A practice of togetherness: Home imaginings in the life of location-independent families

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I examine how home is imagined and socially constructed in the life of "location-independent families" (LIF). Location-independence is a form of lifestyle mobility based on the possibility of running an online business from anywhere in the world and the choice to homeschool the children. Through an examination of families' stories based on in-depth interviews and virtual ethnography, the article explores the ways families-on-the-move negotiate their idea of home at the complicated intersections between security and freedom; material dispossession and need for attachment; isolation and sense of community. LIFs' imagination of home is not bound to a static, fixed, geographical place but takes a contextual and processual dimension, as social process and lived experience. Its core is the simultaneous physical presence of the family members and different home-making practices.

Introduction

This paper explores the way home is imagined and socially constructed in the life of "location-independent families" (LIFs). Location-independence is a form of lifestyle mobility based on the possibility of running a business online. People who embrace it also define themselves as "digital nomads" (Makimoto and Manners, 1997), as they can work anywhere they can connect to the Internet thanks to the support of digital technology. Consequently, they are able to alternate mobility with medium-to-long-term periods of temporary residence in different locations. This pattern of nomadic travel and remote work is combined with the homeschooling of the children.

Despite the increasing academic interest in mobilities and the interplay between leisure, travel and migration, not much attention has yet been paid to the social practices, imaginaries and relationship networks connected to a life of permanent travel, with its increasingly blurring boundaries between work and leisure, movement and mooring, space and place. By virtue of their continuous mobility, the experience of location- independent families provides an interesting and still under-researched context to reflect upon theoretical issues raised by nomadic life, and observe, at the same time, the specific dynamics embedded in a setting of contemporary mobility. At the complex intersections between freedom and security, material dispossession and the need for attachment, this article revolves around the imaginings of home: its purpose is to explore the ways home is narrated and experienced when dwelling without a fixed residence and to unravel its different social, emotional and symbolic meanings.

1.1 Lifestyle mobilities: theoretical framework

Lifestyle mobilities has become a popular term to cover a wide array of "on-going forms of voluntary relocations entailing semi-permanent moves of varying duration" (Cohen et al., 2013: 7). Lifestyle choices are seen as a set of tangible practices that reflect individual aspirations, values and attitudes (Stebbins, 1997; Salazar, 2014) and represent ways in which individuals express their desire for a unique personal identity. In recent decades, forms of translocal and transnational mobility have become one way to corporally embody this desire for distinction. As a consequence, lifestyle mobilities have seen a significant increase in typology, scale, scope, and intensity worldwide, which has raised interdisciplinary academic interest. Kannisto (2016) divides the wide-ranging literature on the topic into three strands based on individuals' relationships with places: studies on long- term travel, lifestyle

migration, and professional lifestyle travel. Studies on long-term travellers have analysed various niches of youth travel, such as backpackers, drifters, flashpackers and lifestyle travellers (e.g. Cohen, 1973; Cohen S.A. 2010, 2011; Hannam and Ateljevic, 2008; Hannam and Diekmann, 2010; Paris, 2012; Richards and Wilson, 2004; Wilson et al., 2009; Kannisto, 2016). Their mobility pattern implies a temporary journey of variable duration, which retains a home base in the country of origin and the possibility to return. Lifestyle migrants, on the other hand, are in search of a new home country with a better quality of life, generally in places with lower cost of living and milder climates (e.g. Benson and O'Reilly, 2009; D'Andrea, 2006; Korpela, 2009; O'Reilly, 2000; Casado-Diaz, 2011; Benson and Osbaldiston, 2014; Torkington et al., 2015). Retirement migration has received especial attention as a key type in this strand (e.g. Benson, 2011; Benson and O'Reilly, 2009; Gustafson, 2008; Balkir and Sudas, 2014), where emphasis is placed more on relocation than continuous mobility. In the case of the professional lifestyle traveler, a flexible profession is often the trigger, in that it allows the worker to move to different countries, taking advantage of short-term contracts (e.g. Inkson and Myers, 2003; Jokinen et al., 2008; Lynn-Ee Ho, 2011; Suutari and Brewster, 2000).

