing agencies and socialisation groups that operate as intermediating actors and mediate digital nomadic mobilities by offering services including legal, immigration and remote work and employment. The digital nomads utilise and navigate these mobility regimes as they move across international borders and practice digital nomadism in the first place and to negotiate, actualise and materialise privilege in active interactions with the macro-structures which include global neoliberal capitalist economy and the political legacies of coloniality within which their actions are inscribed; within the meso level mobility regimes pertaining to state policies such as digital nomad visa schemes or tax and welfare systems targeting to attract desirable migrants; and the micro-level individual agency and their own actions and imaginings of their lives.

3.4.1 Navigating Immigration Systems and Visa Regimes

The first mobility regimes that digital nomads utilise are the digital nomad visa schemes developed by several countries during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This new visa category which was pioneered by Estonia and Barbados in 2020 has been adopted by over fifty countries around the world, including countries and territories in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean (KPMG, 2024). Among them are small island developing states, member states of the European Union and the high income economies such as Costa Rica, Croatia, Greece, Norway, Portugal, and Spain (Dreher & Triandafyllidou, 2023). Several other large economies such as Argentina, Brazil, Malaysia, and the United Arab Emirates have also recently launched digital nomad visa programs. Digital nomad visas greatly

vary but they serve as an enhanced mobility regime to ease and attract the relatively affluent individuals. Digital nomad visas distinguish between desirable and undesirable people, establishing hierarchies based on passports and nationalities, wealth and skills and perceived productivity (KC & Triandafyllidou, 2025), differentiating mobilities into categories and hierarchies (Dahinden et al., 2023). These visa categories filter desirable foreigners granting them special rights with the intent of gaining economic benefits which Mancinelli and Germann Molz (2024) describe as states' 'border artistry' where digital nomads leverage state-imposed constraints into creative forms to practice digital nomadism.

The second mobility regimes which the digital nomads capitalise on are the visa-free regimes to travel to destination countries under tourist visas and work in the sly. Navigating visa regimes using individual privilege like ethnicity, age, class, material resources to find the best possible entry point (e.g. a visitor visa or working holiday maker). By reaping the privileges of their nationalities to navigate the global inequalities of the capitalist system, digital nomads combine their remote work with a lifestyle of travel and leisure (Mancinelli, 2020). The socio-spatial dimension of privilege highlights how it is deeply intertwined with issues of power, through the special right(s) or advantage(s) some may have in terms of particular, reserved or exclusive access to certain places or processes at a given time and location (Cranston & Duplan, 2023).

Privilege in migration can be defined through an individual's ability to access transnational movement, in relation to someone's positioning within global regimes of power as well as through the relative ease and speed through which they move (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013). Only those with strong passports have the ability to mis/appropriate free visa regimes, even though it is considered illegal. Though deemed an 'illegal' practice, many destination countries consider enforcing such a violation of law of low priority, while other countries such as Mexico and Vietnam are indifferent to their visitor visas being misappropriated by digital nomads. Such a selective enforcement of immigration laws shows mutual economic trade-offs between states and digital nomads, but it is only the citizens of the wealthy and geopolitically powerful 'strong passports' countries who are able to do so. Holleran and Notting (2023) argue that even during the travel restrictions imposed by states during the Covid-19 pandemic, digital nomads rationalised their mobility, navigating the feelings of guilt and avoidance of shame, though they limited their social media participation to avoid moral sanction.

3.4.2 Navigating Tax and Welfare Systems

The tax and welfare systems are the other mobility regimes that digital nomads navigate to actualise digital nomadic mobilities. Several countries have offered various financial incentives such as waivers in visa applications and renewals, fast-tracked application processes and income tax exemptions aiming to attract highly skilled foreign workers. In search of minimising their income tax liabilities, many digital

nomads relocate to the countries offering the most competitive incentives about which they keep themselves updated through various digital platforms, social networks and transnational mobility service providing agencies such as Klynveld Peat Marwick Goerdeler (KPMG). Digital nomads navigate the host countries' welfare systems to create possible conditions saying that they do not strain their welfare systems such as health coverage and other social benefits.

In the competition to attract digital nomads, countries compete with each other to reduce the tax burden for digital nomads, as the tax factor plays a decisive role for digital nomads when deciding where to work. Almost 39% of the countries offering digital nomad visas offer some sort of tax exemptions for digital nomads (UNWTO, 2023). Many countries have marketised their countries branding the digital nomad visas (e.g., Global Citizen Concierge of the Cayman Islands, Work Where You Vacation of Belize). This reflects the inventiveness of states in repositioning their immigration systems to economically benefit from digital nomadism. Digital nomads capitalise on their incomes and wealth and their countries' strong passports to prove to the host states that they will not cause a welfare burden. The digital nomads practice 'geoarbitrage' to navigate the tax regimes that create opportunities for them to choose where they want to be taxed (Holleran, 2022). Since many countries start taxing digital nomads after a stay for 183 days, they tend to relocate themselves to a low-tax country to reduce their tax burden. In contrast, it is also argued (e.g., Tyutyuryukov & Guseva, 2021) that digital nomads are at risk of being tax residents nowhere, and may not enjoy the same tax regimes as regular settled employees since the existing tax systems are based on residence and hence incompatible with digital nomadic work modalities.

3.4.3 Mobilising Intermediary Agencies and the Marketplace

A plethora of private agencies acting as intermediaries in digital nomadic mobilities have emerged on the scene. These include self-help communities of digital nomads, ethnic communities, employment agencies, multinational companies, civil society actors, diaspora networks and resources and even social media groups, among others. Such mobility agencies (e.g., Fragomen, KPMG, ScanMovers, LegalPad) sell services and products such as global health insurance, international online banking and coworking spaces while helping digital nomads navigate the immigration and national labour and taxation systems. In addition, a plethora of digital platforms and self-help communities of digital nomads have proliferated to cater to their needs. Digital nomads mobilise and interact with such meso-level infrastructures and market agents such as travel or employment agents, real estate agents, migration brokers, diasporic networks, social media groups and self-help communities of expats in order to embrace digital nomadic mobilities while actively augmenting privilege and mediating risks and liabilities at the same time.

The private profit-seeking intermediary-like agencies present and promote celebratory imaginaries and representations of digital nomads as free-moving cosmopolitans (Cranston & Duplan, 2023). Oftentimes they are overtly and covertly involved in the process of filtering who are worthy of accessing digital nomadic lives based on their skills, wealth and nationality and thus partake in constructing desirable and undesirable migrants. In some cases, these agencies contribute to the shaping of the state's mobility regimes through active campaigning and lobbying with state actors claiming to ensure that they can obtain the skills for the workforce they need and through consulting on visa policies (KC & Triandafyllidou, 2025).

From the above discussions on the ways in which digital nomads interact with and navigate the three regimes of mobility, they are involved in a two-pronged strategy. On the one hand, the digital nomads who mainly originate from the rich countries of the Global North are seen to be resorting to digital nomadism as an adaptive strategy in the face of global capitalism and neoliberalism characterised by precarious employment relations and the dwindling welfare state provisions – lacking social protection, health and social security, stable income and social capital. However, as KC et al. (2026) contend, with the geopolitical and economic power of their countries as manifested through their 'strong passports' and exchange rates, they are in a position to escape the increasing precarisation at home by moving mostly to places in the Global South in pursuit of lower costs of living. We thus discern a sort of displacement of precarity at work whereby digital nomads ease their international mobilities and livelihoods as a geopolitical dividend (KC et al., 2026).

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have proposed an analytical framework for understanding the notion of privilege in international migration by using the case of digital nomads. The framework is built on the notion that privilege in migration is not stable and fixed but it is rather constructed through a dynamic interplay between the regimes of mobility and the individual migrant's agency. Building on Buhr and Zaban in the introduction of this volume, we show how digital nomads mobilise and navigate the regimes of mobilities in embracing digital nomadism and actualising privilege as they move across the borders while working remotely. Privilege is therefore negotiated, conditioned, constrained, and materialised at the interface between the digital nomads and the mobility regimes that include the digital nomad visas, tax and welfare regimes in place by states to attract them and the newly proliferating intermediary private agencies which cater to the need of this mobile migrant population. Our paper reframes the concept of privilege and precarity by examining the operations of power within these infrastructures of migration that idealise and facilitate the mobility of certain people and hinder that of others further entrenching inequality and injustice within the global migration and mobility regimes.

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Chapter 4

Identity Dynamics and Social Cohesion in Privileged Mobilities



Raquel Huete and Alejandro Mantecón

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, privileged mobilities are conceptualised as a nuanced and evolving phenomenon, shaped by shifting interpretations and defined by diverse social strata over time. What criteria have been used to decide what ‘privilege’ is in residential mobilities? To answer this question, an attempt is made to understand why certain mobilities are perceived as threats to the stability of social order, while others are promoted as respectable behaviours. In grappling with this inquiry, we are compelled to delve into the intricate political dimensions of identity and class formation.

Some of the political questions and debates being raised in today’s societies formed around the emerging capitalist centres of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries — Who deserves our help? In what situations? Who forms the group we refer to as ‘Us’? Who is an outsider, and who is someone whom we resemble? Who deserves to live among ‘Us’ despite not being one of ‘Us’? Under what circumstances? Can an outsider become ‘Us’? How? — (Castel, 1995). The answers to these questions depend on who is asking them and who is answering them. But they depend on the disputes taking place in social arenas where tension prevails. This results from the poisoning of rational arguments and scientific evidence through heightened emotions and biased impressions (Brader et al., 2008; Lecheler et al., 2015; Vukov, 2003). Beneath the media noise, the logic of power prevails (Griffiths, 2024; Hopkins, 2010; Schmidt-Catran & Czymara, 2023). A telling example can be observed by examining the possibilities offered by the visas and passports of some states compared to others (Neumayer, 2006; Salter, 2013; Wang, 2004).

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The construct of ‘privilege’ in mobilities emerges as a complex and contested terrain, contingent upon the classification of individuals into categories such as tourists, vagrants, labour migrants, lifestyle migrants, refugees, expatriates, undocumented migrants, or digital nomads, among myriad others. Illustrative of the multifaceted nature of this discourse are a range of contemporary controversies.

A brief overview is given for four different situations: (a) the lexicon employed to study these varying modes of mobility (Castilla-Polo et al., 2023; Huete et al., 2013; Huete & Mantecón, 2012); (b) the underlying agendas fuelling the recent upsurge of digital nomadism as a lifestyle choice (Lacárcel et al., 2024; Mancinelli, 2020; Zerva et al., 2023); (c) the discursive manoeuvres seeking to shape public perceptions of tourism (Mantecón, 2010; Mantecón & Huete, 2008; Mantecón & Velasco, 2020); and (d) the fissures exacerbated by Brexit among British expatriates residing in southern Spain (Giner-Monfort & Huete, 2021; Huete et al., 2025).

Among the possible options, we have selected these four because, as shown with the references included in the previous paragraph, the authors of this chapter have direct experience in the empirical investigation of all these realities. Furthermore, many of our studies have delved into the relationships between material aspects (urban space transformation, mobility flows, issues with managing infrastructures and public resources) and symbolic aspects (public opinion, discourse production, ideological positions). By making this fact explicit, we only aim to clarify that our reflections on the selected issues are grounded in studies in which we have been involved for years. Our ideas may be more or less accurate, but they stem from a constant and prolonged dialogue between theoretical reflection and empirical work. For this reason, we dare to assert that, despite the disparate nature of these four realities, they all share a significant capacity to exemplify some of the tensions linked to the interactions between mobility, privilege, identity, and social cohesion.

In the following section, the first three topics are addressed from a more generic approach. The fourth, on the impact of Brexit among British expatriates residing in Spain, is the only one that is localised and place based. The reason is that it forms part of an ongoing investigation. Nevertheless, here the arguments are maintained at a similar reflective level to those attempted with the other three realities. In this regard, we avoid including empirical evidence and, instead, concentrate on explaining why this fourth situation also serves to understand how some groups attempt to assert their positions or protect themselves against what they perceive as threats. The definition of different forms of mobility becomes an increasingly problematic political issue, as it grows in importance for recognising the position that individuals and groups occupy in society. This, ultimately, shapes how they are perceived and, therefore, how they perceive themselves and others. In other words, it influences their identity.

We conclude with a reflection that results from paying attention to the common elements in the four situations addressed. In it, we suggest the advisability of reorienting the research perspective on privileged mobilities by placing the analysis of ethical aspects at the centre of the discussion.

Thus, our proposed perspective endeavours to unpack the intricate tapestry of privileged mobilities within the broader context of interrogating the interplay between

identities and social cohesion. Through this theoretical exploration, we aim to elucidate the complexities and challenges inherent in this terrain while also suggesting future lines of research.

4.2 Privileged Identities

4.2.1 *Lifestyle Migration? Academic Terminology is not Neutral*

The academic lexicon used to refer to migrations or temporary movements of Canadian, American, British, Scandinavian, etc. citizens to regions in Latin America or Southern Europe is not neutral (Castilla-Polo et al., 2023). Specifically, we focus on the use of the term ‘lifestyle migration’. This label refers to an analytical framework originally built on qualitative studies based on understanding complex social processes through the descriptions and interpretations of their experiences given by interviewees themselves. In the majority of cases, the interviewees are citizens of the same nationality or ethnic-cultural tradition as the researcher, with both the subject and the object of the research sharing an inability to communicate fluently in the dominant languages of the host societies. Often, this issue is not identified as a difficulty that the newcomer must overcome, but rather as a communication problem that the receiving societies are required to solve. This position is easily recognised among British lifestyle migrants, whose tendency towards ethno-linguistic encapsulation is well known (Casado, 2009; Lawson, 2015; O’Reilly, 2009; Olsson & O’Reilly, 2017; Simó-Noguera et al., 2013). As a result, sometimes the explanations given tend to downplay the social, economic, political, and environmental complexity in which the discourses of the interviewees are embedded. This situation is one of the inherent risks in research reliant on in-depth interviews: the ethical obligation to respect interviewees’ perspectives may sometimes overshadow the fact that their discourse represents merely an interpretation of reality, shaped by perceptual biases and undisclosed personal interests. Brinkmann and Kvale (2005, p.162) have highlighted this by explaining that: ‘being an ethically skilled qualitative researcher involves more than respecting the integrity of the research subjects. The ethical researcher also needs to consider the cultural context of her research’.

The two words of which the term ‘lifestyle migration’ is formed serve multiple functions. Firstly, they seek to provide a theoretical consistency that is lacking in the habitual term ‘expat’, predominantly used by journalists in the English-speaking world (regarding the ideological function of the term ‘expat,’ we recommend reading Kunz, 2020). Secondly, the use of the term ‘lifestyle’ defines a boundary with other types of migration that are primarily motivated by economic or political factors. Thirdly, the use of ‘migration’ sets them apart and distinguishes these behaviours from those that could be labelled as tourist activities. This serves, on the one hand, to position researchers of ‘lifestyle migration’ under the umbrella of a more established

line of inquiry within social sciences (migration studies), and on the other, to assert that so-called lifestyle migrants hold a status different to that of long-stay tourists, who are often perceived as having more limited access to the complexity of the places they travel through (Gustafson, 2002).

The term began to gain popularity in academic literature following the publication of studies by Karen O'Reilly and Michaela Benson in 2009. While it initially appeared to overlap with the term 'retirement migration', which had been commonly used by researchers since the 1990s, it sought to establish itself as a distinct concept because it encompasses not only retirees but also individuals at various other stages of life. In any case, its conceptualisation underscores that the fundamental motivation for mobility is not economic (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009). However, a systematic review of case studies guided by this perspective reveals that lifestyle migrants are people with extremely diverse material situations. Nevertheless, their most obvious common denominator is their belonging to a group of nationalities, usually sharing certain whiteness (Knowles, 2005; Lundstrom, 2024).

In a world where mobility is simultaneously perceived as a valuable asset and—under certain conditions and depending on the bodies of those who (try to) move—as a behaviour subject to sanction or criminalisation, until recently lifestyle migrants are portrayed in the scientific literature as a social group that does not pose significant issues for the social cohesion of receiving communities. By explaining the life circumstances of these individuals in close alignment with their self-perception, any resemblance to contentious groups seeking to appropriate resources of other communities is avoided, let alone any suggestion that their behaviours might be reminiscent of neo-colonialist processes, as denounced in the pioneering research carried out in Spain and Mexico in the 1970s and early 1980s (Galán et al., 1977; Gaviria, 1974; Jurdao, 1979; Talavera, 1982). Obviously, so-called 'lifestyle migrants' do not escape the conflicts inherent to the interactions established in any social aggregate with a certain degree of complexity.

The confirmation of nationality as the primary analytical reference relegates other aspects to secondary positions. Specifically, it sidelines approaches that seek to investigate power relations and conflicts between populations with unequal resources on a global scale. This is one of the consequences of an epistemological approach that, consciously or unconsciously, fosters the formation of emotional bonds between the researcher and the subject of study based on national affiliations. The drift of some academic literature in this direction is well documented (Castilla-Polo et al., 2023). In contrast, the analytical weaknesses and ideological biases of this perspective have been recognised and criticised (Hayes, 2018; Huete et al., 2013). In this respect, it is not surprising that Matthew Hayes has produced some of the most interesting critical publications on the ideological aspects surrounding lifestyle migration, given that he is also one of the few researchers trained in an English-speaking culture who has approached the understanding of this phenomenon with (a) an advanced command of the languages of both the protagonists of these forms of residential mobility and that of the already established populations and (b) a sensitivity that comes from working with gentrification caused by this type of privileged mobilities (Hayes, 2020; Hayes & Tello, 2016).

In any case, we are aware that research on lifestyle migration has made significant progress over the past 15 years, incorporating crucial elements of critical reflexivity into its studies. Fortunately, more and more researchers trained in countries of origin for lifestyle migrants (Cranston & Duplan, 2023; Duplan & Cranston, 2023; Lundström, 2024; Lundström & Twine, 2011; Sigler & Wachsmuth, 2020; Spencer, 2025) approach their studies on lifestyle migration and other privileged mobilities by interpreting them as problematic realities embedded in the system of power relations promoted by the capitalist world-economy—to use Immanuel Wallerstein’s expression—, without losing sight of the territorial imbalances and social inequalities that these mobilities generate or amplify. In this regard, the works of Hayes are just one example.

4.2.2 Digital Nomads: Ambassadors of the Neoliberal Ethics

In recent years, digital nomadism has emerged as an expression of a lifestyle based on mobility, blurring the boundaries between work, leisure, and tourism. Its protagonists are the embodiment of an enviable and respected global worker-consumer: people with high qualifications who perform their jobs remotely thanks to digital technologies and, at the same time, consumers who attract the interest of real estate developers and managers of regions competing to position themselves as attractive places for these very nomads (Lacárcel et al., 2024; Mancinelli & Bozzi, 2026; Zerva et al., 2023).

Presented as a type of privileged mobility, they are portrayed in the media as something akin to a new creative class, as autonomous and flexible individuals who choose to pursue happiness through the freedom offered by technocapitalism (Polson, 2019; Suarez-Villa, 2016). Digital nomads are the new ambassadors of the neoliberal ethic (Sequera, 2025). Their ‘courage’, their entrepreneurial attitude, and their ability to control the pace of their lives are based on a citizenship status that is inextricably linked to access to certain visas and ‘powerful’ passports. However, having an administrative document that certifies the possibility of movement depends on the place of birth, family origins, and economic resources of each person (Hermann & Paris, 2020; Mancinelli, 2020; Mancinelli & Molz, 2024). Some individuals must prove, when required, that they do not threaten the social cohesion of populations that have not yet utilised mobility as a form of capital and remain wary of outsiders. In this context, the non-competition of digital nomads in local labour markets and the perception that they primarily bring external income are often considered key factors facilitating their acceptance (Sequera, 2025).

The socio-economic profiles that are grouped under the term digital nomadism encompass a wide range of situations, but in the social construction of their image, there is a clear identification with the principles of anarcho-capitalism (Brown, 1997). The institutional network of states, built up over decades with the aim of managing collective resources, gives way to the only tangible and unquestionable realities: the individual and the market, whose interactions are supported by the possibilities

offered by recent technologies. Thompson (2019) explains how the construction of a digital nomad identity is perceived by its protagonists as having a somewhat countercultural spirit. In practice, the exaltation of the entrepreneurial self and constant innovation only serves to reinforce existing social inertia, following a ritualistic logic subordinate to the interests of the prevailing political-economic order (Bröckling, 2015; Heath & Potter, 2004). In this sense, research by Mancinelli (2020) highlights the association of the digital nomad with a lifestyle largely financed by self-branding and the commodification of everyday experiences.

Again, as with lifestyle migrants, the assertion of a collective identity aims to nullify any suspicion of a threat to social cohesion. However, the links that so-called digital nomads establish with the places where they settle are often ephemeral and tend to benefit economic activities that are not oriented towards addressing the social problems affecting permanent residents. In fact, these problems can sometimes be exacerbated by the instrumentalisation of local economies by real estate deals that, collectively, create more problems than they solve (McElroy, 2020; Sequera, 2025; Sigler & Wachsmuth, 2020).

Digital nomads are not a social category; they are a market segment (Mancinelli & Bozzi, 2026). Their recognition as a social group coexists with their detachment from the places they travel through. If they fulfil any kind of function as a collective subject, it is to embody the glorification of disaffiliation between the individual and the social reality. Society, as a community of individuals affected by common interests and problems linked to a defined territory, does not warrant further attention than may be required of any situation that is expected to be merely temporary and is, in any case, far removed from the objectives that require personal involvement. In this sense, there are no major differences between the sophistication ascribed to digital nomadism and the vulgarity attributed to mass tourism.

The rise of mobile lifestyles challenges the viability of collective institutions and political systems traditionally based on more 'settled' forms of living (Buhr, 2023). If we consider mobility as a form of unequally distributed capital (Bauman, 1998), we must acknowledge that it generates new forms of social exclusion, which also affect digital nomads. Far from being a homogeneous group, digital nomads encompass a wide range of socioeconomic situations (Mancinelli, 2020). This necessitates an exploration of the relationships we establish with the places we inhabit, an analysis of their broader repercussions, and a deeper understanding of the influence exerted by the political economy of neoliberalism.

Regarding this, it would be beneficial to advance the study of the digital nomad lifestyle (and its supposed countercultural nature) by investigating the types of social commitments these individuals establish. The fact of being physically located in places distant from those with whom we establish our most significant emotional and political bonds generates unforeseen consequences. Some of these effects ultimately impact the daily lives of people geographically closest to digital nomads, even though, at the same time, they exist in a very distant affective universe.

4.2.3 *Tourism as a Problem*

In recent years, expressions of dissent towards tourism have proliferated (Milano et al., 2024). The rise in social discontent is often linked to the increase in tourists visiting specific places. In view of this situation, some experts argue that the issues are less about the volume of tourist flows and more about the way they are managed (Ribeiro de Almeida et al., 2020). In this way, it could be argued that tourism is only perceived as a threat to social stability when those responsible for its management are incapable of implementing the available technical solutions. We agree with this argument, but we believe it only explains part of the reality.

Capitalist societies in the twenty-first century are grounded in a liberal pragmatism that prioritises the virtues of the market as a mechanism for regulating the lives of individuals, and places trust in technological innovation as the most effective solution to the challenges arising from market expansion (Reynolds & Szerszynski, 2012). In a context of hypermobility and residential fluidity, the difficulties that tourists and residents (and the multitude of profiles in between) face in their daily practices due to the reconfiguration of the space of social interaction are redefined as private matters: the difficulties in accessing decent housing; the growing precarisation of labour, especially in the tourism economy; the disappearance of vernacular culture; uncivil behaviour, etc. Their solution is a matter for each individual and their ability to make the right choices from a supposedly wide range of options available to them (Fletcher, 2025). For its part, the state remains a key actor in channelling power and responsibilities toward market forces (Harvey, 2005). However, the false ideological neutrality associated with technical solutions and market freedom does not resolve the underlying malaise (Birch, 2020). Instead, it contributes to reducing the possibility of agreeing on solutions to social problems within collective frameworks that ensure the participation of the habitual residents—i.e., those who perceive the space they inhabit not as a sum of elements that are supplied and consumed, but as an environment that, primarily, should enable a prosperous and healthy life from an economic, environmental, and social perspective (Brandajs & Russo, 2023).

The ability of tourism to alter the physical space, customs, and norms of coexistence that regulate social life forces a reorganisation of the personal and collective identities of people who reside in tourist destinations, particularly those who have been socialised in these environments. This situation is the consequence of an adaptation of spaces and their urban infrastructures to the interests of the tourist business and the real estate economy that accompanies it—a process that has been further amplified in recent years by platform capitalism. The result is the creation of a new cosmopolitan environment shaped by neoliberal rationality (Rossi, 2019; Young & Markham, 2020).

The emergence of social opposition to tourism in certain cities is not only related to how tourist mobility is managed, and the pressure it places on public resources and infrastructure, but also to several other factors. These include the perceived role of tourism in the modernisation of the area (Mantecón, 2010); the existence of a civil society capable of integrating criticism of tourism's negative effects within

its protest agenda, successfully advocating the utility of collective action (Crespi-Vallbona & López-Villanueva, 2024); and the perception of tourism's influence on the precariousness of local labour markets (Mantecón et al., 2025). Most importantly, it concerns the effect that the expansion of tourist accommodation has on the difficulty faced by regular residents (whether or not they are connected to the tourism economy) in accessing decent housing (Milano et al., 2023; Ribeiro de Almeida et al., 2020).

Therefore, the perception of tourism as a threat to social cohesion is related to conflicting interpretations of the meaning of the past, present, and future expectations of a society (Kamble & Bouchon, 2016; Mantecón et al., 2023, 2025). It is also linked to debates about the appropriate management of resources; to conflicting arguments about the kind of cities we want to live in; and to the difficulty of reaching agreements that facilitate coexistence among social groups with opposing interests.

Furthermore, it is associated with the tensions that arise when trying to reconcile the objectives of business and the creation of cosmopolitan spaces with respect for established ways of life and identities in specific territories. Resolving these problems is no easy task, as it requires unmasking private interests that are not explicit and exploring points of agreement between different conceptions of justice (Mantecón & Huete, 2021).

If we set aside the descriptive studies on the social perception of tourism guided by Social Exchange Theory—most of which lack a genuine political problematisation—we can observe how, behind the dichotomy between, on the one hand, the proposal of liberal pragmatism and, on the other, the right of those affected by the impacts of tourism to make decisions, a variety of positions can be discerned. Several types of legitimisers, innovators, resignationists, critics, and subversives compete with each other to influence public opinion and define the rules of the game (Mantecón & Velasco, 2020).

The social problems and controversy that have permeated the public debate on tourism in recent years express the conflict and politicisation that surround it. They also reflect its incorporation into the agenda of issues that shape the broader discussion about the meanings we assign to different types of human mobility. In the case of tourist mobility, the discussion about what constitutes privileged mobility is inevitably linked to the debate about who has the privilege to decide how urban spaces and infrastructures should be used.

4.2.4 Brexit and the Redefinition of Privilege

The following section is part of an ongoing research project in which the authors of this chapter are involved. Its aim is to analyse the influence of Brexit on the attitudes and behaviour of the British population in southern Spain.

The ties (both administrative and emotional) and residential strategies that the British establish outside their country give rise to a variety of life projects, where the number of days spent in Spain each year fluctuates depending on their stage of life, their family circumstances, changes in their economic resources or modifications

in the legal framework. The disruption of Brexit redefined the rules regulating the possibilities to maintain a transnational lifestyle, the impact of what is known as the 90/180 law being of particular interest. In December 2020, the Official State Gazette published Royal Decree-Law 38/2020 approving measures to adapt to the status of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland as a third country following the end of the transition period set out in the Withdrawal Agreement from the EU (BOE, 2020). As a consequence of the new legal framework, as of 1 January 2021, UK nationals travelling to the EU and the Schengen area are treated as third-country nationals and, therefore, subject to controls at Schengen Area borders. Among other effects, this means that stays in EU member states cannot exceed 90 days (not necessarily consecutive) within any 180-day period, considering the Schengen Area as an integrated space of free movement and, therefore, applying the rule not to a single country but on a supranational scale. Thus, it does not matter which country within the Schengen Area one accesses for the count of the number of permitted days of stay to begin. In the simplest scenario, it could be summarised by saying that after spending a full 3 months in Spanish territory, it is necessary to leave the Schengen Area and wait another 3 months before re-entering. Violation of this rule places the individual in an irregular situation that leaves them liable to administrative sanctions. The rule applies equally to those who own real estate, although if the properties were acquired after 2014 for a value of at least 500,000 euros, the process of applying for residency through the Golden Visa scheme is provided, the basic requirements for its renewal being to maintain the initial investment and visit Spain at least once a year (BOE, 2013). This promotes reception into an international environment as a privileged class (Holleran, 2021).

Against this backdrop, there is increasing uncertainty about the reactions of the different types of British residents (Giner-Monfort & Huete, 2021). The dominant discourse of the interviewees interprets Brexit as a problematic reality that, however, involves varying degrees of severity depending on the nature of the connection established with Spain. Of the interviewees, both those who are registered and those who are not understand that the most disruptive impacts on daily life are concentrated in the latter group. Thus, those who are registered recognise undesired changes but, nevertheless, perceive them as manageable. These changes do not significantly alter the pattern of their social life nor their evaluation of their experience in Spain.

However, in the case of those who are not registered, legislative changes have led them to reorganise their life plans, the application of the 90/180 law being the main cause. The implications of this regulation cause them inconvenience and, regardless of their opinion about Brexit, their interest is focused on having the law changed. In fact, several of these interviewees do not hesitate to consider Brexit to have had a more critical impact on their lives than COVID-19, directing their frustration and irritation towards British, Spanish, and European political institutions, which they accuse of not taking action to solve their issues. In this regard, this group considers the ownership of property in Spain to be a distinguishing factor which, irrespective of its economic value, should warrant preferential treatment from the authorities (Huete et al., 2025).

Disputes and power relations between major political and economic structures change the rules of the game and subsequently alter the meaning of privileged mobilities. This forces life projects and lifestyles to be modified, producing tensions in the social perception of certain groups towards others. Once again, certain identities become threatened as their status is questioned. The same behaviours that are perceived one way 1 month may be viewed differently the next, with differences between individuals becoming more pronounced. In the case discussed, the conflict resulting from the perceived lack of coherence between the privileges associated with possessing a certain level of economic capital and those derived from belonging to a particular nationality is of particular interest.

4.3 Conclusion: Mobility at the Heart of the Controversy

The four situations described above relate to very different realities in which ideological controversies of varying intensity may be observed. Yet they all share a common denominator: the conflicting relationship between human mobility and the meaning of terms such as privilege, social cohesion, and identity. This indicates the relevance of approaching privileged mobilities as complex realities and advancing our understanding of them by developing approaches that integrate both their material and immaterial dimensions. The success of these approaches requires the application of analytical strategies aimed at deepening the connections between mobility behaviour and other social processes, such as the dynamics of real estate markets or the rise of authoritarian populism.

In this regard, we should be wary of the temptation to judge residential behaviours solely on the basis of their being labelled as tourism or migration. Nor do we recommend approaches whose main objective is to promote the benefits of a world made up of globalised workers and consumers who are disconnected from the social problems affecting the places where they are located. If we aim to carry out independent and critical research, we need to develop perspectives with a cosmopolitan vision of human mobility and social life, where the analysis of ethical aspects helps to overcome reductionist frameworks that are of little use in the twenty-first century.

When we highlight the need to place ethical aspects at the centre of the discussion, we immediately encounter a political scenario whose defining feature is the penetration of modern nation-states by the neoliberal market economic logic. This context demands taking a stance on the meanings we assign to cities. In them, we find social actors convinced that urban spaces must create the most favourable conditions for doing business. Alongside them coexist others who, in contrast, believe that the city is the natural environment for articulating the struggle for social justice. The latter defend the rights of those whose quality of life is threatened by the commoditization of housing and public spaces. Naturally, between these two attitudes, we observe a variety of intermediate positions constructing and reconstructing the ideas of privilege in mobilities. If Alexis de Tocqueville (1942) advocated for a form of collective individualism, —emphasising the affirmation of individual identity

through active engagement with diverse groups—, some authors argue that modern capitalism encourages a negative individualism where individuals disengage from their social responsibilities (Castel, 1995). Consequently, societies are increasingly shaped by a culture of market individualism, which promotes autonomous and self-centred individuals (Dumont, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1994). The collective individualism championed by a liberal thinker like Tocqueville only recognised success when it is consistent with positive collaboration, the formation of social connections, and the creation of a positive societal impact.

All of which forces us to reconsider the usefulness of concepts such as local and global, natural and cultural, or us and them. Rather than being analysed as explanatory variables, these dichotomies should be seen as social and political constructions that serve the interests of actors who try to define reality in the way that best serves their own interests. For example, as we have noted, the portrayal of digital nomadism as an innovative and transnational lifestyle serves to mask problematic realities. Similarly, the framing of tourism as an activity generating antagonisms between visitors and residents seems overly simplistic and overly dualistic. The inherent complexity of modern societies requires approaches that differentiate between actors—both individual and collective—with diverse and variable objectives and relationships. In this way, it becomes possible to identify alliances and tensions among groups composed of people with heterogeneous socio-demographic characteristics and motivations.

The situations discussed bring up to date long-standing disputes about who is sufficiently tied to a territory and who possesses the necessary resources to reside there without jeopardising its social stability. Similarly, and indirectly, these disputes are related to deeper discussions about the limits of human mobility and, ultimately, about the acceptance or rejection of individuals based on their country of origin, cultural traits, economic resources, or socio-demographic characteristics. The analysis of the connections between the affirmation of identities, the cohesion of societies, and privileged mobilities opens new lines of research. These should develop epistemological perspectives capable of integrating the study of ethical aspects or the emotional dimension of social life—such as the influence of fear, shame, or nostalgia—with the transformations occurring in the world of work or the organisation of cities. Finally, all of this is conditioned by the actions of individuals, groups, and organisations with differing and unstable capacities. Power relations always permeate the object of study.

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Chapter 5

Intra-racial Privilege: Japanese Migrant Families Negotiating Global Racial Hierarchies in Malaysia



Hiroki Igarashi

5.1 Introduction

Privileged mobilities from the Global North to the Global South have long been characterised by an assumption of whiteness – ranging from expatriates and mobile professionals to lifestyle migrants. However, after Robertson and Roberts (2022) highlighted ‘a need to decouple binary thinking that associates movements from North to South wholly with Whiteness and privilege’ (p. 8), recent studies have shed light on a more nuanced understanding of privileged mobilities, including non-white individuals (Adler, 2022; Beck et al., 2024; Trinidad & Faas, 2024). This chapter examines non-white North–South family migration, specifically, the parent-accompanied migration of relatively affluent Japanese families to Malaysia for their children’s early study abroad (ESA), their own lifestyle preferences, and risk aversion towards domestic uncertainties.

In Southeast Asian countries, particularly Malaysia, Japanese migrants have been increasingly opting for *rongusutei* (long stays, a form of tourism or migration mobility characterised by prolonged stays in overseas locations) (Ono, 2015). While the initial wave mainly consisted of retirees, the emerging trend, which began in the early 2010s, involves family migrants with school-age children. This form of migration is called *kyōiku-ijū* (education migration), *boshi-ijū* (mother–child migration), or *oyako-ryūgaku* (parent–child study abroad). The children attend international schools – English-medium educational institutions with curricula that differ from Malaysia’s national curriculum. This intra-Asia education migration trend evolved from the earlier trend observed in Japan and other East Asian countries towards Western Anglophone countries, such as the US, Canada, and Australia (Finch & Kim, 2012; Igarashi, 2015; Lee & Koo, 2006; Waters, 2002; Yeoh et al., 2005; Zhou, 1998).

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The motivations behind Japanese families' education migration extend beyond solely educational pursuits to other factors, such as investment opportunities, retirement plans, the desire for a more balanced and fulfilling lifestyle, and risk aversion towards domestic uncertainties such as natural disasters and the perceived stagnation of Japan's socio-economic systems (Igarashi, 2020; Koh, 2017; Shakuto, 2025). In this study, as the families' reasons for relocating to Malaysia extend beyond education migration, I refer to them as 'Japanese migrant families'. However, I use Japanese education migration to Malaysia as a case of non-white North–South mobility and examine the families' narratives – particularly those of the parents – to understand how they experience a sense of privilege within global racial hierarchies through their relocation to Malaysia (Benson, 2013; Scuzzarello, 2020). Specifically, I conceptualise their experience as a form of intra-racial privilege, defining their 'middling' status as a dynamic navigation between inter-racial marginality as non-white individuals and intra-racial privilege as citizens of a dominant Asian power.

Focusing on the case of Japanese migrant families in Malaysia is important for two reasons. First, their experiences in the Global South offer valuable insights into the complexities of non-white privilege, as Japan is not historically a white-majority country nor an English-speaking nation, and is geographically situated outside Europe and North America, in contrast to many nations in the Global North. Second, Japanese migrant families' privileged experience in the Global South has the potential to uncover 'gradients of privilege' (Buhr & Zaban, [in press](#)). The term refers to the varying levels of advantages and disadvantages stemming from an unequal distribution of rights and benefits based on social categories within historical and current inequalities. Crucially, these gradients cannot be fully explained through the lens of privileged whiteness. Instead, they require an analysis of intra-racial privilege – the advantages afforded to Japanese migrants within a regional hierarchy that offsets their vulnerabilities in the 'global West'. This is because Japan, similar to major Western powers, has a history of colonising other Asian countries from the late nineteenth century, and reminiscences of this history would enable the analysis of Japanese migrant families' experience in relation to racialised hierarchies from a postcolonial perspective (Benson, 2013; Fechter & Walsh, 2010; Koh, 2015).

The following section reviews the relevant literature on the shifting focus of privileged migration from whiteness to middling privileges, East Asian families' education migration, Japan's regional history and ideologies of racial hierarchies, and a historical overview of Malaysia–Japan relations. Then, the research methodology is presented. The next section presents excerpts and analyses of migrants' narratives of relocation to Malaysia and how they negotiate their privileged positions within global racial hierarchies. The conclusion summarises the key findings and highlights the theoretical contributions of this chapter.

5.2 Literature Review & Contexts

5.2.1 *Rethinking Privileged Migration: From Whiteness to Middling Privileges*

While research on privileged migration has primarily focused on mobile professionals such as expatriates (Beaverstock, 2002), scholars have broadened their scope to include expatriates' families (Yeoh & Khoo, 1998). Additionally, they have examined the growing phenomena of lifestyle migration (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009), residential tourism (O'Reilly, 2007), investment migration (Koh, 2017), and, more recently, digital nomadism (Mancinelli, 2020). As these diverse mobilities increasingly involve movements from the Global North to the Global South, scholars have critically engaged with the enduring legacies of colonial power to understand contemporary inequalities. Specifically, Benson (2013), Fechter and Walsh (2010), and Scuzzarello (2020) explored these migration patterns within a North–South context through a postcolonial lens, analysing 'how racial hierarchies and power inequalities persist, as well as how they are being reconfigured and challenged' (Fechter & Walsh, 2010, p. 1198). While studies of North–South migration from a postcolonial perspective have predominantly focused on white individuals from Europe and North America – stemming from the impacts of European colonial expansion during the eras of Exploration and Imperialism – postcoloniality is understood as 'going beyond formal relationships of colonisation, recognising that its reach extends even into contexts that were not directly colonised' (Benson, 2013, p. 316; Hall, 1996). Despite this theoretical potential, the field has long remained constrained by a binary focus on white/non-white relations. Such a focus has often obscured the nuances of non-white contexts – specifically the Japanese case – where colonial legacies continue to shape hierarchical intra-racial relations among individuals belonging to the same broad racial category.

