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SPECIAL ISSUE

Introduction: Understanding Neo-nomadic Mobilities beyond Self-Actualisation

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In 2018, Noel Salazar presented a paper at the 5th World Humanities Forum in Busan, South Korea, entitled “*Moveo Ergo Sum: Mobility as Vital to Humanity and Its (Self)image*,” in which he reflected on the existential need for people to move. *Moveo ergo sum* became the motto for the 2021 Global Mobility Humanities Conference (GMHC), encouraging us to think about the multiple ways in which mobility intersects with the construction of modern subjectivities (Salazar, “Introduction”). The expression recalled a quote from one of Fabiola Mancinelli’s research participants, a digital nomad from the US, whose words and unusual biography as a location-independent entrepreneur read like a declaration of self-actualisation through mobility, the desire to realise her full potential by constantly putting herself outside her comfort zone: “Travel is who I am, and this is not negotiable” (426). This remarkable coincidence was the trigger for us to propose the panel “Understanding Neo-nomadic Mobilities beyond Self-actualisation” to unpack the mobility-identity nexus as an analytical lens to explore the phenomenon of contemporary nomads.

Although the label has recently gained traction in popular media, the figure of the “nomad” keeps returning over the years, in reference to literal or metaphorical forms of extreme mobility that have seduced scholars for very different reasons, ranging from marginal(ised) subjects to characters of freedom and resistance. The Greek roots of the word bear a link to pasture, recalling the continuous displacement of herders searching for fresh grazing land for their animals. With this connotation, nomadism entered seminal ethnographic studies describing pastoralist tribes and people relying on ongoing spatial mobility for their livelihood (Engebrigsten 43). The way of life for people who do not reside continually in the

same place but move cyclically or periodically was traditionally associated with so-called primitive societies and considered incompatible with the mobility regimes imposed by modern nation-states.

The resistance to state power makes nomadism a powerful metaphor in postmodern philosophies of difference, where it symbolises intellectual outsiders rebelling against hegemonic forces (Pels), a principle of political action (Deleuze and Guattari; Hardt and Negri; Kaplan), but also the affirmation of feminine subjectivity (Braidotti; see Sutherland). In addition, the nomad's capacity to be at home everywhere and yet supposedly not bounded to any territory has been used as a metaphor to highlight the potential of ubiquity offered by hyperconnectivity and digitalisation (Meyrowitz; MacLuhan; Makimoto and Manners). As a result of these shifting but sequential rebounds, the nomad label has extended in recent years to include many categories of mobile people from the Global North who self-define as nomads and for whom frequent territorial displacements fashion a way of life. The intersection between the mass adoption of portable technologies and the "new era of mobility" (UN General Assembly) bridges the gap between metaphor and embodied experience, turning nomadism into a possible lifestyle pursued as the utopia of deterritorialisation and a practice of cosmopolitanism (Salazar, "Post-national Belongings").

New nomads have drawn the attention of popular literature and media, who have romanticised them as freedom-seeking individuals, drawing on an association between movement and freedom that was curiously absent from early ethnographies about nomads and emerged only later, in their adoption by postmodern thinkers (Engebriksen). While articles about digital nomads, remote professionals who work online whilst abroad or on the road, fill the headlines of economic magazines preconising the future of work, Chloé Zhao's award-winning movie *Nomadland*, an adaptation from Jessica Bruder's book (Bruder), delivers a vivid ethnographic portrait of a growing community of North Americans who choose to become "houseless" to bypass the precarity of a dire economic situation. Despite being located at two opposed extremes, these examples suggest that freedom and precarity intersect in the nomad figure in different yet not entirely charted ways. At the same time, they show how, pushed by popular media, non-conformist practices are brought into the spotlight in a particular way of narrating the transformations of the social "mainstream." This context oriented the conception of this Special Issue, in which we invited contributors to consider the meanings of nomadism in the age of mobility, when constant flow, change and flexibility are much closer to being hegemonic constructs than ideals of resistance (Sutherland). The Special Issue pursues a two-fold objective: (1) fostering a grounded debate on the analytical fruitfulness of the neo-nomad concept to describe historically situated empirical phenomena, and (2) exploring the sociopolitical consequences of these allegedly alternative, although possibly highly individualistic, forms of living for collective projects, such as communities, welfare, and the state.

Scholars in the social sciences and the humanities have used the nomad label invariably to refer to urban vagrants (Spradley; May) as well as types of relatively privileged

transnational countercultures, such as third culture kids (Mclachlan; Schaetti) and global nomads (D'Andrea; Kannisto; Bousiou; Kalčič et al.). Most of these studies highlight (self) marginalisation, countercultural values and—above all—the celebration of limitless freedom as central discursive elements of how neo-nomads tell their stories. In 2006, anthropologist Anthony D'Andrea proposed a theory of neo-nomadism, considering it as a “conceptual middle-ground” (97) to start exploring the emergence of new forms of subjectivity and identity in times of globalisation and cultural change. The global nomads of his research travel around the world following techno music, drugs, and New Age spirituality all of which are quintessential elements of an alternative lifestyle (D'Andrea). Similarly, life on the margins is the prominent feature of the global nomads described by Päivi Kannisto; full-time travellers without a fixed abode or employment (Kannisto). The nomad label also defines Bousiou's research subjects, a group of performers and adventurers pursuing hedonism and uncompromising individualism on a Greek island (Bousiou). In the case studies collected by Kalčič et al. peripatetic nomadism is a survival strategy used by different groups of people from the Global North and South alike. The authors use the concept of “marginal mobility” to describe their lifestyles which are simultaneously liminal, subversive and highly individualistic, as they do not create politicised identities or communities. Although without an explicit reference to the nomad concept, similar countercultural practices can also be found in lifestyle mobilities (Duncan et al.).

