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Rethinking Privilege: U.S. Americans in Cold War Costa Rica

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Abstract

Drawing on an historical perspective and a migration studies conceptualization, this article seeks to rethink the concept of privilege and lifestyle migration as it refers to patterns of U.S. immigration to Costa Rica from the end of WWII and up until the late 1970s, several decades before the concept of privilege migration became a buzz word in migration studies, and before Costa Rica itself became a prime destination for privilege migrants. Based on oral histories gathered by the author in 2009 from tens of U.S. American men and women who moved to the country between 1950 and 1980, the article reconsiders the often-automatic link between economic wealth and privilege among immigrants and identifies non-economic manifestations of privilege.

Keywords: *Privilege migration; lifestyle migration; Costa Rica; North to South migration; counterculture*

Introduction

“Gardening and hanging out, this is what we did for several years. What a privilege,” recounted Barbara Williams, nostalgically, of her lifestyle in Costa Rica in the early 1970s (Williams, interview 2009).² Williams moved to the remote Osa Peninsula in southwest Costa Rica as a young woman in her early 20s, and some 40 years later painted a vivid picture of this community of U.S. Americans counterculturists, dropouts, and hippies. Seeking to emulate the local *campesinos* (Costa Rican peasants), they lived modestly, buying their rice and beans at the local *pulperia* (grocery store), and walking the several miles there and back from their rustic residences in the rainforest; homes that they had purchased for just a few hundred dollars. At this point, several decades before the real estate boom in Costa Rica, their greatest asset was not land and property, but rather non-tangible resources, such as freedom from social restraints, familial expectation, and materialistic society.

Like Williams, most of the U.S. Americans who immigrated to Costa Rica between the end of WWII and the late 1970s were neither powerful nor wealthy. In fact, their life stories strongly suggest a sense of economic, ideological, sexual, or cultural marginality in both countries (Shragai 2017). Yet, just by virtue of being a U.S. American “gringo” in Costa Rica, they acquired a sense of privilege; one that stemmed from their national origin, reflective of its hemispheric hegemonic power, from their “whiteness,” and from the delicate interplay of their affiliation with and detachment from both their homeland and their adoptive country.

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² Informants' names have been changed to protect their privacy.

Employing an historical perspective and a migration studies conceptualization, my aim in this article is twofold. Firstly, I propose a rethinking of the 20th and early 21st century concept of privilege migration and its frequently accompanied term, lifestyle migration, and offer a new perspective on the often-automatic link between economic wealth and privilege among immigrants of this type. Most of the U.S. Americans who immigrated to Costa Rica from the 1950s to the late 1970s were not financially well-to-do, and their lifestyles did not, in fact, change significantly as a result of their migration. Using this phenomenon as a case study enables us to offer a nuanced, bottom-up perspective of the means by which non-economic privilege is constructed and enacted. Secondly, expanding the contemporary concept of privilege migration to encompass the Cold War period, offers a more complex understanding of U.S. American patterns of immigration to Costa Rica and the identity-work these immigrants enacted.

U.S. immigrants who arrived in Costa Rica in the mid-20th century, several decades before the concept of privilege migration and lifestyle migration became buzz words in migration studies, and before Costa Rica itself became a prime destination for this type of immigration (Spencer 2011; van Noorloos 2013), are a particularly apt test case for such a reconsideration of the link between material wealth and privilege. While the a-symmetrical political and economic power relations between the two *countries* are explicit and well-known, on the *individual* level the economic gap was more blurred during this period. Until the late 1970s the Costa Rican colon and the U.S. dollar were more or less equal, and it was only following the severe financial crisis that Costa Rica experienced in the late 1970s that the colon was significantly devaluated. By 1981 the exchange rate already stood at 60 colones to 1 US dollar and kept on rising (Seligson and Muller 1987: 315). This had an immediate impact on the standard of living in the country and generated a significant gap between U.S. Americans and Costa Ricans. Thus, a consideration of U.S. American immigrants in Costa Rica between 1950 to 1980 enables us to examine a privilege that, in most cases, neither originated from, nor expressed, economic wealth; among immigrants who were not necessarily taking advantage of the global geo-arbitrage and benefitting from global-scale inequalities (Hayes 2018: 62). This consideration has the potential to provide historical background to and new insights on the growing body of research into contemporary north to south and west to east migration flows.

