**Class, race, privilege: structuring the lifestyle migrant experience in Boquete, Panama**

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**Abstract**

In this article, I take the case of North American lifestyle migrants living in Boquete (Panama) to highlight (1) how the privilege of these migrants is remade following migration, (2) how it is experienced through intersubjective encounters within the destination, and (3) how it is variously interpreted by the migrants. Drawing on ethnographic research, the article demonstrates how subjective experience of privilege is framed and mediated by locally-inflected class relations and by racialised logics that the migrants carry with them into the destination. Through its focus on the contextualised constitution of privilege, and in particular the intersections of this with race and class, the article offers a unique contribution to a maturing field of enquiry on lifestyle migration.

**Keywords**

Lifestyle migration, privileged migration, privilege, class, race, Panama

**Introduction**

In this article, I take the case of North American lifestyle migrants living in Boquete, Panama, to highlight how the privilege of these migrants is remade following migration, structured along axes that reflect complex intertwinings of class and race. I argue that the significant geographies of power between sending and receiving contexts, alongside the dynamics of the social structure within the destination—and in particular at the local level—play a significant role in structuring the lifestyle migrant experience in Boquete.1 By focusing on the experience of settlement, the empirical examples presented here illuminate how privilege is not only a social and economic condition that facilitates migration, but is a central feature of post-migration lives, variously remade through the migrants’ interpersonal encounters with their Panamanian hosts.

Drawing on ethnographic research with lifestyle migrants in Boquete, the article demonstrates how subjective experiences of privilege are framed and mediated by locally-inflected power relations. Deconstructing privilege along these lines demonstrates the significant influence of both class and race.2 The empirical examples document two specific dimensions of the migrants’ privilege: (1) how they engage in the local field of power through their employment relations; and (2) *their interpretations* of how Panamanians perceive them—how their embodied whiteness might be read as a sign of economic wealth (specifically as something to be exploited by others). In these ways, the article illustrates how, through their narratives, these migrants position themselves within the social environment of their destination.

The article advocates a contextual and situational approach to understanding the structure of privilege. Such an approach recognizes not only global power asymmetries but also local social dynamics and their role in the subjective experience of privilege. Through its focus on the contextual and localized constitution of privilege, and in particular the intersections of this with race and class, the article offers a unique contribution to a maturing field of enquiry on lifestyle migration.

**Constituting privilege in and through lifestyle migration**

Lifestyle migration is a novel extension of a phenomenon with a history, made possible as a result of global developments of the past 50 or 60 years. It relates specifically to the relative economic privilege of individuals in the developed world, the reflexivity evident in the post-/late modernity, the construction of particular places as offering alternative lifestyles, and a more general ease (or freedom) of movement (O’Reilly and Benson, 2009, 12).

The concept of lifestyle migration has had considerable analytical purchase in explaining the lifestyle-oriented movement of relatively affluent individuals within Europe, the most well-documented cases accounting for the movement of North Europeans to Spain (see for example O’Reilly 2000; Casado-Diaz, Kaiser and Warnes 2004; Oliver 2008). However, it is a concept that has a wider geographical reach, as citizens of the Global North strategically deploy their accumulated capitals, assets and resources to facilitate lifestyles in countries with lower daily expenses, a process that Hayes (2014) refers to as geoarbitrage. A corresponding body of literature on lifestyle migration to Mexico and Central America has emerged in the last few years (see for example Dixon, Murray and Gellatt 2006; Croucher 2009a; McWatters 2009; Janoschka 2009; Rojas, LeBlanc and Sunil 2014).

Several key elements of this literature are helpful in understanding North American lifestyle migrants in Panama: (1) the extensive examination of privilege, both as facilitating migration but also as a significant characteristic of migrant lives (Croucher 2009b, 2012; Benson 2013, 2014); (2) neoliberal land reform and the concomitant property development marketed for foreign investment (Barrantes-Reynolds 2011; van Noorloos 2011a, b; Jackiewicz and Craine 2010; Jackiewicz and Benson 2013; Velásquez Runk 2012); (3) the impacts of these migration phenomenon and related transformations in land use for members of the local population. The consideration of this last point is framed in several ways: alienation from the land (McWatters 2009; van Noorloos 2011b); environmental degradation (Spalding 2011; Myers 2009); increasing inequalities between local populations and affluent incomers (Torres and Momsen 2005; Gomez, Kandel and Moran 2009; Lizárraga Morales 2010); and ambivalence from local residents about such development (Myers 2009; McWatters 2009). Focused on the Bocas del Toro archipelago, Panama, the film *Paraiso for sale* (Prado 2012) throws these issues into sharp relief, powerfully highlighting how structural change in relation to land and the incoming migration of wealthy foreigners is felt by and impacts on the lives of local people.