However, after Robertson and Roberts (2022) pinpointed 'a need to decouple binary thinking that associates movements from North to South wholly with Whiteness and privilege and South to North with racialisation and marginalisation' (p. 8), scholars (Adler, 2022; Beck et al., 2024; Robertson & Roberts, 2022; Trinidad & Faas, 2024) have recently begun examining the experiences of migrants with 'middling privileges' (Robertson & Roberts, 2022; Sidhu & Dall'Alba, 2017). These migrants possess a medium level of privileges across the intersecting spectra of race, ethnicity, class, and other social markers. Research on these migrants – often situated within a broader global middle-class framework (Beck et al., 2024) – has shed light on the complex and contradictory nature of their migration experiences, highlighting the nuanced interplay between privilege and precariousness (Mancinelli, 2020; Robertson & Roberts, 2022). This interplay underscores that even individuals with economic and educational advantages may encounter vulnerabilities and challenges related to their social identities, particularly when migrating across racial and cultural boundaries. By focusing on these 'middling' experiences, scholars can uncover what Buhr and Zaban (in press) term 'gradients of privilege' within the broader study of

privilege in migration. In this study, I define ‘middling privilege’ as a dynamic navigation between inter-racial marginality within the global racial hierarchy – stemming from vulnerabilities as non-white and non-English-speaking individuals – and intra-racial privilege within the regional Asian hierarchy, characterised by the superiority derived from being part of a developed nation and a former colonial power.

5.2.2 East Asian Families’ Education Migration and Privilege in Migration

While family migration for children’s education is not uncommon, family-accompanied ESA from East Asia, observed since the 1990s, has attracted scholarly attention due to its strategic transnationalisation of family life (Yeoh et al., 2005). A primary form of this phenomenon, exemplified by the ‘wild geese families’ of South Korea, involves the father remaining in the home country to work while the mother and children migrate abroad for educational purposes (Finch & Kim, 2012; Lee & Koo, 2006). This transnational arrangement is seen to reflect the strengthened family ideology of fathers as breadwinners and mothers as the children’s primary caretakers. The driving force behind this trend is the prioritisation of the children’s accumulation of global cultural capital – specifically, English fluency and cosmopolitan openness – through schooling in Western Anglophone countries (Kim, 2011). Initially, this migration pattern focused on North America (Waters, 2002; Zhou, 1998). However, with the global expansion of international schools in the twenty-first century, families have increasingly sought more affordable and visa-accessible destinations in Europe and Southeast Asia (Beck et al., 2024).

In the existing literature on East Asian families’ parent-accompanied ESA to Singapore and Malaysia, the parents describe these migration destinations as strategic, affordable, and comfortable sites for their children’s international schooling (Huang & Yeoh, 2005; Igarashi, 2020; Kang, 2012). They emphasise that their children can adjust easily to these locations due to the local perceptions of racial similarity with East Asians and the lack of discrimination. Huang and Yeoh et al. (2005) reported that Chinese ‘study mothers’ who migrated to Singapore with their children adapted easily due to the widespread use of the Chinese language. South Korean and Japanese families (Igarashi, 2020; Kang, 2012) viewed Singapore and Malaysia as affordable and strategic study destinations for both English and Mandarin Chinese – languages perceived as either regional cultural capital (Igarashi, 2020) or global linguistic capital (Lee, 2019). Kang (2012) noted that South Korea’s mother-led ESA to Singapore – where ethnic Chinese form the majority – often involves South Koreans blending in with the Chinese Singaporean population to exercise a form of intra-racial privilege by positioning themselves at the top of Singapore’s racial hierarchy, facilitating a smoother experience. Furthermore, because South Koreans in Singapore are less likely to experience the white gaze and potential discrimination (which are prevalent in Western contexts), they often view their time in Singapore

as a ‘comfortable’ stepping stone or ‘practice round’ for future Western destinations (Abelmann et al., 2015; Kim, 2015).

Kang’s (2012) study on Korean migrant families in Singapore is valuable for illustrating how racial proximity serves as a resource for intra-racial privilege within regional mobility. However, the migration of Japanese families to Malaysia highlights a distinct dimension of privilege, as it represents a more pronounced North–South mobility involving a shared colonial history, which enables analysis from a postcolonial perspective. The next subsection explores the historical background of Japan and the broader Asian region relevant to this study, along with the ideology of racial hierarchies in Japan.

5.2.3 *Japan’s Regional History and Ideology of Racial Hierarchies*

Examining Japan’s regional history and ideology of racial hierarchies sheds light on Japanese migrants’ perceptions of their experiences in Malaysia. First, regarding its regional history – during the age of imperialism, amid the global scramble for colonies spearheaded by European powers, Japan solidified its position as an imperial force in Asia through military successes in the Sino–Japanese War of 1894–1895 and the Russo–Japanese War of 1904–1905. By the end of World War II, its territory had expanded extensively, stretching from Burma in the west to the Gilbert Islands in the east, and as far south as Indonesia and the Solomon Islands. Despite relinquishing its territorial holdings after the war, it experienced rapid economic development. Initially, it leveraged other Asian countries as both resource bases and export markets, thereby fostering deep core–periphery relationships with them through economic cooperation.

Second, pertaining to Japan’s ideology of racial hierarchies, the late nineteenth-century Japanese Empire’s militaristic expansion envisioned a ‘ladder of civilisations’, as expressed in its slogan, *Datsu-A Nyu-O* (Leave Asia, Enter Europe). This ideology called for Japan to abandon its Asian identity, adopt Western civilisation, place Western powers at the top of the ladder, and position itself just below such powers. Japanese intellectuals – seeking to emulate Western powers and justify their imperial ambitions – promoted the idea of a unique and superior ‘Japanese’ race. This aspiration was rooted in an implicit acceptance of the following equation: ‘West = Civilised = White = Ruler’. However, this worldview inherently carried the corollary that ‘Asia = Barbarian = Non-white = Ruled’ (Oguma, 1998, pp. 7–8). This race would assert its superiority over indigenous Ainu and Okinawans, and later, *Zainichi* Koreans (colonial migrants and their descendants) and other Asians, solidifying Japan’s place above other Asian nations in the prevailing racial hierarchy (Siddle, 2011; Sugimoto, 2020; Yamashiro, 2013).

Some studies on postwar Japanese tourism have suggested Japanese tourists’ gaze upon Southeast Asia. Yamashita (2009) found that this gaze is shaped by a complex

blend of ‘Japanese Orientalism’ and the legacy of colonialism. It constructs Southeast Asia as both familiar and exotic, allowing Japanese tourists to experience a sense of nostalgia for a perceived ‘lost’ Japan while simultaneously reinforcing their own modernity and economic superiority. The romanticised image of Southeast Asia as a ‘paradise’ for relaxation and healing further exemplifies this phenomenon, often obscuring the region’s complex historical and contemporary realities, including the impact of Japan’s colonisation. Yokota (2006) discovered – from his study of Japanese men’s perceptions and attitudes towards sex workers in Thailand, which has been one of the major sex tourism destinations in Southeast Asia since the late 1970s – that some Japanese men felt a sense of economic and racial superiority over Thai women, which motivated some of these men to engage in commercial sex, viewing it as an easy, casual, and even gamelike activity compared to their interactions with Japanese women.

5.3 Malaysia – Japan Relations: A Historical Overview

Malaysia, with a population of about 34.1 million, is often described as an ‘ethnocracy’ due to its policies mandating citizens to identify with one of the following racial groups from birth: Malays (who, together with various indigenous peoples, form the ‘Bumiputra’ category – meaning ‘sons of the soil’ – and collectively constitute 70.4% of the population), Chinese (22.4%), and Indians (6.5%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024). Malays are considered the dominant ethnic group, enjoying certain privileges and advantages enshrined in the Constitution (Wade, 2009).

Before Malaysia’s European colonisation, it was ‘Malaya’ – a region of numerous independent sultanates, each with its own distinct culture and trade networks. In particular, the Sultanate of Malacca, which flourished in the fifteenth century, served as a vital hub for maritime commerce and the spread of Islam throughout the region. Malaya was later successively colonised by several European powers – the Portuguese (1511–1641), the Dutch (1641–1824), and the British (1824–1924) – before it was occupied by Japan for 3 years during World War II (1942–1945). The Japanese military governed the land by collaborating with Malays and Indians while oppressing those deemed ‘enemies’ (Chinese, British, Australians, etc.), leading to postwar ethnic tension between Malays and Chinese. Consequently, each ethnic group separately undertook efforts to preserve war memories (Watanabe, 2019). After World War II, the British regained control of Malaya (1945–1957).

Malaya gained independence from British rule in August 1957 and became ‘Malaysia’ in September 1963, when it merged with Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak into a single federation (although Singapore became independent in 1965). As Malay nationalism surged, Malaysia’s ties with the UK transitioned from subservience to collaboration. However, Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia’s fourth prime minister (1981–2003), diverged from policies that favoured the British, pursuing instead an economic strategy that reduced Malaysia’s dependence on the West and strengthened

its ties with Japan. Furthermore, Mahathir championed a revised historical narrative that positioned Japan's occupation as a catalyst for Malay nationalism. This perspective gained prominence in Malaysian history textbooks (Hack & Blackburn, 2012) and has contributed to a more positive image of Japan in Malaysia, creating a socio-political environment conducive to intra-racial privilege for Japanese. In 1982, Mahathir also launched the 'Look East Policy', aiming to boost the country's economy by drawing lessons from Japan's and South Korea's economic development.

Since the late 1990s, Malaysia has been a popular destination for Japanese retirees. Surveys by the Long Stay Foundation of Japan (2024) indicate that the country has consistently ranked as a top destination for relocation since 2006. This appeal is due to Malaysia's favourable immigration policies for affluent individuals from Asia and the UK, allowing extended stays. In 1987, Malaysia introduced the 'Silver Hair Programme', which encouraged Japanese and Western Europeans aged 50 and above to relocate to the country for stays of 5–10 years. In 2002, Malaysia replaced the programme with the 'Malaysia My Second Home (MM2H) programme', offering a renewable 10 year Social Visit Pass and multiple-entry visa to foreigners who meet specific financial criteria. Acquiring an MM2H visa requires substantial family assets, indicating that its holders are generally more affluent. Before the COVID-19 pandemic (with an exchange rate of approximately 1 USD to 4.2 MYR as of March 1, 2020), the MM2H programme required applicants under 50 to hold MYR 500,000 (around USD 118,650) in assets and earn a minimum monthly income of MYR 10,000 (around USD 2373). Additionally, they needed to deposit at least MYR 300,000 (around USD 71,190) in a Malaysian bank. Following the pandemic, these financial requirements have risen significantly, further limiting the programme to wealthier individuals.

In 2012, the southern part of the Malaysian state of Johor, which borders Singapore, emerged in Japanese media as a viable alternative for international education, shifting the focus from traditional Western Anglophone destinations (Igarashi, 2020). This trend stemmed from a confluence of factors. One factor was a shift in Malaysian education policy, allowing local students to enrol in international schools. Another factor was the launch of the regional project Iskandar Malaysia, which aimed to boost economic growth by encouraging investment and migration from Asia. As part of this effort, the region sought to establish itself as an education hub by inviting Western universities and international schools to set up their Asian campuses there (Igarashi, 2020; Koh, 2017). While other Southeast Asian destinations – such as Singapore, Thailand, Bali (Indonesia), and the Philippines – are also popular for education migration, Malaysia has remained the top choice in Asia. Integrating information from agents in various regions of Malaysia, the author predicted that by March 2025, at least 1000 Japanese families would be residing in Malaysia for ESA.

The literature reviewed in this section provides the historical and theoretical foundation for examining non-white North–South migration from a postcolonial perspective. By analysing the narratives of Japanese migrant families in Malaysia, I will discuss how they navigate intra-racial privilege – a dynamic position that leverages regional historical 'consonance' to offset inter-racial marginality within the global hierarchy. Ultimately, this chapter explores how these families negotiate being 'the

same but respected', revealing 'how racial hierarchies and power inequalities persist, as well as how they are being reconfigured and challenged' in a postcolonial context (Fechter & Walsh, 2010, p. 1198).

5.4 Methodology

Between 2016 and 2025, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 56 parents from Japanese families who had migrated to Malaysia with their school-age children. Given the absence of an official registry of such families, I used snowball sampling to identify and recruit participants in the three major areas of relocation from Japan: southern Johor, Kuala Lumpur, and Penang Island. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) at least one parent in the family held Japanese nationality; (2) the parent was not a company-assigned expatriate (*chūzaiin*); and (3) the child was enrolled in a preschool, primary school, or secondary school in Malaysia. Corporate expatriates were excluded because their relocation is mandated by Japanese companies, leaving them with limited agency in selecting Malaysia as a destination. By contrast, this study focuses on self-initiated migration. In addition, I also interviewed four international school principals in Malaysia and six individuals working in the migration industry. Additionally, I attended several seminars in Tokyo that promoted education migration from Japan to Malaysia. The interviews with the parents from migrant families were conducted in Japanese and typically lasted between 25 min and 2 h. Interviews were audio-recorded only when permission was granted by the participants, and were subsequently transcribed in their entirety for analysis. The interview topics included the timing of relocation and visa status, socioeconomic backgrounds, the trajectory of their migration, local social networks and friendships, children's education and schooling, and future aspirations. All individual names used in this chapter are pseudonyms to protect the participants' confidentiality.

In terms of socioeconomic backgrounds, all the interviewed parents were 'relatively affluent', except for two single mothers who moved to Malaysia through a local hiring scheme. The majority of the research participants were small- to mid-size business owners (more likely fathers' occupation), though some held elite white-collar positions or were involved in real estate. These participants inherently represent the 'middling' nature of contemporary Japanese privileged migration, as defined by the structural constraints of the destination itself. Their status is marked by a specific economic threshold: as many participants disclosed, they could not afford to relocate to Western Anglophone destinations such as Hawaii – a symbolic pinnacle for the Japanese privileged families (Igarashi, 2015). This indicates that the migration flow to Malaysia is characterised by a structural self-selection process, attracting those who possess sufficient capital for international education but encounter a financial 'ceiling' in the West. By choosing Malaysia, these families perform a strategic navigation to maintain a privileged lifestyle and educational access that would remain unsustainable in more expensive Western contexts. Many interviewees expressed

discomfort with speaking English in daily life, highlighting their reliance on bilingual migration agents for assistance with school visits, housing arrangements, and the overall initial settlement process in Malaysia (Cranston et al., 2018; Koh, 2017). The interview data were analysed using MaxQDA software, employing an open-coding process to identify and develop emerging themes related to privilege and identity.

The migration patterns of Japanese families with children moving to Malaysia are gendered. Specifically, of the 56 parents interviewed, 35 were mothers from mother-child families, where the husbands often remained in Japan as breadwinners. The remaining parents included 16 from two-parent-child families, one case of a grandmother-mother-child family, one case of a grandmother-child family, and two cases of father-child families. In terms of visa type, 15 of the 56 parents held MM2H visas, 32 had guardian visas, and 9 possessed working visas. Most MM2H holders are from two-parent-child families, while most mothers in mother-child migrant families hold guardian visas. As Malaysia grants guardian visas to single parents accompanying their school-enrolled children, this visa type is more likely to be selected in cases of single-parent migration with children.

5.5 Analysis

This section analyses the narratives of Japanese migrant families to explore how they negotiate their ‘middling’ status within global and regional racial hierarchies. By conceptualising their experience as intra-racial privilege, I argue that their position is a dynamic navigation between inter-racial marginality in the ‘global West’ and structural centrality within the Asian hierarchy. This concept highlights how these families strategically leverage regional historical and cultural ‘consonance’ to offset the perceived ‘risks’ of racial marginality encountered in Western Anglophone contexts. Ultimately, this navigation enables them to secure a ‘safe’ international education for their children, maintaining their social standing as respected Asians while circumventing the racial vulnerabilities they might otherwise encounter in the ‘global West’.

In the following analysis, I focus on the emic and binary codes – specifically ‘pro-Japanese’ (*shin-nichi*) versus ‘anti-Japanese’ (*han-nichi*) and ‘comfortable/safe’ (*anshin/anzen*) versus ‘risky/dangerous’ (*kiken*) – which function as essential cognitive tools for these families to interpret their positions within global racial hierarchies. These binary codes serve as the vocabulary through which migrants navigate their ‘middling’ status, allowing them to reconcile their global vulnerabilities with their regional advantages. The analysis proceeds in four interrelated stages. First, I examine how the marketing of Malaysia as a ‘pro-Japanese’ destination relies on an infrastructure of selective memory. Second, I elucidate the strategic (re)valuation of Malaysia as a ‘non-authentic’ but affordable site for international education. Third, I discuss their perception of Western Anglophone countries as ‘risky/dangerous’, illustrating how concerns over racial discrimination not only reinforce the choice of Malaysia but also legitimise it as a morally sound decision. Finally, I illuminate how

these families construct narratives of being ‘the same but respected’, a position that reveals the distinctive manifestation of their intra-racial privilege.

5.5.1 *Marketing Malaysia as ‘Pro-Japanese’: The Infrastructure of Selective Memory*

Living in Malaysia, you would feel the kindness of the people. Malaysians are also said to be *pro-Japanese* (*shin-nichi*) [emphasis in original], and they have respect for Japanese culture and Japanese people. When we Japanese are in Malaysia, they ... often approach and speak to us using the few ... Japanese [words] they know. (Japanese migration agent)

Migration agents actively construct narratives about different destinations, influencing families’ perceptions and aspirations (Cranston et al., 2018; Koh, 2017). The text above is a description of Malaysia’s attractions from a Japanese agent’s website promoting education migration to Malaysia. Migration agents often highlight the ‘Look East Policy’ initiated by former Prime Minister Mahathir, portraying Malaysia as a welcoming multiethnic nation for the Japanese. However, the historical context of Japan’s occupation is rarely mentioned, likely because raising the spectre of war history would evoke anxiety in Japanese families considering education migration, potentially leading to a perception of Malaysia as an ‘anti-Japanese’ (*han-nichi*) or ‘dangerous’ destination. This selective storytelling produces a ‘colonial aphasia’ (Stoler, 2011) – an active silencing of the past that allows migrants to enjoy their privileged status in Malaysia while remaining unburdened by the complexities of Japan’s imperial legacy in the region.

‘Pro-Japanese’ (*shin-nichi*) as an emic concept has been historically used as the antonym of ‘anti-Japanese’ (*han-nichi*). Specifically, ‘anti-Japanese’ sentiment was widely understood to be rooted in the historical grievances stemming from Japan’s past colonialist aggression and policies, particularly the profound emotional burdens borne by populations in China and the Korean Peninsula. The Japanese migrant families who participated in this study were exposed to media coverage of the ‘anti-Japan’ protests that occurred in China and South Korea during the 2000s. These protests were attributed to the increasing influence of conservative political forces in Japan at that time, which advocated a revisionist historical understanding of Japan’s wartime responsibilities in Asia. This perspective frequently minimises or negates the atrocities perpetrated by the Japanese military in World War II, emphasising instead a narrative of Japan as a victim or a liberator of other Asian nations from Western colonialism. Regardless of individual views on Japan’s historical responsibilities, the image of Malaysia as a ‘pro-Japanese’ nation stands in stark contrast to this backdrop of regional animosity, making Malaysia a ‘safe and comfortable’ relocation destination for Japanese parents considering overseas migration with their young children. Consequently, the ‘pro-Japanese’ label provides a strong sense of security for these families, many of whom are moving abroad for the first time. By avoiding the historical friction prevalent in other East Asian contexts, this narrative allows

them to inhabit a ‘sanitised’ form of intra-racial privilege. Ultimately, this muted socio-political dissonance enables them to enjoy their superior status unchallenged in Malaysia.

5.5.2 ‘Non-Authentic’ but Affordable and Cosmopolitan Malaysia

Japanese families view Malaysia as an affordable and strategic site for international education despite its lower standing in the global education hierarchy compared to the dominant Western Anglophone destinations. Because Malaysia has historically had a strong image as a developing country, migration agents strategically (re)framed it for families as a viable alternative to North America. They contrasted the substantial costs, travel distances, and significant time differences of the West with Malaysia’s accessibility, lower living costs, and minimal 1 h time difference. This minimal time difference was particularly appealing for remote workers and mothers migrating with children, as it facilitated seamless communication with family and colleagues back in Japan. The following comment of Mr. Kuwabara, who migrated with his children while his wife and the other children remained in Japan, illustrates these points:

What I found very important about Malaysia was the price range, cost of living, and ... comfortable living environment. Also, we realised early on that it would be very difficult for the whole family to relocate. So, when we had to separate the family, having a small time difference was very important. I think that’s also a key to continuing my work [for my Japanese company] remotely.

Beyond these practical advantages, agents emphasised Malaysia’s cosmopolitan environment, where children can affordably study in English alongside diverse Asian peers, with the added benefit of learning Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language.

However, both the agents and the Japanese families recognised that the English language and the experiences gained in Malaysia might be perceived as ‘non-authentic’ compared to those acquired in schools in Western Anglophone countries or in expensive international schools in Malaysia. Globally, there is a growing trend towards equating international education with Western, English-medium education, particularly featuring American or British English accents, which are often perceived as more ‘authentic’ (Imoto, 2011; Wright, 2024). This hierarchical perspective, rooted in colonial histories, perpetuates symbolic violence by (de)valuing English language learning and its associated spaces in Asian regions, such as Malaysia and the Philippines, where local English varieties are often unfairly labelled as ‘non-authentic’. These normative narratives disregard the valuable perspectives and skill sets that students can develop in these marginalised regions, such as appreciation for local English, and reinforce linguistic imperialism, which prioritises certain forms of English over others (Lipura, 2022).

While Japanese families in Malaysia recognise that Malaysia is not an ‘authentic’ destination for English language acquisition, they strategically (re)value international schooling in Malaysia for its unique affordances. Particularly appealing is the opportunity to acquire proficiency in Mandarin Chinese as a second language alongside English, reflecting China’s rising economic and political power and the elevation of Chinese language as a regional cultural capital (Igarashi, 2020) or global linguistic capital (Lee, 2019). This, in fact, helps Japanese families justify Malaysia as a strategic migration destination, as Ms. Inose and Mr. Machida did:

My husband owns a company. He frequently has business with foreign counterparts, especially with people of Chinese heritage I assume [that] when my children become adults, speaking English would be considered normal. So, I hope they will master one more language. (Ms Inose)

What I liked about Malaysia was the opportunity to learn both English and Chinese. The idea of being able to use languages spoken by more than two-thirds of the world’s population is quite appealing. (Mr Machida)

Nevertheless, some Japanese migrant families are dissatisfied with their perceived quality of international education in Malaysia. This is due to the high turnover rate of teachers in newly established schools and the English accents of local teachers. Thus, these families opt for more ‘authentic’ (expensive) international schools or for relocation. However, many still recognise the strategic value of Malaysia’s multilingual environment as a compelling alternative to Western destinations.

In addition, Japanese migrant families contrast their ‘racially homogenous’ homeland (Lie, 2009) with Malaysia’s multicultural environment and strategically (re)value Malaysia as providing their children with a unique opportunity to interact with diverse racial or ethnic and religious groups of people. This (re)valuing challenges the dominant narrative of Euro- and North American-centric cosmopolitan experiences. For instance, Mr. Utsumi saw Malaysia as a chance for his children to engage with cultures often misunderstood in Japan, such as Islamic and Chinese cultures, thereby broadening their cultural horizons. Ms. Takano’s observation of her son’s developing cosmopolitan outlook further exemplifies this:

There were Indian kids, Chinese kids, and Kazakh kids in my neighbourhood. Moreover, my son often played with them. They eat different foods depending on their religions. When I cooked and served food, they would say, ‘I can’t eat this’, or ‘I can’t eat that’. Then, my son told me, ‘Mom, he can’t eat beef because he is Indian’. Furthermore, he said, ‘Pizza is the one we can all eat’. My son understood [the] respective religions and asked himself, ‘Then, what is the only thing we can all eat?’ I thought this way of thinking that he acquired here was wonderful.

Ms. Takano’s appreciation of her son’s ability to navigate cultural differences and establish common ground underscores the value of cosmopolitanism cultivated within Malaysia’s diverse cultural environment.

5.5.3 *Inter-racial Marginality: ‘Risky’ Western Anglophone Countries*

Alongside practical advantages like affordability, Japanese families’ preference for Malaysia is also driven by their ‘middling’ status. Within this status, the financial boundaries associated with the West are reframed as a proactive negotiation between their regional socio-economic advantages and the inter-racial marginality – rooted in perceived racial and linguistic vulnerabilities in the ‘global West’. By framing these potential experiences of racial exclusion as significant risks, they not only reinforce their choice of an Asian destination but also legitimise their relocation as a morally sound decision.

When migration agents and migrants highlight Malaysia’s advantages, they often contrast them with the risks of discrimination and exclusion faced in traditionally preferred destinations, such as Hawaii, other parts of the US, and Canada – pointing to factors such as being Asian and limited English proficiency as key concerns. This feeling of ‘fear’ stemmed from multiple factors. First, most of the interviews in this study were conducted during the Trump eras in the US (2017–2021 and 2025), periods marked by heightened concerns over anti-Asian discrimination in the US, often referred to as ‘Asian Hate’. Second, some of the families had experienced varying degrees of racial discrimination while living or studying in North America. Third, they were apprehensive about relocating to North America due to their limited international experience and English proficiency. Lastly, and most significantly, they used this discourse to justify their decision to move to Malaysia, an affordable migration destination. In this sense, the ‘risk’ of the ‘global West’ functions as a vocabulary of motive (Mills, 1940); by highlighting racial vulnerabilities, these families can frame their relocation to a more affordable Asian destination not as a financial compromise, but as a proactive and moral choice for their children’s safety. Ms. Murakami’s narrative exemplifies these points:

When my husband was in Canada, he experienced some degree of, well, not exactly Asian Hate, but something similar. So, to avoid that as much as possible ... maybe, for our son’s first experience abroad, it would be better to choose an Asian country where he might fit in more easily. That’s something we started discussing along the way.

Ms. Murakami’s observation aligns with Kang’s study (2012) on South Korean mothers in Singapore, who voiced their concerns about the negative effects of the gaze of whites on their children in North America, potentially signalling discrimination (p. 163).

For the Japanese migrant families, these concerns extended beyond racial discrimination as Asians in North America to fear of experiencing native-speakerism – a form of bias against non-native English speakers. Ms. Hori’s account illustrates this apprehension:

My English could be better. But people here [Malaysia]. ... [try] to understand me.... However, when you go to the US, there is a sense of preference for white people, like, ‘Oh, this person is Asian, and her English is not good enough, so let us not deal with her much’.

The barriers to migration to North America were particularly daunting for individuals with limited English proficiency and no prior experience living abroad. Ms. Inose's remark, 'The hurdles of even coming to Asia were very high for me', reflects their geographical imagination of the West as 'challenging' and of (Southeast) Asia as 'easy' (Cranston, 2016) based on global racial hierarchies.

Nevertheless, these families perceive Malaysia as a 'safe' stepping stone or 'practice round' for future migration to Western destinations (Abelmann et al., 2015; Kim, 2015) because they also imagine the country as a site where their children, as 'Asians', can challenge and resist global racial hierarchies in the future. Ms. Izumi's narrative exemplifies this perspective:

The reason I prefer Asia is that I think it's good for children's education. If you go to America or Hawaii while the children are still young, I feel like it might not be a very kind environment. I've heard stories about discrimination, like being called 'Chinese' even if you're Japanese, or being subjected to other forms of discrimination because you're Japanese or Asian. But you can't change your race ... and children can't talk back; they might just take it all in. So, I think it's better for them to grow up in Asia while they're young, in a place with lots of different ethnic groups, to get experience dealing with that kind of thing ... to develop the strength to argue back against such comments before they go out into the wider world.

Similar to Ms. Hori and Ms. Murakami, Ms. Izumi views Malaysia not merely as a safe place from discrimination but as a strategic site for challenging the global racial hierarchies that marginalise them (Fechter & Walsh, 2010). By leveraging their intra-racial privilege within Malaysia as a protective environment, these families strategically cultivate the resilience needed for their children to eventually navigate the 'wider world' from an empowered standing.

5.5.4 Intra-racial Privilege: 'The Same but Respected' Japanese in Malaysia

Japanese migrant families construct an image of the Western Anglophone countries as a risky destination of racial and linguistic exclusion, which allows them to reframe their relocation and life in Malaysia as a morally reassuring choice. However, their experience in Malaysia extends beyond simply seeking a safe haven from potential discrimination. It involves a profound recognition of their intra-racial privilege. This status is strategically situated within Malaysia's historical 'consonance' – a socio-political environment where Japan's legacy as a former colonial power and its standing as a developed nation are harmonised with local narratives of respect. This alignment enables these families to experience being 'the same but respected' – a distinctive manifestation of intra-racial privilege.

When evaluating Malaysia as a 'safe and comfortable' place for parents and children, Japanese migrants often simultaneously expressed their shared Asian identity with local people in Malaysia, coupled with a distinct sense of being 'respected' within that shared Asian identity. Ms. Miura, remembering the moment she made her decision to relocate to Malaysia with her children, illustrated this point:

Everyone here is Asian; we share the same skin tone, hair, and eyes. In America, there's a clear hierarchy, with white people at the top. But at least in Southeast Asia, they respect Japan. That makes me feel good and think, 'Maybe it's doable to migrate here with my children'.

Ms. Miura's comparison between the US and Southeast Asia (Malaysia) illustrates how Japanese migrant families imagine global and regional racial hierarchies in different contexts. In the US, the racial hierarchy is starkly white-dominated, whereas in Southeast Asia, Japanese feel they are perceived as 'the same but respected' – suggesting a privileged position among Asians. This implicit sense of structural advantage in the region, though perhaps unarticulated, made Ms. Miura feel that it is 'doable' to migrate to Malaysia with her children.

The Japanese migrant families often attribute the respect they receive from Malaysians to the past and current impacts of the Look East Policy and the long dedication of Japanese corporate expatriates in Malaysia, who started and expanded their businesses and factories in collaboration with local people. However, this 'respect' stems not only from these expatriates' dedication, but also, at least more significantly, from two intertwined macro-level factors: Japan's dominant cultural influence in Asia and Malaysia's war memories (Watanabe, 2019).

Regarding the first factor, Japanese migrant families frequently emphasised the palpable respect they experienced in their daily lives during the interviews. They recounted that simply identifying themselves as Japanese often elicited warm smiles and positive sentiments from locals. These interactions typically revolved around an affinity for anime, admiration for the high quality of Japanese consumer goods and cuisine, praise for the politeness of Japanese people, and an idealised view of Japan as a highly desirable travel destination. This widespread acceptance of Japanese popular culture and products in East and Southeast Asia has been evident since the late twentieth century.

While this cultural affinity operates largely at the level of everyday interactions, the second factor shaping this environment of respect is deeply embedded in Malaysia's socio-political history. Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad revised Malaysia's postwar interpretation of Japan's occupation of Malaya by positioning Japan's occupation as the catalyst for Malay nationalism while downplaying the memory of Japanese soldiers' massacre of Chinese Malaysians, a racial minority in the country. For this reason, Malaysia's image of Japan is generally considered positive, although primarily by the dominant Malay population. The following conversation between Mr. and Ms. Tsuruta illustrates the divided war memories of Malaysians:

Mr. Tsuruta: Malaysian people respect Japan a lot, saying, 'Japan has amazing technology and is a wonderful country'. Also, when I took a taxi, a Malay driver told me, 'Thank you for fighting for us during World War II. Japan helped Malaysia gain independence'. This kind of experience is very good for Japanese children, to develop their sense of pride in being Japanese....

Ms. Tsuruta: Malay people are positive ... but some Chinese elderly people told us ... 'Japanese soldiers killed my relatives'.

Mr. Tsuruta: Well ... it's a good opportunity to think beyond *jigyaku-kan* (a self-deprecating view of Japan's wartime role), isn't it?

The Tsuruta couple's encounters with contrasting impressions of Japan's occupation of Malaysia are consistent with the diverse symbolic war memories of different ethnic groups in the country (Watanabe, 2019). Mr. Tsuruta's account suggested that Malaysia's current historical discourse – which frames Japan's actions in the Pacific War not merely as those of an aggressor, but also as a liberator of Asia – contributed to a pervasive respect for the Japanese. Consequently, this narrative transforms the country into a space where migrant families can transcend *jigyaku-kan* (a self-deprecating view of Japan's wartime role) and feel prouder of their national past, including the war. In this sense, the local historical interpretation actively complements the migrants' narrative of being 'the same but respected'. Ultimately, this 'pro-Japanese' environment functions as a socio-political infrastructure that validates their intra-racial privilege; it effectively silences the historical dissonance of colonial rule while providing a convenient ideological sanctuary for narratives that seek to justify Japan's historical aggression in Asia.

Yet, this socio-political infrastructure of historical 'consonance' is not entirely impermeable. The silenced historical dissonance occasionally breaches their everyday lives, abruptly challenging their privileged position within the regional hierarchy. A few Japanese migrant families recounted unexpected encounters where they were directly confronted with the massacres committed by Japanese soldiers. In a stark manifestation of this dissonance, Ms. Hori's son was once bullied at school specifically because of this wartime past.

However, rather than simply avoiding these historical tensions to seek a completely safe and comfortable environment, some migrants demonstrate a critical reflexivity regarding their positionality. Ms. Takada, for example, explicitly sought out this postcolonial tension, expressing a desire to live in a place 'where Japan has had a direct involvement, in both good and bad ways, and to feel firsthand that there are people who think well of Japanese people and those who don't'. Her account reveals a profound awareness of Malaysia not merely as a comfortable ideological sanctuary, but as a complex contact zone where the fractured legacies of the past remain palpable. For these families, navigating intra-racial privilege transcends the passive enjoyment of being 'the same but respected'. It involves a conscious confrontation with the diverse and often conflicting historical realities of their host society.

5.6 Discussion and Conclusion

North–South privileged mobilities have long been characterised by an assumption of whiteness (Robertson & Roberts, 2022). To decouple privilege from whiteness, recent scholarship has examined migrants with 'middling privileges', who navigate intersecting spectra of race/ethnicity, class, and other social markers. This study advances this scholarship by conceptualising Japanese family migration through the

lens of postcolonialism. I define this ‘middling privilege’ as a dynamic navigation between inter-racial marginality within the global racial hierarchy and intra-racial privilege within the regional Asian hierarchy, characterised by the superiority derived from being part of a developed nation and a former colonial power.

The findings indicate that Japanese migrant families’ narratives of privilege are fundamentally dualistic. From the perspective of their global marginality, these families perceive Western Anglophone countries as ‘risky’ destinations where they fear racial and linguistic exclusion as non-white individuals in the ‘global West’. In contrast, they leverage their regional centrality to frame Malaysia as a ‘safe and comfortable’ destination where they are perceived as ‘the same but respected’, the distinctive manifestation of their intra-racial privilege. This status allows them to strategically use Malaysia’s historical ‘consonance’ – a socio-political environment where Japan’s legacy as a former colonial power and its standing as a developed nation are harmonised with local narratives of respect. By residing in a region where the history of Japanese aggression is often reframed as a catalyst for nationalism or silenced through pro-Japanese discourses, these families secure a safe environment that functions as a socio-political infrastructure to validate their superior status while effectively silencing historical dissonance. Such strategic positioning within the gradients of privilege enables them to provide their children with international education in a safe environment that affirms their racial and ethnic dignity. Ultimately, however, navigating this environment is not a monolithic experience. While some migrants obscure the reality of Japan’s colonial legacy by leaning into sanitised narratives that silence historical dissonance, others demonstrate a critical reflexivity, consciously confronting the fractured historical realities of the region as a complex contact zone. Whether through neutralising the past or actively engaging with its tensions, their diverse responses underscore the profound complexities of navigating intra-racial privilege.

The findings of this chapter contribute to migration research in two ways. First, they provide a critical case of non-white North–South migration, demonstrating that privilege consists of complex ‘gradients’ that extend beyond the traditional West/white versus non-West/non-white dichotomy. Second, and most significantly, this study advances the theoretical understanding of ‘middling’ status by conceptualising it specifically as a form of intra-racial privilege. Rather than viewing ‘middling’ as a static socio-economic position, this framework reveals it to be a dynamic process of navigation unfolding between global marginality and regional centrality. This conceptualisation offers a versatile tool for examining the gradients of privilege within any racial category, allowing researchers to analyse how social, historical, and colonial legacies shape hierarchical relations even among individuals of the same racial background. By decoupling privilege from the whiteness-centric binary, this study opens up new avenues for understanding the shifting nature of social standing in an increasingly multipolar world.

Before concluding this chapter, two limitations should be noted. First, as snowball sampling was used, the findings of this study may not represent the experiences of all Japanese migrant families to Malaysia. Second, this study focused solely on Japanese parents’ perspectives, leaving children’s perceptions of privilege unexplored. Future

research could delve into children's viewpoints to further illuminate their sense of intra-racial privilege.

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Part II

Gradients of Privilege

Chapter 6

‘You Zoom Through Border Control’: Narratives of Privileged Mobility Among Israeli IT Migrants



Nir Cohen and Steven J. Gold

6.1 Introduction

Recent years have seen a burgeoning literature on privileged forms of mobility – from lifestyle and retirement migrants to digital nomads. Despite their proliferation, studies of privileged mobility have typically examined the experience of expatriates, namely culturally and economically affluent citizens of Northern countries who reside in countries of the Global South (Croucher, 2016; Ullah et al., 2021). Guided by (post)colonial and imperial readings, these studies have shed important light on the personal and professional lives of the predominantly Western, White subjects and how they imagine, perform, interact with and impact everyday lives of both ‘natives’ and other migrants in foreign places and cultures (Go, 2018).

To date, far less attention was paid to migrants who originate from and settle in (other) countries of the global North (but see Cerna, 2009; Rissing & Castilla, 2014). Missing especially are studies that decipher the ways in which citizens of affluent countries, who enjoy different forms of privilege, conceive of, interpret, and apply them at various stages of their migratory process. Thus, despite small but growing streams of individuals who move between high-income countries for variegated purposes (Cohen & Kranz, 2015; Giner-Monfort et al., 2016), little is currently known about how they discursively construct their own sets of privilege and give meaning to their usage prior to, during and in the aftermath of their journeys.