Theorizing Privilege Migration in Historical Context

The terms privilege migration and lifestyle migration were coined in recent decades to conceptualize contemporary forms and patterns of temporary or permanent spatial movement of relatively affluent people who move to places where they believe a better quality of life will result, one that is not necessarily imagined in terms of economic benefits (Janoschka and Haas 2013: 3; See also Benson and O'Reilly 2016, 2009; Torkington, 2012; Croucher 2010, 2012, 2007. For the related terms of amenity migration and high-end migration see Spencer 2011; Pera 2008). As Matthew Hayes suggests, the term lifestyle migration itself “is tied up with the coloniality of global regimes of mobility,” as it underscores the difference between migration that is motivated by work and the quest for economic mobility, compare to flows that are motivated by change in lifestyle, and that, in many cases, include the rejection of work (Hayes 2018: 25).

Beginning in the early 21st century, privilege migration studies, which had until that point concentrated on the migration of northern Europeans to southern Europe and North Africa,



broadened its focus to include similar patterns of population movement in the Americas as well. These studies tend to emphasize asymmetries of power between the sending versus the receiving societies. They also explore the impact of this migration flow in light of the history of U.S. American intervention in what is currently highly popular destinations for immigration (García-Macías and Munck 2020; Hayes 2018; Benson and O'Reilly 2017; Benson 2013; Croucher 2012, 2010, 2007), thus inferring the problematic colonial or neo-colonial undertones propelling this type of migration (Kuntz 2016, 90). It is likely that the past U.S. intervention in these countries, along with ongoing power relations, is what drew U.S. Americans to these territories in the first place, as they introduced them into the consciousness of U.S. culture and created economic and political conditions favoring such migration. The influence of this history is also felt in the way U.S. immigrants were treated as well as their practices of life and construction of identity.

While in dialogue with this contemporary scholarship, the current study breaks new ground with regards to subject matter, periodization, and conceptualization. Firstly, most research on privilege migration focuses on contemporary flows. Examining U.S. American migration to Costa Rica from the 1950s to the 1970s thus predates what Stephen Castles and his colleagues term 'the era of migration' (Castles and De Haas, 2014) in which societies are described as 'mobile' (Urry, 2007). I also contextualize the north to south flow in the context of U.S. hegemony in Cold War Central America. This conflict, which generated significant stresses for the United States both externally and internally, in fact played a significant role in U.S. immigration to Costa Rica during this period.

The study thus fills a lacuna in both historical research and migration studies conceptualization. Contra to studies on U.S. emigration during the Cold War that tend to focus exclusively on ideological factors or emigration of professionals (Rodgers 2014; Anhalt 2009; Hagan 2001; Nash 1970. For an exception see Trundle 2014), in this study I consider privilege as a critical factor in Cold War U.S. migration as well. Moreover, most studies on the subject tend to analyze foreign enclaves of transplanted North American communities who have settled in a specific town or region (García-Macías and Munck 2020; Benson 2013; Croucher 2007). The current study, however, examines a variety of types of U.S. American immigration and settlement throughout Costa Rica over the course of 30 years, and thus provides a broader canvas for the examination of diverse experiences related to privilege.

Research Design and Methodology

The present study is part of a larger research project in the field of historical ethnography that focused on identity-making among U.S. Americans in Costa Rica (Shragai 2022). It is based on a close listening, literally, to the immigrants' voices as they depict their transition to Costa Rica and their negotiation with their privilege status. The choice of oral history, a methodology that is more common in researching under-privileged and illiterate populations, was chosen partly by default. Given that neither the United States nor Costa Rica considered U.S. American emigration/immigration as a problem to be addressed, the immigrants remained largely under the radar of the authorities of both countries, and there is a dearth of written sources in state archives regarding their whereabouts. Oral history was therefore a critical method to uncover this rather latent flow of immigration and explore the immigrants' experiences.