Understanding lifestyle migration and settlement in destinations outside the West—destinations that include sites of former military occupation by Western powers, ex-colonial settings, and the Global South more generally—and corresponding lifestyle flows necessitates the development of conceptual tools attuned to global inequalities and geometries of power between sending and receiving communities (Croucher 2012; Benson 2013; Hayes 2014). In my previous work on North American lifestyle migration to Panama (Benson 2013; 2014), I have analysed lifestyle migration through the interrelated concepts of postcoloniality and privilege, putting these to work to make sense of the power inequalities that make such flows imaginable and possible, and that shape migrant experience. This framing was inspired by research on mobile professionals that identifies the historical precedents and processes at work within expatriate labour migrations and, in particular, ‘postcolonial continuities’ (Fechter and Walsh 2010: 1197; see also Farrer 2010). Importantly, following Hall (1996) the postcolonial condition is not restricted only to locations that exhibited formal relations of colonization, but reaches into contexts—such as Panama—that were not directly colonized.

Adopting a postcolonial approach to understanding lifestyle migration similarly allows for the recognition of the colonial traces within imaginings of the destination and migration, as well as how, when and in what circumstances these are made explicit in everyday post-migration lives (Benson and Osbaldiston 2014). The concomitant focus on privilege is a critical development of the wider recognition that lifestyle migration is made possible by *relative* privilege (Benson and O’Reilly 2009; Croucher 2009; O’Reilly and Benson 2009). Intertwining relative privilege with postcoloniality gives a more nuanced understanding of the systemic and structural conditions that influence lifestyle migration flows and migrant experience (Benson 2013; 2014).

While privilege is often de-politicized, unrecognized and un-remarked (Knowles 2006), through migration such invisibility is often destabilized as privilege is reconfigured within new settings (Lehmann 2014; Leonard 2010; Lundström 2014). Undoubtedly, the relative privilege that frames experiences of settlement within the destination is fractured along axes that include, among others, race, nationality, ethnicity, class and gender (Benson and Osbaldiston 2014; see Croucher 2013 & Lundström 2014 for discussion of gender and privilege). One element that is particularly pertinent to lifestyle migration research—although it is rarely stated, most documented lifestyle migration populations are of white, Western origin—is how privilege intersects with whiteness, or rather, how such privileged migration and everyday post-migration lives (re)make whiteness (Knowles 2005) making itvisible in the lived experience of being a white migrant:

For some, race may become visibly significant for the first time; whilst others may be aware of more subtle shifts in the race aspects of their lives, brought about as a result of their displacement to a new and different context … In postcolonial and settler contexts, whiteness (together with nationality and gender) will have a particular historically-based relationship to power, and an ongoing and dynamic connection will exist between this and more contemporary versions (Leonard 2010: 19)

What this quotation makes clear is that settlement is partly a process of racialization, echoing Morawska’s (2001) identification of processes of ethnicisation in other migration encounters. In postcolonial contexts this is particularly marked (see for example Fechter 2005, 2007; Hayes 2014b; Lehmann 2014; Lundström 2014), with whiteness enhancing symbolic capital within the destination (Knowles and Harper 2009). While before migration, these migrants unwittingly benefitted from the structural advantage of being white (Hartigan 1997) following migration, the recognition of their whiteness makes them feel their privilege in unprecedented ways.