Situated half-way between lifestyle travellers and migrants, LIFs engage in slow but continuous travel, where resettlement can only accidentally be part of the picture. As family members work and study on the move, mobility happens in a work-leisure continuum and escapes dichotomies considered fundamental for the understanding of travel, such as the binary opposition between home and away, or work and vacation. As a travel lifestyle, this choice is situated mid-way on the continuum between temporary, leisure-driven mobility,such as tourism and permanent migration; nevertheless it has some important differences from both of these ways of travel. While temporary mobility assumes a circular return to a usual residence, LIFs—as I will discuss below—lack a significant home base and instead create multiple "homes along the way" to which to return. Unlike permanent migration, which entails a permanent change of usual residence (Bell and Ward, 2000), the LIF project does not necessarily preclude the intention to return, but "a return to any identified origin cannot be presumed" (Cohen et al., 2013: 9). In the long run, LIFs consider the possibility of acquiring a seasonal home base, but this might not necessarily be in their home country, nor must it entail an interruption of travels.

One of the elements that make mobile lifestyles relevant is that they not only imply spatial displacement, but also are underpinned by a complex set of cultural motivations, discourses and practices. For instance, while emphasising mobility as an expression of personal agency and freedom of choice, LIFs make family a focus of this discourse. As in other forms of lifestyle mobilities, the general aspiration is a better "quality of life" (Korpela, 2010; Gustarfson, 2001; Akerlund and Sandberg, 2015), and for LIFs an essential part of quality of life is having more "quality time" to spend together as a family. This involves the withdrawal of the children from the formal education system and the combination of travel

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with forms of immersive, experiential and transformative learning, as advocated by the philosophy of worldschooling (Ferraro, 2016). Travel is referred to as a means of personal redefinition and self-expression, as well as a defining aspect of personal and family identity: taking the nomadic leap is considered the first significant step in creating a different family project based on tighter bonds.

1.2 Home: a physical structure and a symbolic space

Tourism and migration are based on the assumption that people have a home (Kannisto, 2016). Home and away are usually thought as a spatial dichotomy, where home is the reference point and static alterity of the coordinates of travel. However, it may be asked, what remains of "home" when travel is not a temporary experience but a permanent way of life? How is home imagined, embodied and narrated in mobile space and time?

In a world traversed by the paths of countless mobilities—coerced and voluntary, physical and virtual—home acquires ambiguous meanings. It can be a place of birth, a country, or a place of residence and permanence; it is generally considered the beginning and end of the circular movement of travel, starting with the separation from the physical and symbolic place of belonging and finishing with the reintegration into the daily routine; but home is also a place of safety, self-expression and intimacy. In many Western countries, there is an ideological connection between home and the bounded, physical space that we normally call the house. This latter becomes a *locus* for narratives and expectations about class, welfare, and family composition. The material home is not only a dwelling structure, but also a key device of self-representation, a symbol for "transmitting and codifying an image of oneself to others" (Garvey, 2001: 47); it is, in other words, a powerful status marker. At the same time, home embodies a normative order in society, as it signifies stability in the form of a financial asset to demonstrate citizens' solvency and ability to earn their living (DePastino, 2003: xxi). The simple identification of home with a fixed space in the world, however, does not allow us to grasp fully the latent meanings that are produced when this notion is experienced in mobility, for home is not only a building, but also a place of dwelling, a place made of stories and relationships. The social components allow us to draw a line between house and home, between the material place of residence and the symbolic space of attachment, comfort, intimacy, and feelings. Beyond its material elements and physical existence, home thus reveals itself also as a place for contextual relationships and emotional bonding. For Mary Douglas (1991: 288), home is "an embryonic community" for it reproduces on a small scale a form of socio-cultural order that is embodied in a pattern of regular doings and communitarian practices. It is a "kind of space" (1991), where emphasis is placed on the ideas of routinisation and localisability.