In this chapter, we examine how privilege is conceived of by Israeli expatriates who relocated to the US and the Netherlands. Drawing on personal interviews with professionals in the field of IT (information technology), we explore how they narrate

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their own privileges and give meaning to the ways in which their cultural capital has expedited their easeful admission and settlement in those countries. Alongside highly coveted advanced technological skills, Israeli IT professionals' narratives of privilege typically centre on their previous global experience in the corporate world of the IT sector. Other themes of privilege that emerged were their good command of the English language, typically acquired during previous periods of living abroad as children or young adults, as well as dual citizenship status. Their narratives confirm that privilege obtained through different forms of cultural capital has not only facilitated an agile and painless entry into national labour and housing markets but further allowed them a high degree of selectivity when making decisions concerning a range of issues – from selecting cities of settlement before departure to committing to specific positions upon arrival. By illustrating how Israeli expatriates narrate, perceive, and strategically employ their cultural capital-based privilege, the chapter makes a twofold contribution to the sub-field of privileged mobility studies; first, it gives voice to a group whose experience is sometimes ignored and, often, vehemently critiqued, by migration scholars. Blamed for a host of socio-economic and cultural externalities, from soaring housing prices to elitist socio-spatial self-segregation, the agency of privileged migrants, namely their awareness of – and ability to act on – their advantageous position, is seldom analysed non-judgmentally. And, while we are neither oblivious to, nor condone, such practices and their detrimental effects on places and communities of destination, we believe that to fully capture them, a closer and more meaningful analysis of privilege is first needed. Second, and relatedly, by attending to the variegated forms of (cultural) capital used by mobile individuals, our chapter not only contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the building blocks of privilege, but sheds important light on the lived, everyday experience of privileged individuals who relocate to countries of the Global North. Specifically, it highlights the ways in which differentiated forms of privilege, or what the editors of this collection term 'gradients of privilege' (Buhr & Zaban, 2026), allow individuals varying degrees of access to resources, prestige, and socio-professional networks. In so doing, it suggests that privilege is not a uniform and absolute category, but a position in a fluid and constantly changing social field. We return to this notion in our conclusions.

The chapter is divided into four parts; first, we survey the theoretical literature on the nexus between Bourdieusien cultural capital and (privileged) mobilities, focusing primarily on skilled professionals. We then describe the IT sector in Israel, highlighting its global orientation and the strong tendencies among many of its employees to venture out for (shorter or longer) stints abroad as part of their professional advancement. Following a brief methodological note, we analyse IT migrants' narratives, showing how their privilege is tied to and embedded in three forms of cultural capital, namely institutionalised, embodied, and objectified. We conclude by highlighting the significance of applying the lens of cultural capital to the study of privileged mobilities in both Israel and beyond.

6.2 Cultural Capital and Skilled Migration: A Theoretical Prelude

The concept of cultural capital can be traced back to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Writing in the early 1960s, Bourdieu argued that alongside economic capital, culture is a potential resource that can generate social and economic profits for individual agents (Bourdieu, 2011 [1986]). Especially in class-based societies with a high degree of social inequality, cultural competencies, practices, and habits constitute important means through which individuals distinguish themselves from others, hence creating exclusive personal advantages (Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Mahar et al., 1990).

While these advantages are generated primarily through the selective school system, which favours children hailing from upper social strata, cultural capital is manifested in three different forms, namely embodied, objectified, and institutionalised (Bourdieu, 2011 [1986]); first, it is *embodied*, namely manifested through competence or skill inseparable from its bearer. Embodied cultural capital is part and parcel of the individual's mind and/or body. For example, a foreign language, which a graduate has acquired during college, and which will serve them in attaining high-status jobs, becomes an embodied form of cultural capital.

Second, cultural capital appears in an *objectified* form. Goods and objects like pictures, books, instruments, and machines may function as a form of cultural capital insofar as their use or consumption presupposes a certain amount of embodied cultural capital' (Ibid, p. 243). A collection of artworks could – under some conditions – constitute an objectified form of cultural capital because it requires a certain understanding or training in the field of arts. Finally, in its *institutionalised state*, cultural capital is valued and recognised by (mostly educational) institutions. Academic credentials are probably the most popular form of institutionalised cultural capital, certifying individual skills and endowing their holders with an objective value.

Migration scholars have long drawn on the concept of cultural capital, or its proxies, primarily educational and professional attainments (Bourdieu, 2011 [1986]). This is because of the approaches' abundant application to a multiplicity of issues, settings, and concerns. Neoclassical economists, for example, showed that income gaps between workers in developing and developed countries generate human outflows, particularly among individuals possessing advanced education and professional skills (Borjas, 2015). In this process of self-selection, prospective migrants who balance their mobility costs and benefits, expect that they would get better jobs and receive greater financial rewards for their high levels of cultural capital compared to that of their countries of origin (Doran et al., 2022). Structural-historical theoreticians, on their part, drawing on world systems theory and dependency theory, emphasised the inherently uneven relations between the global north and south (Rissing & Lee, 2022). Economic inequalities, an outcome of centuries of Euro colonialism, propel a massive brain drain, an exodus of highly skilled, cultural capital-rich

workers, which boost developed economies while further aggravating the stagnation of Southern economies (Shachar, 2006).

More recently, scholars working within the framework of transnationalism emphasised the appeal of migrants with high levels of cultural and professional capital to both sending and receiving countries (Gold, 2018). In the past two decades, a range of destination countries have been making efforts to lure expats, highly skilled, and other privileged migrants, whose competitiveness in global economic markets is long acknowledged. Sending countries, for their part, have been using multiple bonding mechanisms (Chander, 2006) as part of their diaspora strategies, which aimed to return home culturally and economically endowed migrants (Cohen, 2016, 2017; Lerner, 2007).

The celebratory sentiment towards these ‘quality migrants’ has been mitigated by critical scholarship that underlined the negative effects some of them have upon the places, especially cities, in which they settle (Beaverstock, 2005). Alongside cultural segregation and the formation of social and residential bubbles (Walsh, 2014; Wu & Webber, 2004), which in some cases have led to rising housing prices (Zaban, 2017), expatriates and other groups of privileged migrants were shown to have negative effects on urban spaces of consumption and service provision. As Maddox (2021), for example, shows, retired Americans who relocate to Mexico ‘to stretch retirement savings further through cheaper costs of living’ (p. 43) are fundamentally changing local landscapes. Through cross-border arbitrage and hitherto unknown patterns of consumerism, aging baby-boomers turn both rural and urban communities along the US-Mexico border ‘into uneven and inequitably developed pockets with the primary purpose of caring for American expats’ (p. 51). Similarly, Croucher (2016) shows that American lifestyle migrants in Nicaragua not only have surprisingly little knowledge of Spanish, but they ‘socialise almost exclusively with co-ethnics, and their engagement with the Nicaraguan “other” consists primarily of interactions with service providers, and philanthropic work’ (p. 446).

Such established critiques of what some see as *limited cosmopolitanism* (Korpela, 2014), especially among privileged migrants have recently been challenged. A small but growing number of studies have questioned the notion that they are an invariably elitist, socially cohesive, and exclusive group (Van Bochove & Engbersen, 2015). Indeed, studies have shown that at least some privileged groups are partially integrated with locals at the building, neighbourhood, or city scale (Maslova & Chiodelli, 2018). Thus, a significant literature describes how symbiotic relations often develop between immigrant (or ethnic) entrepreneurs and immigrant and minority youth in locations of settlement.¹ These relations allow both parties to acquire needed goods and establish trusting interactions which facilitate the exchange of consumables, provide part-time employment, and establish shared notions of local identity (Gold, 2010; Venkatesh, 2009).

¹ Immigrant entrepreneurs are ‘individuals who, as recent arrivals in the country, start a business as a means of economic survival’. They often maintain ‘a migration network linking migrants, former migrants and non-migrants with a common origin and destination’ (Chaganti & Greene, 2002, p. 128).

Notwithstanding their level of local integration (or lack thereof), the question of whether economically, professionally, or culturally well-endowed migrants are aware of their privilege remains open. While some contend that, 'privileged status is often outside of the person possessing it' (Black & Stone, 2005, p. 244), others maintain that at least some privileged migrants are fully aware of their favoured national, class, or ethno-racial positions. As Duplan and Cranston (2023) recently argued, 'Privilege is also produced spatially through an assumed relationship between mobility and cultural capital' (p. 337). Upper-middle class, documented, educated, and (mostly) white citizens of Western countries who relocate to developing countries appreciate their privilege and the benefits it yields over locals and other, less endowed migrants. In this context, the term 'geographic' or 'spatial' 'arbitrage', long used by economists, has been skilfully used since the mid-2010s by migration scholars to refer to privileged migrants' voluntary decision to move to developing countries with a more affordable cost of living (Hayes, 2014). Much like corporate offshoring, geographic arbitrage (aka geoarbitrage) is a well-thought-out strategy of active social agents who are aware of and make calculated use of their set of privileged endowments (e.g., legal, racial, financial) to maximise 'potential earning power through transnational relocation' (Ibid, p. 1962).

However, with a few notable examples (Cohen & Gold, 2022), scholars have paid little attention to how migrants conceive of, articulate, and give meaning to their privilege. To explore these issues, we draw on interviews with IT professionals from Israel² who relocated to the US and the Netherlands. We claim that these skilled migrants conceive of their privilege especially in terms of embodied, institutionalised, and objectified forms. Three resources are key to their narratives; first, their educational attainment in various IT-related disciplines (e.g., computer/electronic engineering, business administration), which is certified by some of the best universities in either Israel or abroad. Second, their professional skills, acquired through years of employment in Israel's highly regarded IT industry. Their experience, which often allowed them to work with and in prestigious transnational corporations, like Google or Intel, has also enabled them to achieve fluency in the English language. Finally, many defined their privilege by alluding to their dual citizenship (Israeli/American, or Israeli/EU), which facilitates their mobility to and integration in labour markets of highly developed countries of destination. In some cases, their ancestral citizenship, typically acquired by their parents, has allowed them to gain valuable life experience abroad – either as children or adults, thus making them competent in cultural codes and practices prevalent in those very same countries. We shall elaborate on each of these forms of cultural capital after a brief methodological note.

² Despite alarming levels of social and economic inequality, Israel is considered a high-income country. A member of the OECD since 2010, its economic performance, measured through such indicators as GDP per capita, inflation rate, and labour force participation, has been robust until October 2023.

6.3 Methods

The chapter is based on thirty-two (32) personal, semi-structured interviews conducted between 2015 and 2018 with Israeli citizens who reside in the USA and the Netherlands.³ In the US, we interviewed 17 individuals (9 men and 8 women, of whom 12 had dual citizenship) and in the Netherlands, 15 individuals (8 men and 7 women, of whom 8 had dual citizenship). All interviewees were either born in or immigrated to Israel at an early age, though they had considerably different demographic backgrounds in terms of age (late 20 s to late 50 s), education (vocational training to PhD holders), place of origin in Israel (small kibbutz to major cities), years abroad (six months to 20+ years), marital/family status (single, divorced, to married w/out children), and place of employment (small start-ups to global corporations). Interviewees were asked to describe their migratory experience, including their motivation to leave the country, the process of moving and settling in the destination city/country, and the personal and professional challenges encountered throughout the process. Specific attention was given to their employment search process prior to and in some cases after their move abroad. In this context, they were asked to elaborate on the factors which they felt helped them attain their current or previous jobs in the destination country.⁴

Interviews were conducted in Hebrew by the first author and lasted one hour on average. In the Netherlands, they were conducted face-to-face in a location chosen by informants, and in the US through Skype. Following verbal consent, interviews were recorded, translated verbatim and then content analysed.

6.4 Institutionalised Cultural Capital: Educational Attainments

Studies of skilled migrants have long emphasised the instrumental role of their professional proficiencies in their successful experience (Saxenian, 2006). This is particularly true for migrants with advanced skills in professional niches that are in high demand, like medicine, engineering, or information technology (Hercog & Sandoz, 2018). The long and arduous training process that is required of students in these fields makes them highly coveted for prospective employers, who expect their professional expertise to make important contributions to their firms. The skills associated with official training – usually a university degree – in IT-related fields (e.g., computer engineering) were acknowledged by many interviewees. They all

³ The US is home to nearly two-thirds of the total Israeli migrant stock (300,000), many of whom hold highly skilled or creative positions (Cohen & Gold, 2022). While the Netherlands hosts a significantly smaller number of migrants from Israel (approximately 10,000), in recent years it has attracted a large number of skilled individuals who came looking for a more geopolitically serene and economically affordable environment (Isler, 2024).

⁴ It should be noted that we did *not* use the term ‘privilege’ in the interviews.

pointed out that their educational attainments and technical knowledge, which in some cases exceeded the expectations of potential employers, were critical for their professional success. As Eran, a product development engineer who quickly assumed a managerial position in a large transnational firm in Silicon Valley, noted:

I came here [the US] and although I'm a project manager because I came from development [in Israel], I have lots of technical knowledge. I know the product, how it works, I can operate it myself, explain about it, so it's a huge advantage of technical knowledge. Regular project managers are not expected to know the product inside out, but I did, so those skills were beneficial for the firm and made me really successful in my position. (M, 42, San Francisco)

Alongside technical fields, a degree in business administration was also an important seal of excellence. Especially if it was earned at a prestigious university, an MBA, combined with technical skills, allowed migrants to land advanced managerial positions, usually in large multinational corporations. Their representatives occasionally attended job fairs held at leading universities, where some of our interviewees studied. As David, who was recruited shortly after receiving his MBA from a well-known university in New England explained, his technological background coupled with his more recently earned skills gave him an important edge in the labour market. 'I graduated from business school when I was 33, so I was much more experienced than other graduates. And I had the [technical] skills [so it helped me get the job]'. Others have similarly admitted that an undergraduate degree in engineering and an MBA was a highly sought-after combination by firms in the tech industry. In the words of Assaf:

Yes, an MBA from [name of Ivy League university] is incredibly helpful. It gives you an edge and opens opportunities in Silicon Valley or anywhere in the US in the [IT] industry. So, an MBA plus my experience [as an engineer], it basically means having great employment opportunities. (M, 39, Sunnyvale)

In some cases, the institutionalised cultural capital owned by migrants was not necessarily amassed through studies of pertinent subjects. Thus, while most of our interviewees were in fact trained – and held university degrees – in IT-oriented disciplines, notably computer sciences or electrical engineering, from Israeli universities, few possessed (advanced) degrees in unrelated disciplines. Drawn to the tech industry because of its lucrative image, some were self-trained, having used their academic background instrumentally in the process. Ariel, who holds a PhD in physics and was on his way to a promising academic career, described the instrumental role played by the skills acquired in graduate school during his early stages in the IT industry:

I didn't know much [about IT], I'm not a programmer, I've never programmed, I mean a little here and there, but I didn't have any formal education, I wasn't a computer guy... but, you know that one of the things you do in academia is learn, so with my background, I quickly taught myself and caught up with those things, and then I was able to go to meetings and speak intelligently with people there. So, that's a good thing that came out of my academic training – the ability to take a very complex problem and take it apart and basically solve it in a simple way, I mean to sort out the important things from the 'background noise', which happens a lot in our business. (M, 51, Palo Alto)

However, in some sub-fields, we were told practical experience was more important than university degrees. In such fields, where a high level of creativity is needed, having years of hands-on experience was often more advantageous in the eyes of potential employers. Uri, for example, a self-proclaimed digital design entrepreneur who never had 'neither the time nor patience for long academic training', claimed that in his field, having a strong 'portfolio', which demonstrates 'years of field experience' was far more important than institutionalised credentials such as academic degrees. Similarly, Omer, a UX designer with over two decades of professional experience, but no formal academic education, claimed that his lack of an academic degree did not prevent him from being recruited by a large corporation in the field of digital imaging. Describing his privileged trajectory as 'a combination of professional skills and quite a bit of luck', he claimed:

In my field, your portfolio is stronger than whatever degree you have. I mean, it's important to have it [a degree], but your skills and what you bring to the table as a designer is more important than whether you went to school here or there. That was my story, really. I mean, I was lucky, I was visiting here and happened to meet my future manager who told me about his team. That was very interesting and then he said: 'we're looking for someone with your skills, know anybody'? and I said, 'umm, yes, me'. And so, he said, 'would you like to relocate'? and I said, 'as a matter of fact, I would, sounds like a great opportunity, very exciting'. He said, 'great, I'll talk to your supervisor in Israel, you check with your wife, and if it's all good, then great'. (M, 40, Cupertino)

As expected, institutionalised cultural capital in the form of academic and other forms of professional training was essential to Israeli migrants' performance in foreign labour markets. And while the importance of educational credentials to migrants' labour market integration is not new, previous studies typically used quantitative methods to measure success or failure (see for example Buzdugan & Halli, 2009; Li, 2001). The qualitative assessment of migrants and the role played by their earned credentials in their performance in the labour market, was usually downplayed or missing altogether. As our findings in this section show, relevant credentials attained in highly regarded institutions are possibly the single most important element in their privileged position. From (under)graduate degrees earned in IT-related (mostly engineering) or management fields at prestigious universities, to the thinking skills accumulated through seemingly non-related fields, migrants often attributed their privileged position and success in gaining employment in competitive markets overseas to the knowledge and credentials they gained in higher education institutions in Israel or abroad. Although hands-on skills developed through years of professional experience were also key, they were typically a value added to the institutionalised capital, which only institutions of higher education could bestow upon (skilled) individuals. In the next section, we expound on the importance of professional experience earned by migrants through jobs they held previously overseas.

6.5 Previous Experience of Living/Working in Israel and Abroad: Embodied Cultural Capital

Work experience is, alongside educational credentials, the most important asset possessed by skilled migrant workers (Houle & Yssaad, 2010). Work experience is particularly important in professional pursuits that require a pertinent background and meaningful command of specific tasks. Indeed, under-utilisation of work experience, which is a key form of embodied cultural capital, is highly detrimental to both individual migrants as well as the labour market in general. In the highly volatile IT job market, work experience attained abroad, especially in countries that are known as technological hubs, is particularly valued by prospective employers. Several interviewees mentioned that the Israeli IT industry's good reputation came up either in their job interviews or during their first few months in the new firms. Noa, for example, a risk management expert, explained that while being from Israel was not per se the reason they are hired: 'Israelis are treated with much respect [in Silicon Valley] ...they are thought of as smart people and Israel has a good reputation in the industry'. Yaron, who works as a software engineer in a mid-size firm located on the outskirts of Amsterdam, also alluded to the added value of having work experience from – and in general being from – Israel:

I think that [having work experience from [Israel]] gives you a certain edge. I mean, I've never heard anyone saying, 'get me Israeli workers here' or anything like that, but Israel certainly has a good reputation in the field [of IT] ...So, yes, even though no one ever came to me and said 'oh, you are from Israel, that's better, or worse', we [Israeli IT workers generally] have a good reputation. (M, 41, Amsterdam)

Therefore, having professional experience (and an academic degree) from Israel is often seen as an advantage. Yael, for example, who arrived with her husband and her newborn son to San Francisco explained that while she was planning on being a stay-at-home mum for a while, it wasn't long before she was contacted by employers who were interested in the experience she accumulated while working at a Tel Aviv-based transnational firm:

I came here thinking that I'd stay home for a while and raise my son. I did that for six months and then I found a job, way too soon. I should have waited longer. I didn't even look for jobs, but because of my experience with [name of large transnational management consulting corporation], which is listed on LinkedIn, I received at least a couple of job offers every week. I don't do those kinds of things anymore but because of my experience in Israel in such a niche expertise, and it's in my CV – recruiters contact me all the time. (F, 35, Sunnyvale)

For some, work experience abroad usually went hand in hand with extensive travel experience. Those who used to hold senior positions in transnational firms reported frequent business trips abroad. While East Asian countries, presumably where regional and global production sites are located, were the most popular destinations, several interviewees also noted frequent trips to the US, either West or East Coast. This type of mobility not only helped them to get acquainted with the local business culture in cities like New York, Seattle, or San Francisco, it also enabled

them a better position from which to compete for jobs abroad. This is how Yuval, a systems analyst in the San Francisco Bay Area, described the instrumental role played by his overseas experience and how the professional relationships cultivated with colleagues abroad was advantageous to his post-relocation career trajectory:

In Israel, I worked for [name of transnational firm in the health-tech industry] and when I got here, I very quickly heard about another firm in the same field, so I emailed them right away, because I felt confident, and told them that I moved to the Bay Area. The firm I worked for in Israel is very big and well-known, so I told them I'm looking for a job. They got back to me a few days later, did a few interviews, and I started working there in December, so pretty quickly. (M, 37, Mountain View)

Ofir was similarly confident that his close familiarity with the business culture in Silicon Valley, developed through his many years of visits there while working in Israel, was a privilege. The experience gave him an advantageous position upon his migration to the US. Securing a full-time job as a systems analyst in an internet security firm in the area shortly before he was interviewed, he explained:

I have fifteen years of experience with international business... even before I relocated, I spent almost half my time in Silicon Valley. I used to come here every other week for business. I flew so often to California that I considered myself American, or half American, because I was there, here, half of the time and I knew pretty much everyone and everything here. (M, 40, Santa Clara)

Travelling to – and sometimes living shorter or longer periods abroad – was important not just because it allowed migrants to secure jobs overseas more easily but also because it permitted them to adapt to the new socio-professional environments in destination cities and countries. Several interviewees described their advantageous position as a result of having spent some years abroad as children of academics on sabbaticals, physicians completing their fellowships at prestigious hospitals, and other opportunities provided by skilled parents. Noa, who lived in Europe as a child on account of her mother's engineering career, explained that the benefits accrued were important in shaping her decision to relocate with her family to the Netherlands as an adult:

As a child, I lived six years ... in Brussels through my mum's work in high technology. I see my parents' decision, this act, as a formative experience. I was 3–9 years old. Those years had an enormous influence on me and gave me skills and tools that I could directly link to them. And now I give them to my children. It challenged me, and them now, to confront things we would have otherwise not. Adaptation to a new place: flexibility, problem solving, emotional strength to deal with changes, new language, new culture. (F, 43, Amsterdam)

Ami, a hardware engineer, was similarly convinced that spending his formative years in the US played an important role in his decision to relocate to the Netherlands with his family in his mid-30 s. However short, time spent abroad was seen as instrumental to his ability to easily adapt to local norms, live with difference, and in general, make a smooth transition into new and (un)familiar sociocultural landscapes abroad. His description of the manifold advantages that were a direct outcome of his years abroad is particularly rich in terms of the references he makes to the embodied cultural and, to some extent, psychological capital, that he developed as a teenager abroad:

[When we considered moving to Silicon Valley], it threw me back to my childhood. Between the ages of 11 to 14 my parents relocated to New York and in my head, I had this understanding that I can do that [relocate with my family]. That it's possible. I can arrive in a place without speaking the local language and deal with the difficulty of acclimation. And there was also the understanding that I could live with other [cultural] patterns, non-Israeli, to contain them, to accept [cultural] resistance, and not be scared by that. (M, 30, Palo Alto)

Others, in both the US and the Netherlands, were also convinced that their successful adaptation to the cultural norms abroad was directly related to having lived and worked abroad in the past. This was true not just in the case of those who lived relatively lengthy periods during their childhood and adolescence, but also with adults, who had dwelled abroad for much shorter intervals. Importantly, for overseas experience to be considered a privilege or a form of embodied cultural capital, it need not have taken place in the same country where the migrants (and their families) are currently residing. In fact, several interviewees explained that familiarity with the specific environment where they previously resided was not the key advantage. Rather, the embodied capabilities acquired from living abroad prepared them for additional experiences of migration. Such was the case for Mila, who described how her and her husband's years of living abroad more directly facilitated their relocation to the San Francisco Bay Area than did her record of several shorter-term sojourns to Vancouver, Canada. While acknowledging the differences between the two countries, including what she referred to as 'people's temperament', she nevertheless conceived of their previous life experience in Canada as a motivation for – and important facilitator in – moving to the US.

For us, relocation was a bit easier, because we know what it's like over there [in the US]. I mean, we both lived and worked in Canada before. True, it's not the same, but it's quite similar – standard of living, people, culture, even the names of the stores. Not much difference. We also travelled to the US when we lived in Canada, so we knew exactly what awaited us. (F, 32, San Mateo)

These and many other Israeli IT migrants spoke freely about the critical advantage that their overseas experience has provided at various phases of their migration process. Whether 'overseas' was used to refer to Israel, or other foreign countries, life experience in socio-cultural, including professional, environments beyond those of the destination countries were typically a constitutive element in their privileged position. Migrants' familiarity with foreign countries, mastery of linguistic and cultural skills, and deep-rooted understanding of how IT labour markets operate in different national contexts, proved to be important qualities in the eyes of prospective employers. This type of 'mobility capital', accumulated during previous acts of cross-mobility allows them 'to cross borders rather easily, to feel comfortable and carry out activities in different places, and to come back again' (Moret, 2020, p. 236), making them culturally competent and professionally adept. Having lived or worked abroad as children, adolescents, or young adults, migrants were certain that their prior exposure to foreign countries equipped them with essential sets of psychological, linguistic, and cultural skills. These skills, many were convinced, not only enabled them to consider relocation in the first place but further eased their way into destination countries and labour markets.

6.6 Foreign Passports: Objectified Cultural Capital

From a Bourdieusien perspective, objectified forms of cultural capital are tangible aspects of culture a person could use to gain advantageous social positions. Common examples include clothing, literature, art, cars, jewellery, and other material objects with symbolic meanings and significance in particular cultures. We argue that in the context of migration, dual citizenship – that is the possession of a foreign passport – constitutes an objectified form of cultural capital. From accelerated border crossing procedures to extended social and economic benefits (e.g., healthcare) in destination countries, dual citizens have important privileges over others who lack official documents (Harpaz & Mateos, 2019).

Over the past two decades, a considerable number of Israeli citizens whose families originated from Central and Eastern Europe have obtained dual citizenship. Based on their ties to Hungary, Germany, Poland, Austria, and Romania, it is estimated that over 100,000 Israeli citizens currently hold EU passports (Harpaz, 2013). These passports facilitate expedited and often hassle-free entry and settlement. In addition, the generous benefits associated with multiple citizenships streamline Israeli migrants' merger into labour, housing, and education markets in destination countries in Europe and beyond. It is therefore hardly surprising that a fair number of our interviewees described their efforts to obtain coveted host-country passports in detail. Tamir, a senior analyst in a venture capital fund described his efforts to obtain a foreign passport:

[When I was in business school in the UK] I realised that when I graduate, my employment options as an Israeli citizen are limited... So, the decision I made at that moment was to try and broaden my options... that was part of my [relocation] strategy. I did it in two ways; first, (re) acquire my German citizenship (which I lost during my service in the IDF) ...and second, apply for an American Green Card. The idea was to open all the relevant labour markets. I was very lucky, and I won the lottery⁵ and the US market opened suddenly, and I was able to get back my German citizenship, so the EU was now open as well. So, from an Israeli with no options, who is pretty much limited to the local market, I managed to have access to labour markets of pretty much the entire Western world. (M, 35, Sunnyvale)

Many of our interviewees who were dual citizenship holders obtained this desired standing prior to their relocation. As expected, these individuals were typically highly satisfied with their relocation process. They reported a quick and painless entry procedure and few – if any – bureaucratic hurdles – as its key benefit. This is how Oren, a programmer in a small-sized firm on the outskirts of Amsterdam described his migratory process to the Netherlands:

So [because I have an EU citizenship on account of my German ancestry], the Netherlands was a reasonable choice...All I had to do was move here. I needed no work visa or permit,

⁵ The Diversity Immigrant Visa Programme (DV; Also known as 'Green Card Lottery') is a programme administered by the U.S. Department of State (DOS). It makes up to 50,000 immigrant visas available annually, drawn from random selection among all entries to individuals who are from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States. Most lottery winners reside outside the United States and immigrate through consular processing and issuance of an immigrant visa.

because of my German passport. You zoom through border control and it's all good. You quickly get your BSN, which is like social security or ID number, and of course a bank account. (M, 30, Amsterdam)

However, some opted to acquire a foreign passport only after their move. Motivations for applying for dual citizenship post-arrival were primarily professional, associated with migrants' aspirations to leave their current visa-sponsoring employers. However, familial motivations were also important, including enhancing the chances of spousal employment by local firms, increasing possibilities for transferring children to better school districts, and receiving citizen-only benefits like tax exemptions. Whatever their reasons, migrants typically reported that host-country citizenship bettered their – and their nuclear families' – lives significantly. Tal, for example, who heads the data security department at a multinational corporation in Amsterdam, states that his decision to apply for EU citizenship while living in the Netherlands was primarily related to the social benefits accruing to nationals. Realising that he reached the top of the pyramid in the firm and that he must search for a better position elsewhere, he explained how these circumstances motivated his acquisition of a Czech Republic passport. 'Once I obtained my passport, I began looking for a job', he said. '[B]ut my search was local – only in Holland, because my wife's career is here, and the benefits are good, but also because of our children's education, which is great here'.

As these examples suggest, dual citizenship constitutes an essential form of cultural capital in the hands of Israeli IT migrants. Conceived as a fundamental challenge to the ubiquitous (national) state system throughout most of the twentieth century (Howard, 2005), dual citizenship has since the 1980s been attained by millions around the world. Instrumentalised to gain entry to (primarily Northern) destination countries, or attain important utilities and benefits provided by their states, and often both, dual citizenship has become an important asset, or form of capital, in the hands of *some* individuals only (Harpaz & Mateos, 2019). As we have shown, this 'premium citizenship' (Spiro, 2019), is strategically used by Israeli migrants; whether it simplifies their physical mobility, shortens waiting times at airports, protects them from over-bureaucratic migration regimes, expedites their access to recession-impaired IT job markets, and bestows upon them fringe benefits that improve their quality of life, dual citizenship is critical for their migratory trajectories, which explains why so many of them go to great lengths to obtain this (objectified) form of cultural capital, either prior to or after their relocation.

6.7 Conclusions

This chapter focuses on the privilege of Israeli IT migrants in the US and the Netherlands. Specifically, it sets out to explore the outlook and actions of these skilled and mobile individuals and the extent to which they are aware of, articulate, and apply their privileged position. Our investigation is driven by Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and the various institutionalised, embodied, and objectified forms

it takes at different phases of their migratory trajectory. Respondents' narratives confirm that privileges obtained through various forms of cultural capital facilitated an agile and straightforward entry into national labour markets of their host societies. Accordingly, our comprehension of migrants' access to cultural capital-based privilege contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the lived experience of highly skilled migrants in countries of the Global North.

Our findings reveal that respondents commonly exercised a significant level of their own access to privilege derived from an array of forms of cultural capital at their disposal. From their educational attainments and technical knowledge, through work experience attained abroad, especially in countries that are regarded as leading centres of technology, to work- and family-related sojourns and a second passport (indicating dual citizenship), Israeli IT migrants possess and regularly utilise cultural capital throughout the migration process. As we have shown, migrants are not only acutely aware of their privilege but invest considerable efforts to (re)produce it, either before or after their relocation. Whether they (re)acquire formerly held second passports prior to departure or pursue advanced degrees at prestigious universities in destination cities, migrants are cognizant of the instrumental role of cultural capital and work continuously to maintain and enhance its various forms. In line with the notion of 'gradients of privilege' guiding this section, many of our informants admitted that their unequal, hierarchical, or 'graded' forms of privilege that are based on their differential access to resources, prestige, and social networks, have been instrumental in their migratory process. Privilege, we therefore submit, acts as a mechanism of distinction that differentiates individuals (e.g., different types of migrants) based on their association with various forms of capital. In this respect, privilege lies on a spectrum, one of which poles includes those possessing high levels of power, rights, and recognition due to their social, [economic and cultural capital](#).

Contextual specificities aside, lessons from our research could benefit scholars working in other geo-cultural settings. Three are worth mentioning here in brief. First, the notion of cultural capital used here to think through privileged migration could inspire researchers to explore other types of mobility, both domestically and internationally. As countries of origin and destination court migrants with high levels of economic and cultural capital, a more subtle conceptualisation of their migratory trajectory and state policies geared towards that end is highly needed. Second, methodologically, allowing cultural capital-endowed subjects to articulate their privileges and the extent to which it has ushered them in relocation, as we did here, is important if we are to gain a more nuanced understanding of the agency of privilege. Like others, subjects of privilege deserve to be heard such that the structure of their advantageous position is better understood and, when needed, undone.

We maintain that studies should refrain from celebrating the economic contribution of privileged migrants, and instead, strive for a more balanced analysis of their relocation, acclimation, and everyday lives to understand their inherently complex mobility. To do so, we ought to give privileged migrants a voice and listen – carefully and non-judgmentally to their narratives, as we tried to do in this chapter.

Finally, from an empirical standpoint, despite using data from two substantially different national contexts, the observations made by our interviewees were similar.

Israeli IT migrants in both countries singled out the very same types of cultural capital as instrumental in their trajectories. Whether institutional, embodied, or objectified, cultural capital expedited and facilitated their access to labour (and other) markets in destination countries. This is not to argue that national context is unimportant; on the contrary, national initiatives like the Diversity Immigrant Visa Programme in the US (DV; also known as 'Green Card Lottery'), or the 30% ruling in the Netherlands—a tax incentive for highly skilled migrants recruited from abroad, which effectively exempts 30% of their gross salary from income tax—have been important factors for some of our interlocutors either when selecting their destinations or attempting to integrate into local labour markets. Future studies ought to pay careful attention to such initiatives to better understand how they shape the course of privileged migration in general and to specific countries in particular. It is our hope that these studies would use some of the insights gained here to reveal the richness of privileged mobility patterns, in countries of both the global North and South.

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Chapter 7

Migration Beyond Marginality: Mobile Managerial Professionals Negotiating Privilege



Anna Spiegel

7.1 Introduction

Migration scholars often emphasise movements from the Global South to the Global North, portraying migrants as escaping economic, political, or environmental crises in search of a better future. However, as spelt out in the introduction to this volume, some migrants do not fit into this picture: migrants who move from the Global North to the Global South or within the Global North as students, retirees, lifestyle migrants, professionals, or digital nomads. This chapter delves into the life-worlds of a specific group among such privileged migrants: globally mobile managerial staff of Multinational Corporations (MNCs), often referred to as ‘expatriates’, with powerful positions within their employing MNCs (Beaverstock, 2005; Sklair, 2001).

Drawing on Anselm Strauss’ ‘negotiated-order approach’ (1978), this chapter first examines the ‘structural conditions’ (Strauss, 1978, p. 5), contributing to the creation and reproduction of privilege in migration. It contends that such policies significantly shape managers’ life-worlds and everyday practices and must be scrutinised for their role in creating and reproducing privilege in the context of professional migration. Secondly, this chapter asks how managers use their resources, develop agency, and negotiate their institutionally framed privileges in everyday contexts. It thus argues that institutional and material resources are only one component in the process of (re)producing privileges (Salverda & Abbink, 2013, p. 4) and that the social order of privilege needs to be constantly reproduced by social actors.

With mobile managerial executives as an empirical example, this chapter aims at three major contributions: First, while prior research has mainly approached privilege from a structural and systemic perspective, a negotiated-order perspective into the study of privileged migration is introduced. Second, while there has been a tendency to overemphasise nationality, race, and citizenship, this chapter puts the

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focus on specific transnational employing organisations, i.e., MNCs and their global mobility policies. And third, it shows how organisational and individual practices are intertwined and where the limits of negotiation privilege in everyday life are.

In the following, the existing literature on privileges in migration is discussed, and a negotiated-order perspective on privilege is introduced. After outlining the methodology, the structural conditions created by the mobility regimes are explored. Following this, the managers' practices of creating, justifying, and embracing privilege while simultaneously engaging in attempts to reject privileges in everyday situations are laid out using the emic concept of 'King Kong'. Finally, findings and conclusions regarding everyday life practices of enacting and negotiating privileges are discussed.

7.2 The Negotiated Order of Privileged Migration

In the field of privileged migration, different theoretical accounts of privilege have informed the research. Some scholars have taken a systemic and structural approach towards privilege, viewing privilege as 'produced by structures' (Benson & Osbaldeston, 2016, p. 412). Migration, they argue, occurs within a hierarchical global political and economic system that produces systemic positions of relative privilege (Benson, 2014, p. 47) for migrants moving from countries with powerful positions to countries with less powerful positions. In addition, this 'global geography of power' (Lan, 2011, p. 1672) is said to produce socio-structural privileges for the migrants, in the sense that when they move, they are automatically positioned at the top of their destination countries' social structures (Benson, 2013, p. 317). Highlighting the colonial, imperialist, and capitalist roots of such a global economic system (Kunz, 2016), this approach emphasises historical processes and global dependencies, elucidating how migrants from Western industrialised nations inherit privileged positions. However, in such an approach, privilege rather appears to be something that individuals simply 'have' and carry with them from one location to the other. It thus risks objectifying and reifying social structures and overlooks 'the individual experience of being part of the international circuit' (Yeoh & Khoo, 1998, p. 161).

As an alternative to such static conceptions of privilege, and social order in general, I propose that adopting Anselm Strauss' 'negotiated-order approach' (1978, 1993) offers a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between structural dimensions and individual enactments of privilege. Rooted in an interactionist tradition, the negotiated-order approach does indeed acknowledge the role of structures for social interactions. In fact, Strauss emphasises that everyday interactions are far from accidental but rather patterned in the sense that they are 'contingent on specific structural conditions' (Strauss, 1978, p. 5). However, such structural elements of social order, on a global, national, community, or organisational level, do not simply constrain and predetermine social action but have to be seen as conditions that social actors have to creatively react upon and engage with, but which also can be changed. The negotiated-order approach stresses the '[...] lack of fixity of social order, its temporal,

mobile and unstable character, and the flexibility of interactants faced with the need to act through interactional processes in specific localised situations where although rules and regulations exist, these are not necessarily prescriptive nor peremptorily constraining' (Strauss, 1993, p. 255). Ultimately, this means shifting the focus from researching the consequences of structures for individual action towards highlighting how interactional processes and the symbolic negotiations therein produce, stabilise, or even reshape social order, as is highlighted by the concept of 'processual ordering' (Strauss, 1993, p. 254).

However, taking up this theoretical openness of social order to negotiations does not mean that, empirically, order is always negotiable.

[...] not everything is either equally negotiable or—at any given time or period of time—negotiable at all. One of the researcher's main tasks, as it is that of the negotiating parties themselves, is to discover just what is negotiable at any given time. (Strauss, 1978, p. 252)

This means that, within specific contexts, some elements of the social order can be negotiated while others cannot. However, the non-negotiable elements might become negotiable as individuals interact with and adapt to the new social order (Wessels et al., 2017).

Mirroring Strauss's emphasis on the verb 'ordering', I conceptualise privilege as multidimensional, relational and embedded in the continual process of social *positioning*. A negotiated-order approach to studying privilege thus moves beyond viewing privilege as a static, given structure and makes visible the 'generic processes' and practices (Schwalbe et al., 2000, p. 420) through which privilege is created and challenged. Privilege is not something one simply 'has' but rather something one 'does' (Morris, 2007, p. 410). Therefore, it has to be analysed through the everyday processes and practices in which it is negotiated, produced, and contested.