Displacement through migration undoubtedly differs significantly in quality from that of other migrants (Fechter 2007; Leonard 2010; Lundström 2014); the ability to carry and convert ‘white capital’ along with other capitals into the destination demonstrates very clearly the global structures of privilege—and their relationship to historic asymmetries of power (Amit 2007)—that facilitate lifestyle migration and make possible the lives desired and led within destinations. A somewhat more nuanced interpretation might suggest that it is not the migrants who carry these capitals with them, metaphorically ‘unpacking’ them within the destination, but rather that their assets and resources, reevaluated in and through the social and cultural value systems of the destination, maintain, or are even enhanced in, value. This rendering echoes Erel’s (2010) insightful argument about the social and occupation mobility of Turkish female migrants that argues against the ‘rucksack approach’ to understanding cultural capital: ‘… this views migrants as bringing with them a package of cultural resources that may or may not fit with the ‘culture’ of the country of residence’ (2010: 646). She instead stresses the need to understand the dynamism and interaction by which the cultural resources of migrants are evaluated within the destination, measured by the terms of the values of the host society and transformed (or not) into capital in life following migration.

While the privilege of lifestyle migrants is undoubtedly shaped by global asymmetries of power, their entry into new and unfamiliar ‘hierarchies of status and privilege’ (Amit 2007: 8) may have localized-inflections that deserve attention. Understanding privilege therefore requires the recognition that it is contextual, influenced by situational, relational and historic contingencies. This is an approach borrowed from ‘third wave’ whiteness studies that recognizes local inflections of whiteness as a form of power (Twine and Gallagher 2008). When applied to the study of privileged migrants, this approach demonstrates that these interlinked contingencies shape and position whiteness through transnational migration flows (Knowles 2005, 2008; Leonard 2010); in this way, whiteness is reinvented and newly experienced through the process of travel and migration (see Lundström 2014). Adopting this approach as a framework for understanding the privilege of lifestyle migrants in Boquete, I argue for similar attention to how privilege is reconstituted and variously experienced through settlement. In particular, what becomes clear is the intertwining of whiteness (inseparable from nationality) and class within the privilege of these North American migrants.

Despite a notable focus on transnational and ethnic community-making practices within lifestyle migration (see for example O’Reilly 2000), the discussion of racialized identities and how they are (re)made through lifestyle migration has for the large part been underplayed (Hayes 2014b; Lundström 2014). This is perhaps the unwitting result of the predominance of research examining intra-European migration flows and analyses that focus on the class dynamics of migration (see for example Oliver and O’Reilly 2010; Benson 2011). There are two notable exceptions. The first is Lundström’s (2014) excellent account of how whiteness is variously experienced by Swedish women as they migrate to Spain, the United States and Singapore, each characterized by very different social, racial and political contexts. The second is Hayes’ insightful examination of the racialization of North American and Canadian migrants in Cuenca, Ecuador and how this risks, “reproducing existing inequalities of caste and class” (Hayes 2014b: 2) in the destination. As he points out, the emerging awareness of their whiteness and how this symbolizes privilege is evident in their practices and narratives. To my knowledge, this is the only research to date that explicitly focuses on processes of racialization in relation to privileged migration to Latin America, displacing the predominant focus on Westerners to Asia within the study of privileged migration; indeed, Hayes (2014b) notes that despite longstanding North American migrations to central and South America, white identity-formation in and through migration has not been a feature of research on these trends, with the result that, “… much remains to be explored through ethnographic and qualitative research into white identity formation in lifestyle communities in Latin America” (ibid.: 4).

The contingencies that structure how race, ethnicity and class operate within Latin American contexts provide new insights into how privilege is (re)made and subjectively experienced through lifestyle migration that adds to our knowledge previously developed in research on privileged migration to East Asia.

*Lifestyle migration in Panama*

Lifestyle migration to Panama has been made possible by significant economic growth, an expanding tourism industry, legislation promoting land markets and the sale of previously public land (Horton 2006; Jackiewicz and Craine 2010; Velásquez Runk 2012)—and the development of a significant residential tourism industry (McWatters 2009; Myers 2009)—part of widespread neoliberal reforms that began after the United States relinquished the Panama Canal in 1999. Panama has been much lauded in the international lifestyle media on retirement and property investment, with academics stressing that such marketing privileges the better way of life that such populations seek (Benson 2013; Jackiewicz and Craine 2010; McWatters 2009; Myers 2009; Spalding 2011, 2013). In addition to the natural amenities that Panama offers, a further attraction for these migrants is the *pensionado* visa, a programme specifically designed by the Panamanian government to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from foreign retirees through property ownership. This provides visa holders with property and import tax exemptions, and a range of significant discounts on the cost of travel, healthcare, and everyday expenses (see also McWatters 2009; Myers 2009; Spalding 2011; Velásquez Runk 2012).