This article builds on the notion of home as a social context, and places at its core a dynamic of discourses, feelings and practices. Home-making practices are central to this approach, as they are ways to transform space into place, to domesticate it by creating a

system of references endowed with meaning. Through home-making, space becomes a place in the form of a unique and complex entity "to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who give it meaning" (Tuan, 1979). Rather than considering home as a fixed locale, I examine home in the context of movement and analyse it as a social process and a lived experience. In this context, home is a "structure of feeling" (Appadurai, 1996: 189). Echoing Raymond Williams' term (1961), Appadurai defines a "structure of feeling" as a dynamic of creation of new forms of social, local life. This form of production of locality is a work of the imagination as social practice, an embodiment of the collective will to transform reality and create new horizons of possibility. A "structure of feeling" is the result of intentional activity and as such, it requires agency and purpose.

2. Research context and methods

The study of LIFs presents several methodological challenges to conventional ethnographic techniques, which require the localised presence of the researcher in the field. As highly mobile global subjects, LIFs span virtually the entire globe, but very little is known about their favourite destinations and travel patterns. On the other hand, LIFs' experience is permeated by the digital culture. The Internet has granted them social visibility and endowed them with like-minded followers; many of their social networks, as well as their social imaginaries and narratives, are mediated by digital networks and the related material infrastructures. As a consequence of the challenging nature of the chosen field of study, this Preliminary approach tackles the research questions using the methods of virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), supporting it with interviews aimed at gaining a deeper insight of the families' everyday life.

The main virtual field of observation is a social network community of location-independent families that at the time of writing featured about 800 members, and was in constant growth during the 6 months of research. Due to the delicate nature of Internet exchanges about children, membership in this group is restricted to families with children. In order to gain access, I introduced my family, and myself while at the same time openly positioning myself as a researcher. I launched a call for volunteer families, based on the main requirement of being "on the move". I recruited twelve families in total, some of which were reached using the snowball method. After the first contact through social media and email, I interviewed participants via video conference calls, which were recorded in audio and video and later transcribed.

The majority of the research participants were from the United States, a few from the United Kingdom, one from Bulgaria and one from the Philippines. All families were composed of two parents and one to four children, except one case of a single mother. The parents' age was between 27 and 49, with the majority between 36 and 41. Socio-demographic profiling suggests that location independence for families, similarly to that of

digital nomads (Altringer, 2015), is a mid-career choice, undertaken primarily by well-educated middle-class people from Western countries. In some cases, people came from a multicultural background, were raised in migrant families or had had a travelling childhood because of parents' employment.

At the time of the interviews, most families had been on the road from five months to eight years, the average time spent travelling being two and a half years. The families had variable mobility patterns and alternated periods of faster and slower mobility, but most of them described themselves as "slow" travellers. They changed location every two weeks to six months. All LIFs considered the travel choice to be permanent and had no intention of returning to their home base, although those who had been travelling the longest showed a desire to transition to a more permanent dwelling somewhere. Only one family had actually stopped travelling, although they still called themselves location-independent from a professional point of view. Almost all participants had travelled in a number of countries, using all the conventional means of transportation, especially air travel. Only one family, despite being veterans in this lifestyle, had travelled only within their country of origin, the United States.

The children's age range was greater, with the youngest being one and the oldest 17. Except for the youngest ones, who had not yet undertaken formal schooling, all the other children were homeschooled or rather worldschooled, a difference that will be explained later. Although both parents reported being involved in educating the children, in half of the families interviewed, mothers identified themselves as the main facilitator, and dedicated most of their time to this task, though balancing it with other creative, not strictly money-making related, activities.

The methodological research design provided in itself an important finding, as many of the families turned out to be public figures, with personal websites, blogs, newspaper stories or books about their lives. Personal storytelling is a central element in the LIFs' experience: some of the parents interviewed offered motivational talks at conferences, as well as private mentoring sessions to other potentially like-minded families who were considering taking the big leap. Telling their story was a primary means of sociability; this was how families came in contact with each other and were thus able to exchange experiences and information. Story telling was also part of a personal web marketing strategy, since for many families the sharing of their story was part of a wider creative revenue-generating strategy. For this reason, most participants chose to appear in this research using their own names, while a few opted for pseudonyms, when there was a concern about their privacy.