Many studies on privileged migration aim at making the invisible and taken-for-granted nature of privileges visible. They highlight how affluent migrants naturalise their privileges and how privileges are enacted in everyday life. For instance, Fauser argues that the German retirement migrants in her study uncritically embraced their privileged position and expressed 'a natural confidence in enacting mobile citizenship' (Fauser, 2020, p. 189). Similarly, Croucher concluded critically that most of the US Americans in Mexico were 'comfortable with, and sometimes blissfully unaware of, their relative privilege' (Croucher, 2009, p. 181). Looking at privileged Western migrants in Thailand, Scuzarello described how they relativised, justified, and actively maintained their economic and social privileges by claiming positions of 'good husbands' who rescue Thai women from abusive local partners or as 'good Westerners' saving Thai people from poverty by offering them employment (Scuzarello, 2020, p. 1622). Only a few scholars placed the ambivalent negotiations and even practices of actively resisting or countering such privileges at the centre of their research, as this could mean risking being labelled apologetic toward privileges (Benson, 2013, p. 314). In her study on US Americans living in Panama, Benson discovered that many of her respondents were quite conscious about their locally privileged position and, as a reaction, engaged in philanthropy and charitable work

aimed at helping the local community or political activism aimed at fostering local development at a structural level.

In summary, while structural perspectives on privilege provide valuable insights into the historical dimensions of privilege, they must be complemented with approaches that capture the dynamic nature of negotiating privilege in everyday life. The negotiated-order perspective offers a consistent approach to exploring how the order of privilege is negotiated, contested, and reproduced within social interactions, thereby enriching our understanding of privileged migrations. Rather than assuming that privilege is based solely on structural factors, this chapter focuses on how privilege is constructed within organisational and individual practices. For mobile managers, this involves, on the one hand, the analysis of Global Mobility Policies of their employing MNCs (Spiegel, 2024, 2021) as specific structural conditions and as sediments of past negotiations simultaneously. On the other hand, it involves analysing the different modes of action, that is, how managers make sense of, produce, and counter organisational practices in their everyday life.

7.3 Methodology

To make the processes of negotiation and the related social meanings, symbolisations, and modes of action visible (Schütz, 1972; Schütz & Luckmann, 1989), complex qualitative methods were employed. Specifically for relatively under-researched privileged groups such as managerial executives, the need for qualitative studies based on everyday practices and modes of action is preminent to work out processes of negotiating privilege (Skovgaard Smith, 2013). This study, conducted between 2011 and 2014 in China, Germany, and the United States, focused on 29 high-ranking American and German executives and their families (Spiegel et al., 2018).¹ The executives held positions ranging from middle management to top management positions in MNCs, sitting on boards of large Chinese or US subsidiaries of the cooperations. Sixteen were aged 40–49, five 30–39, and five 50–59, with only one younger than 29 and only two older than 60. Among the participants, twenty-five were male, and four were female. This proportion roughly mirrors the presence of women in the professional field of middle and top management in the core industrial sectors and the underlying dominant ‘business masculinities’ (Connell & Wood, 2005). To some of them contact was established before the researchers travelled to the respective locations, others joined the research through snowballing at the research site.

The data were gathered through semi-structured and narrative interviews, which lasted between 30 and 120 min, as well as informal conversations with the managers

¹ The project ‘Expatriate Manager: A New Cosmopolitan Elite? Habitus, Everyday Practices and Networks’ was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) under Grant ME 2008/5–1 and hosted by the Institute for World Society Studies at the Faculty of Sociology, Bielefeld University. The research team consisted of Ursula Mense-Petermann (main applicant), Anna Spiegel (post-doctoral researcher), Junchen Yan (doctoral researcher), and Gert Schmidt, with Ruth Ayass and Kathleen M. Park as cooperation partners.

themselves and with family members, colleagues, and friends. In addition, managers were accompanied in their everyday practices through ‘go-alongs’ (Kusenbach, 2003). In their professional spaces, each manager was ‘shadowed’ by the involved researchers for 2–3 days during longer research periods in the respective localities: when attending meetings and interacting with colleagues and superiors, when doing office work, and when having lunch with colleagues. In non-professional spaces, go-alongs for leisure activities and family visits were carried out. By systematically combining formal interviews, informal conversations, and observations, the paradoxes of everyday practices of enacting and countering privilege could be made visible.

The audio files were transcribed for analysis, all other observations were documented in the form of observation protocols, and all names were anonymised for the protection of respondents. All materials were subsequently coded and analysed following the grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During this process, the analysis of emic terms played a central role. An emic concept is grounded in the ‘worldview of the participants, reconstructed by the researcher, and corresponds to the meanings participants themselves attach to their experience’ (Hahn et al., 2011, p. 145). However, in ethnography and grounded theory, emic concepts are not used only to ensure accurate description, but also to enable more abstract generalising (Hahn et al., 2011). The emic concept of ‘King Kong’ was one of those emic terms that turned out to be able to integrate different codes and modes of action into one coherent narration. Due to this integrative capacity and its strong symbolic power, it was thus chosen as an organising category for this chapter. The cases included in this article were selected because they represent different modes of dealing with privilege found in all empirical cases. This intensive case-by-case approach aims at theoretical insights rather than quantitative generalisation and contributes to understanding the different modes of how privileges are negotiated.

7.4 The Making of Privilege by Multinational Corporations’ Mobility Policies

The first step in working out the generic processes and practices of negotiating privilege in managerial action is to sketch out the structural conditions that shape it. The focus is on the structural conditions of privilege that are related to the managers’ membership in their employing companies. For analysing these conditions, the paper draws on cultural globalisation research in global management² (Alcadipani et al., 2012; Boussebaa, 2020, 2021; Boussebaa & Faulconbridge, 2019). As Boussebaa and Morgan (2014) have argued, most of the current MNCs have to be seen as neo-imperial spaces due to the still existing knowledge and power hierarchies between headquarters, mostly based in the leading Western economies, and the peripheral

² For a detailed discussion on the differences of cultural globalization research in global management and a cross cultural management approach see Boussebaa (2021)).

subsidiaries located in other countries, be it in the West or in the developing world. In the following, I will thus focus on privileges as the product of such ‘rules and regulations’ (Strauss, 1993, p. 255), which have to be understood as neo-imperial, namely, specific global mobility policies that govern the work of mobile executive staff in MNCs.

In contrast to most migrants for whom migration is related to processes of ‘deskilling’ (Nowicka, 2012), privileged migrants more often gain than lose status in the migration process (Lundström, 2014). This is also reflected in the professional trajectories of the managers in this study. As a general pattern, the local subsidiaries where the managers worked were organised in such a way that higher and top management positions were filled with one or more ‘expat managers’, while middle and lower management and general workforce positions were filled with local employees. For nearly all of the managers in our research, this meant that their mobility was connected to advancement in the formal organisational hierarchy. If, as most of them did, they held a middle or higher management position before their assignment, they typically occupied the rank of a General Manager, a Managing Director, or a CEO of a local subsidiary. If they had already occupied a higher management position before the assignment, mobility was typically linked with rising to top-level management positions with national, regional, or corporate scope. These assignments thus typically meant a significant career advancement for the managers with increased access to and control over resources and power within their immediate working context. The data also shows that the assignment of managers from the MNC’s home country also produces privileged positions relative to most of the local co-workers, whom the expatriate managers supervise and control as their direct superiors. The effect of such a staffing strategy of filling specific higher and top management positions with managers from the MNC’s home country leads to a clear ethnicisation of the formal organisational hierarchy replicating neo-imperial power relations. It also leads to a systematic production of privileged positions in the companies for the assigned managers ‘in terms of decision-making, responsibility and income’ (Camenisch & Suter, 2020, p. 146). The expatriate managers are thus part of complex mechanisms of ‘political, economic and cultural control’ (Mir et al., 2008, p. 223) within the MNC.

In addition to these neo-imperial staffing policies, specific global mobility policies of MNCs created privileged social positions for Western managers also outside the sphere of work. Global mobility policies contain basic rules and regulations for international assignments in MNCs (Harvey & Moeller, 2009). Through these policies, mobile managers are granted specific *support services*, such as so-called *look-and-see* trips, prior to the assignment, the practical organisation of relocation, and the processing of the tax declaration by an external provider, among other help. Most importantly, they are granted *financial resources*, such as moving, housing, mobility, and ‘hardship’ allowances, as well as specific *financial resources* for spouses and children, such as school allowances and funds for language classes (Phillips & Fox, 2003).

And third, MNCs policies on cross-culturalism play a crucial role in creating a specific type of privilege, namely epistemic privilege. MNCs policies and

programmes on cross-culturalism are typically oriented towards the ‘Hofstede doctrine’ (Hofstede, 1997), which puts emphasis on cultural differences and tends to essentialise and even hierarchise them (Boussebaa, 2021). This doctrine is globally diffused by Business Schools (Alcadipani & Caldas, 2012; Boussebaa & Morgan, 2014), the global migration industry (Cranston, 2016) and International Business researchers (Boussebaa, 2021; Westwood & Jack, 2008) alike. The outcome of such imaginaries is often managerial identities which perceive non-Western subsidiaries as deficient places requiring managerial authority and control (Spiegel, 2024), representations of non-Western employees as in need of development and training along Western lines (Koppman et al., 2016) and narratives of privilege, hierarchy and distance in general (Cranston, 2016; Leggett, 2013). MNCs in this research had clear national identities, and the opposition at the workplace between home and host country nationals and their working styles was striking. Our empirical research on expatriate managers of globally operating MNCs has suggested that MNCs do not provide their members a space for inclusive cosmopolitan sociability, as the inbuilt knowledge hierarchies between the headquarters and the subsidiary prevent such an egalitarian sociability.

To conclude, the specific structural conditions (Strauss, 1978) that shape the everyday life and work of mobile executive staff in MNCs are specific global mobility regimes, creating specific privileges for mobile executives and thus shaping their actions. Following the negotiated order perspective, these mobility regimes are linked to practices and negotiations in two ways: First, they are themselves produced by ‘recurrent patterns’ (Schwalbe et al., 2000) of *organisational* practices. Drawing on Benson’s (2018) and Lundström’s (2014) work, it becomes apparent that privilege is not merely something individuals inherently possess but is constituted through specific organisational practices regulating mobility. Second, and most importantly, these organisational practices can only turn into rules and regulations if they are constantly taken up in individual practices and negotiations. This is because they require active sense-making and social positioning by those subjected to these mobility regimes.

7.5 Managers Negotiating Privilege

When asked about how long he was planning to stay in China, Mr. Hoffmann, a German manager in his late twenties in China, replied:

The fear is that at some point I’ll really be stuck here, as many do, because [...] there are these temptations [...] as an expat, and I don’t want to run the risk that in 4 years I will beat myself on the chest like King Kong and say ‘I’m the cool guy’, and that’s why, 2 years is enough, I think. The temptation is [...] you can always put everything on the foreigner card. If you behave weirdly, you can just say ‘Okay, I am a foreigner, I’m just different. On the other hand, also at work, the Chinese say. ‘Okay, he’s a Westerner, let him go through with it, he’s allowed to do this and that, that’s just his way of being.’ So you get a lot of premature praise in various areas.

Mr. Hoffmann refers to the iconic figure of King Kong, the black monster ape that ‘riots through human society’ (Stymeist, 2009, p. 397), to describe how many expatriates enact their privileged social position. By using the metaphor of King Kong, Mr. Hoffman draws on a set of categorical, binary oppositions such as modernity–primitive life, North–South, white–black, culture–nature (Erb, 1998; Stymeist, 2009) to frame the experiences of expatriates; however, this is done in an unexpected way. While identifying himself and other expatriates from the industrialised North with the monstrous black ape from the ‘primitive’ South, the original racial and spatial positions of the movie seem to be reversed. Nevertheless, the underlying structures of the modern myth of King Kong, the connection of mobility, race, alterity, and power, remain intact. Like King Kong, the managers appear to be migrants moving between two separate, categorically different parallel worlds (Stymeist, 2009). Like King Kong, they appear to be surrounded by categorically different others. However, whereas King Kong’s strength is natural, the power of corporate managers emerges out of the privileged social positions that neo-imperial staffing and mobility policies produce. In Mr. Hoffmann’s perspective, what King Kong *is*, expats run the risk of becoming: convinced that they are ‘King of all’ (Stymeist, 2009, p. 400). And in the case of Mr. Hoffmann, even reflecting about his position through the negatively loaded metaphor of King Kong, does not prevent him of behaving like him.

7.5.1 *Embracing Privilege: Becoming King Kong*

7.5.1.1 *Enjoying Power*

King Kong is a metaphor for an uninhibited and rampant sense of power and control over the other; in the original movie (*King Kong*, 1933), it is over ‘women, the city and modernity’ (Millner, 2013, p. 116). By comparing expatriates with King Kong, Mr. Hoffmann points to the fact that most of the managers occupy powerful positions in the MNC during their assignment and that they very much enjoy the increase in individual managerial power and autonomy gained by the assignment. Like Mr. Hoffmann, most of the managers in this study very emphatically embraced their newly gained privileged position and experienced it as a kind of power boost or a ‘jolt to their senses’ (Leggett, 2013, p. 42). They enjoyed being in a new powerful position and demonstratively performed this newly gained power. Most of the managers very sharply juxtaposed their work life before and during the assignment. Whereas they described their work back home as boring desk work, characterised by bureaucratic restrictions and the need to harmonise and coordinate their work with many people and divisions in the corporation, they described their work during the assignment abroad as actually resembling the position of a ‘General Manager of an independent medium-sized company’, to use Mr. Schreibers words, with much more independence, operative freedom, and management responsibilities. When talking about what made assignments attractive for him, Mr. Schreiber, a German manager assigned to China, said the following:

When you are out there, you are the master in your own house. And to fill in forms to order pencils [at his job at the HQ after returning from his assignment to Hungary, AS] while before it was me who signed all the checks for the company... this is then kind of weird.

The enjoyment of the individual power boost is also reflected in the German top manager Mr. Dittrich's accounts of his power at the Chinese subsidiary: 'I can say 'let it snow tomorrow', and they will arrange an ion rocket and make it snow.' It is this experience of an individual power boost that leads expatriates to 'beat their chests' like King Kong, as Mr. Hoffmann stated. It is their specific privileged position at the foreign subsidiary that enabled them to break out of the iron cage of bureaucracy in a King Kong-like manner. In many cases, when returning to their parent company, the managers once again occupied lower positions. They could not mobilise the privileges they had during their assignment but instead were again subjected to complex organisational hierarchies and had problems coping with this limited autonomy. This is why many tried to prolong their stay and thus found themselves in a condition of permanent provisionality (Spiegel, 2021).

7.5.1.2 Going Against the Rules

King Kong is an iconic representation of an uncivilised, primitive other (Stymest, 2009, p. 398), angry, violent, and destructive, behaving in a way that breaks with all the accepted norms for the social behaviour of his civilised other. Using the King Kong metaphor, Mr. Hoffmann points to the fact that some of the managers see themselves as permitted to behave in a way that is not in conformity with common standards of social behaviour and that they can legitimise this deviant behaviour with their privileged alterity, by 'putting everything on the foreigner card', as he said. Additionally, in Mr. Hoffmann's case, we could observe such bold behaviour, for instance, when he made sexist comments about his female Chinese colleagues, knowing that they could not understand him when he spoke German. This is an extreme case, but there were also other ways in which the managers in our research had the power to transgress socially accepted norms of how things should be done at the subsidiary and were able to legitimise it with their cultural alterity. Many of them explicitly used cultural language to claim authority for their own practices and to enforce and legitimise their management decisions. Such was the case with Mr. Novak, a German Manager in the US, who explained the following: 'Okay, when it's really important to bring more quality into the whole thing, then you have to say: Wait a second, guys, this time it's different, this time I'm doing it *'the German way'*.' Another example is Mr. Schwarz, a German manager with a middle management position in the local formal management hierarchy of the US-American subsidiary, who was able to successfully push his perspectives against the concerns of both higher-ranking local and non-German expatriate managers due to his strong informal networks with the German CEO of the plant. Our data showed that Mr. Schwarz was able to capitalise upon his informal networks based on the shared expatriate status. Additionally, the fact that he did not follow the formal hierarchy

led to tensions with both higher-ranking local and non-German expatriate managers, which, however, did not bother Mr. Schwarz. Claiming a King Kong-like position of difference enabled the managers to legitimately break with standards of accepted social behaviour and organisational procedures. By doing this, they perpetuate and stabilise the order of privilege.

7.5.2 Transforming Local Space

King Kong ‘rampages through the modern industrial city’ (Stymeist, 2009, p. 399) and physically destroys the local space through which he moves. The managers in our research did, of course, not physically destroy local office space, but they actively worked on symbolically transforming the local company space in such a way that local influences were pushed back. Mr. Hoffmann, for instance, explained that it was his task to ‘keep up the European way of doing things’ at the company and make it less Chinese. Here, the control over local staff’s practices at the office became a central instrument of displacing local practices and aesthetics from the office space. During our job shadowing, we observed how he tried to transform the office space into a more German space. One incident where Mr. Hoffmann framed a conflict about the material arrangements of the office space in cultural terms and claimed superiority of his own material practices and standards was the conflict about new trash cans for the office. As the existing trash cans in the office did not correspond to his idea of a representative office, Mr. Hoffmann instructed one of his employees to buy new trash cans. However, when he saw the new ones purchased by his employee, he was not satisfied with them at all. He thus called his employee and instructed her to exchange them again, giving her very detailed instructions of what type of trash can he wanted, namely, ‘closed, not plastic, not cheap looking’. After she left the room, he explained to the researchers that Chinese employees did not have the same ‘sense of perfection’ as he had. He said, ‘How an office looks is just not taken seriously in China. Chinese people just don’t see these things; they don’t have an eye for making things perfect. This is why I have to monitor so many things.’ In the following days of the job shadowing, he repeatedly pointed to several other spots in the office that did not correspond to his aesthetics and quality standards of how an office should look, adding that he would order changes.

Another incident of displacing local practices from the office space was to prohibit Chinese staff from bringing their own lunch to the office and reheating the food in the office. Because of the odour it produced, Mr. Hoffmann and the other German managers in the company perceived this local practice as endangering the quality of the office place, where they also met with customers, and decided that the food needed to be kept out of the office. Mr. Winkelmann, another German manager in China, was frequently confronted with local employees’ attempts to practice Feng Shui in the office, which he disliked very much and has thus far successfully prevented. His position of keeping local practices out of the office space was also reflected in an informative movie that Mr. Winkelmann had produced for newly employed personnel

at the company. In the movie, issues related to the German concepts of ‘order and tidiness’ were put forward, as Mr. Winkelmann explained:

So, when they just start here, they get training about how our company thinks that things should work. The video is about how to behave, about tidiness [...]; so that you should not be spitting and that you do not just dump the tee leaves into the toilet. Because after some time, this looks really awful. Things like this. So, these things like order and tidiness, you have to keep digging and rub their noses into this continuously.

As this section showed, many managers worked on culturally transforming the local office space. Of course, they do not use the same means as King Kong, who ‘tears New York City to pieces’ (Millner, 2013, p. 116). However, by keeping local people, practices, and objects that disrupt their aesthetics out of the offices, they enact their privilege by symbolically keeping the local out of the office space.

To conclude, the three identified modes of action—*enjoying power, going against the rules, transforming local space*—contribute to the reproduction and perpetuation of privileged positions.

7.5.3 *Rejecting Privilege: Distancing Oneself from ‘King Kong’*

Whereas in the sphere of work, joyfully embracing privilege was the dominant form of making sense of the privileged social positions created by neo-imperial staffing policies, negotiating privilege in everyday life outside the company was more complex. In the everyday realm, the privileged position was more ambivalently negotiated by the managers and their families: A considerable number of managers and their families who were part of the research were, in fact, very critical of the privileges granted by their expatriate packages and the social and spatial segregation from the local society typical for the expatriate bubble life. Additionally, even if they did not use the term ‘King Kong’, they were actively engaged in distancing themselves from those expatriates who uncritically embraced their privileges in everyday life in a King Kong-like manner.

7.5.3.1 *Rejecting Luxury*

Many of the managers and their families tried to maintain a *normal* life through a set of different everyday practices. For example, the Kellys, a US–Korean bi-national couple in China, negotiated privilege by choosing a place of residence where they would be in direct spatial proximity to local nonelite groups. Mrs. Kelly explained as follows:

We wanted to [...] live just bog-standard. So first we lived in a courtyard, our cleaning lady lived just across the street, and here where we live now, people are taxi drivers or, you know, blue collar workers, or even just retired. And when you walk on the street, you can see them. [...] It’s just nice to be bog-standard people. (Mrs Kelly)

For the Kellys, the decision to live in the same neighbourhood together with their cleaning lady, taxi drivers, and other blue-collar workers was the main instrument to distance themselves from the spatially and socially secluded lifestyle usually practised by Western expatriates in China (Spiegel, 2018a).

The Schwarzes, a German expatriate couple in the US, also actively worked on distancing themselves from the typical expatriate lifestyle, which they perceived as unnecessarily luxurious and extravagant. Mr. Schwarz told us in a very disgusted tone that most of the houses of his expatriate colleagues ‘are so big that they have a real echo in the living room’. The Schwarzes chose not to make use of the generous housing allowance provided by their company and instead rented a small house that cost much less. They lived in a relatively small subdivision with unpretentious middle-class houses, which they described as follows: ‘This is neither an exclusive neighbourhood nor is it white trash. It is very diverse, we have all skin colours, we have local Americans, and we have other expatriates. This is conventional commodity housing.’ Not choosing the elite housing options enabled them to use the money from the housing allowance to carry out a remarkable travel program in the US and Central America.

In contrast, the Novaks, a German–Slovenian bi-national expatriate couple in the US, did not question living in a very wealthy local elite neighbourhood in the catchment area of one of the biggest American global cities. However, they seemed rather lost in their huge villa, which was extraordinarily big by German standards, with a spacious entrance hall and the typical structure of separated formal and informal living and dining areas. The Novaks negotiated their privileged position within this very private realm by converting representative spaces connected to the social practices of the local elite into ordinary family spaces. The formal dining room with space for over ten guests was not used by the family at all. The entire formal living area, designed to be the place for representative social gatherings, was nearly empty and was mainly used as a gigantic playroom for their 2 year-old son.

7.5.3.2 Rejecting the Expat Bubble

Many of the managers and their families developed different practices of countering the image of the cultural exclusiveness and homogeneity of expatriate communities to different degrees. Therefore, opting against living in ethnically homogeneous expatriate compounds represents a way to establish spatial proximity to different cultural others. For the Neumanns and others, the main issue was to transcend the boundaries of their own national expatriate community. They consciously opted out of living in a gated community known as being German-dominated so that their children could have some exposure to cultural differences. For others, the main concern was to work against segregation from the host country population. The Kellys chose their neighbourhood not only to evade class boundaries but also to bypass the socio-cultural distance from the local population:

Well, we have opted against living in a compound, because if you live like this, then you don't live in [China]... you could easily think that you're in Dallas, in Texas, walking around in such a compound. [...] But we decided that we wanted to experience Chinese life, not only an expat life. [...] We wanted to be in the middle of a Chinese neighbourhood. (Mrs Kelly)

In contrast to expatriates living 'outside China' (Spiegel, 2018a), the Kellys actively worked on positioning themselves 'in the middle of China' through their dwelling practices.

The most far-reaching attempts to break the expat bubble were practices related to pursuing not only spatial but also social proximity to locals. The Neumanns decided not to attend a German-dominated church, which they claimed was too narrow for them. They were instead extremely active in an international evangelical denomination with an American pastor and a highly international congregation—with congregants coming from the US, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong, as well as Chinese return migrants with non-Chinese passports.

For the vast majority of the managers in our study, there was no doubt but to send their children to national enclave schools (German School, American School) or to International Schools. In contrast, the Kellys initially sent their children to a regular Chinese school. In addition, both Mr. and Mrs. Kelly put a strong emphasis on learning local languages during their assignments to both Germany and China, and their children were also fluent in the two languages. The Richters, a German couple in China, consciously avoided the typical gatherings of the expatriate community, such as 'charity events and coffee mornings for expatriate wives'. Instead, they decided to 'only meet with Chinese in the first years and to talk with them about everything, about China, about the government, even about sexuality', stating that 'this has helped me to understand the country and the culture, to understand why people are how they are'. Through this constant work to transcend the boundaries of their national expat bubble, the Richters were able to build up an extended network, especially to local Chinese artists and other international expatriates.

Reflecting on the above examples, we can see everyday practices of *rejecting luxury* and *rejecting the expat bubble* as different practices of how privilege is negotiated. However, all of these attempts were highly ambivalent, if not paradoxical. For the Kellys, the limits and paradoxes of their ambitions to live an ordinary life are particularly evident. Although they opted to dwell in a location in which they are constantly confronted with locals who have a different socio-structural background, the class divide is still intact, as they have the means to hire a domestic worker among their neighbours. Additionally, the spatial proximity did not directly lead to social proximity. They regretfully told us that although they had lived there for 6 years and spoke basic Chinese, contact with neighbours had never gone beyond a greeting. Their wider social networks also failed to reflect spatial proximity to China. For instance, Mrs. Kelly reflected very self-critically about the fact that she had no Chinese friends. In the other cases presented, there were also inherent ambivalences. While the Novaks rejected what they perceived to be the US upper-class luxury lifestyle with separated representational areas in the house, they, at the same time,

provided their son with the luxury of having a gigantic indoor playground. In addition, while the Schwarzes did not use their financial bonuses for luxury housing, they did use them for extensive touristic activities. In this sense, they indeed negotiated privilege. However, this was rather through a transformation of privilege, away from more obvious to more subtle and unpretentious expressions, than through an actual disassembly of privilege altogether.

7.6 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to advance our understanding of how privilege works in the context of migration and how it is negotiated by a particular group of privileged migrants: globally mobile managerial staff of Multinational Corporations (MNCs). A negotiated-order approach to studying privilege was used in order to analyse the structural conditions of mobile managers' privileges and identify interactional processes and the symbolic negotiations, which, on the one hand, reproduced and stabilised the social order of privilege and, on the other, challenged and reshaped this order.

By examining the negotiations of privilege by mobile managers, this chapter makes three contributions to the scholarship on privileged migrations.

First, it shows that privilege is not simply something that migrants 'have' and carry with them as a form of embodied capital, but something that is produced by individual and organisational actors. At least for the mobile executives, it became clear that it is specific organisational practices, sedimented in global mobility and staffing policies of MNCs, that put their mobile staff in individually unprecedented, privileged positions for the period of their assignment. In that sense, privilege is strictly relational and contextual, as spelled out in the introduction to this volume (Buhr & Zaban), as for mobile managerial professionals it emerges mainly in the specific spatial and social contexts of the local MNC subsidiaries.³ However, this also means that privilege is temporary, as most of the managers in our sample acquired their privileged managerial positions only with their assignment and lost their privileges, once they came back to the headquarters. This points to the importance of linking the analysis of structural and systemic sources of privilege, such as the hierarchical global political and economic system (Benson, 2014, p. 47), with a more nuanced analysis of organisational and institutional actors of the migration industry (Cranston, 2018; Koh & Wissink, 2018). It also points to the need to combine social, spatial and temporal dimensions when researching 'gradients of privilege' (Buhr & Zaban, 2026).

Second, and in line with the negotiated order approach, this chapter demonstrates that these structural conditions do not entirely determine the actions of privileged

³ For an analysis of corporate offices as contact zones, in which the identity of the MNCs is negotiated see Spiegel (2018b)

migrants but rather forces them to react creatively to them. In search for 'gradients of privilege' in mobile manager's agency, the chapter identified different action modes of dealing with privilege. The action modes of *enjoying power*, *going against the rules*, and *transforming local space* stabilise and reproduce privilege in the sphere of work. They do so because they perpetuate specific 'powerful virtual selves' (Schwalbe et al., 2000, p. 424) of potent, competent, and superior managers from the West who claim to have the right to exercise power over the local workforce and local office space. These images rely on specific modes of emotion management (Schwalbe et al., 2000, p. 431). In this case, patterns of feeling about power were related to enjoyment and satisfaction, which sustain the order of privilege. They also contribute to the maintenance of social boundaries (Schwalbe et al., 2000, p. 430) between mobile managers and the local workforce by reshaping local networks. Conversely, the action modes of *rejecting luxury* and *rejecting the expat bubble* aim at transforming and reshaping privilege. They aim to downplay the material and symbolic manifestations of the 'powerful virtual selves' (Schwalbe et al., 2000, p. 424), such as huge villas, segregated communities, luxury company cars, and elite practices of representation. They are connected to patterns of feeling about power and luxury, which are built on emotions such as modesty and embarrassment. Additionally, they make group boundaries more permeable and social networks more inclusive.

While the focus of this chapter was to contribute to generalisation 'about process, not populations' (Becker, 1990, p. 242) some remarks can be made about the numerical incidence of the different action modes. Approximately, 1/3 of the 29 interviewed managers showed one or more of the King Kong like action modes, while 2/3 showed action modes related to the deconstruction of privilege and clearly distanced themselves from managers whom they themselves described with powerful metaphors such as 'King Kong' or even 'generals'. However, there was a considerable number of managers who showed action modes from both types and who acted highly paradoxical.

This leads to the discussion of the third contribution of this chapter, namely the question of what aspects of the order of privilege were 'negotiable at any given time' (Strauss, 1978, p. 252). It became clear that many managers individually negotiated the order of privilege in their everyday lives. They engaged in reorganising and transforming the manifestations of privilege, away from more obvious to more subtle and unpretentious expressions, and reshuffled the ways they used financial and material resources, distancing themselves from common notions of luxury. They sought new ways to socio-spatially position themselves with regard to expat communities that were less exclusive. They distanced themselves from the majority of managers who accepted the order of privilege without hesitating and who behaved in a 'King Kong-like' manner. However, the outcomes of all of these attempts remained highly paradoxical, challenging and reproducing privilege at the same time. The studied managers did thus neither belong to the group of those who are blissfully unaware of their privilege (Croucher, 2009, p. 181) nor to the ones who were politically using their privileged position to tackle social inequality at the local level (Benson, 2013) but paradoxically navigated their everyday lives through an institutionally shaped

order of privilege. However, these everyday negotiations did not have direct repercussions on the organisational order of privilege, as the global mobility regimes of the employing companies were not transformed. The argument is thus that to significantly change the order of privilege for mobile managers, not only the individual practices but also the organisational practices have to change. As long as global mobility policies build on the assumption that mobility is a ‘hardship’, for which managers need to be compensated with a significant amount of financial resources, the order of privilege will remain intact.

Ethics Approval This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent to participate and/or to publish was obtained from all individual participants.

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Chapter 8

Sao Paulo as a ‘Second-Best’ Option: Classed Confidence and Fear of Failure in Privileged Migration



Helena Hof

8.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the seemingly ‘natural taste’ that makes some people eager to move internationally in their early career and their confidence in being able to do so more smoothly than others (Bourdieu, 1984). Feminist, postcolonial, and critical race approaches have made significant advances in explaining how inequality is maintained, challenged, or reinforced through mobility and how geographical arbitrage is intrinsically bound up in these processes (Benson, 2013; Croucher, 2012). Research on skilled, privileged, racialised, or labour migration, among others, has demonstrated the usefulness of Bourdieu’s theory of distinction and capitals (1984) as it elucidates how and why certain characteristics and qualifications are valued upon migration – and thus might contribute to placing certain people in more favourable positions in the host society. Yet, discussing Bourdieu’s concepts against the framework of coloniality may also help in understanding when and why this expected outcome does not materialise (Nowicka, 2015). Rather, bringing coloniality in dialogue with conceptualisations of seemingly ‘natural’ tastes contributes to developing a class-sensitive perspective to middle-class migratory strategies of geoarbitrage (Hayes, 2014), that is, migration to destinations that lure less with lower costs of living but with potentially attainable professional upward mobility.

The chapter uses the case of highly-educated young international migrants in Sao Paulo, Brazil, to analyse how the embodiment of transnationally recognised behaviour and skills – sometimes termed transnational human capital (THC) in Bourdieusian analyses and adopted here for ease of use – first facilitates their labour migration to a less common destination of professional migration, Sao Paulo, Brazil, and then becomes partly devalued. Data collected through qualitative interviews with and participant observation among university-educated millennial migrants in Sao

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Paulo in 2019 and early 2020 demonstrates how these migrants narrate their initial motivation to move to Brazil but then fear professional or social stagnation. Their narratives are strikingly similar and reveal the roles habitus and previously accumulated THC play in the perception and interpretation of status migration. The migrants come from a wide range of countries, including those from middle-class families in the ‘West’, such as Europe or the U.S., who are commonly classified as privileged in international migration research (Amit, 2007), and those from upper-middle-class families of countries considered outside the Global North, such as India, Korea, or Russia, whose upper-middle-class financial resources and international upbringing have spurred their orientation towards an international career.

Commonalities within the group outweigh the differences as these aspiring professionals have grown up with the norm and desirability of international mobility and project opportunities for career and personal development on their move to Sao Paulo. The chapter argues that migrants’ class-specific self-confidence translates into their expectations of smoothly settling in. When this is not the case, these young adults struggle to handle the devaluation of their cultural, social, or economic capital. The chapter contributes to the somewhat neglected role of class in anthropological research of international migration. By focusing on how middle-class and upper-middle-class habitus, in combination with THC, shape professional migration, the chapter aims at developing a more nuanced understanding of the way social inequality is maintained, reproduced, or reshuffled through international mobility. Furthermore, the chapter demonstrates how these capital-rich migrants fall through some of the support structures that guarantee other privileged migrants socio-economic and legal stability in Brazil and thus provides a more differentiated picture of gradients of privilege.

8.2 Class and Transnational Human Capital in Privileged Migration

This chapter adopts Bourdieusian conceptualisations of resources that help or constrain changing one’s position in a given field – in his terminology, capital – (Bourdieu, 1984) in its modified way as it has been adapted to global contexts by Gerhards et al. (2019) through the concept of transnational human capital (THC). The authors define THC as ‘a specific form of capital that comprises foreign language skills, cross-cultural competencies, knowledge about other countries and institutions, and international experiences that allow individuals to act in social fields beyond their nation-state as well as to act in transnationalized areas of society within the nation-state’ (Gerhards et al., 2019, p. 4). Gerhards et al. (2019) show how middle and upper-class parents ensure their children’s accumulation of THC by sending them to bilingual daycare centres or overseas study programs during high school. I credit Bourdieu (1987) in attending to the blurred boundaries of classes and thus study migratory class-making through an ethnographically-informed approach

which considers the relational and contextual dynamics of social mobility (Coe & Pauli, 2020). In so doing I use THC for conceptualising (upper-)middle-class young professionals' enthusiasm for and interpretation of their migration to less common destinations of professional migration.

The question of class has been central to research on privileged migration (Amit, 2007; Benson & O'Reilly, 2009). However, class has mostly been taken as a given and analysed in relation to migrants' socialising and boundary work in their destinations, as well as the role of geoarbitrage in shaping destination decisions (Hayes, 2014). Approaching class less as 'an already-defined position that determines both consciousness and action, and more an invitation to discover people's shifting historical, situated and antagonistic social interdependences' (Kalb, 2015, p. 16) allows us to investigate how a classed habitus might have spurred the formation of THC but also how migrants' rationales toward upward mobility or class maintenance (Hof & Alloul, 2023) might change in shifting contexts, such as when encountering constraints upon migration.

Moreover, most research has focused on nationally or ethnically defined groups of 'privileged migrants' (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009; Hayes, 2014; Heil, 2020). Interested in further developing the class-specific understanding of this migration, I studied a heterogeneous group of migrants. Regardless necessary limitations (see Methods), I capture them as a group given their upbringing in the middle-class (in the case of countries of the Global North) or upper-middle-class (in the case of countries of the Global South) families. Their social circles as well as higher educational pathways introduced future migrants of the (upper) middle classes to the desirability of international mobility and nurtured 'cosmopolitan' orientations (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 59). According to Bourdieu, children of such (upper-) middle-class families have developed, internalised, and (unconsciously) groomed certain tastes and cultural competencies that allow them to navigate elite social environments and situations confidently. These tastes 'feel natural' to those who hold them because they result from the socialisation of classed cultures since early childhood. Bourdieu (1984, p. 63) argues that it is here where social origin becomes more important than education because those regarded as skilled or competent are 'only required to express a status-induced familiarity with legitimate or soon-to-be legitimated culture.'

I analyse the effects of a classed habitus on migration by recognising one additional group characteristic: the generation (Mannheim, 1952). Global events have significantly shaped the worldview of those sometimes called millennials (Ng et al., 2012). Their formative years fell together with 9/11 and later the Lehman Shock in 2008, followed by a succession of political, social, and economic crises of Western hegemony in the 2010s (Tazzioli & DeGenova, 2016), when this generation accumulated first work experiences. Such events amount to a shared experience since they are 'mediated' through modern technology and reached millennials around the globe. The discourse on the norm of mobility and the benefits of international education and careers might be limited to the already more privileged segment of the millennial generation (Collins, 2013) but it can be suggested to have affected young people's rationales on status-making through mobility across continents (Hof, 2022; Hof & Alloul, 2023).

The chapter analyses privileged migrants' experiences in Brazil and their changing interpretation of career prospects and processes of social incorporation through the lens of THC and its (lack of) convertibility to context-specific cultural, social, and economic capital. Higher educational degrees, work experience in corporations of the Global North, and business proficiency in several languages all contribute to a high THC, whose possession Gerhards et al. (2019) suggest positively affect global career development and international moves. Yet, supposedly privileged migrants struggle to use their capital in less common destinations of professional labour migration (Heil, 2020; Hof, 2022; Kunz, 2022). I thus examine if and how these migrants' classed habitus rather than only their THC influences their decision to move to Sao Paulo and how dispositions are challenged by relational and contextual renegotiations of privilege when migrants encounter obstacles in Brazil.

8.3 Ambivalent Social Positionings: Inequality and Coloniality in 'Professional' Migration to Sao Paulo

As Heil (2020) argues for Spaniards' migration to Rio de Janeiro after the global financial crisis of 2008, historical power relations of coloniality – despite the lack of direct postcolonial links – and its racial underpinnings contribute to placing Brazil as a low-ranked country within global power hierarchies. While reconfigurations of global power have put 'non-Western' players on the map of the world capitalist system (Dikötter, 2017), postcolonial countries remain attractive for a variety of reasons and shape migrants' social imaginaries, including colonial stereotypes of life in the tropics, which are 'constructed in [...] dialogue with European colonial racial categories' (Hayes, 2021, p. 11).

As one of the reasons for migration, the young migrants of this research aspire to careers in a globally operating professional field. The spatial iteration of this field is concentrated on Sao Paulo rather than Brazil, if not mainly Sao Paulo's Central Business District, whose function as *the* node in South America makes it an unparalleled destination for international business across the continent. This complicates the role of coloniality; Brazil is a former colony yet Sao Paulo functions as a dynamic destination for business within a global field of professional labour.

Racial discrimination and white privilege are so entrenched in society to date that not only the descendants of the former colonisers enjoy a special status in contemporary Brazil. Rather, whiteness continues to confer privilege and grants foreigners of symbolic white capital a 'head start' when arriving in Brazil. Such symbolic white capital extends to people of the Global North or with associated cultural capital like 'Western' university education (Lovell, 2000). This means that all migrants in this study can presumably leverage their 'Western' cultural capital to a greater or lesser extent. They are highly educated and raised in relatively well-to-do or even upper-middle-class families in their home countries, with the majority coming from industrialised countries in Europe, North America, or Asia, having educational degrees

from or work experiences in global elite institutions. As such, Brazil might figure as a less prestigious (not Global North) but at the same time also more accessible destination for those with certain privileges but lacking upper-class status (Hayes, 2014).