Government policies and incentives focus on the economic dimensions of this migration, specifically attracting incoming populations that are more economically privileged than receiving communities. They areimagined as ‘residential tourists’ with the ability to buy property and the independent wealth that would qualify them for particularly favourable terms of residence. The *pensionados*visa is available to individuals and households on the proviso that they have a monthly pension for life exceeding $1000, or, in the case that they own property worth $100,000 or more, with a monthly income or pension over $750 (Autoridad Nacional para la Innovación Guberamental 2011). This means that, with the exception of Panama Province (which includes Panama City), where the average household income per month is $826, the income required of foreign residents on *pensionados* visas significantly exceeds average household incomes. For example, in Bocas del Toro Province, average monthly household income is $400, while in Chiriqui Province (which includes Boquete), average monthly household income is $433.3 In this way, the governance of lifestyle migration to Panama structures the possibility of enhanced social and economic inequalities within destinations, and the reproduction of existing class and race relations (see also Hayes 2014b, Myers 2009).

Panama is a multiracial society stratified along class lines (Zimbalist and Weeks 1991). As in the case of other Latin American countries (Wade 1997; Garner 2006), the ‘whitening’ of the population was an institutionalized part of the nation-building project. As Horton (2006) makes clear, following Panama’s independence from Colombia in 1903, the efforts of elites to consolidate a national identity around whiteness included the encouragement of migration from Europe at the same time as introducing limitations to the migration of non-white, non-Spanish speaking populations. A later nationalist trend commencing in the 1940s similarly excluded populations constructed as non-white, ‘to be ‘Panamanian’ was to be not black, not Indian, not Asian’ (Horton 2006: 836). Today Panama claims racial egalitarianism and ostensibly promotes a national identity framed around liberal multiculturalism; however, as various authors have argued (Bourgois 1989; Guerron Montero 2006; Horton 2006; Velásquez Runk 2012) racial inequality is pervasive in Panamanian society with notable political and economic consequences. Further indicators of how whiteness might intersect with class in Panama is made apparent through the commonly used—although not well-documented—colloquial term *rabiblanco* (which translates as ‘white tail’), a term used to refer to a white elite of European origin who, it is argued, control social and economic life in Panama (Gott 2007; Seales Soley 2008).

The longstanding relationship between the United States and Panama also plays an important role in contemporary migration trends. As Donoghue (2014: 60-61) highlights, ambivalence towards the United States was evident in Panamanian attitudes towards the Canal Zone—an area stretching five miles either side of the Panama Canal that was controlled and governed by the United States from 1904-79—its inhabitants and their exclusivist behavior. The Zone, described by Donoghue as an ‘overseas imperial frontier’ (2014: 246), was characterized by the colonial lifestyles of its white United States’ citizens, commonly referred to as Zonians; notably, social segregation (further enhanced through segregated housing and education) on the grounds of race, including non-white US citizens (ibid. 2014), and nationality was in force within the Zone until 1979 (ibid. 2014); racialised discrimination practices during their occupation of the Canal Zone are well-documented (Taussig 1993; Frenkel 2002; Velásquez Runk 2012). As Donoghue (2014) makes clear the North American presence in the Zone involved the importation of racialised logics that were common in the United States at the time they took up control of the area. This also fostered a heightened sense of being American, framed around white supremacist logic, a nationalism promoted by local English-language media and education (ibid. 2014). It was a place of exclusivity, insularity, racial and national privilege (ibid. 2014). The contested history of United States-Panama relations (see for example Diaz Espino 2001; Lindsay-Poland 2003; Bolivar Pedreschi 2004) is reflected in rather ambivalent attitudes of many Panamanians towards North Americans (Theodossopoulos 2010). As both McWatters (2009) and Myers (2009) document, such ambivalence similarly characterizes the attitudes of Boqueteños towards the newly incoming North American lifestyle migration population.