The virtual ethnography consisted of following these families and other ones on various social media sites and personal blogs and websites. This component proved to be very useful in trying to understand the context and relational networks in which LIFs share their personal experiences, beyond individual motivations.

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3. Home imagining

The discourse that LIFs produce about home embodies all the ambiguities of the meaning of home. Challenging the idea of home as a static and bounded space or a "synchronic figure in the landscape" (Miller, 2001:6), LIFs' imaginings of home intersect different material, symbolic and performative dimensions, harbouring sometimes opposed meanings, in both time and space.

3.1 Home as a practice of togetherness

In 2014, Paul and Becky (USA), a digital marketer and a stay-at-home mother from Michigan, embarked on a journey relayed on their blog *Home along the way*, together with their four kids, aged two to eight. As they reported in one of the podcasts published on their website, they wanted "to find a home, and considered the path a way". The subtitle of their blog was "finding home where we find ourselves" and the project took them to several different places in different countries. In the podcast, Becky defined home as "where you feel peaceful in your surroundings". Curiously though, "home" was what they had just left behind, a fixed point in space—somewhere in Michigan—where they were born and raised and a part of their extended family still lived. The house and all their possession had been sold; there was no place to go back to. When I interviewed Paul, he and his family were still on the move. They had bought a motorhome and had already spent several months travelling through the USA and Mexico, slowly heading to Central and South America. All the time they had been on the move, Paul had kept running his digital marketing agency, dedicating six to seven hours per day to it. When I asked him to mention some of the advantages of their mobile lifestyle, he told me that most of his time—work and leisure— was nowadays spent in the same space with his family and he considered this an element of great importance. He considered "home" to be a flexible, hard-to-define word, whose meaning depended on whether we were referring to the children's experience or that of Paul and his wife. For the couple, after many years in a location-dependent mode, "home" still referred to a physical place, where friends and family property are. However, for his children, home was wherever they slept together as a family and kept their most important belongings.

The experience of Suzy (UK), although geographically distant from Paul's, shared some commonalities with his. Only six months into a location-independent lifestyle, this British woman, who travelled with her husband and eight-year-old daughter, still considered home to be in the UK town where she was born and raised. However, on another level, home was wherever she and her family "existed together". With different words, the same idea was expressed by all of the other families: home as a place "where people you love are" (Sandra, USA); or where they "could be together as a family" (Michael, USA). For most, in the time it took to unpack their suitcases (generally two or three days) "that place becomes home".

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Reflecting the old adage "home is where the heart is", LIFs' first discourse about home finds its core in an everyday practice of togetherness, a constant habitude to nurture and share spaces, places and experiences. The outcome of the process is the creation of an emotional and physical bond that—especially because children are involved—helps to create a stability in movement and reproduce a realm of comfort and safety. In this first connotation, home stands as a practiced space that recalls Michel De Certeau's idea of a place as "an instantaneous configuration of positions" and "an indicator of stability" (1984:117). Home is that special kind of place whose ontological significance is established through the synchronic presence of human subjects in movement, a kind of place that acquires meaning through a set of inter-subjective practices. Home becomes a moving entity, "a structure that can be created anywhere" (Patricia, EU). Contrary to other global nomads' narratives (Kannisto, 2016), where the opposite of home is a discourse of homelessness, home is still essential in LIFs' imagining, but rather as a possibility of being together, on a deeper and more meaningful basis.

3.2 Home as an embodiment of the Western script

Although LIFs praise the idea of home as a practice of everyday bonding, this positive meaning, when approached solely from the parents' standpoint, intersects with another one: the image of home as a static physical place from which they have escaped. In this discourse, the notion of home overlaps with that of the house and the idea of property, suggesting a form of mutual belonging: of the house and to the house. In order to understand how this narrative couples with the first one, we need to analyse the implications and the dynamics of the location-independence choice, and its interplay with agency and freedom.

Exploring the personal circumstances that had led these families to embrace the location-independent lifestyle, I learned that the mobility choice emerged from two main drivers: excessive work pressure and the desire to spend a greater amount of time with their children. Before embracing mobility, most of the parents were working between 40 to 60 hours a week just "to survive", and "getting a low quality of life in exchange for high efforts" (Sandra, USA).