For this research, a total of sixty-five U.S. Americans people who lived in Costa Rica between 1944 and 1980 (intermittently) were engaged in semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. Of the interviewees, 40 (61 percent) were women, and 25 (39 percent) were men. Such a gender imbalance is common in volunteer-based oral history research (Squire 2013, 48; Rodriguez and Cohen 2005), yet it has important implications for the knowledge acquired in this research and the picture it paints of the lives and experiences of U.S. Americans in Costa Rica during this period.

As the U.S. American population in Costa Rica lacks both strong communal institutions and self-documentation, I had to create my own indexes. Each of these began with a contact person in one of the social networks of U.S. citizens in Costa Rica that I identified in the early stages of my research, such as the U.S. Women's Club, a counterculture commune, a church, or a particular neighborhood or region. Using the "snowball sampling technique," I then was able to expand from one informant to the next.

Structurally, the interviews followed the informants' life-course chronologically from the United States to Costa Rica and throughout their lives there, as immigration is a process rather than an act, whose meaning evolves and changes throughout the life course and in relation to the consequences of life in the adoptive country (Baird 2012:59). In addition to oral sources, I also used a number of primary texts, such as the local English-language newspaper in Costa Rica, and non-published works written by the interviewees.

From the American to the Costa Rican Dream: Institutional Power and Individual Privilege

In contrast to other Central American republics, Costa Rica was never officially colonized by the United States. However, from the late 19th century on, U.S.-based fruit corporations made Costa Rica the hub of their activity, contributing to its public image as inept "banana republics" on the one hand, and as exotic tropical haven on the other. The United States expanded its political and economic involvement in Costa Rica during WWII, to the extent that in 1943 Costa Rican political thinker Rodrigo Brenes Facio dubbed it a "semi-colonial" country of the United States (Brenes Facio, 1943, cited in Palmer and Molina 2004: 187). This relationship continued into the following decade, when, as Cold War-related tensions intensified throughout the region, Costa Rica often opted to align itself with the United States, in contrast to the other Central American republics.

During this period the number of U.S. Americans arriving in the country rose from 2,219 in 1950 to 3,453 in 1973. Thus, by the mid-1970s there were, for the first time, more U.S. Americans in the country than the total number of Europeans (Costa Rican census for the years 1950, 1973); a data point reflective of changes in hemispheric power relations. Not included in this number, however, are those U.S. Americans living in the country who were somewhere on the continuum between long-term travelers and undocumented immigrants, a category that Sirkeci and Cohen define as "movers," a term that encompasses the wide range of people who are on the move, yet do not identify themselves or are not identified by the authorities as immigrants (2016: 383-4). According to the estimates of a U.S. American living in Costa Rica since the early 1970s, there were about 30,000 U.S. Americans living in the country during this period (Joshua Steinberger, interview 2009), a discrepancy common in data concerning immigrants of this type (Croucher 2007).



Two other concepts coined by Sirkeci and Cohen (2016) are useful in my consideration of U.S. American migration to Costa Rica in the Cold War period. The first is their Model of Conflicts, which I will attribute to diverse types of conflicts – geo-political, national, and individual; the second is the Culture of Immigration that is useful when considering the creation of the multi-generational communities of U.S. Americans in Costa Rica.

The U.S. Americans who arrived in Costa Rica in the 1950s consisted mainly of employees of U.S. governmental agencies, businessmen, and protestant missionaries who were part of the infiltrating presence of the United States in Cold War Central America. Other U.S. Americans who came to Costa Rica as a consequence—albeit indirectly—of the United States’ hegemonic role in the region, were U.S. women, who married Costa Rican men, veterans of WWII, whom they met while the latter were studying in U.S. universities thanks to the 1944 G.I. Bill.