**Fieldwork in Boquete**

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Boquete is a district in the Chiriquí Province of Panama located in the highlands of Western Panama (see Figure 1). The capital of the district, Bajo Boquete, is a popular destination among US and Canadian migrants—often retirees—who value its cool climate and picturesque surroundings. There is a significant history of North American and European migration to the area; many of the so-called ‘founding families’ of the town (established in 1911), depicted on the wall of the local museum, were European and North American settlers (Sánchez Pinzón 2001),. It is common to find that local landowners still have the North American and European surnames of their ancestors (McWatter 2009) and to claim this heritage in conversation. Among Panamanians, Boquete is known as a holiday destination, a place to escape the heat and discomfort of Panama City, with many affluent Panamanians owning a second home in the area. The population is diverse, comprised of middle-class landowning–mostly Hispanic–Panamanians, other middle-/working-class Panamanians and indigenous workers (ordinarily Ngäbe Bugle), as well as the lifestyle migrants moving more recently to the area and Panamanian second-home owners.

The empirical data reported in this paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork with lifestyle migrants in Panama conducted over three months between 2008 and 2010 in Boquete.4 The research project from which this data is drawn focused on the motivations behind lifestyle migration to Panama (also examining cases in Panama City and Bocas del Toro), life experiences within the destination and impact on the local community. Research included the collection of migration and life histories and in-depth interviews with twenty-five lifestyle migrant households. Participants were recruited first through invitation emails sent out through local mailing lists, announcements at meetings, and then by snowball sampling. In these respects, participants in this stage of the research were self-selecting. The research also included extensive participant observation, including participation in both migrant-organised activities and general community events that attracted a wide cross-section of the local and migrant population as well as daily life in the area. The participant observation was documented through taking field notes. Since 2010, I have also been in contact with some of the research participants through social media, and have regularly consulted blogs focused on Boquete and the online community forum. I have adopted an inductive mode of analysis that focused on drawing out key themes emerging through the research. Here, I focus in detail on the classed and racialized dimensions of privilege as these are lived and experienced by the lifestyle migrants who took part in the research. I also provide an interpretative framework that recognizes the continued influence of classed and racialized logics imported from North America on their understandings of their lives in Panama. The quotations used within this paper have been chosen to represent these themes, although they are not the only occasions when these themes were mentioned.

The people who took part in my research varied in terms of their age, where they had come from, where they chose to live, whether they had to work once they moved to Boquete, and what had brought them there in the first place. Admittedly, there were very few young families in the study, although I was aware of a few living in the area, and the retired population was somewhat over-represented. Participants were from North America (including the United and Canada) and were exclusively white, regularly claiming white European origins. However, in terms of the resources and assets with which they came to Panama, and their class status prior to migration, this varied significantly. Quite early on in the research, it became clear that some migrants had relatively few resources at their fingertips; they had not come with capital from properties, savings and with good pensions. In this respect, there were members of the lifestyle migrant population who, as scholars working on lifestyle migration populations have documented (see for example Hayes 2014a; Lundström 2014), were in both the position of being simultaneously privileged—being white and North American—and precarious.

It was also clear that the lifestyle migrants living in Boquete varied in terms of where and how they chose to live, and while some of them did live in gated communities, there were others who bought, built or rented houses in Panamanian neighbourhoods in the town and the wider area. In terms of their patterns of settlement, the population included migrants who were peripatetic as well as those who had established a year-round home in Boquete.

**Understanding the lifestyle migration experience in Panama**

Lifestyle migration to Panama is shaped by global asymmetries of power between the Global South and the wealthier economies from which many lifestyle migrants originate as well as existing class and race contexts in Panama. The examples presented here question the circumstances under which intersubjective experiences become sites of the migrants’ recognition of their own privilege (see also Benson 2014). The focus below is telling of the lifestyles of these incomers, tending towards social contact with the service sector but also with Panamanian and local elites—mirroring the Zonians’ relations with Panamanians (Donoghue 2014)—relations that take on different qualities in the migrants’ accounts and through which they present a particular image of their social position.

*Employment relations*

This section examines how the migrants, through their employment of local workers, negotiate local power relations. Many respondents employ Hispanic Panamanians and indigenous (Ngäbe Bugle) workers to provide services for them; indeed, the (relatively) low cost of labour is part of the discourse through which Boquete is marketed as one of the best places in the world to retire to.