> We were becoming so comfortable; we were following the pattern of a UK life (…). We were both working full-time and not spending enough time with our daughter. We became mentally uncomfortable with how comfortable we were; we felt like our whole life was planned up for us. We thought: maybe we could have a different story! (Suzy, UK).

As Suzy's words highlight, long working hours were jeopardizing family life and creating an upward spiral of increasing pressure for social mobility. Despite this condition, however, the established path created a comfort zone, in which there were no decisions to make. This spiral was explicitly referred to by some participants as a form of "script", a

predictable social path of increasing accumulation of wealth and material possession, and described as: "the way you are supposed to believe that things are supposed to go. And if they do not, it is a failure" (Paul, USA). For LIFs, the "script" acts as a form of social pressure to conform, and involves the collection of various kinds of tangible and intangible assets: a college degree, a high-paying secure job, a house, one car then two, a family, savings for college education, then a bigger house, and so on. Life enjoyment is postponed until retirement. This "script" was referred to as a dominant discourse, present in many Western societies, in which the house, and particularly home ownership, becomes a major embodiment of social success (an experience shared by almost all of the research participants). LIFs considered home ownership to be disempowering, as its comfort comes in the form of ties, conformism and predictability, at the expense of agency and personal choices.

The decision to look for an alternative way of life was preceded by a significant event either in their personal or professional sphere: the death of a loved one, psychological and emotional discomfort, redundancy at work. In order to undertake their life of travel, all research participants had sold or rented out their houses, together with nearly all of their belongings. In the interviews, participants gave this act a certain symbolic relevance and described it as a formal distancing from Western values. By relinquishing their homes, both physically and symbolically, LIFs felt they were detaching themselves from the dominant discourse, reclaiming their freedom of choice.

> Location independence is about choices. We have taken back the freedom to choose: the right education for our children, the amount of time we dedicate to work and family, the best health option when it comes to medical care (Paul, USA).

Here the mobility choice embodies a tension between freedom *from* and freedom *to*. According to philosopher Isaiah Berlin (1958) negative freedom centres on freedom from obstacles or restrictions, whereas positive freedom is the capacity to choose and act accordingly (see also Sager, 2006: 468; Dean, 2016). As the words of Suzy (cited above) suggest, travel and mobility are marked by a break that liberates the LIF from materialistic comfort and celebrates of a new beginning: the possibility of a "different story". When families liberate themselves from alienating work routines, they set the baseline for a new position in the world defined by emotional attachment. Interestingly, many families cited the book "The 4 hours work week" by Timothy Ferris as an inspirational reading for the change. Freedom *from* home as a physical place, as symbol of the structure of needs and desires constructed by the capitalist system, allows freedom *for* home as a practice of togetherness.

LIFs often described this process in terms of a spiritual call for more meaning and value, a response to "an overall sense of stagnation in personal growth" (Brandon, USA), but also as an urge for a spiritual journey within a religious community, for those who identified with one. Within this spiritual strand, the relationship between lifestyle mobilities and the

influence of nomadic missionary practices would certainly be worth deeper investigation. Overall, the struggle against materialistic comfort was considered in itself part of a spiritual call for redefining their lives and values, a way to negotiate the growing complexity of modern living through a choice of mobility (McIntire, 2006).

> Back home, a lot of personal worth is tied up with what people own. I like the different focus of putting more value on what matters, rather than on what you own. It is a practice of educational values (Jennifer, USA).

As well as a form of resistance against the capitalistic mode of production, continuous mobility expresses also an anti-consumerism stance, as advocated by a few during our conversations. The travel choice translated first and foremost into a "financial re-education" (Sandra, USA), aimed at simpler living, or "a culture to live with less" (Suzy, UK). The first outcome is the compression of the former suburban home into a suitcase and a carry-on—the two pieces of luggage each family member is entitled to—and the consequent drastic downsizing of material possessions, a process sometimes referred to as a consequence, sometimes as a goal of this lifestyle choice.