During this period (1950s-1970s) Costa Rica also attracted U.S. dissidents who opposed the U.S.’s increasingly aggressive pursuit of global hegemony and who sought to distance themselves from their homeland both geographically and ideologically. They were attracted to Costa Rica by the country’s self-proclaimed status as the “Switzerland of Central America,” an image it had been projecting since the 19th century and one that was further strengthened by the abolition of the national army in 1948 and the implementation of a variety of far-reaching social policies (For a critical analysis of the Costa Rican peaceful and egalitarian ethos see Kordick 2019: chap.1). Among these immigrants was a group of Quakers, conscientious objects to the Korean War, who moved to Costa Rica in the 1950s. As the first organized settlement of U.S. Americans in Costa Rica, the Quakers contributed significantly to the creation of a culture of migration (Sirkeci and Cohen, 2016: 392) from the United States to Costa Rica. They were joined, in the 1960s and 1970s, by young people who were part of U.S. counterculture movement. According to my interviews, particularly at a time when the United States was buffeted by socio-economic and ethnic conflict at home and armed political conflicts abroad, many U.S. citizens, disillusioned with the American Dream, sought to replace it with a Costa Rican one.

However, given the constructed nature of these narratives of immigration, collected some forty to sixty years after the act of migration and inevitably shaped and re-shaped over the years of living in Costa Rica, in response to both local criticism and self-doubt, it is critical to be attuned to the hierarchy of values implicit in these accounts. Some push-and-pull factors—primarily ideological ones—are regarded as more legitimate and worthy and are therefore explicitly told, while other factors, derived from personal distress or economic difficulties, are suppressed or downplayed. We should therefore wonder whether in fact it was their animosity to the Nixon administration that caused young counterculturalists to leave, or was it a bitter conflict with their fathers? Some forty years later, these distinctions have blurred.

For its part, Costa Rica was eager to receive immigrants from its wealthy, powerful, northern neighbor, both as validation of the country’s self-image as “white” and “civilized,” as well as a way to improve these features and better its economic situation. To that end, in 1964 the country passed the *Ley de Pensionados* (Law of Retirees, see Puga 2011), which granted residential status to immigrants, regardless of their age, on condition that they deposit into Costa Rican banks a monthly sum, which, although it grew over the years, in 1964 stood at the not particularly exorbitant amount of \$300 USD. Several thousand U.S. Americans arrived

in Costa Rica as a result of this law. Although these immigrants were not necessarily wealthy, given that their status was defined by monetary criteria I will not address them in this article.

Working Within and Against Privilege

Mark Bach was a young geologist and a Vietnam War veteran who settled in Costa Rica in 1968 while on a journey that was supposed to have taken him across Latin America. In San José, he frequented the weekly square dances organized by the U.S.-Costa Rican Cultural Center, seeing these events as an opportunity for him and his fellow single U.S. American men to meet single Costa Rican women, who in turn were there in order to meet U.S. American men, who were considered to be potentially advantageous matches. At the same time, Bach also took part in anti-Vietnam war protests held in front of the U.S. embassy in San José, taking full advantage of the protection from persecution by the Costa Rican police that his U.S. passport afforded him, even in the midst of carrying out anti-U.S. activities. Moreover, as a U.S. citizen Bach did not bother to acquire legal status in Costa Rica, as he was considered a welcome guest. Contra Nicaraguan immigrants who were considered “a problem” (see Sandoval 2004), U.S. Americans were politely asked to register as residences: ‘We’d been here for years, ten-fifteen years, they called us up and said, “Would you please come down and register? We have so many of you now.” So we all went down and got our residency’ (Bach, interview 2009).

Thus, even when rejecting their home country, the source of their privilege, the status of being a U.S. American protected U.S. citizens in Costa Rica. It also led many to feel that certain behaviors were expected of them. Wilford (Wolf) Guindon, came to Costa Rica in the early 1950s, after being released from a U.S. prison, where he had served time as a conscientious objector to the Korean War. He was among the founders of the Quaker colony of Monteverde. Due to his contacts in the United States, he was also one of the first salesmen of chainsaws in Costa Rica and felt obliged to act upon his privilege status. “By coming to what was called an ‘undeveloped’ country I saw this as a way to contribute to its development, converting forest jungle into pasture” (Guindon et al. 2001: 105).