Not all lifestyle migrants in Boquete recognize how the employment of local workers positions them within local power relations. Indeed, this was highlighted in a conversation I had with a North American woman living in Panama City, who had spent some time in Boquete, but had chosen not to stay. Her decision to leave Boquete was the result of her increasing dislike of the North American community there. She recalled her attendance at the ‘Tuesday Morning Meeting’, the weekly event run primarily for the North American community in Boquete. There had been reports that there had been some discontent from the local community about the increasing number of North Americans moving into the area. One of the audience members put her hand up to respond, ‘Why don’t we just tell them that we give them jobs?’ While many incomers to Boquete are critical of their privilege, attempting to displace it through acts of philanthropy (Benson 2013), this naïve display of privilege demonstrates that in relation to some members of the local population these affluent incomers are in a strong position of power.

In practice this often translated into a sense of paternalism that, while demonstrating that they cared for their employees, was also deeply revealing of the power inequalities between them. For one couple, who employed indigenous workers to do horticultural work on their land, the important thing was to keep their workers. They explained that they paid them more than the going rate because of the specialist and demanding nature of the work. They had invested in the workers, both in terms of cultivating their knowledge and expertise, but also taking on a long-term commitment to employ them. Many others however, had a more ambivalent relationship to employment practices. It was particularly common to find people explaining that they felt a sense of responsibility to their workers. Relationships that started on the basis of idealisations of the employer-employee relationship—respondents stressed how they had imagined that they would learn Spanish from their workers in exchange for English, and their relationship would more closely resemble friendship—were tempered over time and through experience as the following example clearly demonstrates.

I met Nicholas and Tracey5 for the first time in 2008, and was invited to their home for lunch. One topic of conversation was their employment of Ngäbe Bugle (one of indigenous groups in Panama) worker, Enrico, who they employed full-time to tend their ‘coffee finca’ (translation: agricultural estate) and garden.6 Within minutes, Nicholas and Tracey were keen to stress that they paid Enrico what they thought was a reasonable salary, more than other people might pay their workers, also being sure to pay his social security contributions. The following year, I visited Nicholas and Tracey again. The conversation quickly came around to a discussion of Enrico; earlier in the year they had made what they described as the difficult decision not to renew his contract. Recently, they had found that Enrico was asking for more help with the finca, suggesting that they employ another person to help him with his work, but asking around they felt that other people expected their workers to do a lot more than he was doing. This seemed to instill in them a sense of mistrust in their worker, which had ultimately led to them choosing not to re-employ Enrico when his last contract had come to an end, hiring someone else instead.

From initially being concerned that they treat their employee in a just manner, providing him with comfortable living quarters and taking his opinions into account, over time Nicholas and Tracey present an explanation of their actions that reaffirms their position in the social hierarchy rather than working to invert this. Changing their attitude towards their worker therefore worked to reinforce local class relations.

Everyday interactions with their employees are the sites at which the migrants negotiate local power relations. At times they experience their position of relative power as uncomfortable, evidenced by the fact that they try to promote themselves as good and ethical employers. While for those who employed domestic help in lives before migration these relationships are familiar, it is also the case that for others this is new—having not had the economic and social wherewithal to employ workers previously—indicating an elevated status within the local social hierarchy.

Their social position, while evidently related to the extant class structure of the area, is also racialized. This is a dimension of the experience that the migrants may not directly realize or acknowledge but which is made clear in a common narrative used to depict the society and their position within it: ‘The Americans live on $500 a week; the Panamanians on $500 a month; and the Indians live on $500 a year’ (see also Myers 2009). This rendering reveals the significant economic inequalities in the area, but is additionally framed through the language of ethnicity. Within a context where most (if not all) lifestyle migrants to the area are white, this takes on additional significance.

A significant contrast to the examples already presented in this section shows the extent to which this logic had implicit racial dimensions. Steve had moved to the area in 1999, when he was in his thirties. His migration from Canada had been spurred by multiple visits to the area in the early 1990s. As a working age migrant, he had had to find a way of supporting his life in Boquete and had variously worked as an English-language teacher and handyman to the foreign population in the area. In respect to the latter he explained, “I don’t have any problem working for the foreigners; I charge a lot more than the locals do, but I don't fool them around. I consider myself to be a lot more professional.” He continued to explain that he had more than enough work; single ‘gringa’ (in his terms) women living in the area trusted him over local workmen, he refused work on a regular basis because he wanted to have the free time that he had moved to Panama for. He works to support the lifestyle that he had chosen.