LIFs' anti-consumerist convictions produce a paradox, because their spiritual quest is in constant tension with a concern for the financial sustainability of the family choice. The household economy is a major point of reflection, and the first meaning LIFs give to "security" is financial. For most families, the mobility choice was driven, in the first place, by the desire to save money. For some of them, this goal had actually been realized, as they declared to be living on a third of what they needed back home. However, in the long run, they admitted that location-independence was not *per se*, cheaper than living stationary. "We are still putting out a significant amount of money, but we are putting it into different places, and to travel to different places" (Sandra, USA). Together with a family vision, many LIFs had a sort of business plan and were constantly exploring ways to generate passive income. Those who were able to earn enough made investments and/or bought property as a safety net. As discussed above, LIF choice remains a privilege of relatively well-educated, middle-class individuals, generally from wealthy societies of the Western hemisphere. As a socio-political privilege, the LIF lifestyle draws on the availability of specific forms of capital: economic, but also social, symbolic (Benson, 2011) and, most of all, network capital (Elliot and Urry, 2010; Larsen et al., 2006). We can argue that their lifestyle mobility can still be regarded as a form of consumption, although a reflexive one, a "project of the self" (Giddens, 1991) aimed at weaving a unique, personalised life narrative, rather than acquiring desired goods. My participants claimed travel and mobility as the core of a narrative of self-identity: "Travel is who I am, and this is not negotiable" (Monique, USA).

As pointed out by Giddens (1991: 193), although "the project of the self expresses a struggle against commodified influences, not all aspects of commodification are inimical to it". Through the unique, personal intertwining of travel and identity LIFs indeed create a "different story", and the narrative of such experience becomes itself a primary commodity.

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The sharing of their personal stories, lifestyle strategies and practical knowledge becomes a revenue-generating system, aimed at other potentially like-minded people.

3.3 Routines and transitional objects as home-making strategies

As discussed above, moving away from the "home as house", as framed in the dominant discourse, is a necessary step for projecting a more processual and contextual notion of "home", in which the idea does not stand in opposition to that of movement but is actually made possible and achieved through it. Transcending the constraints of the material house and creating a home through living and having experiences together is, to a certain extent, the goal of LIFs' mobility. In this context, home is understood as a moving entity that is potentially reproduced in every context. As Jennifer and Brandon (USA) put it, travelling had brought to them "a deeper sense of home within ourselves and our family, a sense of independence from the physical place". In this section, I analyse more closely LIFs' different strategies for creating a home in mobility.

In order to find places to stay, LIFs used a variety of resources: Airbnb, social networks, travel forums and international house-sitting networks. When it came to establishing a sense of familiarity with their new dwelling, they also deployed different strategies. For Monique and Derek, a couple from the USA who travelled with their two toddlers, routine was a crucial element for home-in-mobility.

> The routine we have in Mexico is not very different from the one we have in Arizona. (…) It is this routine that gives my kids stability. This is, essentially, what home is. Home is not an address; it is stability and routine for my children. I seek a balance between routine and adventure but basically, whenever I can, I try to keep the same exact schedule every day (Monique, USA).

Although not all LIFs followed a strict routine, largely depending on the age of their children, a consistent but flexible routine was the most-mentioned strategy for quickly adapting to a variety of environments. The research participants also mentioned the repetition of some portable practices, such as working out, or having meals together. Other families referred to small rituals, such as reading, watching a show, or singing a song together. Sandra, for instance, played an imagination game with her child after he woke up. "These bonding activities are comforting and can be done anywhere, no matter where we are", she said.

Reference was also made to objects brought from the original home, such as stuffed animals, photo albums, blankets, pillows, music, technological devices, kitchen utensils and workout equipment. These objects can be considered transitional as they create an ontological bridge between the past home and the new dwelling. At the same time, they provide a sense of ontological security (Giddens, 1991; Author, 2009), for they create a reference in a new context that still has none. As noted by Molz (2008: 334), "objects and

possessions can be material symbols of home whether one travels or not, but for round-the-world travellers, certain objects can act specifically as signifiers of familiarity and continuity through which homely feelings are evoked". For example, Thomas and his family always took a small travelling gym with them, made of yoga mats and some dumbbells, "stuff that would help them keep a normal life routine". Suzy's daughter would make herself at home by hanging her drawings on the wall and setting up her teddy bears in a very specific way. One family mentioned how they had realized along the way that the practice of getting their kids to try local food at all costs was producing a cultural stress on them, so they had agreed always to carry a small supply of comfort food from their culture of origin, such as cereal and oatmeal, in order to relieve that discomfort.