The Privilege of Withdrawing

The immigrants of the 1950s-1970s tended to distance themselves from the material privilege connected to or originating in the United States. Thus, for example, when asked if she had considered joining the U.S. American women's club, Sharon Abrahams, who had arrived in Costa Rica in the 1970s, responded, “Oh no, it was for the old wealthy ladies” (Abrahams, interview 2009). In fact, most U.S. Americans in Costa Rica that I interviewed articulated their sense of privilege as the freedom from affiliation and responsibility vis-à-vis both their homeland and their adoptive country, or indeed any national framework.

“I was a lady of leisure,” confessed Mary Thompson when she described her life as a U.S. immigrant in Costa Rica in the early 1950s. Hailing from a working-class background in Bedford, Massachusetts, Thompson grew up during the Great Depression and came of age during WWII. She was working as a teacher when she met her husband, a Costa Rican army veteran who had taken advantage of the GI Bill to study civic engineering in the United States, and followed him to Costa Rica. Settling in the San José area, she recounted her afternoons visiting friends with her toddler son, while the *china*, the local term for nanny, stayed home and took care of her baby girl: “I drove around to meet other American women... I was a



lady of leisure. I was very lucky” (Mary Thompson, interview 2008). Although critical of her husband's machoist attitudes, Thompson stressed that this had not led to her filling ultra-conservative and traditional roles as a wife and mother. Rather, instead of suffering under the burden of a dual marginality, as a woman and as a foreigner, her position as a U.S. woman *in* Costa Rica enabled her to escape both the class and gender expectations experienced by U.S. housewives in the 1950s, as well as, to a large extent, the burdens and limitations of a middle-class Costa Rican wife. Thompson, who at the time of the interview was over 80 years old, made a point of noting that after her divorce from her Costa Rican husband, she opted to neither acquire Costa Rican citizenship nor to return to the States, and instead bought a burial plot in San José's cemetery for foreigners (*el cementerio de los extranjeros*).

This sense of freedom from restraints is apparent also in the biography of Thomas Dent, who arrived in Costa Rica two decades later and under very different circumstances. The son of a farmer's family from the San Joaquin Valley in California, Dent served as a paratrooper in the Vietnam War. After completing his tour of duty, he returned home only to find that his family had lost their land and were now scattered all over the country. Unsure what to do next, Dent joined the Peace Corps and was stationed in Costa Rica. Arriving there, according to his testimony, with only a hundred dollars in his pocket and not much else, he soon married a Costa Rican woman and upon completing his commitment to the Peace Corps, went to work as a farmer in the Central Valley, selling his wares at local farmers markets and living very similarly, in terms of standard of living, to the local *campesinos*. His privilege was grounded, according to his testimony, in the non-alignment that he felt. “I'm somewhat disillusioned, or very disillusioned, depending on what day you talk to me, with government in general and just that whole thing of flag and country and stuff like that” (Dent, interview 2009).

Professional Continuity vs. Cultural Changes

Privilege migration is often connected to a change in lifestyle and is often associated with the romantic idea of “quitting the rat race” for a calmer, more idyllic experience, a move enabled by taking advantage of global economic relations of power (García-Macías and Munck 2020: 384). This was not the case however for the majority of U.S. Americans living in Costa Rica between the 1950s and the 1970s, for whom the transition did not lead to far-reaching or drastic changes in lifestyle.

For some, particularly the hippies who arrived in the 1970s, Costa Rica was perceived as an extension of the bygone era of counterculture in the United States. “It's a pity,” lamented the *Tico Times*, the English-language newspaper in Costa Rica, in a report on a scandal involving public nudity on the part of U.S. Americans in Cahuita, a small town on the Costa Rican Atlantic coast, “These people would fit right into Height Ashbury in the 1960s” (*The Tico Times*, February 25, 1977: 15).