While the migrants of this research can be considered privileged, they differ from the upper classes or what Sklair (2001) called the transnational capitalist class, in that for them, migration to a business hub *outside* of the centre of global capitalism (Sassen, 1991) promises upward professional mobility. Elites can ponder migration as a way of exploiting benefits elsewhere (Weiss, 2005). Generally, they rarely need to move and if they do, they might flexibly move between citizenships (Ong, 2000), something foreclosed for the migrants discussed here. The highly-educated millennials in focus here are thus closer to the businesspeople from the 'semi-periphery' (Wallerstein, 1974), who hope to advance their careers or status by moving to strategically attractive locations (Tseng, 2000). Also, young middle classes of the 'centre' find it increasingly hard to excel or distinguish themselves from their peers based on their degrees or intercultural competencies within the mobility regimes of their home country regions, such as the EU (Hof, 2022; Hof & Alloul, 2023).

Despite the varying power of migrants' passports, the migrants of this research share important similarities, that is, their previous mobility experiences across global destinations of higher education and globalised labour markets and their universally acknowledged transnational capital. I contend that these common characteristics outweigh citizenship and the origin of a certain country as determinants of social position. This perspective not only allows us to capture highly-educated migrants' mobility aspirations, actual moves, and unfolding practices in Sao Paulo but also to discern where gradients of privilege matter.

8.4 Methods

This chapter relies on data from in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations of highly-educated migrants in Sao Paulo, Brazil. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 migrants between 2019 and early 2020, most of whom I followed up with either in person or via email. The interview data was complemented by extensive participant observation and ethnographic observations during a total of 4 months in Brazil, where I co-lived with people of a similar age and professional group as my interlocutors in a multi-purpose building in a residential area close to the Central Business District, where most of the interlocutors resided. I casually conversed with both foreigners and locals at the building's co-working space, which helped me better understand the subtleties of Brazil's social structure. I also attended networking events and casual meetups where I was introduced to a larger number of young professionals of various backgrounds.

The 14 interlocutors are in their late 20 s to mid-30 s and early in their careers, with a majority (10) from European, including post-Soviet, countries, and another four respondents from Russia, the USA, India, and South Korea. All hold university

degrees and have grown up in middle-class or, in the case of a few, upper-middle-class families and had internalised the opportunity of study or work overseas, having completed internships, exchange semesters, or full-time jobs abroad before moving to Brazil for work. All interlocutors had moved to Brazil alone and most received a work visa which legalised their status as foreign professionals while a few entered the country as tourists or international students and later applied for a work visa. The participants worked in such fields as marketing, engineering, IT, finance, or industrial manufacturing. Study inclusion criteria were that they worked in Sao Paulo on local contracts, which distinguishes them from assigned expatriates whose contracts stipulate return to their home country and company headquarters after a specific period. Drawing on Bourdieu, Anja Weiss' (2005) writing on skilled migrants leads me to suggest that the migrants in this study could 'be seen as a "theoretical class", i.e. a group of people with objective affinities in a social space that extends beyond the limits of the nation-state' (p. 722). Yet, such position is neither a given nor fixed, which is the focus of my processual analysis below.

My positionality influenced access to the field and led to a certain bias in the recruitment of interlocutors. Being a highly-educated European woman and a labour migrant myself helped approaching potential interlocutors via online networking communities for (mostly self-initiated) 'expats', such as InterNations (2024).¹ Having established connections with a few migrants online pointed me towards events of a community of self-proclaimed young foreign professionals in Sao Paulo, whose events I subsequently attended. This allowed me not only to build rapport with some of the interlocutors but additionally provided opportunities to observe how people socialise in leisure time and network in professional circles. Despite these limitations, the research findings enable me to contribute a class perspective to the anthropology of migration and a class-sensitive analysis of a multi-ethnic and multi-national group of privileged migrants, whose socialising in the same professional circles is facilitated by their classed habitus and previous mobility experiences. I obtained oral or written informed consent and conducted interviews in English and German, which I tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed first with open codes and then higher-level codes. All names in this chapter are pseudonyms.

8.5 (Upper) Middle-Class Confidence in Migration to Postcolonial Brazil

Few of the migrants in this study *chose* Sao Paulo as a migration destination. More often, Sao Paulo happened to be the location of their current firm's South America regional headquarter or they looked for professional opportunities globally and came across a job offer in Brazil's business hub. For some, neither was the case, as they had more personal or lifestyle-related reasons for moving to South America, but Sao

¹ InterNations calls itself the 'largest global expat network' and offers a community for networking and exchange of information for 'international people' living abroad (InterNations, 2024).

Paulo was the only option in the region that offered professional opportunities and a comfortable standard of living. Suni, a 29 year-old Indian IT consultant, has lived in Sao Paulo for more than 4 years. His family is spread across nine countries, mostly in the Global North. Thus, working abroad had long been an unquestioned goal for him. When his firm offered him a position in their Brazilian subsidiary Suni reckoned:

When I came here, I had no knowledge of so many things. So, that's the reason why I decided to take this assignment. New country, new language. I don't have any relations there. Just trying to learn what's going on. That's what I wanted in my life. Do everything alone. I don't want to go somewhere and then somebody helps me and pushes me ahead. That's why from my childhood, my college, my university, everything I did myself. The second factor was that there was no representation for my company here. It's very rare that people get this opportunity at a very young age.

Suni's rationale for moving to Brazil resembles that of other interlocutors in that he wanted to 'achieve' something on his own, something that was different than what his peers or family members had achieved. Despite her significantly different background as a German woman and without migrant family members, Karina (31), with a doctoral degree in business and work experience in business consulting of chemical companies, had similar reasons to move to Sao Paulo. Having spent an exchange semester in Spain and several months of traveling and research in South America, Karina had for long been keen on working abroad. Her consulting firm did not have subsidiaries in Spanish-speaking countries, but her superior suggested Brazil as a place from which to expand the company's metal industry to South America. Karina figured that Sao Paulo – and potential business trips to Spanish-speaking South America – would be the closest to her desiring 'something bigger... farer away'. She decided to move, enrolling in Portuguese lessons and proudly talking about the stimulating challenges of her 'local' daily life, including flat sharing with Brazilian young professionals.

These narratives reveal something at the core of these migrants' decision-making: They embraced the challenge of moving to an unfamiliar place whose language they did not speak. They did so without the comforting support of an 'expatriate package'. While most of the interlocutors received some support from their companies, they searched for affordable accommodation themselves, lacking the generous financial packages that would have granted them access to expensive gated communities or social clubs, which shield corporate expatriates from some of the challenges of life abroad and channel them into upper-class social circles (Beaverstock, 2005).

The narratives reveal how the migrants perceive migration to Brazil as a professional and personal opportunity rather than a daunting move to unknown fields. The field analogy is intentional: While Brazil, its domestic labour market and class structure might be a black box for these migrants, they compete for jobs in a transnational professional field. Regardless of their varying backgrounds, they are equipped with credentials of significant value in this field, such as degrees from well-known universities, previous international mobility and proficiency in several languages. In short, the migrants are rich in THC. Furthermore, they have grown up in a globalising world, where transnational labour markets and global careers have become more

common (Hof, 2019), if not a means to upward social mobility, all of which have shaped their habitus.

I argue that it is these young professionals' (upper-)middle-class habitus, rather than their accumulated THC only, that matters for the decision to move to Sao Paulo. Their upbringing in families that value international mobility and cosmopolitan orientations entailed that the young migrants regarded foreign language acquisition and spatial mobility as an almost natural step towards what they considered to be a desirable life. Eva (Russian, retail) pointed to the crucial role her mother played in her migration: 'My mother has always had this interest in me being an international person. She wanted me to be like the citizen of the world. It was the dream for herself, and she wanted to give this to me. ... We started to travel a lot, so she always motivated me to speak English in other countries.'

Eva and others grew up with stepwise expanding physical mobility, from family holidays to language exchange programs during school, sometimes full-time study abroad, to their first or second job in a foreign country (Hof, 2019). Most of the young adults thus had experienced traveling and migration before moving to Brazil. Even if not, they were optimistic that they would be able to handle the challenges accompanying the move, as Suni's account demonstrates. Having seen family members migrate to business hubs around the world, Sao Paulo seemed to offer something new and promising. Suni's confidence in his migratory pathway then underlines the 'casual self-confidence' that allows upper-middle-class families like Suni's to equip their children with the predispositions that facilitate class reproduction. In Suni's case, migration seemed to promise professional, followed by socio-economic upward mobility (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 59). This is also apparent in Jiwon's (35) rationale for moving to Brazil, a South Korean woman with study abroad experience in Australia and 5 years working experience in the South Korean subsidiary of a European market research company in Seoul. Young and with career aspirations, the job seemed attractive to Jiwon.

At that time, Brazil was on the rise. They had just confirmed that they're gonna have the Olympics in Rio, so there was a lot of investment. I didn't know of all the corruption and economic problems. Some people at the company told me that working at the emerging market is a once in a lifetime opportunity. Because if you grew up in a developed country like Korea, it's hard to see the growth. They say it opens your mind. So I thought 'OK, Brazil, perfect'.

Jiwon speaks of the opportunities tied to working in an 'emerging market' and contrasts this to her own work experience in a 'developed country', Korea. The professional chances associated with 'growth' are prevalent in all interlocutors' accounts, but some migrants more clearly adopt a colonial narrative (Kunz, 2022). For some, the distance to their home countries, coupled with Brazil's somewhat 'exotic' branding as a 'non-mainstream' destination such as Europe, the USA, or even Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America added an aura of glamour and distinction to their migration projects. Nick (30, e-commerce startup), a Danish man with study and work experience in retail and investment banking in three European countries, talked about the professional opportunities in his current firm. Nick had come to Brazil at a time when he wanted 'change'.

I always wanted to live abroad. I mean, we used to come from a family where we were traveling a lot, it's Europe. So I was thinking a lot of where should I go, and there are few different criteria for me. Number one was that I lived in Denmark, I lived in France, I lived in the Netherlands, I want to do something with a bigger cultural distance, and go somewhere warmer, honestly speaking. And I wanted to learn a new language. Most important is that I wanted to go somewhere where there were real business opportunities. So I'm not going to go to the Caribbean. So if you map it out there are not that many opportunities. And I've been here a few times on holiday. I loved it here.

Nick's account resembles colonial imaginations of life in less developed places and in the tropics (Benson & O'Reilly, 2018). However, in contrast to the cited lifestyle-related migration motivations, these aspiring professionals are lured by the business opportunities they expect in Sao Paulo, rather than a slower pace of life or mild climate. As revealed above, the young migrants believed in career development in Sao Paulo and thus migrated without having networks or Portuguese language proficiency. However, many realised soon that lacking the language and local connections would limit their career development and social networks. I could thus observe that despite their initial eagerness to study a new language and 'explore something new' many turned towards more familiar international communities. Polish woman Ekaterina was the first to mention InterNations events as a place where she found friends and, eventually, her Brazilian husband. Curious to understand the role of this self-proclaimed 'expat community', I attended several events, where I met further interlocutors.

One of these was the InterNations 12 year anniversary celebration at Azucar Club Cubano, a popular salsa club close to vibrant party districts such as Itaim Bibi and Villa Madalena, which my interlocutors chose for leisure or (shared) accommodation. According to the InterNations anniversary event information, 179 people from 39 countries registered. One of them was Sascha, a tall blond woman with a white blazer, whose flamboyant appearance drew attention to her enthusiastically talking with a group of middle-aged men in suits in the centre of the dance floor. Meeting her later for lunch, I learned that she had been in the city for 18 months, having moved from the Netherlands in the hope of quicker career advancement in her Irish firm through relocation to Brazil. Sascha, originally from Lithuania, had lived in several European countries. Once arrived in Brazil, she soon found a Brazilian partner, but the relationship broke. Sascha shared during the interview that she was looking for foreign friends and potentially job opportunities back in Europe, disillusioned by her inability to form meaningful relationships with locals as she had hoped.

The Brazilians I met at these events were generally interested in me, eager to practice English, and confirmed my interlocutors' narratives: Communities like InterNations cater to the 'next generation' of expatriates, millennials who grew up in a globalising world with educational and professional mobility as a more common pathway to middle-classness and career development. At the same time, these events allow recently arrived foreigners to converse in English, to access first-hand information, and thus function as a comforting net for those whose migratory routes follow colonial explorer imaginaries while no longer backed by generous corporate expatriate packages (Beaverstock, 2005).

Vincenzo, an Italian I met at one of these events, remarked during the later interview: 'From what I understood, [Brazilians] feel a bit of shame in speaking English, because their level is not so good.' Vincenzo actively socialised in Inter-Nations circles, where he also met his Brazilian girlfriend, but not all interlocutors relied on expatriate communities. Suni, the Indian IT consultant, engaged with the Indian community in Sao Paulo next to social gatherings with his colleagues; the Korean woman Jiwon found some Korean networks, and others, like the Slovakian Ottakar, focused mostly on their career with limited socialising with their few English-speaking colleagues. The colonial narratives, so clearly exemplified by Nick above when he referred to the 'change' he wanted, mattered in shaping images of Sao Paulo among those coming from the 'centres' of the world. Yet despite these discernible differences, all migrants expected career opportunities in Sao Paulo and were confident in their ability to 'make it work.'

8.6 Exposing Gradients of Privilege: Fear of Failure in a 'Second-Best' Destination

Migrants' privileged class positioning that enabled them to move in the first place is unsettled by contextual factors they face in the Portuguese-speaking, expensive metropolis of Sao Paulo. Their narratives reveal the fear that what they so emphatically embraced by moving to Brazil might have been based on wrong expectations, perhaps on underestimating their limited work experience, professional connections, or deficiencies in Portuguese. Nick, the Danish man who independently moved to Sao Paulo (see above), struggled to find employment and master Portuguese, both of which his proud narrative of professional achievements and satisfaction with daily life in Brazil first had concealed.

Of course, [I had] a lot of considerations if I can find a relevant job. No offense to anyone, but a lot of people work as English teachers. And that's great, you still get to experience being here but it's irrelevant career-wise. So maybe I was a little bit optimistic. When I came here, I was like, I have great educational background, I had worked in a really interesting area, good work experience, I had a profile, right. I was not straight out of college. So I thought, 'smart guy', I thought 'it's going to be easy'.

Nick's account reveals that he lacked the social and cultural capital that is decisive to access employment in Brazil. Migrants' THC was of limited use. Portuguese language was crucial in most sectors, even in multinational firms. Nick needed 3 months to find project-based employment before securing a contract. Prospects for career development were also unclear because, although he started to study Portuguese intensively, he realised that it would take him several years to acquire business-level proficiency. These difficulties came as a surprise to Nick and some others as they had expected their skills to be universally recognised THC, which proved wrong in the domestic Brazilian labour market. Trying to explain why the job search took him some time, Nick also sought to distance himself from those whose

jobs he considered less worthy or professional (English teachers). Such boundary work reveals the relational workings of class (Zaban & Buhr, this volume) and the strong colonial notion inherent to the migration of those who chose to come to Brazil without having a job offer. As multilingual, highly-educated migrants with previous mobility experiences in several countries and, importantly, strong passports, the latter of which had enabled their previous mobility, they seemed to take smooth transition to the Brazilian labour market and Portuguese language acquisition for granted (Fechter & Walsh, 2012).

However, as most business activities concentrate on the Brazilian market, hiring practices and HR departments focus on the domestic labour pool. The high requirements and untransparent bureaucratic processes for issuing work visas entail that companies often shy away from visa applications unless supporting higher management with very specific skills (Heil, 2020). As such, the symbolic privilege that helps migrants from the Global North or white migrants into employment in many (post-colonial) contexts is less pronounced in Brazil. As apparent from Nick's quote, Brazil, too, offers an (ethnic) niche of English teaching jobs. This however does not hold for professional employment with technical or industry-specific expertise and thus THC only seems to be partially convertible to economic or cultural capital of value in the Brazilian labour market, at least when migrants arrive without a job and valid visa.

Nick's account conveys his strong focus on professional success, which he emphasises by differentiating his approach to finding 'relevant' work from the 'irrelevant' work of English teaching. It is in this attempt at distinction that we might see privilege at its best. For Nick, traveling, good education, fluency in English, and similar markers of a cosmopolitan lifestyle were the norm. His trajectory up until coming to Brazil had served to confirm his 'casual' self-confidence (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 59). Proud of what he regarded as his achievements (successful applications for study abroad programs, work experience in several industries, proficiency in several languages), he confidently initiated the move to Sao Paulo even without a job or visa.

Yet, Nick's EU passport had played an important role in allowing him to accumulate THC by studying and working in different European countries (Kalm, 2020). Also, his upbringing by highly-educated parents with the means to travel and to raise him with cosmopolitan orientations paved the way for his valuing of international mobility and professional work in the first place and led to his pursuit of an international career. When his job search and progress in Portuguese did not unfold as smoothly as expected, a nagging sense of doubt seemed to encroach upon him, probably more strongly than his carefully constructed narrative of confidence suggests.

Nick's habitus is typical of well-travelled middle-class Europeans of the millennial generation (Frändberg, 2014; Hof, 2019). They grew up in the context of a relatively peaceful and prosperous integrating European Union whose abolished borders nurtured a sense of freedom and seemingly unlimited opportunities for a growing number of people. That said, a few interlocutors are of non-EU background, including Russia, South Korea, and India. All of them had grown up in highly-educated families and as part of the upwardly aspiring middle class or upper middle class in their home

countries. As Jiwon's account above exemplifies, their belief in mobility and the norm of working in global contexts did not differ from that of the Europeans. What is different, though, is that their privilege is more thoroughly grounded in a high-class status in their home countries and associated economic capital. This allowed Jiwon to study abroad in an expensive Australian university and enabled Suni to aim for, work towards, and eventually graduate from one of the leading technical universities in India. The same does not apply to their citizenship capital, however. Given Brazil's rigid visa policies, it is very unlikely that either of them would have been able to come to Brazil without a job offer that sponsored their work visa.

While those with strong passports such as from the EU also struggled considerably, they benefited from their symbolic capital and associated cultural capital as Europeans. Several of them entered the country as tourists or students and eventually managed to convert their visas into work visas. Immigration authorities did not question their repeated re-entry after the expiration of their 90 days of visa-free tourism in the country. For others like the French woman Virginie, demand for native French staff at French language schools allowed her to secure employment for a certain time and when her visa was not renewed, she enrolled in a master studies program that granted her the legal status of a college student and allowed her to work on her lifestyle firm on the side. These millennials were able to enter and stay in Brazil even without a highly specialised professional job given their countries' 'trustworthiness' and the more generous travel and study agreements accorded to citizens of countries of the capitalist core (Croucher, 2012).

Migrants' discursive efforts at differentiating themselves from what in their eyes were 'less professional' jobs such as language teaching also point to another layer of their social positioning in Sao Paulo. Their working conditions placed them on a lower living standard than assigned corporate expatriates (Cranston, 2017). Eight of the 14 interlocutors came to Sao Paulo with a contract at hand and moved internally within their current company. That said, none received high salaries, financial benefits, or support with organising their intercontinental move or finding housing equal to traditional expatriate assignments. Accommodation in Sao Paulo is very expensive and means that most young Brazilians continue living with their families or move to the less expensive outskirts of the city. Others move into shared apartments or centrally located apartment blocks with small apartments and shared cooking and co-working spaces, such as the one where I stayed throughout my field research and where I came into conversation with open-minded Brazilians and non-Brazilians of similar age.

Doubts about the longer-term outcomes of their migration and the fear of failure were pervasive throughout the stories, especially for those who came to Brazil without jobs. Others did not see their career unfolding or struggled with their marginal social position. The THC that had secured them employment did not smoothly convert into other forms of capital of use in Sao Paulo, where local networks and Portuguese proficiency were crucial. Jiwon, the South Korean woman, was able to negotiate a better contract in Chile after 3 years in Brazil. I met her several times when she travelled from Chile to Sao Paulo for business, which allowed me to probe into her reflections on life in Brazil. While her inner wish was to move to a 'more developed

country', such as the U.S. or somewhere in Europe, Jiwon relayed how life in Chile's capital city Santiago was more organised and infrastructure more reliable than in Sao Paulo. When she received a promotion, this 'step up' convinced her that while Chile was a compromise, it was a good one for the time being. 'If any opportunity came up', Jiwon was clear, she would move to a more developed country, 'but going back to Korea is not an option for me.' She explained how she appreciated the physical distance from her family, who wanted her to marry, the recently weaker South Korean economy, and her home country's harsh working culture. That said, the path towards career development and a lifestyle more in line with her classed cosmopolitan tastes seemed most feasible by staying in Chile for the time being rather than staying longer in Brazil or returning to South Korea.

Over time, the migrants who had been keen on working in a Portuguese-speaking context found themselves unable to foresee continued career progression, if stable jobs at all, and their plans gradually shifted towards return or onwards migration to countries of the Global North. Migrants' increasing doubt over career progression and a satisfying life in Brazil revealed that they saw the country as a second- or even third-best option. With a better understanding, Jiwon recognised the differences between different economies of the Global South (Chile and Brazil), while this had not been the case when making her originally hasty decision to move to Brazil as the first option at hand. Similar was true for Suni, who had first looked at the U.S. and Canada, where family members of his lived, but where he was unable to obtain a visa. Migrants' unstable class positionings manifest in the way their privilege becomes relationally and contextually contested in Sao Paulo, where they are a small and largely unrecognised group of highly-educated yet not 'elite-expatriate' minority without sufficient proficiency in Portuguese.

Gradients of privilege become even clearer when assessing migrants' fear of failure to succeed professionally. Constrained citizenship capital or symbolic capital (Kalm, 2020), as in the case of migrants from outside of the Global North, first led them to choose Brazil with the aim of career development and spurred them to move on when continued upward mobility seemed difficult. For others like the European migrants, high citizenship and symbolic capital compensated for the lack of degrees from elite institutions or significant previous work experience. While they successfully initiated migration to Sao Paulo, they found themselves stuck professionally and socially, pointing to the limits of their THC in the Brazilian context. Eventually, Brazil was a compromise for all: While promising upward socio-economic mobility over time, migrants had to come to terms with the fact that their THC did not facilitate their onwards migration to prime destinations in the Global North, which resulted in their discursive framing of Brazil as an exciting or opportunistic destination that promised distinction.

8.7 Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter conceptualised the case of (upper-)middle-class young professionals' migration to Sao Paulo, Brazil, through an ethnographically-informed perspective to classed tastes and transnational human capital (THC). Postcolonial research has demonstrated how privileged migration is intricately linked to the capitalist world order and colonial frames (Benson & O'Reilly, 2018; Heil, 2020). This chapter unravelled how (upper-)middle-class habitus and a cosmopolitan orientation, cultivated within the family and embodied through educational and professional mobility practices, spark aspiring professionals' desire for migration beyond common world cities in the Global North. Migrants' internalised confidence of being able to successfully navigate unfamiliar contexts encourages them to move to South America's business centre Sao Paulo (Bourdieu, 1984), where they lack professional networks and Portuguese language proficiency but expect career progression nevertheless.

Furthermore, the chapter discussed how notions of coloniality intersect with class-making practices, and foregrounded gradients of privilege within the group of highly-educated and transnationally experienced migrants. The migrants seek both career development and a cosmopolitan lifestyle that satisfies their classed orientations. That said, the analysis underlines that Brazil is only the second-best option, if at all. Those from upper-middle-class families but with weaker passports and thus lower citizenship capital (Kalm, 2020) are unable to access 'prime' destinations such as the U.S. Migrants with strong passports and high symbolic capital (for instance from Europe) come from middle-class background with less economic capital and limited previous work experience, which results in them choosing Brazil for its accessibility among destinations that promise career development in the first place. Sao Paulo, then, manifests as a professional destination for highly-educated migrants of somewhat limited competitiveness, either because of ethnic or national characteristics or their professional competencies or economic capital at disposal (Hof & Alloul, 2023).

To conclude, despite the notable differences within the group, class works as an overriding factor. The migrants struggle to convert their THC into capital of value in Brazil, a country with rigid immigration policies, a lack of experience with self-initiated non-corporate expatriate migrants, and the subsequent bureaucratic hurdles, as well as the requirement of the Portuguese language in most business contexts. Doubtful of career progression in Brazil, migrants' initial enthusiasm for studying Portuguese and investing in life in Brazil turns into their orientation towards more 'international' or ethnic networks over time, with some considering re-migration to destinations of 'easier' upward socio-economic mobility. Brazil, which first seemed exotic and promising, reveals itself as the second-best option, and migrants' fear of failure – for instance, professional stagnation – affects their rationalising of their continued migratory lives.

With these findings, the chapter contributes a new empirical case to the study of privileged migration, which thanks to its contextual focus on Sao Paulo as a destination outside the Global North, revealed similarities *within* a continuously evolving

notion of class yet *beyond* ethnicity or nationality. As such, the chapter also makes a theoretical contribution to the under-researched roles of habitus and classed tastes as they direct and reconfigure privileged migration. Doing so, it provides a more nuanced picture of gradients of privilege within millennials' professional migration, which shape migratory aspirations and result in class-specific patterns of self-initiated migration that, examined in their relational and contextual manifestations, are privileged and precarious at once.

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Chapter 9

Privileged Mobilities in Hard Times: The Case of Pandemic-Years Jewish Migration to Israel



Hila Zaban

9.1 Introduction

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic compelled governments worldwide to implement stringent restrictions, disrupting global movement to curb the spread of the virus. Mobility, a norm of daily life, was abruptly constrained, affecting activities from local travel and social gatherings to international migration. Despite these limitations, the pandemic paradoxically magnified existing inequalities in global mobility, distinguishing the restricted majority from those who could navigate privileged pathways to relocation to places deemed safer or more pleasant. This period of heightened immobility unveiled disparities in access and privilege (Adey et al., 2021).

While pandemic-induced mobility inequalities were particularly visible, they underscore a pre-existing, uneven global mobility regime. Mobility and borders remain deeply entangled in a network of privileges and restrictions, in which some are free to move while others face systemic barriers. Scholars have long examined the structural inequalities embedded in global mobility, advocating for a critical re-examination of governance systems and the ethical implications of the global mobility infrastructure (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013; Shamir, 2005; Sheller, 2018; Spijkerboer, 2018). This global mobility regime, characterised by a ‘paradigm of suspicion’ (Shamir, 2005), operates to manage certain kinds of migration as perceived global risks, often reinforcing systemic exclusions based on nationality, race, class, and gender (Bianchi et al., 2020; Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013; Spijkerboer, 2018).

This chapter examines the dichotomy between the privileged mobile and the constrained immobile through the case of diaspora Jews migrating to Israel during the COVID-19 pandemic. Israel’s 1950 Law of Return, which guarantees Jews the right to migrate to Israel, kept allowing Jewish individuals from various countries

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to enter Israel even during the pandemic, when most global borders were tightly closed. By focusing on this legal birthright, the chapter maps a specific gradient of privilege (Buhr & Zaban, 2026) that exists beyond traditional definitions of economic or professional elite status. This unique instance of continued mobility, framed by global immobility, demonstrates what I call ‘temporal privilege-manoeuvring’ – the strategic use of timing to leverage stable advantages (such as legal birthrights or professional capital) during specific windows of opportunity. For these migrants, time became a primary coordinate of ‘geoarbitrage’ – the strategy of relocating to areas with lower costs or better opportunities to enhance one’s lifestyle or finances (Hayes, 2014). They moved beyond selecting a destination for its lifestyle or financial benefits to strategically determining the optimal moment to relocate, thereby transforming a period of general standstill into a period of exclusive mobility. This strategy illustrates how privilege is not a static trait but a relational and context-dependent resource that shifts according to temporal coordinates (Buhr & Zaban, 2026).

This chapter investigates how privilege facilitated migration during an unprecedented period of global immobility and why individuals exercised it amid difficult circumstances. It also explores the pandemic’s effect on accelerating migration decisions, contextualising these moves as responses to ‘collective watershed events’ that fast-track or interrupt migration plans. The study draws on 30 semi-structured interviews with English-speaking Jewish migrants from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom who moved to Israel between 2016 and 2021. Conducted in 2021–2022, the interviews included a distinct subset of 13 participants who arrived during the pandemic years (2020–2021), revealing nuances in motivations and the challenges that pandemic migrants faced, notably the paradox of heightened urgency to relocate but slowed perceptions of integration. This chapter focuses primarily on the experiences of these pandemic-era migrants while remaining informed by insights from the broader cohort.

While privileged migrants typically choose migration timing according to life-stage considerations (Amit, 2007) or personal watershed events, such as having children or retiring (Benson, 2012; Hoey, 2006), the ‘right time’ in this case was defined by a globally shared crisis. Unlike other crises (wars, economic downturns, Brexit), COVID-19 uniquely shaped movement patterns, revealing how ‘privilege’ was context-dependent and allowed the mobility of some amid a restrictive global climate.

The chapter contributes to the literature on privileged migration by introducing ‘temporal privilege-manoeuvring’ as a framework for understanding how migrants strategically leverage their status to navigate the temporalities of movement. By focusing on the ‘when’ as much as the ‘where’, this approach reveals how privileged international mobility is often a matter of capturing specific historical windows to maximise opportunities across various contexts. The chapter proceeds with a literature review on privileged migration, exploring its dimensions, motivations, and the temporal dynamics influenced by global events like economic crises, Brexit, and the pandemic. A methodological section follows, leading into an empirical analysis of push-pull factors driving migration to Israel, the influence of COVID-19 on migration timing, and the paradox of pandemic-era relocation: an intensified urgency to

move that is met with the structural delays of postponed integration. The concluding reflections discuss the broader implications of integration. These findings suggest that temporal privilege-maneuvring can be a valuable tool for analysing migration strategies even beyond moments of acute global crisis.

9.2 Privileged Migration and Times of Crises

Jews from high-income English-speaking countries – the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom – migrating to Israel can be classified as privileged migrants. Privileged migration refers to the mobility of individuals who possess various forms of capital that facilitate their movement and ease their access to migration opportunities. These migrants are often excluded from mainstream academic discussions on migration, and their mobility remains comparatively understudied in migration research (Duplan & Cranston, 2023). Additionally, privileged migrants are frequently viewed as unproblematic in policy contexts, with their migration and integration framed as less politically contentious than that of less privileged groups (Cranston & Duplan, 2023).

The privilege of Western Jews migrating to Israel stems, first and foremost, from their ability to choose if and when to migrate – or make ‘Aliyah’ (ascend), as Jewish migration to Israel is often termed – or where to settle post-migration, but also from their birthright to move to Israel and naturalise as citizens there (Zaban, 2015, 2022). When people are motivated to migrate in search of an improved way of life, however they may define it, it is, in itself, a privilege they enjoy, as it presupposes the financial means and personal agency to make such a move (Croucher, 2012). Privileged migrants enjoy many forms of privilege beyond having options and agency. They typically have a wealth of cultural capital and often come from relatively affluent middle-class backgrounds (Benson, 2014; Salazar, 2014), enabling them to navigate their chosen destination’s social and cultural norms, demonstrating their social and cultural privilege. Duplan and Cranston (2023) emphasise the multidimensional nature of privilege among lifestyle migrants. They argue that due to their relative economic and cultural capitals, as well as their whiteness (also see Kunz, 2022), privileged migrants embody privilege in ways they do not necessarily acknowledge.

Faist (2000) and Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013) expand the discussion to transnational social spaces and mobility regimes, highlighting the global dimensions of privilege in migration. The central role of privilege in shaping migrants’ cross-border movement extends beyond individual agency and relates to citizenship and ties to influential nation-states in the global system (Croucher, 2012; Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013; Knowles & Harper, 2009; McGarrigle, 2022). This privilege is further underscored by nation-states’ willingness to actively welcome these migrants, as evidenced by political discourse, social norms, and migration policies that favour their entry and settlement. Such policies allow lifestyle migrants to secure visas, permits, and even citizenship with relative ease, positioning them advantageously within global mobility hierarchies. Moreover, their privilege is not only in

their freedom to move but also in their option to return (Fauser, 2020), reflecting disparities in systems of movement and contributing to the perpetuation of structural inequalities (Benson, 2014; Hayes, 2018).

Lifestyle migrations are one example of the ‘geographies of privilege’, where social inequalities are mapped onto, constituted in, and reproduced in space (Fauser, 2020). Lifestyle migration is ‘the spatial mobility of relatively affluent individuals... moving either part-time or full-time, to places that are meaningful because, for various reasons, they offer the potential for a better quality of life’ (Benson & O’Reilly, 2009). Lifestyle migration is not a category, but rather an ‘analytical tool’ (McGarrigle, 2022). Applying this tool to privileged migrants helps us understand the subjective meanings they ascribe to their relocation choices and what they might define as ‘the good life’ that warrants their relocation (Benson & O’Reilly, 2016; Knowles & Harper, 2009). As McGarrigle (2022) argues, what distinguishes lifestyle migrants from other migrants is their ease of relocation, enabled by relative privilege. However, as Korpela (2020) argues, the concept of lifestyle mobilities has overemphasised individual choices while neglecting political and economic structures, including the role of nation-states.

Privileged migrants are motivated to move for various reasons, such as a better work-life balance (Benson & O’Reilly, 2016), better religious or spiritual opportunities (Korpela, 2009), better weather conditions (O’Reilly, 2000; Osbaldeston, 2022), living closer to nature (Kordel & Pohle, 2018; Persson, 2019), enjoying a permanent tourist lifestyle (Molina Caminero & McGarrigle, 2023; Torkington, 2012), gaining a better sense of belonging (Zaban, 2015), gaining accessibility to better health and emotional care (Botterill, 2017), building ability to live more comfortably on foreign incomes which do not suffice back home (Hayes, 2014), increasing opportunities for their children (Amante & Rodrigues, 2022; Igarashi, 2026), or opening their dream business (Buhr, 2026). These motivations often overlap, and there is often more than one thing motivating the move. Migration, however privileged, is never an easy decision to make, and people usually do not make it on a whim. As Benson (2012) argues, the decision to migrate tends to be one that has been brewing in them for a long time.

The decision to immigrate, regardless of one’s privilege, is shaped by a multi-faceted interplay of economic, social, cultural, and political factors, with economic considerations, social ties, cultural affinity, political instability, and individual aspirations all playing varying roles depending on the individual’s unique circumstances (Czaika et al., 2021). While these factors can brew in people over a long time, there comes a point when they need to act on their decision, which raises the question of timing. While privileged migrants may have more control over their migration timing due to greater access to resources, information, and opportunities, their timing is still influenced by a variety of factors. The timing of migration is generally influenced by factors such as individual life course trajectories, including child-bearing, education, employment, age-related decisions, and economic considerations (Czaika et al., 2021), and privileged migrants are affected by these factors as much as other migrants. Indeed, lifecycle changes are known to influence privileged migrants’ timing decision-making (Amit, 2007), and economic considerations are an important factor, despite relative privilege (Bell, 2017; Hayes, 2014; Koh, 2021).

Personal ‘watershed moments’ are a major factor in determining migration timing. Hoey (2006) contends that many individuals can identify significant moments in their lives, possibly triggered by events or a series of crucial occurrences, which serve as catalysts for life-altering decisions. These pivotal moments are characterised by epiphanies that lead individuals to life-altering decisions. Building on Hoey’s ideas, Benson (2012) also discusses how many of her research participants shared pivotal moments in their lives, which played a significant role in their decision to migrate from the United Kingdom to France, such as job loss, retirement, or children leaving home. However, she suggests that these moments primarily account for migration timing, representing only ‘the tip of the iceberg’ in the overall explanation. They do not encompass the complete reasons for considering migration, which have taken shape over an extended period. While similar watershed moments also exist in the case of privileged Jewish migrants to Israel, before or during the pandemic, when focusing on pandemic-years migrants, the watershed moments are not only personal but collective and global. Their decision to migrate at that time emerged amid a global emergency that prompted many to re-evaluate their priorities and trajectories.

Historically, crises and states of emergency have driven migration, but their impact on the privileged remains underexplored. Scholars have recently addressed this question in the context of several crises. The 2008 economic crisis had severe repercussions for Southern European countries and led many highly skilled individuals to migrate to countries offering better career prospects, living conditions, and quality of life (Bartolini et al., 2017; Mendoza, 2020). Franceschelli (2020) explores the pursuit of ‘anchored lives’ by migrants, particularly from privileged classes, in post-recession Europe, emphasising the search for stability and belonging during challenging times, while Kawashima (2020) delves into class slippage during an economic downturn in Japan, illustrating how privileged individuals are willing to migrate to China for better career prospects, even if it entails accepting lower earnings. The timing of migration can also be affected by political considerations that shape privileged migrants’ choices, as in the case of Brazilian middle-class migrants to Lisbon, seeking better political and economic stability (Torresan, 2012).

The more recent 2016 Brexit referendum was another prolonged crisis that affected privileged intra-EU migration. The impact of Brexit on privileged migrants in London reveals the vulnerability of previously secure privileges and the growing uncertainties that result (Lulle et al., 2018; Mulholland & Ryan, 2023). However, it also revealed the adaptability of higher-status migrants, e.g. Nordic migrants, in leveraging their migrant capital, rooted in valuable cultural and social assets, to navigate the post-Brexit social hierarchy and job market (Koikkalainen, 2019). In the opposite direction, Auer and Tetlow (2023) emphasise that the Brexit vote has induced a notable increase in British citizens migrating to the EU, driven by uncertainty, and a notable 600% rise in British citizens’ naturalisation across continental Europe, demonstrating the profound impact of the referendum on securing migratory opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted privileged migrants, revealing both their adaptability and vulnerabilities during global crises. Scholars have investigated the return migration of globally mobile individuals during this time, shedding light on how the crisis affected this group (Maxwell et al., 2022; Witte et al., 2023). Ehn et al. (2022) examined the experiences of digital nomads, highlighting their resilience and resourcefulness in navigating lockdowns and mobility restrictions. Similarly, Holleran and Notting (2023) discuss ‘mobility guilt’ among digital nomads, emphasising the ethical challenges and introspective dilemmas faced by privileged migrants. However, in contexts such as Malaysia, privileged foreign residents encountered mobility barriers and were vulnerable to sudden shifts in national priorities, as Koh (2024) demonstrates. These residents, initially welcomed as long-term settlers, were denied re-entry during the pandemic, underscoring how crises can be strategically leveraged to undermine migrants’ rights and urban citizenship status. Together, these studies present a nuanced view of privileged migrants, illustrating their capacity for adaptation and the precariousness of their rights amidst states of emergency.

Crises are understood as watershed moments occurring in global, national, local, or personal contexts, and indeed, the pandemic often represented a personal crisis across multiple domains for people who relied on crossing borders to sustain their family ties (Wray et al., 2023). This pattern also emerged among many participants in the current study, for whom the pandemic served as a collective watershed event, often coinciding with other collective crises, personal watershed events, lifecycle transitions, and deeper motivations and trajectories. At a time when most people’s mobility was restricted, the participants in this study were fortunate to utilise their legal right as Jews to actualise the ever-available option to move to Israel, as the country kept its borders open exclusively for Jewish migrants.