For LIFs, home is a mobile notion, something that, as suggested by Berger (1984), can be taken anywhere in the form of routine practices, embodied gestures, social interactions, and small daily rituals. These actions can provide order and continuity, a stability in mobility. Although none of these strategies was considered as essential to creating a home as time spent in the company of family, all of them recurred in LIFs' talk. We can view them as flexible strategies to counter the ever-changing external environment and culture.

3.4 Worldschooling and network capital

As mentioned above, homeschooling the children is, together with remote work, one of the pillars of the LIF's choice. All of the people interviewed had taken this option: for some it had started with travel; others were already homeschooling their children before travel began. For the majority of the LIFs, homeschooling was not merely a consequence of travel, but rather one of its goals. Homeschooling can thus be considered an important home-making practice, as well as a component of the already mentioned "project of the self". In this last section, I understand the homeschooling choice both as a kind of home-making practice and as a network-building one.

Home education is legal and widely accepted all over the United States. In some European countries, it continues to encounter cultural resistance, despite not being illegal. Generally speaking, homeschooling involves the independent overseeing of the child's education by his or her parents, in harmony with the family's ethical and cultural values, and with particular attention paid to the interests and development of the individual child. However, a wide spectrum of pedagogical approaches to learning can be found within this broad definition, ranging from replicating a school structure at home, with a given set curriculum and routines, to forms of child-driven learning, centred on the child's curiosity and interests. This latter approach is better known as *unschooling* or, in a more descriptive and positive version, *worldschooling*. Worldschooling is a form of self-directed, experiential and immersive learning. The term was coined by Eli Gerzon, a travelling unschooler and

writer, who defined this approach as "when the whole world is your school, instead of school being your whole world" (Gerzon, 2007).

Most of the LIFs interviewed had started with a traditional homeschooling approach, but had either switched to worldschooling along the way or were mixing different learning strategies, encouraging their children's desire to learn by taking advantage of the educational value of situations that emerged from travel (Ferraro, 2016). LIFs were convinced that travel itself is the best form of education and self-discovery and can provide effective ways for educating outside the formal system. As Jennifer (USA) put it: "For our kids, we consider that travelling is the best way we could give them security. Knowing themselves is the best security they can get, the security to go forward". The worldschooling choice reproduces the same dialectic between negative and positive freedom that we have seen towards the home as a signifier of the "script". Embracing worldschooling entails first deconstructing the usual conception of education, as part of the value system LIFs reject. On the one hand, it is an open act of refusal of institutional education, motivated by a "dying out of the traditional education system" (Thomas, USA), a system where "college education is becoming unnecessary" (Paul, USA). This idea is shown in the following quote from a conversation with Brandon:

> In these days we have information at our fingertip and we don't need it to be fed by institutions that set up deadlines. The things we need to learn are constantly changing. So the most important thing is not what we learn, but how we learn it, through ways we use and remember (Brandon, USA).

Getting in the mind-set for worldschooling was not an easy task for the parents who had grown up in traditional educational systems: it required a form of resetting. One mother called it "de-schooling": "I am de-schooling myself, because after 17 years in the education system, we think that school has got all the answers, that school is the only way to go".

On the other hand, however, it was a central embodiment of LIFs' freedom to choose, as we saw above in Paul's words, and as a way to build security and confidence for their children through self-exploration and the teaching of "flexibility, skills, adaptability". For LIFs, worldschooling means fostering personal growth, but also learning entrepreneurship skills, to be used not only in business but also in all human interactions. This involves the possibility of giving their children the experience and benefits of third-culture kids. By growing up among different localities and cultures, third-culture kids challenge the notion of belonging to one dominant culture and instead negotiate new cross-cultural identities. However, as pointed out by Pollock and Van Reken (1999:19), their sense of belonging in relationships is established towards individuals of the similar background.