In all these examples, neo-nomadic living proclaims resistance against dominant values, a “negative diaspora” (D'Andrea 103) whose protagonists can live outside conventions and activate new modes of self-identity through mobility. Theorising around different configurations of the mobility-freedom nexus, previous studies capture the nomad as a hero of modernity, one that shakes the ontology of sedentarism (Cresswell). However, as Mari Korpela critically points out, these studies focus on participants' self-representations (Korpela 3366), telling only one side of the story. She suggests that to gain a more holistic approach, it would be necessary to pay attention to how structural constraints and mobility regimes bound these global nomads' agencies, shedding light on the unequal economic conditions of access to hypermobile lifestyles and the political frameworks that allow or hinder mobility privileges. Elaborating on this critique, this Special Issue sought contributions to study the challenges neo-nomadic pose to individuals, places, and states.

Whilst considering different expressions of ongoing mobility, the four contributions in this Special Issue allow for discussions on how freedom is often used as a fetish and ambivalent concept, a rhetoric of self-entrepreneurialism that hides vulnerability as a condition of neoliberal times and a constitutive feature of life in mobility. Such consideration contrasts sharply with the status of many of the research participants as holders of privileged nationalities. Consequently, it leads us to contemplate how they perform a kind of “discordant freedom,” “strung between the mobility rights granted by their national citizenship and the layers of norms and bureaucratic requirements that pin them down” (Mancinelli and Germann Molz 16). In this sense, their way of living comes

out simultaneously as utopian and dystopian, a form of self-actualisation skating close to constant uncertainty and heightened individual responsibility.

In this regard, there is a substantial difference with D'Andrea's global nomads, whose agency is "informed by cultural motivations that defy economic rationale" (98). Conversely, the mobile people described in the presented case studies perform what de Certeau describes as "tactics" of everyday life: "a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus" (219). As the "the art of the weak" (219), tactics are opportunistic adaptations to the circumstances, bypass manoeuvres (Mancinelli and Germann Molz) or forms of border artistry (Kannisto) that use the cracks of power to bend structures to mobile people's advantages. Overall, it seems that, as Korpela points out, despite celebrating the ethos of freedom, neo-nomads do not genuinely oppose the system; instead, they try to navigate it to maximise their benefits. All these considerations complicate the celebration of freedom as a constitutive feature of the nomad's way of living (Abram et al.), challenging the core of their postmodern figuration. If for Hardt and Negri nomadic mobility brought political freedom (Hardt and Negri), the case studies in this Special Issue contrarily suggest how the mainstream use of the nomad label hides the risk of producing political disengagement for individuals, collectives, and states.

Célia Forget's research on North-American full-time RVers—people living year-round in a recreational vehicle—focuses on their paradoxical practices of home and territory. These mobile people are homeless in the eye of the state, as they do not comply with the apparently trivial obligation to have a permanent postal address. So, they choose one based on convenience, trying to maximise the perks of multiterritoriality whilst trying to maintain their rights as citizens. At the same time, while on the move, they paradoxically tend to reproduce the referencing system of control used by state-power, appropriating and organising their campgrounds' space in much the same way sedentary people do, putting up street name signs and numbers and paying rent for their lot. They disengage from the idea of belonging anywhere but still strive to create a "rootedness in wandering."

Lorena Izaguirre and Laure Sandoz bring together two different cases of self-employed "people on the move," digital nomads in Barcelona (Spain) and street vendors in São Paulo (Peru), associating the conceptualisation of neo-nomadism with the emergence of a self-entrepreneurial subjectivity. The two groups use mobility to redefine and pursue their model of success while experimenting with non-conventional tactics to tackle the risks and uncertainties of securing their livelihood. Despite their diverse nationalities, unequal social conditions and power differential, their entrepreneurial selves embody all the contradictions of flexibilisation in strikingly similar ways, requiring "the disposition to be spatially mobile but also a willingness to constantly adapt to a changing world."

Nataša Rogelja Caf delves into the experiences of maritime lifestyle migrants, people who travel, work, and live on sailing boats. Beyond their aura of hypermobility, Rogelija finds out that their lifestyle has more to do with circular stillness than movement. The liveaboard

of the Mediterranean—another name for her interlocutors—only sail around during the warmer months, while tending to remain anchored from November to March. Their mobile way of life revolves around ongoing circular movement between winter and summer ports, the sea and the land, the country of origin and the place they anchor their boat. These intersecting mobilities allow them to escape to parallel geographies, but also from various problems they may encounter, such as unemployment and fast-paced working conditions.

Mari Toivanen's contribution addresses the case of digital nomads, focusing on the commodification of their neo-nomadic way of life. Her study brings to our attention an interesting aspect of the transformation of previously counter-cultural practices into a mainstream phenomenon, pointing out the development of a specific infrastructure of mobility-sensitive services internationally offered by private and public agents to cater for the needs of travelling remote workers. Such an offer, Toivanen argues, shapes and capitalises on digital nomads' mobile trajectories while fostering the production of alternative state bureaucracies (such as special visas, insurance schemes and tax consultation services), which explicitly target these relatively privileged travellers. This is an interesting case in point for future explorations on the effects of neo-nomadic mobilities on the future of work and organisations.

Together with this introduction, the four contributions to this Special Issue ethnographically and conceptually illustrate the complexity of the phenomenon of contemporary nomads, suggesting that an ongoing mobility choice is not only a means of expressing and narrating identity, but could also be considered a strategic choice to negotiate the increasing precarity and the fading social welfare in developed countries.

Competing Interests

The author(s) reported that no competing interests exist.

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