9.3 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach, involving 30 semi-structured interviews with English-speaking migrants who arrived in Israel between 2016 and 2021. The interviews, conducted by a research assistant¹ under the author’s guidance between July 2021 and February 2022, were thematically analysed by the author, using an inductive coding process to identify recurring patterns in migration timing and motivations. To ensure confidentiality, all participants are referred to by pseudonyms throughout the findings section, and specific identifying details have been slightly altered where necessary.

Participants were Jewish individuals primarily from the United States (21), with others from the United Kingdom (5) and Canada (4), reflecting the prevalence of

¹ I extend my gratitude to my devoted research assistant on this project, Ms Netta Gilbey.

migration from these countries.² Ages ranged from 23 to 67, covering a spectrum of working-age adults who independently made migration decisions. Seven participants were in their twenties, seven in their thirties, two in their forties, five in their fifties, and nine in their sixties – mirroring Western migration trends to Israel, which often occur around early adulthood or retirement. Nineteen participants were women, and 11 were men, with marital statuses including 16 married, four divorced, and 10 single; 19 had children, and some were grandparents. Their religious affiliations spanned the Jewish spectrum, from secular to ultra-Orthodox, with most identifying as Orthodox, secular, or traditional (in this order). Professionally, four participants had retired, two were unemployed, and the others worked across fields, including education, IT, writing, tourism, healthcare, management, real estate, and self-employment. Most participants resided in central Israel, primarily Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, with nine in the north (including three in Haifa) and one in the south.

The study aimed to understand how migrants select their locations in Israel, with a broader focus on their motivations for immigration and decision-making processes. Notably, a significant portion of the participants, 13 individuals, had arrived during the pandemic years of 2020–2021. Their unique motivations and decision-making during this period stood out, prompting a closer examination in this chapter, which focuses on data from these 13 participants while being informed by the broader cohort's insights. Interviews were conducted in English, either in person or via Zoom, and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes; they were transcribed by the research assistant. Participants were recruited through personal networks, snowball sampling, and relevant Facebook groups for English-speaking migrants to Israel. Institutional ethics approval was obtained, and participants provided informed consent to ensure their anonymity.

9.4 Push and Pull Factors Amidst the Pandemic

Deciding to migrate is rarely an impulsive act. Typically, the desire to move brews over years, evolving gradually until watershed moments prompt individuals to act (Benson, 2012). For English-speaking migrants to Israel, those who moved during the pandemic years emerged from the same 'brewing' of motivations as those who migrated before the pandemic. The underlying reasons for migration to Israel among respondents from 2016–2021 were consistent with findings from my previous study on Western Jews (United States, France, United Kingdom) who moved to Israel between the 1960s and 2010 (Zaban, 2015). Participants in this study cited several recurring push-and-pull motivations.

² According to Israel's Ministry of Aliyah and Integration, between 2016 and 2021, 18,742 people immigrated from the United States, 3,329 from the United Kingdom, and 2,119 from Canada.

9.4.1 Israel's Pull Factors

For many, the desire to live as part of a majority society was a primary pull factor, reflecting both a cultural and social shift from minority status in their countries of origin (Dashefsky & Woodrow-Lafield, 2020). Regardless of whether they came from prominent Jewish neighbourhoods in places like New York, New Jersey, Montreal, or London, the experience of being a minority left many feeling isolated. Dalia (42, UK) captured this sentiment: 'I felt like a bit of an outsider all the time. They don't understand the festivals, they don't understand anything'. In Israel, they find an entirely different experience, one where they become part of a majority group within a predominantly Jewish society. As Daniel (39, UK) noted, 'You don't feel so isolated; even though you're new to the country, you're almost immediately part of the group'. Israel's alignment with the Jewish calendar and culture, the abundance of kosher establishments and synagogues even in the remotest villages, and the provision of Jewish education in public schools further cement this sense of belonging.

To top this, Israel lies on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and enjoys warm weather, which is deeply appealing to many North Americans and Europeans. Israeli culture, despite appearing direct and aggressive, is also considered warm and outgoing, and the large cities offer lively nightlife. Sarah (23, USA) expressed this appeal: 'Every time I came here, I was the best version of myself. I fit in more with the vibe and the culture here'.

Another important pull factor is proximity to family or friends in Israel, as many follow loved ones who have already relocated there (see also Amit & Riss, 2007; Palmer & Kraus, 2017). Additionally, for many Jews who eventually migrate to Israel, the idea of moving there has often framed their life possibilities from an early age. Migration to Israel is frequently woven into their upbringing and life trajectory through exposure to Jewish schools and youth movements that teach Zionist ideology, participation in religious communities with close ties to Israel, and regular donations to Jewish and Israeli NGOs. Many have travelled to Israel with family, schools, youth movements, or through programs such as Birthright or Gap Year initiatives. Israel thus becomes an integral part of their Jewish identity (Palmer & Kraus, 2017) and an ever-present possibility for life change. Another pull factor, mentioned by some respondents, pre- or during COVID, was Israel's healthcare system, which predominantly appealed to Americans. While not entirely free and suffering from many ills, healthcare is available for all, regardless of employment status, and at affordable prices.

9.4.2 The Push Factors Motivating Migration

A notable shift among both pre-pandemic and pandemic migrants was a search for change, more frequently mentioned than among veteran migrants in my previous

study (Zaban, 2015). Searching for ‘the good life’, however one defines it, is repeatedly apparent in much of the lifestyle migration literature, whereas for Jewish migrants to Israel, it is the search for a ‘better Jewish life’ (Palmer & Kraus, 2017). Other push factors included individual concerns and determining factors such as high costs of education or healthcare, children’s ages, and lifecycle stage, also characterising other lifestyle migration patterns (Amit, 2007; Botterill, 2017). Several pandemic-era migrants cited additional, collectively unsettling factors. In the United States, political concerns following Donald Trump’s 2016 election and socio-political polarisation influenced decisions to migrate, while in Britain, Brexit was a major concern. Growing anti-Semitism was mentioned as a concern by respondents from all three sending countries. For instance, Brexit has been labelled an ‘unsettling event’ with significant political, social, and economic ramifications that have disrupted longstanding migration plans (Kilkey & Ryan, 2021, p. 229). For Daniel (39, UK), a French migrant in the United Kingdom for 20 years, Brexit and rising anti-Semitism were key reasons in fostering a sentiment that ‘maybe our time here is done’. This, along with lifecycle factors like children’s ages, led to the decision to move in February 2019, which materialised in August 2020 during COVID, though he argued the pandemic did not influence the choice.

Arieh (67, USA) mentioned current conditions in the United States (‘America has gone crazy’), along with increased anti-Semitism, as reasons to leave, advocating for Israel as a haven: ‘When Jews are being targeted and threatened in Europe and in America, where is it you’re supposed to go? Israel. It’s time to come home’. Like Daniel, the lifecycle stage mattered, with a desire for closeness to family in Israel. For him, too, COVID did not drive his decision, just delayed the move due to bureaucracy. Both migrated during COVID but cited other collectively ‘unsettling events’ and personal reasons as fast-tracking their slow-brewing thoughts of moving.

9.5 ‘The Right Time’ to Move: Pandemic-Specific Motivations

In March 2020, global movement restrictions and health measures to contain COVID-19 halted familiar routines, forcing an ‘emergency-turned-normal’ way of life. This led to temporal privilege-manoeuvring among some individuals, who capitalised on their ability to relocate to Israel during an era of limited mobility options. This manoeuvring was shaped by the unprecedented global standstill: illness, loss, job cuts, and shifts to remote work were widespread, with parents managing home-schooling without extended-family support, and social gatherings, cultural events, and routine activities suspended. Yet, throughout this standstill, Israel kept its doors open to Jewish migrants, including the operation of ‘Aliyah planes’ to bring them over. This somewhat ‘transparent’ privilege is available in normal times too, but becomes more special in times of global immobility.

Several individuals who participated in this research decided to move to Israel amidst these challenges, viewing COVID as both a personal and collective watershed moment that accelerated their migration timelines. For many, the pandemic marked an urgent opportunity to realise long-standing plans, with phrases such as ‘it was time to go’, ‘sense of urgency’, ‘acceleration’, and ‘fast-tracking’ frequently mentioned in interviews. Ariela (51, USA) embodies this well, moving to Israel in June 2020 to join her daughter, who had relocated there the year before:

It was a very quick move for us, but we were in a place that *it was time to go*. I felt a very big *sense of urgency* to get here... I just felt a real pull... It was our dream to come. We just ended up *fast-tracking it*. (my accentuations)

Ariela highlighted this sense of urgency in relocating closer to her daughter, influenced by temporal privilege-manoeuvring that included the flexibility to care for her elderly mother and adapt to changed work dynamics she and her partner had already experienced before COVID. Although she had previously considered moving, the pandemic accelerated her decision. This acceleration demonstrates that privilege is often an active social practice, something that is ‘done’ rather than ‘had’, as migrants strategically negotiate their status against global crises.

The question remains: Why Israel, and why now? For many, Israel had long been part of their future plans, but specific motivations gained prominence. The primary, overlapping motivations included (1) the restrictions on non-citizen visits to Israel, prompting Aliyah as the only way to reunite with family; (2) disruptions to lifestyle abroad, making physical location feel less consequential; and (3) perceptions of Israel’s superior handling of COVID.

9.5.1 ‘We Wanted to See Our Grandkids’

A powerful motivation to move to Israel during the pandemic was the restriction on non-citizen entry into Israel. Diaspora Jews with family members in Israel were unable to visit them, which many parents and grandparents found intolerable. As Aliyah – the Jewish migration to Israel – was still permitted (see Kritzman-Amir, 2021), people realised they needed to activate their rights and migrate to Israel. For those like Ariela, this was an acceleration of a prior intention; for others, it prompted serious contemplation of a move. Jeff (64, USA) expressed this sentiment:

We wanted to see our kids and grandkids, but we couldn’t get to Israel, and it just *accelerated* the process. We had things that we did that were preventing us from making Aliyah. When COVID came, everything disappeared. It would make no difference whether we were in America or in Israel. *If COVID hadn’t come, I don’t think we would have made Aliyah.*

Jeff’s life, once defined by frequent business and leisure travel, had been drastically limited. COVID shifted their values, drawing them toward family over previous commitments. For some, the pandemic-driven temporal privilege-manoeuvring aligned with broader trends of migration from cities as affluent households sought stability (Haslag & Weagley, 2024).

Young adults were similarly affected. Higher education moved online, deeply reshaping the college experience, and job losses in sectors such as hospitality altered financial independence, leaving many feeling isolated and facing economic difficulties (see Chen & Lucock, 2022). Kim (27, Canada) had previously visited Israel on a Birthright trip and had not planned to relocate. Yet, after a personal turning point – her breakup during COVID – she sought change: ‘I needed adventure, and during COVID, the only place I could go was to do a Masa program in Israel’ (a 2–10 month internship/study/volunteering program for young Jewish adults). Initially interested in the program, Kim ultimately chose to stay, finding purpose in a time-limited context where Israel presented a unique option exclusively accessible to her as a Jew.

9.5.2 ‘*This Was My Worst Nightmare*’: *The Loss of a Familiar Lifestyle*

The loss of familiar routines and connections during the pandemic prompted many to reassess their lives and priorities. Israel’s pandemic restrictions were similar to those in other countries, limiting social gatherings and movement, but they were often less strictly enforced in rural areas, where residents also had access to open spaces and nature. For some, this created added appeal, particularly for those seeking a quieter or more rural lifestyle. Miriam, a 48-year-old American single mother with a remote job, had previously lived in Jerusalem in her twenties and had learned about kibbutz life (a communal rural lifestyle) through friends in Israel. The idea of moving there ‘one day’ suddenly felt feasible and especially attractive:

My 10-year-old daughter and I were going to be just the two of us in our house in the suburbs. I didn’t know if school would be open. It was a very fast decision because of COVID. Because of COVID, I couldn’t visit my son in college, and he couldn’t visit me. My mother was ill, and I visited once a week, but with COVID, I couldn’t see her because those were the rules, so then I could be anywhere in the world.

For Miriam, Israel offered a more communal lifestyle she felt was missing at home, highlighting another aspect of temporal privilege-manoeuvring during COVID.

Similarly, Sarah (23, USA) initially planned to move to Israel after travelling there in 2019, but decided to study in the United States first. Her plans were disrupted by the pandemic:

Moving back in with my family from college was hard to adapt to. Being stuck at home was my worst nightmare. Ever since my first trip to Israel, I knew I wanted to make Aliyah, and I felt *I couldn’t wait anymore*. I applied to every single Masa program I could, and two weeks later, I flew off to Israel. *It happened that fast*. The program was five months, and it was time to decide.

For many like Miriam and Sarah, moving during the pandemic was not only about realising dreams but also about escaping an unwanted reality back home.

Nadia (66, USA) adds a different layer where lifestyle changes influenced by work intersected with migration decisions: ‘We weren’t planning on coming to Israel as soon as we did, but COVID accelerated our Aliyah. My husband was an executive director in nursing homes and got COVID. After we recovered, we decided he wasn’t going back to his career’. COVID significantly altered Nadia and her husband’s plans. Initially, they had intended to relocate after retirement to be closer to their daughters in Israel. However, due to the pandemic and a reassessment of work priorities, they advanced their timeline by two to three years. This shows how the pandemic not only accelerated life decisions but reshaped them, as disrupted routines and work situations became a powerful force behind migration choices.

9.5.3 *‘Israel’s Handling COVID Better’*

Israel’s handling of the pandemic was a crucial factor guiding migrants’ decisions. It closed schools and imposed movement restrictions earlier than many countries, maintaining closed borders for an extended period due to its limited number of entry points. Israel’s rapid vaccine deployment, starting in December 2020, inoculated a significant portion of its population (Rosen et al., 2021). Despite Israeli tendencies toward non-compliance, the majority of people followed early-stage pandemic rules and mask mandates.

This approach influenced migration decisions. Donna, a retired 67-year-old American whose post-retirement plans were derailed by COVID, felt compelled to move to Israel as her daughter assured her of Israel’s better handling of the situation. The opportunity to bond with her granddaughter and support her pregnant daughter motivated her to migrate, an opportunity she might not otherwise have seized.

Lilly (26, USA) was travelling in the United States with her husband as a break before fulfilling their plan to migrate to Israel, where Lilly could afford higher education thanks to full state funding for new migrants up to a certain age. COVID started when they were en route, with nowhere to go and no health insurance: ‘It felt a lot safer to be in Israel, knowing that there would be medical care and that people were taking COVID seriously’. For her, the importance of healthcare became a real push factor once the pandemic started, when horrifying thoughts of hospitalisation followed by lifelong debts loomed over. Lilly also mentions that in Israel, ‘people take COVID seriously’, referring to compliance with government restrictions and health instructions.

Similarly, Ariela (51, USA) said she felt safest in Israel, noting the cultural emphasis on protecting life and mutual care, distinct from her perception of the American approach: ‘In Israel, the philosophy is to do everything to protect life. You have compliance because nobody wants to get somebody else’s grandmother sick and kill her. I don’t feel that you have that sense in the States’.

The experiences shared here illustrate temporal privilege-manoeuvering in its many forms, as the pandemic influenced relocation decisions and catalysed life changes amidst global upheaval.

9.6 The Paradox of Migration During COVID: Urgency vs. Delayed Integration

The pandemic created an unusual paradox for migrants in Israel: while it intensified the urgency to materialise migration plans, it also delayed integration due to severe official social restrictions. This contradiction, between the need to relocate immediately and the difficulty of adapting to a new life, highlights the impact of watershed events on migration trajectories, affecting both the initial migration decision and the subsequent settling-in phase (Barker, 2021).

For many Jewish migrants, Israel offered a strategic opportunity to exercise temporal privilege-manoeuvring, using their legal right to migrate despite global restrictions. This manoeuvre allowed them to restore disrupted lifestyles by relocating during a time of widespread immobility. However, while migration itself became more pressing or feasible, social belonging and integration proved challenging.

The pandemic intensified traditional migration challenges, particularly with bureaucratic hurdles. Many faced severe delays in obtaining essential documents due to government backlogs and lockdowns. Nadia (66, USA) described the process as ‘unbelievably stressful’, especially as she struggled to obtain basic records because many offices were closed. Similarly, Arie (67, USA) noted that securing his birth certificate and fingerprints became a nearly two-year ordeal due to the pandemic’s shutdowns.

Social integration was significantly hindered by restricted access to community spaces, language classes, and religious institutions, which typically help new migrants build local networks. Dalia (42, UK) described her early days in Israel as isolating: ‘The *gan* (kindergarten) was closed, there was no *ulpan* (language class) for me. I was in this bubble without any friends’. Daniel (39, UK) highlighted the challenges his children faced with online schooling in a new language, describing it as particularly challenging. Finding religious communities was similarly difficult for newcomers like Nadia, who noted that without access to synagogues, which were open only to members during COVID, they had to pray outside in a parking deck. Belonging to a religious community is essential for support, and the lack of access to spaces like language schools, cafés, and community centres further contributed to feelings of isolation. Lilly (26, USA) echoed this sentiment, mentioning how lockdowns prevented her from participating in local cultural experiences until a year after her arrival.

This paradox – migration made urgent, but integration postponed – underscores how watershed events like the pandemic create ambiguities along the migration journey, shaping immediate decisions as well as the long-term experience of settlement. As Barker (2021) notes, the social integration of newcomers was uniquely constrained by pandemic policies, making social belonging temporarily out of reach for many despite their successful relocation.

9.7 Conclusion

In times of global upheaval, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, migration patterns undergo profound shifts, often marked by accelerated migration but slowed-down integration. Israel, a historically available destination to Jewish people all over the world, emerged not only as a choice but, in some cases, the sole viable option for relocation amidst the pandemic's global mobility restrictions. This period catalysed the acceleration of long-held aspirations to move, as the present moment became an opportune, if pressured, time to fulfil such plans. The pandemic intensified the need to act, turning distant dreams into urgent realities and prompting individuals to prioritise their relocation goals and re-evaluate life choices.

The COVID crisis intensified external push factors, often combined with other events such as rising anti-Semitism, Brexit, or Trump's rule, propelling individuals to seek refuge in Israel. Simultaneously, personal push factors like unemployment, remote work opportunities, familial obligations, and closed educational institutions created a more mobile environment. These factors converged, fostering an environment conducive to relocation and emphasising greater malleability during crises. The allure of Israel burgeoned amid the pandemic due to its perceived social solidarity, robust healthcare system, and efficiency in handling the crisis. The country's pull factors, including family connections, a sense of safety, and communal responsibility, became more pronounced, drawing individuals seeking refuge and stability in uncertain times. Despite the restrictions imposed on social interactions. Moreover, the pandemic catalysed a reimagining of priorities and a recalibration of dreams, a phenomenon not confined to Israel alone. Globally, individuals reassessed their aspirations, prompting a paradigm shift in migration choices (Ehn et al., 2022; Holleran & Notting, 2023; Maxwell et al., 2022), urging people to reconsider what they value most in life.

Collective watershed events influence privileged mobility choices and timing beyond the case study of Jewish migration to Israel during COVID. It is true in other crises and emergency circumstances, such as economic crises (Bartolini et al., 2017; Mendoza, 2020; Torresan, 2012), Brexit (Auer & Tetlow, 2023; Benson, 2020), or war, as in the case of Russian emigration following the war in Ukraine (The Economist, 2023). Crises accelerate long-brewing processes, initiate new ones, and help shape migration timing and destination choice. Choices are affected by the necessary privilege gradients, the type of crisis, and the desired solution. For example, the Russia-Ukraine war has not only prompted Ukrainian refugees but also the more privileged mobility of Russians who manoeuvre their privileges to relocate to destinations that offer a better lifestyle (Rapoport, 2023).

The current situation in Israel, characterised by societal and political unrest, a full-scale war, and surges in anti-Semitic sentiments, particularly in Europe and North America, serves as another collective watershed moment. This period has prompted temporal privilege-manoeuving among a growing number of Israelis with resources, foreign citizenships, flexible employability, or life circumstances conducive to short- or long-term mobility to destinations such as Thailand, Berlin, Greece, and Portugal.

Meanwhile, rising anti-Semitism is disrupting Jewish lives in Europe and North America, pushing more Jews to emigrate to Israel, where, paradoxically, they feel both at home and safer as Jews despite the ongoing war.

This chapter underscores the privileges and complexities of these migrations, exploring how ‘the right time’ to move is shaped by multiple factors that influence when, where, and whether individuals choose to relocate. Temporal privilege-manoeuvring is a key concept explored here, highlighting that the privilege to move is not just about location but also about timing, leveraging privileged status at specific points in history when migration becomes most advantageous. This aspect also deepens the concept of geoarbitrage (Hayes, 2014), traditionally concerned with choosing destinations to achieve a better lifestyle; temporal privilege-manoeuvring adds a new dimension, illustrating how specific events prompt privileged individuals to determine not only *where* but *when* to relocate to enhance their quality of life. Ultimately, these findings reinforce the argument that we must view privilege as a relational lens to understand how global inequalities are reproduced through the ease of movement (Buhr & Zaban, 2026). The chapter thus illuminates the understudied interconnectedness of time and privilege in migration choices, where the convergence of historical moments and personal resources opens pathways for those who can act swiftly and decisively to improve their situation by relocating at a specific time.

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Part III
Privileged Mobilities and Local Urban
Settings

Chapter 10

Privileged Mobilities and Migrants' Businesses in Lisbon: Migrant Entrepreneurship in a Lifestyle Destination



Franz Buhr

10.1 Introduction

In the last decade, Lisbon has experienced an intense process of urban change characterised most notably by both public and private investment in the visitor economy, real estate rehabilitation, and the transformation of its commercial fabric. The pace of the city's transformation is widely seen as unprecedented, with international airport arrivals increasing by 112% and housing prices by 124% within the 2013–2023 period (Statistics Portugal, 2024). Backed by a leisure-led restructuring of the city, tourists and other mobile populations such as lifestyle migrants, international students, and digital nomads have turned to the city in search of its increasingly 'cosmopolitan' appeal, laid-back atmosphere and pleasant weather (Buhr, 2023; Molina Caminero & McGarrigle, 2023). Although the recent patterns of lifestyle migration to the city have been fairly documented, very little attention has been given to understanding how lifestyle migrants have contributed to reshaping Lisbon's service and commercial economy through entrepreneurship. This chapter looks at businesses established by relatively privileged migrants which are embedded in the city's new leisure economy. By shedding light on the diverse business experiences described by lifestyle migrants in Lisbon, I explore the overlap between lifestyle migration, migrant entrepreneurship and commercial gentrification in a context of accelerated urban change.

Migrant entrepreneurship scholarship has long addressed the ways migrants' businesses have suited cities' celebratory slogans of 'diversity', 'cosmopolitanism', and 'conviviality' (Scuzzarello, 2015; Zukin et al., 2016). So-called 'ethnic restaurants', for example, often integrate tourism circuits in European cities, usually materialising the reminiscences of colonial power, such as in Surinamese restaurants in

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Amsterdam, Indian shops in London, or Brazilian canteens in Lisbon. Yet, less attention has been given to emerging businesses opened by relatively privileged migrants (usually not perceived as *migrants*), such as intra-EU migrants, Western ‘expats’, or lifestyle migrants (Kunz, 2020). Although lifestyle migration scholars have previously documented, for example, the opening of pubs and restaurants by British citizens in the Spanish Costa del Sol (O’Reilly, 2003), or of campsite accommodation by Dutch nationals in the Swedish countryside (van Rooij & Margaryan, 2019), the commercial venues established by privileged migrants within *urban contexts* have been far less studied.

The term ‘expat-preneur’ (Vance et al., 2016) was coined to capture the existence of migrant individuals who initiate a new business venture in a host country. The term has been taken up by several scholars concerned with the sphere of work within migration trajectories that are not driven primarily by labour motivations, but rather by ‘something loosely defined as quality of life’ (Benson & O’Reilly, 2009, p. 621). In other words, the term raises attention to the businesses set up (often ‘on the side’) by people whose migration experience had more to do with improving lifestyle than with actual employment opportunities.

In definitional terms, the ‘expat-preneur’ description does not differ from long-established conceptualisations around migrant entrepreneurship. The implicit difference lies in the relative privilege (Duplan & Cranston, 2023; McGarrigle, 2022) the ‘so-called expats’ (Kunz, 2016) are able to mobilise when compared to the ‘archetypical migrant entrepreneur’ (Kloosterman & Rath, 2018), whose entrepreneurial strategies often result from barriers faced in host country’s labour market. Privilege here has manifold gradients, including socioeconomic capital and citizenship, but also Whiteness, and the very fact that relatively affluent migrants are actively sought by some destinations, including Portugal in general and Lisbon in particular.

As Girling and Bamwenda (2018) argue, the entrepreneurial activity of relatively affluent migrants remains largely ignored. In Lisbon, it is important to look at them not only because they are under-researched in the field of migration scholarship, but perhaps mostly because, as I try to demonstrate here, many of these businesses are entangled in wider processes of urban change and transnational gentrification (Hayes & Zaban, 2020). Including middling migrants into migrant entrepreneurship accounts has thus the potential to contribute to wider migration studies scholarship by shedding light on the inequalities underpinning migrants’ entrepreneurial strategies and market integration. In this chapter, I provide evidence that privileged migrants are key players in the transformation of Lisbon’s commercial landscape, which has come to cater to increasingly mobile transnational middle classes.

This chapter first presents a very brief literature review exploring the need for a liaison across three fields, namely lifestyle migration, migrant entrepreneurship, and gentrification studies. From that, it provides a schematic account of the recent urban change registered in Lisbon and the changing dimension of relatively privileged migration patterns to the city. Then I introduce my data production methods and explore the findings from qualitative fieldwork I carried out in 2021 and 2024 with 10 foreign business-owners who had recently moved to the city. The chapter ends with a discussion about the ways privilege is reproduced through deliberate strategies

to cater to a well-off transnational clientele and about the ethical conundrum faced by foreign entrepreneurial gentrifiers.

10.2 Literature Review

10.2.1 Lifestyle Migration

All kinds of migration entail a lifestyle change. People who flee political persecution, or who migrate to reunite with family members, or those who cross international borders looking for better work conditions – we are all searching for a better way of life. Yet, lifestyle migration has been proposed by Benson and O'Reilly (2016) as a lens to understand the interplay of migration, consumption, and migrants' identity-making projects (idem, 33). Rather than a discrete migration category, lifestyle migration as an analytical tool draws attention to *choice* and *consumption* within migration trajectories, rather than *necessity* and *work* (McGarrigle, 2022).

In practical terms, lifestyle migration scholars have mostly explored the mobilities of relatively well-off individuals who move somewhere where they expect to carry out a more pleasant way of life. Examples abound from retirees of more advanced economies relocating to tranquil countryside destinations (Benson, 2011) or to sunny coastal towns (O'Reilly, 2000), usually to countries with lower costs of living, enabling them to access more/better services than they would in their native countries (Hayes, 2018). Retirement migrants, second-home owners, downsizers, but also bohemian migrants and neo-nomads (Botterill, 2016; Halfacree, 2012; Korpela, 2020) have been the main characters of those accounts – usually individuals who earn their revenues elsewhere, either from pensions, real estate investment, or from a savings accounts, but who rarely need to engage with local income-generating activities.

Although Huete et al. (2013) have already pointed to the economic dimensions that still permeate lifestyle migration, the strength of lifestyle migration as an analytical tool has historically lain in its capacity to comprehend how certain kinds of migration are approached as a form of *consumption*. More recently, scholars have tried to broaden this perspective and looked through a lifestyle migration prism to youth mobilities that entail individuals' interaction with local employment and income-generating activities (Griffiths & Maile, 2014; Molina Caminero & McGarrigle, 2023). Still, the lifestyle migration lens has insufficiently exposed the ways lifestyle migration may also involve *production through entrepreneurship*. As we will see later from the Lisbon data, setting up their own businesses represents a key part of the lifestyle these migrants experience locally, a lifestyle that remains privileged enough to accommodate very flexible and fulfilling work-life arrangements.

10.2.2 Migrant Entrepreneurship

Scholarly work on migrant entrepreneurship has a long-standing tradition. Broadly speaking, the field has mostly looked into the formal or informal entrepreneurial ‘activities of less-privileged [migrant] individuals’ (Sandoz et al., 2022) usually considered to be ‘pushed’ into entrepreneurship due to some form of local labour market discrimination and/or for lacking qualifications. In addition, for a long time migrant entrepreneurship was almost synonymous to establishing ‘ethnic businesses’, meaning that migrants would not only work on low-profit sectors, but would also cater to their co-ethnics/co-nationals or mobilise ethnic identity markers as a defining feature of their businesses (e.g. ‘ethnic restaurants’).

The proliferation of so-called ‘ethnic’ restaurants and ‘immigrant shops’ (offering money transfer services, international phone calls, internet access, etc.) gave Western cities a particular kind of cosmopolitan feel, and some of these restaurants found their ways into the circuits of local middle-classes’ and tourist consumption. Scholarship focused on entrepreneurial migrants coming from Global South-to-North (or periphery-to-centre) and explored how these businesses often occupied marginal spaces in the city, thus reproducing wider patterns of social/cultural segregation (Kloosterman & Rath, 2001).

Recently, scholars have added complexity to the ‘ethnic’ aspect of migrants’ businesses, drawing attention to the multifocality of migrants’ strategies (Solano et al., 2022), as well as to their penetration into higher-end markets (Kloosterman & Rath, 2010; Lugosi & Allis, 2019), often resulting from migrants’ upward social mobility in the host country – which presupposes lengthier time of residence and cumulated business experiences.

The data from the Lisbon-based foreign entrepreneurs I will explore later in the chapter has very little to do with the descriptions above. As we will see, research participants not only set up higher-value activities, but they did so relatively shortly after arrival, and occupying very central (and expensive) areas of the city. In that sense, this project tries to contribute to Girling and Bamwenda’s (2018) call for rendering visible the entrepreneurial activities of relatively privileged migrants and recalibrating traditional analytical tools in order to account for the specificities of North-to-North migrants’ businesses and their impacts on urban life.

10.2.3 Gentrification Studies

In its classical formulation and predominant use, the concept of gentrification refers to a process of neighbourhood change characterised by the displacement of existing populations and the arrival of newcomers with higher socioeconomic status (Lees et al., 2008). It is a complex process of population replacement that may take many shapes, either by the growth of new local middle-classes (idem), the arrival of relatively privileged foreigners as residents – transnational gentrification (Buhr &

Cocola-Gant, 2024; Hayes & Zaban, 2020; Sigler & Wachsmuth, 2016), or even the substitution of more permanent neighbourhood inhabitants by visitors and temporary city users – tourism gentrification (Cocola-Gant & Lopez-Gay, 2020; Sequera & Nofre, 2020).

Research on gentrifying contexts around the globe have paid special attention to the role of capital investment/financialisation of the housing market, real estate speculation, short-term rentals, and residential instability/evictions/expulsions (Gago & Cocola-Gant, 2019). Yet, gentrification as a manifold process of neighbourhood change inevitably entails significant transformations in the local commercial fabric, which is gradually restructured into an urban infrastructure for the entertainment and consumption of more affluent users (Cocola-Gant, 2015).

The sub-branch of commercial or retail gentrification studies has bourgeoned recently, exploring the emergence of commercial venues that typically synthesise the process of 'commercial upgrade' in Western cities, such as gourmet outlets, artisanal bakeries, craft beer and cocktail bars, design shops, ceramic ateliers, among others (Alkon et al., 2020; Hubbard, 2018). In fact, a now-classic description of gentrifying Brooklyn (NY) holds that the 'ABC' of gentrification consists of the opening of art galleries, boutiques, and coffee shops (Zukin et al., 2016).

These studies have, nevertheless, rarely scrutinised the national origins of the entrepreneurs responsible for setting up the 'ABC' of commercial gentrification (Bantman-Masum, 2020 being a bright exception). In general, there seems to be an underlying assumption that such transformation is solely premised on the national/domestic market and local class dynamics. In order to question this assumption, this chapter proposes to link these three bodies of literature by directing our attention to the role relatively privileged migrants' businesses have played in the process of Lisbon's commercial change.

10.3 Lisbon: Urban Change and Mobile Lifestyles

It is hard to exaggerate the level, scale, and the pace of recent urban change in Lisbon. The seemingly established consensus across the Portuguese political spectrum around the promotion of tourism as a central solution to the 2008 financial crisis remains barely unaltered 15 years from then (Lestegás, 2019). The promotion of public and private investment in the visitor economy reshaped the city, including an extensive riverside rehabilitation, a new cruise ship terminal, several airport expansion works, real estate investment, new hotels, etc., which in very little time placed the city high on the rankings of global and European most attractive tourism destinations. The series of awards it received (Europe's Leading City Break Destination in 2009, 2010, 2013; Europe's Leading Cruise Destination in 2009, 2014, 2016, 2017; and, in 2017, World's Leading City Break Destination) paved the way for the consolidation of a touristic imaginary about the city, where a relatively-low cost of life, sun exposure and proximity to the ocean made it very appealing to those looking for leisure.

Yet, the circulation of such a leisure-based imaginary about the city made it also attractive to other privileged mobile populations.¹ Foreign retirees, corporate ‘expats’, second-home owners, international students and, particularly during/after the COVID-19 pandemic, digital nomads and international remote workers began to land in the city in search for a new lifestyle. Digital nomads, in particular, ranked Lisbon as their favourite destination in 2022, highlighting the city’s quality of life and abundant infrastructure such as coworking spaces, social events and nightlife (Nomads, 2022). Some of these new mobility patterns were actively incentivised by either the Portuguese State (e.g., through the creation of low taxation regimes for foreigners, the Golden Visa programme, the digital nomad visa), or by the municipality itself (by launching various initiatives aiming to attract ‘international talent’ and to promote Lisbon as a city of innovation).

Research trying to capture and analyse recent urban and population changes in Lisbon has given priority to understanding the emerging housing crisis and its relationship with the ubiquity of Airbnb and other short-term rental platforms in the city (Gago & Cocola-Gant, 2019), the processes of neighbourhood change and place transformation (Cocola-Gant, 2023), and, more broadly, the nature of Lisbon’s processes of gentrification and touristification (Estevens et al., 2023; Mendes, 2018; Tulumello & Allegretti, 2021). Studies of commercial transformation have also looked at various places/neighbourhoods in the city, mostly concerned with the impact of tourism and the adaptation/resilience of commercial venues (Barata-Salgueiro et al., 2017; Guimarães, 2021a, 2021b, 2022).

Scholarship on the different privileged mobile lifestyles that have converged to Lisbon is incipient. Lifestyle migrants and investors (McGarrigle, 2021; Montezuma & McGarrigle, 2019), international students (Malet Calvo, 2018), tourists (Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2021; Mendes, 2018), young professionals (Molina Caminero & McGarrigle, 2023), Golden visa holders (Amante & Rodrigues, 2021), or even digital nomads (Buhr, 2023) are often examined as relatively privileged consumers (of housing, goods, services, and place itself). Although initial steps have been taken (Jung & Buhr, 2022), there is a niche in the social-scientific accounts about contemporary Lisbon to explore how relatively privileged migrants not only participate in this process as consumers, but also as *producers* of urban change – through entrepreneurship.

10.4 Research Design and Findings

The data that informs this project was produced qualitatively by recourse to two methods: non-systematic ethnographic work in Misericórdia, one of Lisbon’s historical city centre districts which includes neighbourhoods such as Cais do Sodré and

¹ Traditional labour and postcolonial migration patterns to the city remained important, yet intra-EU and UK migrants, together, have now become the most numerous group of foreign residents in Lisbon (Buhr et al., 2024).

Bairro Alto, among others; and in-depth conversations with 10 migrant business owners. Although in this chapter I will mostly rely on the data produced during the conversations I had with entrepreneurs, the ethnographic work was fundamental for identifying the kinds of businesses that are typically present in gentrifying contexts, as well as the nationality of their owners. Ethnographic work consisted of various walks in the neighbourhood, informal conversations with shopkeepers, long- and short-term residents, and passersby. Larger-scale ethnographic observation also allowed us to identify other districts in Lisbon where similar commercial change is taking place, where the pop-up of foreign-owned businesses is significantly present. Actual interviewees were usually approached in-person and a future interview date would be settled. All conversations happened face-to-face, with the exception of one (#4), that was carried out virtually. Five conversations took place in 2021 (in the ambit of the H2020 SMARTDEST project) and 5 in 2024 (carried out independently). All businesses are situated in the same city-centre district, with the exception of Mark's (#9) night club, located on the eastern side of the city. I also approached the owners of 3 other businesses (a burger place, a specialty coffee shop, and a ceramics atelier), but they did not show interest/availability to participate in the study. As most businesses were located in proximity to one another, participants often suggested that I would try and recruit another business owner that they knew was also foreigner, so snowballing was also partially employed. Whenever available, I checked for online information about the shops, usually in local news outlets, which helped me to better prepare for the interviews.

I approached potential participants describing the project as an academic research on *new businesses created by foreigners who had recently moved to Lisbon*. I did not mention terms such as 'migrants', 'expats', 'privilege', or 'gentrification', although some of them were brought into the conversation by participants themselves (I explore some of these interactions in the findings section). I asked them about basic biographic information; decision to migrate; previous international experience; if they had visited Lisbon before moving there. I also enquired about previous business experience, the locational choice of the business they had opened in Lisbon, and asked them to walk me through the whole process of opening and operating their businesses. Questions about clientele, resistance, prices, neighbourhood transformation, and their own residential location were also posed. Finally, I asked them about their daily lives; about the hours spent at the workplace; the kinds of tasks they carried out there; and about what they usually did in their free time. Most of that information emerged naturally during the conversations, and did not necessarily follow the order above.

Regarding the selection of types of businesses, I wanted to keep the classic 'ABC' of gentrification in my dataset, that is, an art gallery ($n = 1$), a designer clothes boutique ($n = 1$), and specialty coffee shops ($n = 3$). Reflecting on the leisure-led restructuring of the city and the increasing presence of a relatively privileged foreign young adult population, I strove to include an interview with a bar owner ($n = 1$) and with a nightclub owner too ($n = 1$). In addition, I was able to interview the creator of a coworking space ($n = 1$), which was of special significance given Lisbon's recent success among digital nomads and foreign remote workers. All information about

Table 10.1 Participants' details. Names have been changed

#	Name	Nationality	Business	Arrival	Opening of business
1	Juan	Argentina	Restaurant and specialty tea shop*	2000	2014*
2	Jerôme	France	Bar and social events	2004	2016
3	Joana	Brazil	Art gallery	2005	2017
4	Anya	Russia	Brunch and specialty coffee shop	2015	2018
5	Jeff	Australia	Specialty coffee shop	2017	2019
6	François	France	Restaurant	2017	2020
7	Thierry	France	Designer clothes boutique	2018	2021
8	Jason	Australia	Coworking and social entrepreneurship	2019	2021
9	Mark	USA	Night club	2019	2022
10	Igor	Russia	Pastrami sandwich restaurant	2022	2024

*2014 is the opening year of Juan's tea shop. His first business, an Argentinian restaurant, opened in 2002

nationality, gender, type of business, year of arrival in Lisbon, and year of business opening are shown in Table 10.1. As the table shows, most research participants arrived in Lisbon during the process described in the last section, in which urban transformation walked hand in hand with the increasing presence of relatively privileged migrants in the city. The findings section below has taken into account the data produced in all 10 encounters with migrant entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, due to the chapter's length limitations, I provide more detailed accounts particularly about the cases that seem to challenge existing interpretations and analytical tools from the scholarship of reference.