A lack of community and like-minded families with children of the same age was considered by some families to be the hardest part of travel and could, to a certain extent, impact the mobility pattern. It must be said that, for many families, the mobility choice often came through a hard negotiation with extended families, most of whom had been

sceptical of the mobility decision: this had provoked a certain isolation of the mobile family within the community of origin. The presence of other location-Independent and worldschooling families, on the other hand, felt encouraging, supportive. Unlike extended families other families who had made similar choices cast a normalizing gaze upon LIFs' decision. This allows us to understand the centrality of network capital in LIFs' social life. Urry and other scholars (Elliot and Urry, 2010; Larsen et al., 2006) discuss network capital and its importance in a world of mobilities. They define it as the capacity to form and extend personal networks, entailing travel-related competences and ability to communicate and access information, in order to connect with people, meet up, and solve eventual problems related to mobility. For Elliott and Urry (2010: 11), "people with very high levels of network capital experience high levels of geographic mobility and can influence the movement of others". LIFs' experiences illustrate very well this dynamics: their reliance on network capital explains the commodification of their personal stories, but also the fact that a great number of them had websites and travel blogs related to their experience, or led social groups for inspiring people to adopt this lifestyle. Social networks, local worldschooling groups and meet-ups become the main catalysts of socialisation. They were not aimed at people who were physically proximate, but rather at people who were like-minded and whose friendship could engender emotional, financial and practical benefits (Urry, 2007). Worldschoolers and other travelling families become the social complement to the mono-nuclear family, an alternative community where, "despite disagreements on politics and religion, one can make best and long-term instant friends" (Paul, USA). However, the limit of this community is that it is composed almost completely of expatriates, similar in race, class, culture and financial status. This highlights the LIF lifestyle's major shortcoming: the difficulty of gaining full integration in any host culture. This aspect is a direct consequence of their specific mobility patterns, mostly favouring countries with a more affordable cost of living, and by consequence, more evident economic and power asymmetries.

Conclusions

This article has explored the meanings connected with imagining and enacting the idea of home in a life lived in continuous mobility. The topic was approached by focusing on the experience of location-independent families, a form of lifestyle mobility based on a combination of slow but continuous travel, remote work and worldschooling.

The main finding of the research is the notion of home as a mobile, processual notion, independent of the physical place. Its essence is built on a dynamic between negative and positive freedom: it is by *freeing themselves*, both materially and/or symbolically, *from* the physical place, that LIFs acquire the possibility to re-establish home at the centre of their family life, reinventing it as a set of social, symbolic and emotional practices. In their speech, the physical home describes not only a place of dwelling, but also a system of material and symbolic values: as a financial asset and a social status marker, home is an embodiment of a pressure for social mobility that LIFs define as the "script". The

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dynamic between negative and positive freedom is underpinned by a challenge to this dominant discourse, where the act of deconstruction is the impulse to create an alternative value system, entailing a financial re-education and new education practices.

In this sense, home is also a project of the imagination, the real goal of this form of continuous mobility. Going beyond its spatial sense, LIFs' home illustrates the phenomenological idea of a "structure of feeling", where the notions of freedom and agency are crucial triggers of a local response to a dominant discourse. Home is a new social form actively constructed through the material inter-subjective practices of everyday life, whilst its ontological significance is given by the physical co-presence and localisation in time and space of the family members. It embodies freedom in the possibility to be together and finds security and belonging in routines and transitional objects.

While the research has been able to examine some meanings involved in constructing a dwelling in mobility, it has a few limitations: further research is needed about the integration, impacts and relationship networks of LIF within wider communities, namely local ones; the dynamics between work and leisure and how they are coupled and decoupled in mobility would also deserve a closer examination. The focus could be broadened by the means of a mobile methodology, centred on following families-on-the move, or observing the interactions of worldschooling groups in their destination clusters.

My argument contributes to current debates about mobility and dwelling by highlighting the centrality of home as a symbolic space, the starting point for rethinking accepted norms and socio-cultural values, reestabilishing them on everyday practices and virtual relationship networks.

Acknowledgements

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