

## Expat or Immigrant? The Language of Whiteness Tells on Itself

By Andrea Davis, PhD

As someone who studies whiteness and white racial attitudes, I often think about how power and privilege hide in plain sight. And one of the most common places it hides? Language. Let's deconstruct two words to explore this phenomenon: *expat* and *immigrant*. Theoretically, expat and immigrant should mean the same thing, a person living outside of their home country. But we know they don't. A white American working in Ghana is an expat. A Black Ghanaian working in the United States is an immigrant. One is seen as adventurous and worldly; the other is often viewed as suspicious, possibly even a burden. These words don't just describe where people live; they reveal who gets to belong and how. And that's not random. That's racial. That's white supremacy culture at play.

For clarity, *White supremacy* is both a belief system and a power structure that claims white people are superior to people of color, also known as people of the global majority. It operates not only through overt acts like racial violence and hate groups but also through more subtle channels like policies, institutions, language, and everyday norms that uphold racial hierarchies. Importantly, white supremacy isn't just about individual prejudice, it's about the systemic privileging of whiteness across all aspects of life, from housing and education to immigration and media. Whereas *white supremacy culture* refers to the everyday habits, values, and ways of functioning that are often seen as "normal" in the U.S. but in reality reinforce white dominance. These cultural norms are usually invisible, unquestioned, and widely accepted—making them especially hard both to detect and to challenge. In short, white supremacy is the overarching system of racial power; white supremacy culture is how that system shows up in day-to-day life, often disguised as business as usual.

Language that sounds neutral on the surface often carries a deep history of racial hierarchy and quiet violence underneath. "Expat" is a term that silently says, "I chose to be here. I'm valuable. I belong." It signals status, freedom, even glamour, even while occupying someone else's land. Now compare that to "immigrant", a term that's been politicized and weaponized, especially against Black and brown people. "Immigrant" is (improperly) loaded with assumptions about struggle, desperation, and lack. Even when immigrants are highly skilled, they're rarely framed as desirable unless white supremacy culture decides they are. They're forever seen as guests, as "others", or even as intruders some people's eyes.

I saw this up close when I had an extended vacation in Belize. When I was around groups of white travelers, other vacationers from the States often asked if I was an expat—warmly, curiously, assuming a certain level of access and ease. But when I was alone, especially in spaces where locals or officials interacted with foreigners, the questions changed. "Did you emigrate here?" "Are you moving permanently?" "What kind of work do you do?" The energy shifted, and the assumptions seemed to shift with it. I didn't change—but my temporary proximity to whiteness did. That's the thing: as a Black woman, I don't benefit from white racial privilege (although I do indeed benefit from other types of privilege based on the identities I hold). However, I'm not immune to the ways that proximity to whiteness can offer protection, cover, or even elevated status in certain global contexts. That's how white supremacy culture functions. It

doesn't just reward whiteness; it also extends certain benefits to those who stand close enough to it, behave in ways it deems to be in alignment with it, or move through spaces in its shadow.

Whiteness moves through the world expecting welcome. It doesn't see itself as foreign, no matter where it goes. It doesn't matter if it's Belize or Bangkok, Nairobi or Naples, white people are presumed to belong. The evolution of language is a key aspect of quietly reinforcing these racialized power dynamics because language doesn't just describe reality—it shapes it. Take, for instance, the term “digital nomad”—the latest evolution of the expat narrative. “Digital nomad” paints mobility as a form of freedom and productivity, as long as the person moving through the world does so with a laptop, a passport from the Global North, and proximity to whiteness. It reframes privilege as innovation. It allows one person to get praised for seeking opportunity outside of their home country, while another person may get punished for doing the same thing.

And that's why all of this is so important—language isn't “just words”. Language does the heavy lifting for systems of dominance, even when it's dressed up as polite or neutral. It influences how people are treated, what policies get *passed*, what policies get *enforced*, who feels safe, and who stays on edge. Language exposes that we are still living in a global racial order that decided who gets to roam and who gets detained. Who gets to explore and who gets deported. Who gets to “experience culture” and who gets asked to explain their presence. When I hear “expat,” I listen for the subtext. When I hear “immigrant,” I ask who's using it and why. Words tell on us. And these words tell a story about race, power, and who the world was built to accommodate. We can't fix what we won't name. So I'm naming it.