10.5 Findings

10.5.1 *From 'Cool Breadwinning' to 'Adventurous Entrepreneurship'*

Faustine agreed to meet me at her specialty coffee shop right after its closing hour. I had already been there before this project because I saw online that they sold *choux* [a kind of French pastry] – something rare to find in Lisbon. The place was beautiful, minimalist but different from the sterile minimalism so typical of other specialty coffee shops in Lisbon (and elsewhere). The structure of the place itself was beautiful, (...) with an unusually high ceiling, and art déco doors. (...) I arrived there right after 15h30 and the café lights were off,

doors were already closed and all I could see across the glass doors was a woman cleaning the floor with a mop and placing all chairs upside down over the tables. I knocked, she came to me, and I told her, in Portuguese, that I had a meeting with Faustine. "Ah, ok" she said, "you can sit over there", in Portuguese too, and pointed to one chair that wasn't upside down. There was a smell of bleach in the air from the cleaning. She went somewhere inside the "Staff only" area and came back without her gloves and bringing a glass of water. "Do you want a glass of water?" she asked me as she sat down on the chair across the table. I said no thanks, and she drank from it. "I'm sorry I'm a bit in a hurry today, everything is a mess" she said in a very French-charged Portuguese accent. *She* was Faustine, to my surprise.² Not the cleaner – or not *only* the cleaner.

(...) so I asked her about her interest in specialty coffee, if she had any training as a barista, about the coffee beans she used and she quickly interrupted my questioning and said "I don't know anything about coffee. I like it but I hired a barista for that" (...) and I remembered the *choux* I had eaten there before and asked her about French *pâtisserie*, to which she said "I can't cook anything, I don't do the pastries, I buy it from a person who does that" – fragment from fieldwork diary

Before moving to Lisbon in 2019, Faustine (#6) used to be an art director in the advertisement sector in Paris. She is French, White, in her 40 s, and owns a specialty coffee shop in a very expensive spot in the city. Having a café was 'an old dream' of hers. She related to me she was tired with her 'crazy life' in Paris, working too much, and barely having any time to see her friends. Her partner (also French) lived between Paris and Oporto (north of Portugal) because the clothes he designs for his own brand were produced in textile workshops up north in the country. In one of her stays in Oporto, the couple decided to spend a week in Lisbon and that was when she 'fell in love with this space', which was for rent. From that moment, everything happened quickly: she quit her job in Paris, rented the space in Lisbon, found an apartment 3 minutes away from the café, and started the renovation works.

Now, the café has a clientele composed of 'many French expats, because this [the café] is French, and people want to talk [in French], it's kind of a psychological service [laughter]'. Faustine referred here to the conversations she had with clients during the pandemic, when social interactions were scarce. 'But now there are digital nomads, people working on their computers. And some Portuguese too, but I think they are, hum, of an upper class'.

I commented that her coffee shop looked quite different from other specialty coffee shops in the vicinity to what she said 'I don't have much time for that [to see other coffee shops], I work too much here'. From my fieldwork notes above, we know that she did not operate the coffee machine, nor did she bake the pastries. Her role, she said, is to 'talk to people. I like talking to people, waiting tables. That's mostly what I do here. Cleaning too. And the Instagram page, of course, I was an art director'. At the end of our talk, I commented on the café's early closing hour,

² My surprise in realising that the woman cleaning the floor with bleach was the business owner is testament to a semi-conscious bias about labour hierarchies and their racial underpinnings. Being usually perceived as a White man, with an academic job, and coming from a deeply racialised and unequal country such as Brazil requires me to constantly challenge deeply ingrained structural racism and other kinds of naturalised inequalities.

and her reply could not have been more enlightening. 'I close early because I want to enjoy life, the sun'.

Faustine's coffee shop was her first-ever business, and it came about not from a carefully-designed business strategy, but rather from a somewhat vague dream she was able to materialise. As the owner of the place, she was performing the tasks which are usually lesser paid and valued in the hierarchies of the service economy. Her privilege was not obviously displayed in the labour she carried out at the coffee shop, but rather in her capacity *to make the café happen* regardless of her lack of knowledge and skills about coffee or pastries. Once these 'details' had been taken care of, she could determine the café's working hours in a way that allowed her to do what she was not able to do in Paris.

Not far from Faustine's café, there is another specialty coffee shop, owned by two Australian brothers (both White, in their 30 s/early 40 s) – Jeff (#5) being the one I talked to. His coffee shop differs in many aspects from the general ambiance of Lisbon's specialty coffee scene. They got an authorisation to use their ample sidewalk, where they placed benches, tables, and chairs. Though some decorative elements are not unsimilar to other cafés (the use of cement, plants, and wooden materials), the place might be easily perceived rather as a bar. Music is played louder, a lot of (handcraft local) beer being ordered, not many people working on their computers. About that, Jeff said 'yeah, that's something we are trying to combat actually. Some people come and just order an espresso and keep the table busy the whole day working on their stuff. That doesn't cut it, really'. Jeff was also a bit bothered by hearing 'out there' that his café was a 'tourist place'. 'There are tourists, of course, but there are lots of other people too, mostly foreigners living here'. When asked about his Portuguese clientele, he said 'they just don't like the coffee. It's a matter of taste actually, (...) and education, over time tastes adjust'.

Jeff and his brother had lived in London for ten years before heading to Portugal. Jeff used to work as a surveyor, but his brother was a barista. 'He saw the whole [specialty coffee] thing blow up in London. And we would travel to Lisbon quite often, we liked it here'. Jeff said they noticed the specialty coffee scene was giving its first steps in Lisbon, although he confessed that was pure impression, not at all a market study. 'So we decided to move here and do something', he said after mentioning they had searched for other places along the Portuguese coastline, as *what really mattered* was 'to be near the sea'. Lisbon was chosen because it was the place where they could enjoy the lifestyle they wanted while having greater chances to run a profitable business – a sort of 'entrepreneurial' *geoarbitrage* (Hayes, 2014).

'Specialty coffee is definitely blowing up in the last two years, since we got here' he said. The success of this emerging niche market allowed him and his brother to stick to their Lisbon plan. 'We live off this'. Yet the competition did not seem to scare him. His impression is that most of the new coffee shops are all painted white, minimalist, where people go to work on their computers, so music needs to be low or there is no music at all. 'People feel like they can't make any noise, have a conversation, laugh!'. In contrast, he and his brother wanted to create a 'cool' atmosphere. 'Here I think it's quite relaxed. Like, *we just have fun*. Like, today we got the Soprano's soundtrack on'.

Faustine, Jeff and other entrepreneurs I talked to go to their businesses every day and work. Tasks performed by them may vary, or working hours regarded with a degree with flexibility. Prior to migration, these individuals were workers and work was never excluded from the lifestyle they imagined for themselves in Lisbon. Work was largely an undisputed matter, a rather unquestioned need. Yet, they stood on the privileged position to try and match the realm of work to a destination where they could maximise wellbeing. In their case, privilege was the capacity to *customise* their 'cool' coffee shops in a way that allowed them to earn a living, but also to decide how to balance work and leisure, wait tables and sunbathe, serve coffee and go surfing.

In contrast to the businesses described above, the nightlife club created by Mark (#9) in 2023 was never meant to be his main source of income. Working in the tech industry from San Francisco, Mark (White, gay, late 40 s) used to work in a project that required him to go to Lisbon five to six times per year, but only for a few days each time. After successive visits to Lisbon, he decided to relocate to the city in 2021 and work remotely from an apartment he rented with his partner, with a backyard filled with olive and almond trees, and enough space for his dog [which also came from the USA] to play around.

Mark was determined to move out of the US 'no matter what'. He wanted to live 'in a society that reflects [his] personal values more than the US', and Lisbon 'aligned perfectly with the lifestyle [he] want[ed] to live, you know, the weather, it's close to the beach, whatever else'. Mark was excited to share with me some business ideas he was pondering about investing in a network of living spaces for 'global creatives', where they would be able to 'cool off for a while', work on their projects, 'collab', 'meet the locals', and have fun. Each of these living spaces would include a nightclub, and Mark was gaining some experience with his own night venue (opened 7 months before our interview) – a huge rented warehouse in the eastern side of the city. When I asked him about his motivation to open a disco club, he said the following:

Hmm, honestly it started because... It sounds really petty, but, hum... sometimes I would go to Lux [night club in Lisbon] and they wouldn't let me inside, and I feel like, oh man, c'mon, that's a little bit crazy, you're not Berghain [a night club in Berlin known for its unpredictable door policy], you know, calm down... And then one night I got really frustrated and I was just sitting in bed at home, it was like 2 or 3 in the morning, so I had expected to be in the club at that time, but I came home because there was nothing else to do 'cause I didn't get in, and I just thought to myself like 'fuck them', I'm just gonna create my own space. Lux is not that great anyway.

Mark told me he and his partner had become 'pandemic DJs', buying professional equipment during the COVID-19 lockdown, and learning the craft on their own. They both played at the club, also welcoming guest DJs and hosting theme parties. Yet, the club did not have a regular working schedule and Mark struggled to find a business partner to navigate all the bureaucracy for obtaining licenses to legally sell alcohol and play loud music until early morning hours. The club was perhaps an adventure, a short-lived one, as by the time of writing this chapter he had decided to close the venue. He did not feel excited about it anymore.

10.5.2 *Gentrification: Where Privilege Meets Privilege*

When I sat down with Thierry (#7, White, French, 50 s) to talk about his apparel boutique, he asked me what my fields of study were, the courses I taught at the university, and what degrees I had. When I said I was interested, among other topics, in urban studies, he instantly affirmed ‘*ah, ok, you’re studying gentrification*’. Whenever the term *gentrification* was mobilised by participants, I took the opportunity to ask them about their views on the process.

Thierry designs clothes and sells his creations online and at his shops in Paris and Lisbon. Knowing he had visited Lisbon quite often before settling there, I questioned the timing of his business investment and asked if he thought his shop would have been successful if opened some 10 years before. ‘No, no. There has been a lot of promotion about the city, and now there are many more people with money here. *It’s a wave of rich people, really*. And my products are expensive. That’s why I don’t have many Portuguese customers, local salaries are [and pointed his finger down]’. His buyers, he shared, are mostly tourists and some ‘expatriates’.

Jérôme (#2), the French creative who arrived in Lisbon ‘before it was cool’ (2014), also brought up his concern for the gentrification process going on in Lisbon. He was conscious about the fact that one of his nightlife venues (a secret spot only accessible to *habitués* with an expiring password) was expensive for local standards and only attracted a wealthy international crowd. As a way to compensate for that, he parallelly took over the management of a small kiosk bar near the Tagus river where ‘beer was cheap and we had many Portuguese clients; it was more diverse, more democratic’. As the life of a nightlife entrepreneur can be very unstable, he said, Jérôme managed to secure some funds by selling an apartment in Lisbon he acquired and renovated as soon as he arrived in Lisbon, ‘back when things were way cheaper’.

Reflecting on gentrification, he stated to be ‘part of that, I know it, I’m conscious of it’. But he argued that Lisbon’s main problem was that it had become ‘a city for foreigners only’, where internationals just meet other internationals, speak only English or other languages, and make no effort to learn Portuguese. Our conversation was all held in Portuguese, but when Jérôme talked about his rage at Instagram and ‘lifestyle influencers’, he switched to English and put on a mocking voice to imitate them: ‘Come to Lisbon, it’s amazing! Portuguese are so nice. It’s cheap, blablabla... We have 300 days of sun per year and you don’t pay taxes if you’re rich. Bring all your friends from California’.

10.6 Discussion and Conclusion

The ways relatively privileged migrants have appropriated urban spaces have become an important topic of social-scientific concern (Hayes & Zaban, 2020; López-Gay et al., 2021). Permitted and even stimulated by specific migration policies, their place consumption practices (Novy, 2018) have fuelled gentrification processes worldwide

and lent them a transnational character. This chapter illustrates how lifestyle migrants are not only consumers, but also *producers* (Lefebvre, 1992) of specific urbanities that materialise and reproduce privilege through migrants' entrepreneurial activities. This study has attempted to answer to Hayes and Zaban's (2020) call for more analysis of how transnational mobility can intertwine with gentrification processes by looking at the businesses established by relatively privileged migrants in Lisbon.

This last section discusses three main research conclusions. First: what happens when transnationally mobile gentrifiers have the means to set up their own businesses? As we have seen from the data presented in the chapter, some of these businesses give urban shape to their owners' relative privilege, while also acting as places for consumption and circulation of other relatively privileged individuals, who are often mobile too. The specialty coffee shops presented here, the apparel boutique, or the nightclub parties function as rather exclusive consumption spaces for a relatively mobile middle-class embodied by figures such as 'expats', digital nomads, or other lifestyle migrants. The specificity of the data analysed here is that these infrastructures supporting privileged mobile lives are the very businesses created by other privileged migrants.

Most of the business owners who participated in this project related that their clientele was mainly composed of people *like them*: wealthier and mobile. These relatively privileged and mobile ways of life resonate through specific locales (Jung & Buhr, 2022; Merriman, 2016), which give shape to a rather exclusive form of urbanity, composed by Airbnb apartments, specialty coffee shops, or coworking spaces, for example. These places function as infrastructures (Buhr, 2023) facilitating the maintenance of privileged and mobile lifestyles in Lisbon.

The second claim this chapter advances relates to the role of work (through entrepreneurship) in lifestyle migration accounts. Lifestyle migration scholarship has tended to focus on migrants as higher-paying individuals whose consumption practices are backed by generous pensions, real estate investment, or a lifetime savings account. Molina Caminero and McGarrigle, (2023) have argued that lifestyle migration literature has left a blind spot for overlooking mobility patterns of younger populations to urban contexts and focusing rather on the mobility of older, retired migrants in rural or coastal settings, for whom income availability and regularity is not a concern. I would like to take this argument further and hold that this 'blind spot' has also contributed to the consolidation of an idea of *lifestyle* that seems fundamentally disconnected from work – in this case through the form of entrepreneurship.

For most working-age lifestyle migrants, lifestyle does not exclude work, even if they are relatively privileged individuals. As shown in this chapter, work was always on the table – only *not any work*, but work that could be tailored through entrepreneurship in order to match migrants' lifestyle expectations. In many cases, entrepreneurship was precisely the *means* to make their imagined lifestyle come true – not only as an income-generating activity but also because it permits them to design an occupational-wellness balance that suits their lifestyle project. It seems therefore important to reshuffle the idea that lifestyle precludes work, or that economic factors and lifestyle belong to different realms, as well as to account for the various gradients composing privilege and for how they are always relational and relationally practiced.

Finally, I would like to highlight one of the analytical strengths lifestyle migration tools provide for the case of lifestyle migrant entrepreneurs. As Benson and O'Reilly argued, lifestyle migration entails a 'reflexive project of the self' (2009, p.615). Indeed, these two authors have explored how individuals try to achieve self-improvement through migration. In this chapter, we have also seen how self-improvement is realised through migrant entrepreneurship – and how work was a constitutive element of these migrant entrepreneurs' desired lifestyle. It is evident that the cases discussed here provide a spectrum of entrepreneurial initiatives, ranging from migrants whose businesses are their main source of income to those to whom entrepreneurship was rather an impulsive experiment. In all cases, though, materialising a business idea was part of their process of identity construction and of the way they construed their migration narratives.

Yet, similarly to Molina Caminero and McGarrigle's (2023) findings with young lifestyle migrants, the self-reflexive discourses voiced out by these foreign entrepreneurs about their role within gentrification processes in Lisbon had obvious limitations. Their explicit recognition in being part of a wider gentrifying context (which was usually perceived by them as an exclusionary phenomenon) does not translate into a critical questioning of their business strategies. On the contrary, the viability of their businesses *directly depends* on the ongoing processes of gentrification and touristification of the city. Such ambiguous ethical standpoint resonates with Korpela's (2014) argument that lifestyle migration projects tend to be constructed around an individualistic ethos, where mobility (*and* entrepreneurship) are interpreted by migrants as experiences with implications to the self – and to the self only. The lack of acknowledgement of wider structural inequalities predicated on race, class, citizenship, or coloniality – upon which their lifestyles and businesses' success also rely – is illustrative of an individualist ethics that reproduces those very systemic inequalities.

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Chapter 11

From ‘Trailing Spouses’ to Top ‘Expatriates’ Urban Translators: Blogging for (Self)Integration in and Through Copenhagen



Tatiana Fogelman

11.1 Introduction

The growth of global corporations, globalised professional sectors, and migration policy changes have, over the past decades, increased the cross-border mobility of highly skilled workers. Such relocation of professionals includes both those moving abroad independently and those relocating through a corporate or organisational transfer. Especially in the latter case, it most often involves relocating the entire family, or at the very least the worker's partner or spouse (Chen & Shaffer, 2018). These spouses' migration and adaptation experiences have long been of interest to management research, given their clear impact on the success of corporate relocation (Chen & Shaffer, 2018; Lauring & Selmer, 2010). More recently, however, non-functional research (McKenna & Richardson, 2016) has begun examining these so-called 'trailing spouses' in their own right (Fechter, 2007, 2011; Slobodin, 2019; van Bochove & Engbersen, 2015). This shift reflects, at least in part, the fact that such spouses are increasingly highly educated and professionally active prior to the move. Even when their career ambitions differ from those of their relocated partners, their own professional identities and aspirations are entangled in their overall adaptations to new places abroad. Quite contrary to the term 'trailing spouse', which 'conjures an experience defined by a lack of agency' (Hunter, 2023, p. 54), this body of research recognises and explores their active role and expansive engagements in the migration and adaptation processes. This is evident in the work they do in refashioning their own professional pathways, social networks and identities, as well as in the emotional, social and logistical work they undertake for the family unit in their new locations (Spiegel, 2018a).

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Copenhagen has, over the past ten to 15 years, become one such highly popular destination for many professional migrants. New Danish migration policies designed to attract highly skilled migrants, often at the expense of asylum-seekers and lower-skilled migrants, are one key factor behind this development. Over the past decade, it has indeed been primarily highly skilled and educated workers, as well as students pursuing higher education, that have moved to the country,¹ settling primarily in Copenhagen and its metropolitan area. It is here that the key employers of foreign workers, mostly large companies within biotechnology, logistics, and finance (Foged et al., 2019), are concentrated. Professional migrants' strong preference for the capital region also reflects Copenhagen's global reputation, developed over the past decade, as one of the world's most liveable cities. This globalised popularity has been nurtured by the municipality itself and further seized upon by Copenhagen Capacity, the main official initiative of Greater Copenhagen for attracting foreign professionals and companies to the area. Drawing on city's frequent top rankings in international liveability indices,² Copenhagen Capacity promotes the area to 'international talent' as a 'trendy, vibrant and sustainable metropolis, offering high living standards, work-life balance and opportunities for the entire family'.³

Yet the local context can still constitute a challenging environment for social adaptation and, for those arriving without an employment contract, such as 'trailing spouses', also for professional integration. Socially, the challenge is reflected in Denmark's frequent placement near the bottom of 'ease of settling' or 'expat'⁴ friendliness indices,⁵ which capture the insular and often cliquish nature of social life, and at times also professional life, in the country. Professionally, research has documented high labour market barriers even for highly-skilled foreigners – whether due to an unusually strong reliance of Danish employers on personal connections and social networks (Bredgaard, 2018), the limited recognition of foreign qualifications

¹ The shift is clear from national statistics: in 2020 55% of (temporary) resident permits were granted to EU citizens, out of which 58% were job-based, 15% study-based and 13% based on wealth alone. Permits for non-EU citizens were even more dominated by being based on a job (44%), followed by study (37%) and only then family reunification (17%). Only 0.8% of permits were granted to refugees. This situation is striking in comparison to pre-tightening of the asylum and immigration policies when for example in 1997 only 32% of permits were given because of a job or study.

² For the latest example see <https://www.copcap.com/news-archive/copenhagen-is-the-second-most-livable-city-in-the-world>, retrieved Jan 3, 2025.

³ <https://www.copcap.com/living-and-working/life-in-copenhagen>, retrieved Dec 13, 2019.

⁴ As recent reflexive research on privileged migration (Cranston, 2017; Kunz, 2020; Yeung, 2016) stresses, the term 'expat' is highly problematic due to its colonial overtones. As a category of practice, it is often deployed to frame the highly educated, professional, and usually Western migrants-sojourners as the 'good migrants', unlike the low-skilled, usually racialised and problematic figure of the 'immigrant'. 'Trailing spouses' are in fact sometimes interchangeably referred to as expatriate spouses, including in research, generally falling under the category of temporary, Western, self-sufficient 'expats'. I continue using the term here, reflecting its commonplace deployment as a (self)descriptor of migrants I examine here, but do so with quotation marks to signal this critical awareness.

⁵ <https://www.internations.org/expat-insider/2023/ease-of-settling-in-index-40355>, retrieved Jan 3, 2025.

and experiences, or the requirements for Danish language proficiency (Bredgaard & Lund Thomsen, 2018). This chapter focuses on precisely such highly educated, Western 'trailing spouses' in Copenhagen and their navigation of the social and professional challenges of adaptation. It does so through a case of two women who, in the wake of their relocation, became the most successful 'expat' Copenhagen bloggers, translating the city for other newcomers. Drawing on interviews and analysis of their digital content, I examine their urban blogging practice as a crucial, albeit uneven, venue and a tool for their own social adaptation and professional reinvention. Throughout, I highlight how the city's specific context has both shaped and enabled this specific way of adjustment to their migration experience.

11.2 'Trailing Spouses': Privilege, Post-relocation Adjustment, and Entrepreneurialism

'Trailing spouses', traditionally (assumed to be) mostly female spouses of successful male professionals, have conventionally been perceived as privileged migrants. This perception stems from the fact that they usually move with a well-paid partner, possess a secure albeit temporary legal status, and often receive generous relocation assistance, including domestic help or other perks (Fechter, 2007; Schnurr et al., 2016). Moving with the family can also provide support and comfort that mitigate some of the social ruptures mobility typically brings about (Cangià & Zittoun, 2018). However, in line with a broader turn toward reflexive, relational and situated understandings of privilege in migration studies (e.g. Robertson & Roberts, 2022), which this volume further advances, their privilege is increasingly recognised as relative, place-contingent (Buhr & Zaban, 2026), and often fragile. An intersectional approach highlights that 'trailing spouses' may belong to quite an elite group of resource-rich 'expats' while simultaneously experiencing marginalisation, for example, as members of sexual or racialised groups stigmatised in their new locations (Rodriguez & Ridgway, 2019). Moreover, their very 'trailing in mobility' induces a particular precarity in their privilege (Cangià, 2018, p. 2022). While many migrants negotiate varying configurations of concurrent precarity and privilege (Botterill, 2017; Buhr & Zaban, 2026; Robertson & Roberts, 2022), 'trailing spouses' must do so at the intimate, everyday scale of their partnerships. Not only is their class-based privilege household-based and thus derivative, it is also tempered at an individual scale through their subordination in the migration project, and through the lack of career continuity and immediate social network that their partners typically acquire via their new workplaces (Büchle, 2018). Relative to their partners, 'trailing spouses' therefore tend to experience more significant disruptions in their social and professional networks and occupational lives (Fechter, 2007, 2011; Kanstrén & Mäkelä, 2022).

Adjustment experiences among 'trailing spouses' vary quite widely, often along gendered lines (Cole et al., 2014; Rodriguez & Ridgway, 2019; Spiegel, 2018a). The

gender composition of partners accompanying migrants has become more diverse, with a growing number of male ‘trailing spouses’. While this development to some extent undoes the traditionally gendered image of the accompanying partner, research also shows some persistence of gendered norms in terms of what male and female accompanying spouses most often need support with (Cole et al., 2014; see also Slobodin, 2019), and which aspects of their identities they tend to find most under pressure during relocation (Collins & Bertone, 2017). But individualised aspects, such as prior international experience, specific personality traits, and linguistic competences also strongly shape adjustment trajectories (Chen & Shaffer, 2018; Ramos et al., 2017). Organisational support for ‘trailing spouses’ social integration and professional adaptation, widely advocated for in the literature, can likewise mitigate many of the ruptures associated with cross-border migration, especially when tailored both to spouses’ needs and the local context (Harvey, 1998; McNulty, 2012). Those without support, however, are much more exposed to the host environment’s culture without any guidance, and must cope largely on their own (Lauring & Selmer, 2015). Repeated relocation (Cangià & Zittoun, 2018), especially among those with limited personal desire for moving abroad (Fechter, 2007; Kerulis et al., 2019), can further compound the challenges.

Despite such variations, the adaptation processes of ‘trailing spouses’ are, on the whole, more complex than those of their partners. The precarity, or fragility, of their privileged status is closely tied to the fact that these processes involve intense threats to central identities (Cangià, 2018; Collins & Bertone, 2017; Slobodin, 2019). These migrants are thus involved in ‘often intense identity struggle[s]’ (Hunter, 2023, p. 54) as they navigate new social, cultural, professional, and at times also intimate (Cangià & Zittoun, 2018) landscapes. This work of identity reconstruction and adjustment remains mostly invisible (Hunter, 2023), yet it can be psychologically taxing. It typically involves the situated negotiation of multiple lay, composite identities. For example, in relation place-related identities, ‘expat’ spouses may find themselves adopting and performing different and increasingly multi-layered identity positions depending on the particular circumstances of their lives. As van Bochove and Engbersen (van Bochove & Engbersen, 2015) highlight through their research in Rotterdam, such ‘expats’ may identify as cosmopolitans in some spaces or moments, as nationals in others, or as what they call ‘wannabe’ locals.

A crucial dimension of identity struggles for many ‘trailing spouses’ concerns their professional identity, which is challenged by disruptions to their careers and common difficulties securing employment abroad. A lack of career continuity can lead to a diminished sense of self-worth, particularly for highly educated professionals for whom careers form a central component of identity (Kupka & Cathro, 2007). Many spouses thus seek to reinvent themselves professionally. Those with stronger self-directed capacities or entrepreneurial dispositions are often better equipped to reconstruct their professional pathways (Kanstrén, 2021). The narratives that ‘trailing spouses’ adopt regarding their professional identities – whether framed as threatened, lost or emerging – are intimately bound up with how successful these readjustments are, especially in their own self-understanding. Those unable to refashion themselves often drift towards resentment or resignation (McNulty & Moeller, 2018), becoming

're-domesticated' despite their previous ambitions or feminist orientations toward equal career partnerships (Elitok & Nawyn, 2023; Fechter, 2007).

Many 'trailing spouses' reorient their career ambitions by creating new paths through self-employment or entrepreneurial ventures (McNulty & Moeller, 2018). This is enabled by the relative economic security that comes with marriage to a highly skilled professional with a well-paid position (Özcan, 2011). Yet unlike the type of 'expatpreneurs' (Vance et al., 2016) who move abroad with an intention to establish businesses, 'trailing spouses' typically turn to self-employment or entrepreneurship out of necessity after failing to secure paid work post-relocation. They often have no prior entrepreneurial experience and develop their own business ideas alongside their everyday lives (Stone & Stubbs, 2007), and – especially among women – as part of their intense efforts to build new social support networks in their new homes (Kupka & Cathro, 2007). In part because of this often peripatetic pathway into self-employment and entrepreneurial activity, such spouses tend to hold multiple co-existing motivations for pursuing these careers (Selmer et al., 2018).

As Stone and Stubbs (2007) highlight, the businesses such migrants create often provide services catering to other 'expats' in the same location. This is consistent with broader research on migration industries and the varied labour of migration intermediaries (Cohen et al., 2022; Jones & Sha, 2020), which shows that more settled migrants frequently become involved in commodified migration industries themselves (Žabko et al., 2017). Established migrants, including 'trailing spouses', often provide services that ease newcomers' adaptation (Garapich, 2008), such as support for rebuilding social life in the new setting (e.g. Spaan, 1994). Especially when provided digitally, such coaching or consulting services offer a low-barrier, low upfront-cost arena for 'trailing spouses' seeking new professional pathways. Yet despite the rapid growth of such digital services, research attention has so far been scant (Harvey et al., 2018).

Researchers have, however, begun to systematically examine not only the types of entrepreneurial activities migrants take up and the pathways through which they do so, but also the impacts of such activities on their overall adjustment. This work forms part of a broader emerging field on the impacts of entrepreneurialism on individuals' well-being (Wiklund et al., 2019). Although the benefits accruing to entrepreneurs differ depending on whether they transition into self-employment out of necessity or choice, the transition generally proves beneficial to mental health (Nikolova, 2019). Research on specifically 'expats', using a long-term eudaimonic concept of happiness and well-being (Kerulis et al., 2019) shows that developing entrepreneurial activities can counteract relocation-related challenges by generating new purpose, fostering personal growth, and increasing self-acceptance. Kanstrén and Mäkelä (2022) similarly highlight how 'trailing spouses' often regain self-esteem and a sense of agency, mitigating feelings of dependency and alienation. Because entrepreneurial activities typically require greater interaction with others, including members of the local society, they also help reduce feelings of isolation. However, these benefits may be less pronounced for spouses – such as those in this chapter – who engage in the entrepreneurialism, or more appropriately micro-preneurialism (Nicholson, 2001), primarily within the digital worlds.

11.3 The ‘Expat’ Copenhagen Bloggers as Urban Translators

This book chapter draws on the data originally collected for an article examining how migrants present Copenhagen urbanism to other newcomers and to an international audience through their digital content (Fogelman & Christensen, 2022). We focused on two ‘expat’, full-time bloggers because for a number of years they had featured on lists of the most prominent English-language Copenhagen bloggers.⁶ Since their blogging can be conceptualised as a work of translation, they represent two particularly successful digital migrant translators of Copenhagen at the time. As sociological theory of translation insists, presenting and representing ideas and places across different contexts involves more than just simple reproduction. Because the translator must select, assemble and structure what to present and how (Tymoczko & Gentzler, 2002), translation necessarily entails interpretation. This makes any translation a productive and performative practice that highlights the agency of translators – in our case, the two bloggers (Risku, 2002; Sapiro, 2014). Throughout this chapter, the bloggers are referred to by their blog names, The Dejlige Days⁷ (DD) and Oregon Girl around the World (OG). Both are middle-aged, white, anglophone women from the UK and USA, respectively, who at the time of data collection had resided in Copenhagen with their families for eight and 7 years after relocating due to their husbands’ professional careers.⁸

In my contribution to this book, I examine how their becoming urban translators relates to their migrant experience as specifically ‘trailing spouses’. To do so, I draw primarily on the individual semi-structured interviews I conducted with them in early 2021, supplemented by posts and images shared on their blogs and Instagram accounts relating to Copenhagen between January 2017 and July 2020. Each interview lasted between one and 2 h and included questions not only about the thematic development of their blogs but also about the broader context of their turn to blogging, the role blogging played in their professional and personal pathways, and their reflections on their blogging careers. Interview transcripts underwent thematic analysis based on the coding categories aligned with the analytical focus of this chapter.

⁶ These were lists in 2017 and in the following years of the top five to ten most interesting or influential bloggers on fora such as *spottedbylocals.dk* or *expatfocus.dk*.

⁷ The expression mixes Danish word for lovely (*dejlige*) with English *days lovely*.

⁸ DD had lived in Copenhagen for a total of 11 years, but after the first 2 years they lived in Berlin for 2 years due to her husband’s subsequent relocation.

11.4 'Expat' Copenhagen Blogging: Adjustment, Identity and the City

11.4.1 *Between Blogging as Self-Integration and Livelihood*

For both DD and OG, the pathway toward becoming full-time, successful 'expat' micro-entrepreneurs of the Copenhagen blogosphere emerged rather organically. Like many migrants finding themselves far from their familiar social circles, they initially shared updates about their new lives abroad with family and friends through emails and Facebook posts. As these modes of communication began to feel limiting – particularly in relation to their growing interest in more systematic and in-depth reflections on the socio-culturally novel environment they were encountering – they established their own blogs and, eventually, Instagram accounts. Blogging became a way of, as OG put it, 'working through those differences' between the two places. This therapeutic aspect of blogging about local culture and everyday life is unsurprising, given that migration involves a disruption of habitus that can be mitigated through self-reflexivity. For DD, the curative dimensions of blogging became especially significant during her brief relocation from Copenhagen to Berlin. As a new and isolated mother in a new city, writing about Berlin's places appropriate for other 'expat' mothers quickly became both intentional and healing: it provided her not only with 'a reason to get out of the house, do things', but also – through the appreciation she received from her readers – a renewed sense of wider purpose.

The positive psychological effects of blogging hinge strongly on its social dimensions. DD's reflection that if she 'made one person feel less isolated, less alone' in the city, she had achieved something meaningful, illustrates this point clearly. Positive feedback from followers, and extended engagement with them, played an important role for both bloggers, both socially and professionally. Most of their followers were fellow British or North American 'expats' living in Copenhagen and in need of translations of the city and its culture. Others were, more generally, 'third culture' people who, as OG described them, 'have had experience of otherness or experience of being an outsider'. OG's and DD's accounts resonated with these audiences, and the bloggers often created content in response to specific requests from the followers. This interactional dynamic highlights the social and almost collective nature of their urban blogging practices. In several cases, followers also became their closest social networks.

Turning to blogging as a means of at once social and professional integration was especially OG's intention. This became clear after she realised that the 'expat' parent community at her children's international school failed to provide the kinds of connections that would speak to her interests. She also became quickly aware of the challenges of forming connections with Danes. Through her 'meet the locals' series she thus approached blogging as a 'door opener' to making such connections. A handful of the like-minded Danish professionals she interviewed became supportive acquaintances – mostly in professional terms. Still, she did not succeed in achieving her larger goal for the series, namely to integrate professionally and socially into the

local creative community, even if the interviews did help her better orient herself within Copenhagen's professional and cultural landscape.

Both OG and DD assumed that building stronger local networks would be pathways into other professional fora and paid assignments, such as writing for online city magazines. Given their relatively limited success in local networking, however, it was ultimately their blogs and social media accounts that proved more productive in this regard. As DD explained when reflecting briefly on the livelihood aspects of her blogging:

I tend to get income more because of the profile that the blog gives me. So I get hired for writing jobs on the back of the fact that, hmm, my blog is almost like a portfolio, so if I pitch to a newspaper an article on sustainability project in Copenhagen, then they can see 'Oh, she's writing on this'.

This role of the blog as a publicly visible profile of a Copenhagen expert was crucial for how the bloggers' content developed thematically over time. DD's content, for example, shifted during the period of this research toward in-demand introductions for her audience to both practical and socio-culturally specific aspects of settling in Copenhagen, such as the importance of design culture and its public space accessibility. At the same time, she shaped her profile through her own long-standing interest in environmental sustainability, for instance by sharing tips about places and institutions in the city that supported a more non-consumerist everyday life. Crafting such a distinct profile enabled her to pursue additional micro-entrepreneurial, income-generating activities that capitalised on her urban expertise, including starting a small consultancy offering personalised relocation assistance for other, primarily British 'trailing spouses' in Copenhagen. Before it could reach a livelihood-sustaining scale, however, the consultancy was negatively affected by Brexit.

Migrants' micro-entrepreneurial strategies generally face considerable challenges in generating a more sustained, regular income, something that especially DD was interested in pursuing. One common strategy, among at least some digital freelancers, is to aggressively monetise their online accounts. Both DD and OG, however, felt uncomfortable after their initial forays into monetisation because of the perceived loss of ownership, authenticity and alignment between their digital content and their personal interests and values. DD, for example, maintained only a highly selective set of commercial relationships with a few small businesses in the city that closely matched the urban themes she wanted to write about. The selective approach is also, of course, enabled by the privilege inherent in their position as 'trailing spouses', who were not economically dependent on their blogging. Both bloggers emphasised that despite some professionalisation and limited income-generation orientation, blogging remained just as much a tool of self-expression and exploration as it had been at the outset. As DD, who highlighted her need for writing to be personally fulfilling, summarised: 'I still write for myself as well, not just for my readers'. She did not, therefore, abandon writing critical entries on urban issues such as gentrification, even though she, like OG, was acutely aware of the need to balance such topics with sufficient material that would appeal to her followers. Crucially, then, their urban

blogging practice did not neatly develop from a tool of self-help and social integration into a clear avenue of professional reinvention and a new livelihood. Rather, it continued to be driven by multiple, overlapping rationales and motivations.

11.4.2 Blogging and Identity Reworking

Meanwhile, blogging had also become both a tool and a central site for the 'identity reworking of these 'trailing spouses'. First and foremost, as noted above, OG and DD used blogging to refashion their professional identities after the move. In doing so, they drew on their previous professional skills and personal interests, as is common among other 'expat' spouses turning to entrepreneurial or self-employment strategies (Stone & Stubbs, 2007). Having moved several times within the US because of her husband's job, OG had already become accustomed to professional reinvention, having previously run small businesses in areas such as wedding invitation design and event planning. This experience had smoothed her professional adaptation in Copenhagen as a blogger, as the work drew on, and consolidated, her competence in art history and her interest in writing. For DD, becoming a blogger similarly solidified her professional identity as a writer. She understood blogging as an extension of her pre-relocation career as head of communications for an environmental non-profit committed to conveying accurate and reliable information. Unlike OG, she narrated her development as a writer more firmly not as a rupture but as in fact something emerging directly from her childhood, when she created her own newsletter.

At the same time, the successful establishment of OG and DD as urban translators relied on more than their interest or prior expertise in writing and communication. It also required an ability to process their own experience of otherness as migrants in a socially, culturally and linguistically unfamiliar milieu, and then to translate that process of adjustment effectively for others. Certainly not all migrants allow themselves to fully experience this sense of personal dislocation, some may lack the reflective skills required to handle it, or simply have little interest in being transformed through it. This is so despite the need for the painful work of processing the new environment if one is to cultivate a cosmopolitan sensibility (Spiegel, 2018b), a quality that the term 'expat' itself often connotes (Cangia & Zittoun, 2018). The bloggers' cosmopolitan sensibilities and identifications, characterised by openness toward and ease with cultural and place-based diversity and a worldly sense of belonging, became assets they could capitalise on vis-à-vis their audience. Their cosmopolitanism was further reinforced by the audience that expected it and that interpellated them precisely as experts with such dispositions. This was especially evident in DD's work with relocation clients, mostly 'trailing spouses' of British professionals. Many of these clients lacked cosmopolitan dispositions or cultural curiosity, and instead preferred to rely on the safe consumption of bloggers' advice.

At the same time, the increasing professionalisation of the bloggers' translation work in the form of their blogs also made them, in a sense, professional 'expats' or

migrants.⁹ Reflecting especially on her work with recently relocated migrants, DD highlighted how central her identity as a migrant, rather than simply a local, had been to her professional remaking:

I often get clients whose husbands' companies are paying for relocation services, but they also book me for a few hours to ask specific questions. Often these relocation people are Danish so they don't have in their minds 'Oh they don't know that and this etc.' It's understandable. But if you [yourself] come from a different country, you remember 'I always struggled with this or that, I didn't know how this worked'. You've got to experience it.