However, even for those looking to continue the lifestyle they had led in the United States, life in Costa Rica was embedded with a new perception of time and self. Nathaniel Davis, a veterinarian who moved to Costa Rica in 1969, was doing the same type of work – taking care of household animals – as he had done in his native New England. Yet, riding his horse through the vast, dry plateaus of the northwestern province of Guanacaste, he felt as if he had entered a time machine and ended up back in the 19th century, reenacting the Wild West that had been brought so vividly to life in the radio plays of his childhood (Davis, interview 2009). Darryl Cole-Christensen came from a family involved in agriculture in California and

went on to establish a vast farm along Costa Rica's southern border. In his memoir, *A Place in the Rain Forest: Settling the Costa Rican Frontier* (Cole-Christensen, 1997), he expresses a similar sense of satisfaction at living the life of a 19th century U.S. American pioneer, despite doing so in 20th century Costa Rica.

Immigrants experienced changes to their sense of time not always in terms of historical periods, but also to the quality of its ebb and flow in the present. Jack Ewing, a native of Colorado, moved to Costa Rica in the early 1970s where he ran a large cattle estate in the southern Pacific region. He wrote about his shift from the U.S. perception of time to that of the local reliance on phases of the moon (Ewing 2005, 22). In 1971 fashion designer Theodor Hage, together with his entire artists' commune, moved from Los Angeles to a small fishing village in Costa Rica. Hage brought with him his stereo and art supplies, and continued his artistic activities in the commune hamlet, which one visitor described as "a Fellini set stuck in the mud" (Linda Iverson, interview 2009). Yet, although his day-to-day activities continued much as before, Hage spoke about a change in the perception of time that significantly affected his sense of being: "You get into this southern linger and everything drifts into nothing" (Hage, interview 2009).

When immigration did change the lifestyle of these immigrants it was not necessarily for the better, especially for women. Many of the U.S. American women who came to Costa Rica had been working as teachers, secretaries, or saleswomen, and their professions had come to play a crucial part in their identity-formation. Once in their adoptive country, they discovered that working outside the home was neither culturally acceptable nor, at times, legally possible, due to their status as residents rather than citizens. For many of these women, the leisure time enforced on them, which Thompson celebrated, was not always desirable, as it pushed them back into the domestic sphere and into more traditional feminine roles. In this regard, the change in their lifestyle also reverberated temporally, and was linked to the perception of Costa Rica as a relic of the past (On the change in space as a change in time see McClintock 1995: 226, 242).

Conclusion

Broadening the scope of the temporal boundaries of the concept of privilege through the consideration of U.S. American immigration to Costa Rica from the 1950s to late 1970s, this article aspires to rethink the linkage between economic wealth and privileged status. As I have demonstrated, most of these immigrants were not economically wealthy or powerful, neither in the United States nor in Costa Rica. Instead, they articulated their sense of privilege in the notion of emancipation from the social constraints of both their homeland and their adoptive country or tried to compensate for their privilege, derived mainly from their U.S. origin, by a sense of obligation to contribute to Costa Rica.

As north to south immigration in the Americas is becoming a significant phenomenon, whose implications, in terms of the impact of immigrants on the receiving society and the relations of power between the receiving and the sending societies, are profound (Croucher 2012: 2), the study of these earlier trends of north to south migration provides important historical background and contextualizes current trends. The examination of various manifestations of privilege and their negotiation, enable us to understand relations of power from the bottom up, and to nuance north to south immigration and acknowledge their heterogeneity.



Willimas, whose story opened this article, recounted in her interview how her Costa Rican idyll came to an abrupt end, not as a result of any attempt at impingement by the Costa Rican authorities, but rather due to a new cohort of U.S. Americans that began arriving in the area during the 1980s. This population, with its material resources and its lack of interest in the local communities: "... came with motorcycles and the equipment and the whole atmosphere totally changed from very *tranquilo* into a nightmare" (Williams, interview 2009). Note her distinction between herself, identified with the local population (*tranquilo*), and her former compatriots, who are firmly in the outsider status (nightmare). Further research into the conflict between these different flows of privileged immigrants, has the potential to offer a deeper and more complex understanding of this central 21st century concept.

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