Longstanding power relations in Boquete—landowning elites, working-/middle-class Panamanians and indigenous workers—are negotiated by migrants through their employment practices , while the payment and employment of their fellow migrants is not.

*Panamanian elites*

Lifestyle migrants find themselves ensconsed in a complex web of power relations that also includes Panamanian elites. On my first visit to Boquete, I attended the ‘Tuesday Morning Meeting’, a weekly event organized by and for the North American community in the area. The presenter was the Panamanian Minister of Science and Technology. He was late, having travelled to Boquete by helicopter, and the start of the meeting was delayed. He presented a report on the works of his office, the initiative that they had set up to provide all school age children with a laptop, but also to give a presentation on volcano awareness—Boquete lies in the shadows of the Volcán Baru, a live volcano which has not erupted since 1550. Presenting in clear English, he stressed that the government was monitoring the volcano for any signs of activity, so there would be advanced warning of any volcanic activity. This was followed by an explanation of volcano preparedness, targeted at the North American community. As the Minister explained the challenges that his office were facing in educating the indigenous population of the area to be prepared for potential volcanic activity, he outlined some of the beliefs that the indigenous people had about the volcano, highlighting their ignorance of its potential dangers.7 As he described the indigenous belief that witches lived inside the crater, the foreign audience looked on and listened in fascination.

Over time, I have found this example to be revealing; the stratification of Panama along axes of class, race and ethnicity influences the dynamics of the relationship between the Minister and his audience. This is a dynamic whereby he self-identifies as a United States-educated Panamanian while simultaneously exoticising the indigenous population. In this manner, the Panamanian minister assumes common ground between himself and his audience.

Within Boquete, relationships between the landowning elites—often families who for generations have run the coffee estates—and some of these privileged incomers is also evident. Indeed, it was at the recommendation of Nicholas that I first found myself in the position to talk to a member of one these families, spending the afternoon with her as she explained to me her vision for the future of Boquete. As she explained, there was a hope that Boquete could become a kind ‘Napa valley for coffee’, internationally-renowned for gourmet produce. While the marketing and organizational work for this would be quite intense, this would significantly reduce the amount of farming necessary as gourmet production required less acreage.

Among those lifestyle migrants who were in the position to buy property in the area, many had bought land that had previously been part of the large coffee estates. This land had been specifically zoned by the Panamanian government for sale to attract FDI (Jackiewicz and Craine 2010). Many of the participants in the study had bought land on subdivided coffee estates had often started their own small fincas, employing indigenous workers and producing a small quantity of coffee. While this was evidently one dimension of living in Boquete that gave the migrants a great deal of pleasure—that they could produce their own coffee—but it also led to them having engagements with, and opinions about the future of the coffee industry in the area. As they knowledgeably explained to me how coffee was grown, harvested and processed, the value of different varieties of coffee grown in the area and the proposed shift over to the production of gourmet coffee (which some of them were experimenting in cultivating), they indicated that the conversation about coffee production in the area was not only restricted to the larger producers.

Within Boquete, the lifestyle migrant population had access to and relationships with the landowning elite. They attend the same social events, are engaged in the same networks, and often are members of the same clubs and organisations (e.g. Rotary Club, Lions’ Club, Boquete Community Players). The migrants did not appear to think twice about this. Indeed, it was through contacts within the North American community in Boquete that I was passed the details of various important local Panamanian actors – members of the founding families, the mayor, and the organizer of the local jazz festival.

As the examples in this section have demonstrated, it is not only in relation to their employees that lifestyle migrants are positioned; the migrants’ interactions and encounters with Panamanian and local elites also provide indications of their positioning within the local social structure. Relationships with these elites did not, unlike their relationships with their employees, seem to elicit ambiguity or critical attention by the migrants. There are clear continuities between the relationships of Panamanian elites with the Zonians that Donoghue highlights, ‘[H]aving themselves been educated in the United States, many of these elite Panamanians spoke English and rubbed elbows with the more educated Zonians and US Businessmen in joint clubs …’ (2014: 74).