Still, it is a very specific migrant identity that is both required of, and further reified through being a blogger-translator: that of an already somewhat settled migrant that is sufficiently familiar with the new place, an almost-local. Their more reflexive blog pieces, in particular, reflected their ongoing process of 'becoming local' (Buhr, 2018), that is becoming someone who understands local cultural differences and the details of everyday urban life in depth. Both, however, also referred to themselves as not fully or exclusively local, but rather as 'expats'. Despite being aware of the problematic, racialised dimensions implicit in the immigrant/'expat' distinction, OG stressed that the label 'expat' continued to work for her even after many years in Copenhagen, since:

For me it's always about intent and about how, how, I don't intend to migrate to Denmark, I don't intend to make a life, I'm not retiring here forever. There's still parentheses on our experience here, the parentheses keep getting pushed out but to me it's still temporary.

But while OG failed to reflect on the privilege inherent in such intentionality, or the privilege of her 'expat' whiteness in shaping her Copenhagen experience, DD reflected on it at length, unprompted. She was not only concerned about the tightening of immigration and settlement rules in Denmark that primarily target refugees and poorer migrants, most of them racialised. She also highlighted how her own white, English 'expat'-ness shaped her experiences in Copenhagen and thus the limits of her own translations of the city:

What I would love to see and I don't think it exists is a blog written by like an Indian person living here, like an Indian woman, because I know their experiences are so different for a lot of different reasons...that would be a very interesting perspective to have because a lot of the challenges that they encounter are very different from the challenges that white Europeans encounter.

Finally, relying on translations that come from a 'personal space', as OG described it, activated another crucial aspect of the bloggers' identity: their national background. Both bloggers explicitly referenced their specific national contexts as a comparative framework in their blog discussions of various elements of Copenhagen urbanism. OG, for example, juxtaposed Copenhagen's strong cycling culture and infrastructure in the city with the commonplace car-centricity of US cities, while DD highlighted the accessibility of high-quality public space in the Danish capital in contrast to its rampant privatisation in the cities in the UK. This regular referencing

⁹ I would like to thank Anna Spiegel for this insight.

of their compatriots to their blogs, as noted above. As some of those followers also became social acquaintances, the bloggers' social circle became, in part, re-nationalised. Despite their strong sense of cosmopolitan, migrancy-driven localness, their national belonging thus remained salient, co-producing the kind of 'composite' identity typical for many 'expats' (van Bochove & Engbersen, 2015; for contrast see Fechter, 2007).

11.4.3 *Blogging for Integration in and Through the City*

At the same time, it was the city itself that, in a mutually reinforcing way, most decisively enabled and shaped the bloggers' particular forms of professional and socio-cultural reinvention. This was due both to generic aspects of city-based migrant adjustment and to conditions related specifically to Copenhagen. Regarding the former, geographers have long stressed the importance of local conditions in migrant settlement processes. More recent urban research has further argued convincingly that migrant adaptation not only unfolds in a particular place but also *through* that place, or city. Namely, it is through becoming acquainted with the everyday city in its mundane aspects, through embodied familiarity, that migrants integrate, becoming (like the) locals (Buhr, 2018). This entails gaining knowledge of the aspects of the city that non-locals typically do not hold, including about the socio-material resources and infrastructures available to residents and how to access them (Buhr & McGarigle, 2017). To become successful Copenhagen bloggers, DD and OG had to acquire such 'urban know-how' (Buhr, 2018, p. 315).

For both OG and DD, this acquisition was closely tied to the intimate connection to the city that is most easily developed through walking. For OG, it was especially the pandemic, combined with following the daily goal of 10.000 steps, that launched her into extensive, foot-based explorations of her own and other neighbourhoods. The aimlessness of some of these walks yielded small-scale, intimate discoveries about the city, related often to little-known public artworks and their connections to Copenhagen's history. For DD, walking had long been a habitual way of navigating the relatively compact city and the various neighbourhoods she and her family had lived in. She credited this practice almost entirely with her intimate knowledge of the city:

I know the city really well because I walk. I walk most places, really a lot, with my eyes open. And of course other people have their eyes open. But you know what I mean. They have their bubble. But I am looking for things. And I'm not shy. If I see something interesting, I go up and ask 'Hey what's going on here, what's this about', and that's how I often find interesting stories.

Some of the bloggers' digital content featured classic, well-known themes of Copenhagen urbanism – such as architectural landmarks, harbour life, and other elements familiar from the city's promotional imaginary – or practical information useful to other migrants who, as research has shown, regularly rely on a range of digital

tools when navigating the city (see e.g. Buhr et al., 2024). Other posts, however, offered insights into the bloggers' discoveries and personal interpretations of the city. Although DD acknowledged that not all 'expats' would necessarily be interested in finding 'their own Copenhagen', both bloggers nonetheless both hoped to inspire curiosity about the city among their followers. As OG reflected on her approach to blogging:

I want you to look a little deeper, not just the pretty houses along the Nyhavn, I want you to actually think and engage with what you're seeing....I want you to feel that, that I love that, those like secret little things that you walk by but you don't really know. Ask what it is. So sharing those things, looking a little deeper, and yeah, seeing it differently.

What is additionally clear in this excerpt is OG's emotional investment in, and sense of attachment to the city – an attachment developed through her immersion in Copenhagen and the expertise she gained about it. Besides showcasing and encouraging the urban resourcefulness (Buhr et al., 2024) of these 'trailing spouses', the blogs also performed – and potentially deepened – the bloggers' own sense of belonging to and in the city. OG articulated this explicitly in our interview, stressing: 'I'll never be Danish. But I am a Copenhagener. I think I am. I mean, almost 7 years gives me a bit of credibility'. In claiming this local-like expertise, she appealed to the length of her stay as justification for the role. But she also genuinely perceived herself as having become a local. This is not unusual in that urban belonging tends to emerge far more readily by migrants than a sense of belonging to a new nation. This is particularly the case in countries such as Denmark, countries without a long history of immigration and where a heavily ethnic understanding of national identity persists. For 'expats' and especially for 'trailing spouses' who often think of their residence as temporary, this contrast is even more pronounced. For them, adopting a local urban identity may be especially attractive if the city has at least some multicultural feel or, as in Copenhagen's case, possesses a strong global appeal.

The current coolness of Copenhagen is crucial here. It underscores that beyond the general importance of the city to the bloggers' reinvention of themselves as digital urban translators, the particularity of Copenhagen played a key role in their post-relocation adaptation. Namely, their blogging success unfolded within a broader global context in which Copenhagen had become seen as the paragon of much-touted urban liveability and sustainability. Such Copen-filia¹⁰ has been evidenced by the city's persistent top rankings over the past decade in numerous global liveability indices, as well as by the successful international export of its urban planning and design approaches, centred on human-scale and sustainable urbanism. This heightened global interest in Copenhagen provided an eager audience for informal, less curated and more personal digital translations of life in the city and Denmark more broadly – exactly the kind of content DD and OG provided. Through blog content that echoed the themes of Copenhagen's image as one of the world's leading liveable and green cities (Anderberg & Clark, 2013), they contributed, in turn, to reinforcing this image of the city.

¹⁰ The term is taken from <https://andrewlainton.wordpress.com/2012/04/10/copen-filia-why-urbanists-metros-justifiably-sometimes-go-ga-ga-over-copenhagen/> accessed June 3, 2024.

11.5 Conclusion

The two 'expat' spouses-turned-successful bloggers examined in this chapter are not necessarily the most typical 'trailing spouses', even among those who are highly educated and professionally active prior to relocation. Yet the pathways of social and professional post-relocation adaptation traced here resonate strongly with existing research (e.g. Kanstrén & Mäkelä, 2022; Kerulis et al., 2019; McNulty & Moeller, 2018; Selmer et al., 2018; Stone & Stubbs, 2007). They underline in particular how deeply intertwined migrants' social adaptation is with their professional adjustment, especially when the latter involves reinvention. The complex interplay likely applies more broadly for many migrants arriving in a new country without ready access to employment. However, due to the centrality of digital space and social media in the lives of the two 'expat' migrants examined here, this intertwining of personal, social and professional aspects is especially pronounced, and notably fluid. This fluidity is itself partly linked to the massive commercialisation of social media over the past decade, which has transformed them into key nodes of 'micro-competitive platform capitalism' (Meged & Christensen, 2017, p. 203).

Yet as I have emphasised, despite the professionalisation of these migrants' blogging practices and their occasional reliance on blogging for income, their initial motivations – blogging as a tool for and of expression of personal experiences and reflections – remained equally relevant. This is due in part to the fact that blogging had for both migrants become a key site and practice of identity re-making following their move to Copenhagen. Blogging first ushered in or reinforced their identities as skilled writers, bringing a renewed sense of purpose and personal fulfilment. But because of the blogs' focus on the city, blogging especially fostered these 'trailing spouses' identity as 'expat' Copenhageners, enabling them to showcase and simultaneously deepen their emerging sense of localness and belonging in and to the city. Blogging also sustained the migrant part of their multi-layered identities, not only by facilitating social connections with migrant blog-readers but even more profoundly through the very practice of translating the city to the migrant and non-Danish audiences. Finally, I have highlighted the dual role of the urban in their post-relocation adaptation. It did so because migrant integration always takes place in and through the city. At the same time, it was Copenhagen's specific global reputation as the leading site of liveable and sustainable urbanism that created especially favourable conditions for these migrants' self-reinvention as successful urban bloggers.

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Chapter 12

Conclusion: Reassembling Privilege in the Migration Context



Hila Zaban and Franz Buhr

12.1 The Analytical Weight of Privilege

The primary objective of this volume has been to move beyond the descriptive allure of the ‘expat’ lifestyle to establish privilege as a rigorous analytical lens in migration studies. For too long, the field has been bifurcated between the study of ‘vulnerable migrants’ and ‘mobile professionals’ or ‘lifestyle migrants’ – a division that often obscures the underlying mechanisms through which power and inequality are reproduced. By titling this work ‘Privilege in Migration’ rather than ‘privileged migration’, we have sought to shift from studying a static category of elite individuals to using privilege as a contextual and relational lens. This shift is essential because, while migration literature has traditionally focused on the pathology of the vulnerable – those compelled to move by necessity – it has frequently treated the more fortunate as a separate species of human mobility.

Even within the sub-field of lifestyle migration, pioneered by scholars such as Benson and O’Reilly (2009, 2016, 2018), research has tended to remain somewhat siloed, focusing on affluent North-to-South moves. This volume breaks that silo by demonstrating that privilege is not a binary state but a spectrum of ‘gradients’. These gradients are not reserved for the super-rich; they are found in a diverse array of mobilities, including those often miscategorised as ‘pressured’ or purely ‘middle-class’. By focusing on ‘privilege in migration’, we include a much broader range of actors who possess certain advantages – be they legal, cultural, economic, national, or racial – that allow them to orchestrate their moves with a degree of agency and choice that remains invisible when we only look at the most marginalised.

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It is also important to clarify the spatial dimension of this volume. While the ‘urban context’ features prominently in our title and in specific sections of the book, it is not the sole focus of every chapter. Rather, the urban is presented as a crucial site where privilege is often materialised, performed, and contested. In chapters dealing with transnational gentrification or the ‘expat bubble’ – in Lisbon, São Paulo, Southern Spain, or Copenhagen – the city is an active participant in the reproduction of privilege. However, in other cases, the focus remains on the biographical, the institutional, or the temporal aspects of the move itself. The contribution of this book is thus to show how privilege operates across different scales – from the intimate narratives of globally mobile childhoods and the individualised ‘privilege of choice’ exercised by digital nomads, to the macro-structures of global tech or corporate labour markets.

Ultimately, the analytical weight of privilege lies in its relationality. It is not an immutable trait but a context-dependent resource that shifts according to spatial, social, and temporal coordinates. As the various chapters illustrate, privilege is often ‘done’ rather than ‘had’; it is an active social practice and a performance that must be continuously negotiated against local racial hierarchies, professional settings, and global crises. This is evident in the way Japanese migrants in Malaysia navigate regional hierarchies to be ‘the same but respected’, or how European migrants in São Paulo utilise their status as a defensive resource against stagnation at home. Whether manifested as the ‘work’ of elite cosmopolitanism by corporates, the ‘privilege of choice’ for digital nomads, or the frictionless ‘zoom through border controls’ of IT professionals, these ‘gradients’ provide a more nuanced, intersectional, and globally representative understanding of the contemporary migration experience. Such relational and context-dependent perception of privilege forces a reassessment of what it means to be a ‘migrant’ in a world where the ease of movement remains a primary marker of global inequality.

12.2 Synthesis: Diversifying the Gaze and Mapping the Gradients

The synthesis of this volume’s contributions lies in its ability to map the ‘gradients’ of privilege across varied geographies and demographics, moving away from a North-to-South trajectory toward a more complex global mapping. Each chapter contributes to the volume’s main purpose by illustrating a specific manifestation of how advantage is leveraged, negotiated, or maintained.

In the first part, we focus on the conceptualisation and representation of these advantages. Sophie Cranston (2026, Chapter 2) explores privilege across the life course, using the narratives of UK university students who grew up moving abroad, framing their privilege as an intergenerational ‘invisible backpack’ of mobility capital. Applying a framework of ‘having’ (possessing resources), ‘being’ (holding identity markers), and ‘doing’ (actively reproducing status), she demonstrates how

gradients of privilege are managed across different settings. Her work reveals that while these students viewed their mobile childhoods as ‘normal’ within international school circles, the label of privilege becomes ‘awkward’ in the UK university system, where their backgrounds are perceived as an unearned advantage. Privilege is thus shown to be fundamentally relational and contextual; its narration shifts through comparisons with others and across spaces, as students articulate their status differently depending on whether they are with similar peers or within the wider university environment.

This is followed by KC H, Anna Triandafyllidou, and Nick Dreher (2026, Chapter 3), who utilise the phenomenon of digital nomadism to propose an analytical framework where privilege is viewed as fluid and ‘perennially in the making’ rather than a fixed category. They illustrate how gradients of privilege are produced through a dynamic interplay between macro-structures, such as the global neoliberal economy, and micro-level individual agency. By navigating meso-level ‘mobility regimes’ – encompassing visa systems, tax arrangements, and newly proliferating private intermediary agencies – digital nomads leverage their digital literacy and strong passport power to actualise a ‘privilege of choice’. Their advantage is negotiated, conditioned, and materialised at the interface between individual capability and these structural regimes, revealing how privilege is both relational and intersectional as it fluctuates across different geographical and regulatory contexts.

The next chapter, by Raquel Huete and Alejandro Mantecón (2026, Chapter 4), connects privileged mobilities with debates on social cohesion and collective identity in receiving societies, integrating material and immaterial dimensions to unpack how advantage is maintained. They illustrate this through four distinct but interconnected situations: the conceptual questioning of the term ‘lifestyle migration’ as a category that can obscure power relations; the implications of ‘digital nomadism’ as a way of life that leverages high mobility capital; the redefinition of tourism as a social problem in the face of local conflict; and the consequences of Brexit for British residents in southern Spain. By synthesising these cases, they demonstrate that privilege involves a continuous political struggle to legitimise one’s interests within unstable power systems, showing that even ‘choice-led’ moves are deeply embedded in the contested and often precarious dynamics of urban and social life.

This part concludes with Hiroki Igarashi (2026, Chapter 5), whose study challenges the assumption that North–South migration is inherently linked to whiteness. By exploring the relocation of affluent Japanese families to Malaysia, he illustrates the concept of ‘middling privilege’ – a medium level of advantage across intersecting markers such as race and class. These migrants navigate global hierarchies to maintain social standing, leveraging a local ‘pro-Japanese’ discourse to position themselves as ‘the same but respected’ superior Asians. Their advantage is maintained through a strategic geographic choice; Malaysia is perceived as a ‘comfortable’ destination compared to Western Anglophone countries, where the risk of racial exclusion is higher. This highlights how privilege is relational and context-dependent, allowing migrants to secure an elite lifestyle while avoiding the racial frictions encountered in other global contexts.

The second part of the book delves deeper into the ‘gradients’ – the subtle shifts and ‘middling’ positions that challenge the elite-vulnerable binary. This conceptualisation frames privilege not as a fixed attribute, but as a relational and context-dependent resource that migrants must actively negotiate and ‘perform’ as they move across different social and geographical scales.

Nir Cohen and Steven J. Gold (2026, Chapter 6) explore ‘gradients’ of privilege through a North–North migration flow, specifically centring on Israeli IT professionals relocating to the United States and the Netherlands. This demography leverages high levels of cultural capital – institutionalised through prestigious degrees, embodied through high-tech professional experience, travel experience and English fluency, and objectified via foreign citizenship – to facilitate an ‘agile and painless’ entry into competitive labour and housing markets. Their advantage is maintained through geographic arbitrage, where migrants strategically utilise privileged endowments to maximise earning power and professional selectivity. While this allows them to ‘zoom’ through border control with significant agency, the authors call for studies that move beyond celebrating economic contributions or pathologising migrants as a source of harm. Instead, they advocate for a balanced, ‘non-judgemental’ analysis that listens to their narratives to understand their ‘inherently complex mobility’.

Anna Spiegel (2026, Chapter 7) shifts the analytical lens to the ‘negotiated-order’ of privilege created by the institutional practices of Multinational Corporations. She examines ‘gradients’ of privilege through German and American managerial professionals in China and the United States, a demography whose status is explicitly tied to corporate mobility policies. Spiegel argues that global mobility regimes position mobile staff in uniquely privileged, yet temporary, positions during their assignments. Privilege is thus revealed as a social practice that managers ‘do’ – oscillating between ‘embracing’ power as disruptive, King Kong-like figures in the workplace and ‘rejecting’ such status in their everyday lives to maintain a sense of normality. Ultimately, these advantages are leveraged through organisational structures but maintained through a paradoxical process of both claiming and rejecting powerful identities.

This is followed by Helena Hof (2026, Chapter 8), who provides a ‘differentiated picture of gradients of privilege’ by examining university-educated millennials relocating to São Paulo, Brazil, for professional or other reasons. She clarifies the concept of ‘transnational human capital’ – a specific form of capital comprising foreign-language skills, international experience, and cross-cultural competencies that enables individuals to act in social fields beyond their nation-state. Hof demonstrates that privilege is relational and context-dependent, revealing a gradient of geoarbitrage where middle-class migrants with strong passports but limited work experience choose São Paulo for its accessibility, whereas upper-middle-class migrants from the Global South are forced to rationalise Brazil as a ‘second-best’ option due to ‘weaker’ citizenship capital. Their advantage, Hof explains, is eroded by local factors, such as the critical requirement for Portuguese proficiency and a lack of local networks, which fuel a pervasive ‘fear of failure’ about their professional success.

Finally, Hila Zaban (2026, Chapter 9) explores ‘gradients’ of privilege by introducing the framework of ‘temporal privilege-manoeuvring’ through a study of Jewish migrants from high-income English-speaking countries – the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada – relocating to Israel. Her research on Jewish migration shows that privilege is the ability to manoeuvre through a crisis, illustrated by how these migrants leveraged their national birthright as Jews to legally enter Israel as migrants even when global borders were tightly closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Zaban illustrates that privilege is not only spatial but also temporal; their advantage was negotiated and maintained by using timing as a strategic form of ‘geoarbitrage’ to achieve aspirations amidst a global standstill. Ultimately, this reveals a gradient where previously ‘transparent’ privileges become powerful catalysts during collective watershed events, demonstrating how privilege is fundamentally context-dependent and strategically applied to maximise life outcomes.

The final part of the book explores the material and digital ways in which privilege is emplaced and negotiated within local urban settings. Franz Buhr (2026, Chapter 10) explores ‘gradients’ of privilege through migrant entrepreneurship in Lisbon, where ‘expat-preneurs’ from the Global North and South leverage cultural capital, citizenship, and whiteness. Actively sought by destinations like Portugal, their businesses – such as speciality coffee shops and galleries – give urban shape to their relative status. These locales function as infrastructure that facilitates the circulation and consumption of other wealthy, mobile individuals like them, reinforcing an exclusive urbanity. Their advantage is maintained and negotiated by embedding privilege into the urban fabric, revealing that economic and lifestyle factors are inextricably linked rather than separate realms. As Buhr demonstrates, these commercial activities contribute to transnational gentrification, demonstrating that privilege consists of manifold gradients that are always relational and relationally practised.

Lastly, Tatiana Fogelman (2026, Chapter 11) examines ‘gradients’ of privilege through the experiences of highly educated, Western ‘trailing spouses’ in Copenhagen. This demographic group occupies a ‘relative’ and ‘precarious’ position: while they benefit from the economic security of a partner’s relocation, they often experience social and professional marginalisation within the ‘cliquish’ Danish context. Advantage is leveraged by refashioning themselves as ‘urban translators’, using digital blogging to commodify their cosmopolitan sensibilities and ‘urban know-how’. By negotiating multi-layered identities as both temporary ‘expats’ and ‘local-like’ experts, they maintain status through ‘micro-entrepreneurialism’ that capitalises on Copenhagen’s global renown. Ultimately, Fogelman illustrates that privilege is a tool for ‘self-integration’, enabling these migrants to navigate a specific gradient in which elite status and personal dislocation coexist.

Bringing these diverse case studies together reveals privilege not as a fixed attribute, but as a relational resource perennially ‘in the making’. Mapping these ‘gradients’ – from the ‘privilege of choice’ exercised by digital nomads to the ‘manoeuvring’ of privilege during global crises – demonstrates that advantage is a spectrum to be strategically leveraged and materially maintained. Whether through the professional ‘zooming’ of tech experts, the production of exclusive urbanities by

expat-preneurs, or the identity refashioning of expatriate bloggers acting as urban translators, privilege acts as a selective lubricant that smooths migratory paths while others remain blocked. The chapters in this volume illustrate that privilege is an active social practice, continually ‘done’ and negotiated to sustain status within the unequal and often precarious geographies of modern mobility.

12.3 Theoretical Anchoring: Privilege as Capital, Practice, and Regime

To move privilege beyond a descriptive label, this volume anchors its analysis in several key theoretical frameworks that bridge the gap between structural forces and individual agency. A primary theoretical thread is the adaptation of Bourdieusian concepts – specifically capital and habitus – to the context of mobility. Cranston (2026, Chapter 2) frames privilege through life-course narratives of having, being, and doing privilege, while also conceptualising an intergenerational ‘invisible backpack’ of mobility capital (McIntosh, 1988). Similarly, Cohen and Gold (2026, Chapter 6) employ institutionalised, embodied, and objectified forms of cultural capital to explain how IT professionals ‘zoom’ through borders. Hof (2026, Chapter 8) complicates coloniality and class by introducing ‘transnational human capital’ (Nohl et al., 2014) and a ‘classed confidence’ – or habitus (Nowicka, 2015) – that enables millennials to pursue professional careers in São Paulo, even as they navigate the potential devaluation of these resources in a local context. Ultimately, these authors illustrate that privilege is not merely a static attribute one ‘has’, but a dynamic set of resources that must be strategically converted and applied across different social fields.

This focus on capital is inextricably linked to the tension between structural forces and individual agency. Migrants’ agency is always situated within, and constrained by, broader systems of neoliberalism, postcoloniality, and globalisation that shape the uneven landscapes of global mobility. This structure–agency tension appears in this volume particularly through the lens of work and employment, as migrants often need to navigate new professional landscapes. KC, Triandafyllidou, and Dreher (2026, Chapter 3) conceptualise privilege as fluid and ‘perennially in the making’, reframing the relationship between privilege and precarity by examining the operations of power within macro-level neoliberal economies and meso-level ‘mobility regimes’. For many subjects, employment serves as the primary structural anchor of their privilege. This is most evident for the corporate managers in Spiegel (2026, Chapter 7), whose status is explicitly tied to the global mobility policies of Multinational Corporations. Spiegel utilises a ‘negotiated-order’ approach (Strauss, 1978, 1993) to argue that privilege is a social practice that migrants ‘do’ – oscillating between ‘embracing’ power as disruptive figures in the workplace and ‘rejecting’ elite status in their everyday lives to maintain a sense of normality.

Work also emerges as a vital site for agency and the maintenance of advantage when structural support is absent or precarious. Fogelman (2026, Chapter 11) illustrates how ‘trailing spouses’ in Copenhagen engage in ‘micro-entrepreneurialism’ as ‘urban translators’, where their professional adjustment is deeply intertwined with their social adaptation as they refashion their identities through digital blogging. Likewise, Buhr (2026, Chapter 10) shows how ‘expat-preneurs’ in Lisbon leverage their cultural and economic capital to create exclusive urban infrastructures that facilitate wealthy, mobile lifestyles. These cases indicate that employment is not merely an economic activity, but a performative practice used to navigate social and professional hierarchies. This political dimension of work is further unpacked by Huete and Mantecón (2026, Chapter 4), who suggest that the ‘entrepreneurial self’ of digital nomads acts as a strategy for legitimacy; by working remotely and ensuring non-competition in local labour markets, these migrants use their professional status to facilitate their acceptance and minimise social friction in the receiving society.

A key contribution of this volume is the development of the ‘arbitrage’ perspective, which encompasses both spatial and temporal dimensions. Cohen and Gold (2026, Chapter 6) and Hof (2026, Chapter 8) utilise ‘geographic arbitrage’ (Hayes, 2014) to show how migrants strategically leverage their endowments to maximise life outcomes, such as choosing ‘second-best’ destinations for career development. KC, Triandafyllidou, and Dreher (2026, Chapter 3) similarly deploy the concept of geoarbitrage (Holleran, 2022) to describe how digital nomads leverage the disparity between high-income professional environments and lower-cost living destinations to actualise their lifestyle aspirations. This is significantly expanded by Zaban (2026, Chapter 9), who introduces ‘temporal privilege-manoeuvring’ to show how the strategic use of collective ‘watershed moments’ allows privileged actors to move when others are immobilised. This temporal aspect is further linked to the ‘work’ of migration, as the ability to control one’s timing is a powerful marker of agency, which is often crucial for identity change in mobile lives (Slobodin, 2019).

The concept of ‘middling privilege’ further nuances these gradients, moving away from a rigid elite–vulnerable binary (Buhr & Zaban, 2026). Igarashi (2026, Chapter 5) uses this to analyse non-white privilege, showing how Japanese families leverage regional hierarchies in Malaysia to position themselves as ‘superior Asians’. Hof (2026, Chapter 8) offers a ‘differentiated picture’ of university-educated millennials whose medium levels of capital do not provide absolute security. Similarly, Buhr (2026, Chapter 10) addresses ‘middling’ positions through migrant entrepreneurs who, while possessing relative affluence, must navigate the dependencies and fragilities of the local market. These positions involve a continuous political struggle for legitimacy, as Huete and Mantecón (2026, Chapter 4) argue that lifestyle migration often obscures power relations and local conflicts.

Furthermore, the volume adopts a critical lens on coloniality and the socio-political implications of privileged mobility. Hof (2026, Chapter 8) highlights how the ‘continuity of coloniality’ and a ‘coloniality of habitus’ fuel expectations of smooth settling and rapid career development in the Global South. This intersects with KC,

Triandafyllidou, and Dreher's (2026, Chapter 3) take on coloniality, which acknowledges how digital nomadism can inadvertently reproduce neo-colonial dependencies through the consumption of local resources and the exploitation of global economic disparities. This is further reflected in Igarashi's (2026, Chapter 5) analysis of racialised regional hierarchies, in which privilege is negotiated within a post-colonial order. Finally, privilege is anchored in the material city through 'transnational gentrification' (Hayes & Zaban, 2020; Sigler & Wachsmuth, 2016). Buhr (2026, Chapter 10) illustrates how advantage is maintained by embedding privilege in Lisbon's urban fabric through commercial activities that create exclusive spaces of sociability and consumption – such as hip galleries and coffee shops – that cater to a high-paying, transnational clientele. By weaving together these perspectives on capital, negotiated practice, arbitrage, and coloniality, the book provides a robust framework for understanding privilege as a relational, multi-layered, and deeply context-dependent force that defines the contemporary migration experience (Buhr & Zaban, 2026).

12.4 Developing a Typology of Privileged Migrants

To bring analytical order to the diverse manifestations discussed in this volume, we propose a 'rough typology' that accounts for the intersectionality, relationality, and inherent gradients of privilege. This typology moves beyond seeing privilege as a static label, instead categorising it by the specific resources and contexts through which it is leveraged, negotiated, and maintained.

12.4.1 *Structural, Legal and Institutional Advantage*

This type is defined by 'passport power' and 'citizenship capital'. It allows for the frictionless 'zoom' through border controls that IT professionals experience (Cohen and Gold, 2026, Chapter 6) and the navigation of meso-level 'mobility regimes' by digital nomads (KC, Triandafyllidou, and Dreher, 2026, Chapter 3). In its most potent form, it manifests as a legal birthright that permits mobility even during a global standstill, such as the ability of Jewish migrants to enter Israel when global borders were closed (Zaban, 2026, Chapter 9). A significant dimension of this is intra-EU migration, in which the Schengen Area and EU citizenship provide a unique institutional 'green lane' for frictionless movement. This is particularly visible in the analysis of Brexit (Huete and Mantecón, 2026, Chapter 4), where the sudden loss of this institutional status transformed a previously seamless mobile existence into a site of bureaucratic and political struggle.

12.4.2 Economic and Class-Based Advantage

This type is defined by high income, wealth, and the capacity for ‘geographic arbitrage’ (Hayes, 2014) – the strategic practice of leveraging economic disparities between different locations to maximise the purchasing power and social reach of one’s resources. By utilising geoarbitrage, migrants can effectively bypass the economic struggles and constraints faced by local populations in their destination (KC, Triandafyllidou, and Dreher, 2026, Chapter 3). This advantage is often ‘emplaced’ through the creation of exclusive urban infrastructures; in Lisbon (Buhr, 2026, Chapter 10), for instance, ‘expat-preneurs’ establish ‘hip’ galleries and speciality coffee shops that cater to a wealthy, mobile clientele rather than local residents. This manifestation of privilege is a primary driver of transnational gentrification, in which migrants’ advantage is maintained through their ability to out-compete locals for physical space and social resources. Beyond direct wealth, Cranston (2026, Chapter 2) illustrates economic privilege as an intergenerational ‘invisible backpack’ of mobility capital that funds a global lifestyle from childhood. Similarly, Hof (2026, Chapter 8) highlights the ‘classed confidence’ of middle-class millennials, which functions as a psychological and financial safety net, allowing them to pursue international careers even without high initial salaries or established local networks.

12.4.3 Cultural and Professional Advantage

This type centres on ‘transnational human capital’ and ‘mobility capital’. It is defined by professional accreditation and the ability to refashion one’s identity to fit new markets. It is visible in the ‘invisible backpack’ of mobile students (Cranston, 2026, Chapter 2) and the ‘urban translators’ in Copenhagen (Fogelman, 2026, Chapter 11) who commodify their cosmopolitan sensibilities, higher education, and writing experience into micro-entrepreneurial ventures. This form of privilege is further discussed across several chapters: Cohen and Gold (2026, Chapter 6) describe the ‘institutionalised’ and ‘embodied’ capital of tech workers, while Spiegel (2026, Chapter 7) examines the status derived from senior roles within corporate hierarchies. KC, Triandafyllidou, and Dreher (2026, Chapter 3) identify ‘digital literacy’ as a vital cultural asset for digital nomads, Hof (2026, Chapter 8) emphasises transnational human capital, and Buhr (2026, Chapter 10) illustrates how cultural capital is used to curate the urban environments that define privileged consumption. Unlike purely economic capital, this privilege is highly relational; it can be devalued by local factors such as language proficiency, thereby forcing a constant negotiation of standing.

12.4.4 Racial, Ethnic and National Advantage

This type is anchored in whiteness or high status within regional and post-colonial racial hierarchies. As seen in the Japanese case in Malaysia (Igarashi, 2026, Chapter 5), it allows migrants to be ‘the same but respected’, positioning themselves as ‘superior Asians’ to avoid racial friction. In Global South contexts, Hof (2026, Chapter 8) highlights how the ‘continuity of coloniality’ and a ‘coloniality of habitus’ fuel expectations of smooth settling and rapid career development. In European settings, Buhr (2026, Chapter 10) identifies whiteness as a ‘manifold gradient’ of privilege, noting that relatively affluent migrants are often ‘actively sought’ by destinations like Lisbon. Such attributes frequently act as a ‘door opener’ to social and professional circles that remain closed to racialised migrants – a point reinforced by Fogelman (2026, Chapter 11), who contrasts the ‘transparent’ privilege of white Anglophone bloggers with the challenges faced by migrants of colour. Meanwhile, Zaban (2026, Chapter 9) addresses ethno-national privilege through a birthright that grants immediate legal entry to a nation-state. Huete and Mantecón (2026, Chapter 4) explore how British national identity has become a site of negotiation post-Brexit, and both Cranston (2026, Chapter 2) and Cohen and Gold (2026, Chapter 6) show how ‘Western’ identities carry status that can be strategically deployed or downplayed depending on the social field.

12.4.5 Temporal and Crisis-Driven Advantage

A unique contribution of this volume is the identification of privilege as the ability to manoeuvre through time. This is the advantage of choosing the ‘right moment’ to relocate, particularly during collective watershed events. It is defined by the ability to strategically select the timing of migration to achieve aspirations amidst global crises, turning a period of general immobility into a window of exclusive opportunity. While Zaban (2026, Chapter 9) focuses on the pandemic, Huete and Mantecón (2026, Chapter 4) also touch on the timing of the Brexit transition period, in which the ability to secure residency before a specific ‘watershed’ deadline determined whether a migrant maintained or lost their previous institutional advantages.

12.4.6 Gendered and Relational Advantage

This type addresses how privilege is negotiated within intimate or institutional units. It is often a ‘relative’ and ‘precarious’ privilege, as seen in the case of ‘trailing spouses’ (Fogelman, 2026, Chapter 11) who possess the economic safety of a partner but face personal dislocation and a diminished sense of self-worth. It also encompasses the ‘negotiated order’ of corporate managers (Spiegel, 2026, Chapter 7) who

must performatively ‘do’ privilege in the workplace while ‘rejecting’ it in private to maintain a sense of normality.

12.4.7 The Intersectionality of Gradients

This typology is inherently relational and intersectional, as the ‘gradients’ of privilege mean that a migrant is rarely privileged across all dimensions simultaneously. For instance, Fogelman (2026, Chapter 11) demonstrates that a Western ‘trailing spouse’ may be privileged in terms of race and income but simultaneously marginalised by gendered dependencies and professional stagnation. Similarly, Igarashi (2026, Chapter 5) shows that Japanese families enjoy significant racial and class privilege in Malaysia but may face exclusion in Western contexts, while KC, Triandafyllidou, and Dreher (2026, Chapter 3) highlight the inherent precarity of traditional labour markets, which often pushes individuals toward digital nomadism. Moreover, even those with high mobility capital remain subject to the structural ‘friction’ of fluctuating visa and tax regimes. Furthermore, Cranston (2026, Chapter 2) illustrates how students with immense mobility capital find the label of privilege ‘awkward’ and contested upon arriving at the institutional setting of a UK university. These overlapping categories show that privilege is rarely stable, existing instead as a spectrum of ‘middling’ and ‘elite’ positions that must be actively ‘practised’. Ultimately, the contemporary experience is defined by this intersectional friction – the way a migrant’s specific advantages and disadvantages interact with the regulatory, professional, and social contexts of their host environment. These ‘shifting constellations’ of privilege inherently demand the fine-grained, ethnographic tools discussed in the next section.

12.5 Methodological Reflections: The Qualitative Lens and the Quantitative Challenge

A critical reflection on the methodology of this volume reveals a predominantly qualitative orientation. This is not a coincidence but a reflection of a broader pattern in the study of privileged migration, where a ‘fine-grained’ approach is often necessary to reveal individual experiences and subtle power dynamics that are frequently smoothed over by broader statistical categories. The chapters in this volume rely on a diverse array of qualitative tools – ranging from semi-structured and narrative interviews to more immersive techniques like ethnographic ‘go-alongs’ and ‘shadowing’ in both professional and private spaces, participant observation in co-living and co-working environments or in urban commercial settings, and the analysis of digital landscapes and visual social media content.

As Suzanne Hall (2012) articulates in her work on the ‘diversity turn’, there is a significant challenge in representing individuals through traditional modes of classification. While Hall’s work focuses on the urban, her critique of how survey techniques can ‘short-circuit’ our understanding is highly relevant to the diverse geographical and social scales addressed in this book. She notes:

The aggregation and classification of individuals by way of ethnicity, income and religion through survey techniques is a primary official mode... But the tools of the survey short-circuit our understanding of how diverse individuals and groups establish meeting points and assert divisions... The challenge for fine-grained research is how to reveal individual experiences alongside the histories of migration, racism and class. (Hall, 2012, p. 13)

This ‘short-circuiting’ is particularly acute in the study of privilege. Because these migrants often do not appear in ‘vulnerability datasets’ and are frequently grouped under broad, opaque headers like ‘highly skilled’, ‘Western’, or ‘expatriate’, they become largely invisible to traditional quantitative tools. Berg and Sigona (2013, p. 348) argue that the emergence of the super-diversity paradigm (Vertovec, 2007) was a direct response to the recognition that these standard ‘survey techniques’ are no longer adequate for capturing the dynamism and multi-layered nature of contemporary mobility. In the context of this volume, their argument underscores why a qualitative lens is vital: privilege is often lost in the ‘statistical noise’ of aggregate data. By failing to account for the subtle interplay of legal status, professional capital, and social positioning, quantitative models overlook the very ‘gradients’ and ‘middling’ positions that define the privileged experience.

The qualitative methods employed by our authors – such as the non-systematic ethnographic walks used to identify gentrifying businesses in Lisbon or the longitudinal tracking of digital ‘urban translators’ in Copenhagen – allow for a mapping of the ‘gradients’ that quantitative data often misses. These methods capture the ‘negotiated order’ of privilege and the ‘temporal manoeuvring’ of moves during crises that a snapshot survey cannot record.

While we advocate for the depth of qualitative research to expose these relational nuances, we also recognise the field’s need to move toward more robustly quantified accounts. Currently, the lack of specific quantitative data on privileged flows remains a general limitation in migration studies. The challenge for the future is to develop quantitative metrics that can move beyond ‘ethnic-only’ lenses to account for ‘other-than-ethnic factors’ (Wessendorf, 2017), such as specific professional accreditations, precise levels of mobility capital, and the intersection of age, gender, and occupation. Integrating these metrics would enable a more comprehensive mapping of how privilege transforms social and geographical spaces globally.

12.6 Concluding Thoughts

By reassembling privilege as a central analytical theme, this volume has demonstrated that migration is not merely a story of ‘the marginalised’, but a vivid mapping of global power dynamics in motion. Moving forward, we hope this volume encourages scholars to continue questioning the ‘invisibility’ of the privileged and to explore how their mobilities shape the social and physical spaces we all inhabit. Acknowledging these multi-layered, context-dependent, and relational ‘gradients’ is essential to understanding that privilege is often precarious and must be strategically maintained. By exposing the active social practices required to sustain these advantages, we reveal the contemporary migration experience as a primary marker – and a constant site of negotiation – of global inequality.

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