IF YOU CAN WORK FROM ANYWHERE, WHY WORK ANYWHERE ELSE? FLEXIBLE CITIZENSHIP, REGIMES OF MOBILITY, AND THE DISCOURSE OF DIGITAL NOMADISM

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Amidst the COVID-19 crisis, as much of the world entered lockdowns and issued shelter-in-place orders in an attempt to restrict global mobility, a number of places began launching "digital nomad visas" in order to entice remote workers, largely in communication technology industries, to live and labor abroad. These visas represent a marked shift in the governing strategies of governments. Where once digital nomads were required to declare themselves as entrepreneurs or workers with a company to sponsor their stay (a lengthy, expensive, and bureaucratic process), or declare themselves as "tourists" (but risk deportation if caught extending their stay by authorities), the digital nomad visas that have proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic have provided a legitimate route to flexible mobility through remote work. Varying in length from a few months to two years, these visas provide formalized yet flexible (and temporary) forms of citizenship that attempt to capitalize on the mobilities made possible by both technological infrastructures and new forms of governance that encourage some forms of mobility while restricting or inhibiting others. The discourse of digital nomadism thus emerges as a key site at which to examine the cultural logics of globalization, forms of flexible citizenship and capital accumulation, and regimes of (im)mobility that structure the political economy of movement (Ong, 1999; Salazar and Smith, 2011; Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013).

This paper examines these intersections through a critical discourse analysis of digital nomadism that emerged in popular press articles, government websites, and social media posts promoting digital nomad visas and remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. While research on digital nomadism has thus far examined self-identity construction and lifestyle, technology usage, and self-disciplining labor strategies, less research has expanded this conversation to focus on the ways in which various governments formalize and institutionalize these structures of mobility for their own gain. This paper thus attends to the broader networks of power and capital the digital nomad traverses, as well as the institutions and industries that imagine and capitalize on transnational mobility via the cultural avatar of the digital nomad. At stake in the

discourse of digital nomadism are neo-colonial regimes of mobility and forms of techno-imperialism that reinscribe global inequalities.

Locating the Digital Nomad

Digital nomadism is a term that has entered the cultural lexicon relatively recently to describe a lifestyle unbound from the traditional structures and constraints of office work (Hermann and Paris, 2020). This identity is organized, in part, around the digital technologies and infrastructures that make "remote work" possible, allowing digital nomads to claim "location independence" and granting them the freedom to travel while working. Largely employed as freelancers or as self-styled entrepreneurs, digital nomads assert their independence from the traditional strictures of work through the digital technologies they use at the same time that they remain "plugged in" to the infrastructures, economies, and lifeworlds of Silicon Valley (McElroy, 2019, p. 216). While a number of studies have examined how digital nomads understand their own communities and lifestyles, less research has critically examined how various governments have leveraged the category of digital nomadism to encourage independent workers to participate in their economies via remote work. Previous work on digital nomadism has focused mainly on how the term should be defined, as well as how self-identified digital nomads understand their working practices, uses of technology, and relationships to their communities (Hermann and Paris, 2020).

Methodology

This paper uses discourse analysis to examine the construction and representation of digital nomadism in popular press and industry articles, Instagram posts from official tourism boards, and governmental websites during the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020-July 2021), including visa application requirements. I examine the materials surrounding the visa programs of ten different destinations, including Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Bermuda, Cayman Islands, Croatia, Dubai (UAE), Estonia, Georgia, and Malta. Each of these destinations offered flexible work visas and residency programs in response to the restricted mobility and periods of lockdown imposed by governments and recommended by global health organizations in response to COVID-19.

The "Borderless Battle for Talent": Techno-Imperialism and Regimes of Mobility in the Digital Economy

My analysis reveals the ways in which the figure of the digital nomad has emerged during the COVID-19 crisis as a key site where an imagined global borderless battle for "talent" and technological innovation will be waged. As one industry article put it, "The talent battle is not only between companies but between both companies and countries," underscoring the perceived importance of new visa programs that support flexible, short-term forms of temporary citizenship. This sentiment was echoed by government officials from the UAE to Estonia to Barbados, who emphasize the figure of the digital nomad as a highly skilled worker who will reinvigorate national economies and provide new avenues into tech markets. Importantly, this discursive strategy often links the digital nomad to Silicon Valley companies and infrastructures, thereby

reproducing what Erin McElroy has termed "techno-imperialism," or the materialization of "new nodes and edges that facilitate surplus capital accumulation" and the expansion of Silicon Valley into increasingly intimate and global spaces (2019, p. 220). I argue that the promotional materials surrounding digital nomad visas thus construct an idealized transnational subject and contribute to and reinscribe a global mobility regime, which creates differential and unequal access to the resource of mobility (Shamir, 2005). These visas can be understood as a strategic response by the state to recapture and repurpose mobility and ultimately reinforce local, regional, and national boundaries even as the paradigm of digital nomadism is predicated on notions of freedom and location independence.

My analysis contributes to a broader understanding of how regimes of mobility are imagined, enacted, and enforced through the discourse of digital nomadism. By focusing on the ways in which governmental entities have constructed and communicated ideas of digital nomadism during the COVID-19 pandemic, I seek to add a new perspective to existing scholarship on contemporary forms of techno-imperialism and regimes of mobility.

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