

If you can do it, others can do it, too?: Unacknowledged Privileges in Tourism

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Plain Language Summary

This open letter, composed in a first-year writing course, addresses a Twitter thread initiated by Kristen Gray in which she promoted her relocation to Bali to live and work during the pandemic. The letter identifies Gray's book, which she promotes in the thread, as representative of the significant power imbalances related to tourism in developing nations. These imbalances result in problems for local populations in tourist hotspots, including pricing locals out of their own land and resources, national development that prioritizes tourism over other local interests, and various other issues. This open letter was composed with an imagined context of a travel blog that highlights mindful, responsible tourism.

Publication Category

Course-based Assignment

Academic Context

This Open Letter is a high-stakes assignment in a first-year writing course. Students identify a person or group to whom they write a public letter addressing an issue related to inequality. Students are tasked with, among other things, 1) navigating the dual audience of the addressee and the broader readership of the venue they choose; 2) developing and organizing an effective, researched argument; and 3) using and citing sources in ways that are appropriate to their imagined publication venue.

Dear Kristen Gray,

How lovely it must have felt to finally be able to breathe without being constrained by the thought of where your next meal is coming from. To be able to relax in a fully furnished treehouse embraced by the luscious green forestry, admiring the sound of waves as you float among the turquoise waterbeds. To be able to devour the warmth of vegetable-mixed nasi goreng with a side of grilled satay, served on banana leaf-covered wooden bowls and accessorized with colorful frangipanis. To be able to witness the sun practice its closing scene while you sit among forest trees overlooking the rice fields and river valley.

If it was so easy for you to elevate your lifestyle, then it must mean anyone can do it right?

Nope. Although you might have had the great intention to help others improve their living standards, the [Twitter thread](#) you posted to promote your book, *Our Bali Life is Yours*, failed to acknowledge how privilege played a key role in easing your relocation experience. The truth is that this transition is not as accessible for anyone as you have marketed it to be.

Your twitter thread sheds light on an even larger issue: exploitative tourism relationships between more politically powerful countries and others. One important factor that eases certain people's relocation journey is the power of the passport that they hold. One's passport can provide them with the privilege to maneuver local rules. Many locals who lack this privilege are prone to exploitations because they fall short on their own social hierarchy.

The Power of Passports

Encased with the pride of one's nationality, a passport is more than just a book that reveals the history of your travel within every flip of its pages. It is more than just an identification document that is used to verify a traveler's country of citizenship during airport security checkpoints.

But how can such a small book hold so much power?

Passports also act as a symbol of global political capital, whereby the power of one's passport can be determined by the number of borders it can cross without arranging a visa prior to arrival. [Mazanek](#) (2017) argues that ranked according to the country that can travel visa-free the most, the Visa free ranking system portrays a representation of the world order, with countries upholding more political power dominating the list.

Have you ever considered how the value of your American passport might have somehow made your transfer process to Bali easier? And how in reverse, this might not have been the case if it were a Balinese travelling to America with an Indonesian passport? Due to the difference in political power each country possesses, American citizens generally have more freedom to experience life in other countries than Indonesia citizens.

To put things into perspective, according to the [Henley Passport Index](#), the United States passport is ranked 7th in terms of travel freedom, having access to 186 countries without a travel visa or with a visa on arrival. Whereas in comparison, the Indonesian passport ranks 76th and only have such access to 72 countries.

More specifically, as the United States is part of [Indonesia's visa-waiver list](#), American citizens are provided with the option for a visa-free entry to the country for a maximum of 30 days -which can be extended before the expiry deadline of your tourist or business [Visa on Arrival \(VOA\)](#) or if you applied for the actual respective visa in advance.

In contrast, Indonesia is not part of the list of countries eligible to apply for America's [Visa Waiver Program \(VWP\)](#), which enables visa-free tourist or business related travel to the United states for a maximum of 90 days. So Indonesian passport holders would require more document preparation in order to receive a visa approval prior to travelling to the US.

In terms of migration or relocating for work, both Americans and Indonesians require more extensive documentation to attain the respective visas. Despite this, a major component that differentiates one country's accessibility over the other is the impact of foreign exchange rates. Sustaining a living in Indonesia would be more affordable for an average American than if the roles were reversed. Because of this difference in power dynamics, conflicts of interests between foreigners and locals emerge, such as the gentrification of local environment and resources to accommodate tourists.

It is safe to say that passports and the corresponding national privileges play a vital role in providing certain holders with the ability to more easily develop their living quality in a new place. In this sense, it is unrealistic for you to assume that everyone has similar—let alone equal—opportunities to do so.

New Elite in Town

Your passport is only the tip of the iceberg.

Maybe you didn't realize how your identity as an American in Indonesia alone automatically granted you a higher social status. Maybe it was because you were finally relieved to be able to live more comfortably in comparison to the previous difficulties you faced in America. Or maybe it was because you didn't notice the influence of your American privilege in Bali as you migrated from an environment with a long history of racial discrimination.

But the lack of awareness of your privilege should not be an excuse to disregard the fact that your needs were more easily accommodated because of your national background.

Alongside the power of your passport, the skills that you have developed throughout your upbringing (e.g., ability to speak in English) and experiences (working as a consultant and digital nomad) played a disguised role in making the comfortable Bali lifestyle more accessible. These traits you possess carry great significance in Bali, primarily because [poverty acts as a barrier](#) for many Indonesians to quality education necessary to nurture professional competencies. Climbing up the social ladder and finally being able to afford such luxury typically takes much longer for most locals, if ever. And based on the context you gave of your previous life in the States, it seems that it was not as easy to elevate your lifestyle—

especially in comparison to the rate that you were able to in Bali. Surely you can see that your cultural competency gave you a head start in Bali's social hierarchy.