**Conclusion: race and class in the experience of privilege**

This article has progressed beyond the assumption of privilege as a social condition that facilitates migration, to demonstrate how privilege manifests within post-migration lives. I have argued that accounts of privilege in lifestyle migration studies need to adopt a contextual approach that recognizes not only global asymmetries in power that may influence migration. Lifestyle migrants thus enter into local social hierarchies at an elevated position. As the examples demonstrate, the migrants’ perceptions of their social position in Boquete reveal how they negotiate between the knowledge and understanding of class and race relations imported from life before migration and those their find in place in the destination. This is rendered visible through their recognition of their relative wealth vis-à-vis the local population, but also from their embodiment as white citizens of more powerful nation states. Whiteness, for the purposes of these research findings is inseparable from their nationality, a result of a sample that only included white participants.

Such considerations are central to understanding the privilege of these migrants as it is felt and experienced through intersubjective encounters, encounters that include their employment practices, social relations and connections with Panamanians, and their speculations about how they are perceived by others. Analysing these encounters and my respondents’ reactions to these reveals identity-formation in process; the identities constituted through this process are racialized—in this case as white and North American—and framed by the contexts of a highly stratified class structure in Panama and, specifically, Boquete.

What is also clear is how privilege is (re)made through this process. The subjective experience and performance of privilege among lifestyle migrants in Boquete can be read along intrinsically interconnected axes of class and racial privilege, and the product of local, national and global power relations.

I conclude here with one final reflection on my respondents’ cognizance of their privilege, or rather how they variously interpret their encounters with Panamanians—indigenous people, local Hispanic populations as well as middle-class landowners and elites. What I hope I have made clear in the examples presented here is how the white lifestyle migrant is imagined—by governments creating incentives for migration, local populations and elites—as having access to significant economic and cultural resources. However, as the contrast between how the migrants relate to their employees and elites makes clear, the ways in which the migrants themselves experience and interpret this varies. While the assumption that they risk the possibility of being exploited is discomforting precisely because of their being singled out on the basis of their relative privilege, the migrants experience and read their relationships with elites in a more positive light, perhaps flattered by the attention or even taking this for granted. Both cases involve the symbolic association of the white lifestyle migrant with economic and cultural capital. The difference lies in the social and economic stakes of the encounter. What is ironic is that these two processes are not dissimilar; in fact, they might be read as two sides of the same coin.

**Notes**

1. My naming of the fieldsite here and throughout the article is deliberate. Although there is not room here to go into much detail, my research across three locations in Panama confirms that social stratification on a local level can vary significantly. Particularly notable are the variations in how ‘race’ and class intersect, the result of various nation-building projects and different local histories. It is for this reason that I refer specifically to Boquete, rather than generalizing to the whole of Panama. In this way, I argue for a recognition of local power relations alongside the national social structures.
2. This is not to suggest that these are the only axes along which privilege is experienced; they have been selected as they best reflect the argument presented here. Indeed, as other authors (Croucher 2013; Lundström 2014; Trundle 2009, 2014) demonstrate, lifestyle migration and privilege may be experienced in ways that are highly gendered.

Figures derived from *XI Censo Nacional de Población y VII de Vivienda 2010*, the latest population census, conducted in 2010, specifically from Table 44: *Viviendas particulares ocupadas en la república, por tenencia, según provincial, comarca indígena, sexo del jefe e ingreso mensual* (Private homes in the Republic, by tenancy, by province and indigenous reservation, by gender of household head, and monthly household income). Available at <http://www.contraloria.gob.pa/inec/Publicaciones/Publicaciones.aspx?ID_SUBCATEGORIA=59&ID_PUBLICACION=357&ID_IDIOMA=1&ID_CATEGORIA=13>.

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5. All names appearing in the paper are pseudonyms in order to protect the anonymity of research participants.

6. Such plots of land are sold as ‘*fincas’*, reflecting the relationship between this land and the landowning elite in the area, yet another indication of the longstanding class inequalities in Boquete and reproduced through the everyday practices of coffee farming by incoming lifestyle migrants and coffee cultivators.

7. In Panama, as in most other Latin American countries, the term indigenous is used in a narrow, racialised sense to refer to ethnic groups that trace their history to before the Spanish conquest (cf. Wade 1997). The narrow use of the term separates in categorical terms the ‘latino’, majority population of the country from Amerindian groups (Theodossopoulos 2014).

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