In this respect, your "disguised privilege" and new elite status became visible in your twitter thread as you were unaware of the advantages that your cultural background provided you and the disadvantages that others may face trying to follow your path. As is the case with most privilege, those who have it often don't realize the struggles others may go through to have what they already possess. Shamus Khan, a sociologist who investigated the characteristics of elites in his book *Privilege*, said "Like new immigrants and middle-class Americans, they believe that anyone can achieve what they have, that upward mobility is a perpetual American possibility." But in many cases, it's not.

Your assumption that just about anyone can achieve the lifestyle you secured in Bali is oblivious of the locals who—just like you previously did—struggle to make ends meet.

Welcome to the Other Side: Locals' Point of View

Despite the different ways that you've supported the Balinese community during your stay, such as regularly purchasing local farmers' produce and using your graphic design expertise to help create table menus for a Balinese restaurant owner, it cannot be denied how the Bali tourist living standard that you promoted online is nowhere near comparable to locals' reality.

With great respect, the local Balinese community are appreciative of the financial leverage that tourism provides, and the developments tourism has motivated are also greatly valued. But sometimes it's unfair how these "developments" are exclusively reserved for the upper class— or how tourists can often get away with maneuvering the local rules solely because of their elevated social status.

This very difference in power dynamics, as a result of nationality-based privileges, sheds light on the predatory relationship between foreigners from developed countries and the locals with limited economic resources. Many locals are unsettled with how their resources and environment have been [gentrified for the sake of tourism](#), but foreigners often lack awareness.

Even the locals themselves have been mapped onto the tourist agenda. For example, Balinese domestic workers, *pembantus*, have been ascribed appropriate for the role of caregiving for aging Westerners. They are seen as "well suited because they are seen as patient, respectful, gentle and affordable" (Cassells, 2012, qtd in [Bell, 2015](#)).

There is nothing wrong with wanting to move to Bali for the sake of improving your living conditions or learning more about the culture. However, it is the way that you and many others market it using labels such as "low-cost luxury lifestyle" and "resort island." These characterizations are harmful as [they misrepresent Bali](#) only as a place for one to "escape" to for the comfort of a tropical wonderland, and they overshadow the major challenges that many locals face daily, in part due to tourism effects.

"People feel stressed and they need a break, so they come to Bali and do whatever they want; they're searching for a place to escape, a place to throw out their trash," [says Dwi Ermayanthi](#), co-owner of Little Talks library café in Bali.

The 150 tons of waste tourism contributes in a day, the [pollution](#) emitted through road congestion, and the [dangers on water supply](#) due in part to the construction of more tourist facilities are some problems that have been overlooked for the sake of tourism. Many Balinese have no choice but to accept the mistreatment as long as they receive the money necessary to support their basic needs.

Do you not realize the impacts of what you are encouraging your online followers to do [during the time of a pandemic](#)? Let alone capitalizing on your book that advises others to enter Bali through cheating the local visa system? Then believing that you were exempted from paying local taxes—upon exceeding 183 days of stay in 12 months—solely because you were earning in US dollars?

Some have criticized the negative online response you received and the reason for your deportation, as a form of anti-black discrimination. But for a Black American in Indonesia, the difference in power dynamic is not the same as it is in America. Your ability to spend in US dollars alone automatically grants you social status that the majority of the locals don't enjoy. I cannot discount race as a factor in your Bali experience. However, your

Twitter thread continues to demonstrate a history of foreigners taking advantage of developing nations.

Domino Effect of Marginalization

Did you know the very rice field view that you championed was the result of [local farmers bribed to sell](#) their main source of income for the purpose of facilitating more tourist spots? The effects of tourism have domino effects.

You may find a \$400 treehouse in Bali very affordable, but this is truly not the case for many Balinese.

As more foreigners relocate to Bali, this dramatically drives up local prices, and currency exchange rates make local prices more affordable for outsiders. As the demand for a limited supply of local resources increases, prices increase.

But what about those who need basic resources but are no longer able to afford it?

This is the case for many Balinese. Due to incentives that prioritize the tourism industry, many locals are simply priced out of living in certain regions of their own land. [Bell](#) (2015) shows that “more than 200,000 Balinese live below the U.N poverty benchmark of \$1.35 a day.” The struggle of affording a basic livelihood contributes to the 275% increase in suicide rate in 2010. In this account, a contrast of experience can be illustrated. While on one end, many expats are able to find an alternative solution to finance a better lifestyle, the majority of local Balinese face extreme poverty on the other end.

A domino effect of marginalization occurs: the relocation of economically marginalized people can further marginalize locals in their new location.

The Verdict

With all that has been said, this open letter is not meant to personally target you as an individual. You are not the problem, but rather what you promoted is a symptom of it. The Twitter thread you posted sheds light on the global issue regarding the predatory tourism relationship between more politically powerful countries over others. It is about how many foreigners tend to get away with abusing the systems of developing countries due to the elevated status they hold.

It seems that it has become a common trend for digital nomads to travel to a “natural wonderland” with a tourist

visa and conduct business remotely—often outside the bounds of what the visa permits legally.

This global problem also goes both ways. If we don't criticize the governments and urbanized locals for blindly wanting to profit from the tourism industry, locals will always fall victim to the rapid urbanization of their homes. If we don't encourage first class citizens with a privilege check, they will inevitably contribute to perpetrating gentrification.

On an individual basis, the least we can all do is to be more aware of how our own privileges have played a role in our lives and choices - especially before we promote our behavior for others to emulate.

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