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DIGITAL NOMADS: Freedom, responsibility and the neoliberal order

Introduction

Digital nomads are individuals who, taking advantage of portable computing technologies and widespread Internet access, can work remotely from any location and use this freedom to explore the world. Their aspirations blend tourism, leisure and professional activity to fashion a unique lifestyle based on remote work, global travel and multi-residential practices. In this article, I contrast the motivations of digital nomads with the economic strategies they adopt to make their lifestyle financially viable, analyzing the interplay between their discourse of freedom and self-realization and the structural constraints within which they operate.

To understand why digital nomads decide to move, we must examine personal agency and cultural motivations. In the case of digital nomads, the "good life" (O'Reilly and Benson 2009), a general aspiration motivating many kinds of mobility, has more to do with a quest for meaning than with economic or political factors (Korpela 2014; D'Andrea 2007). Digital nomads embody this search for a meaningful life by freeing themselves from a fixed workplace and taking work with them while exploring different places and cultures. The flexibility provided by online work is thus a fundamental requisite for their life project. However, the feature that differentiates them from other remote workers is the value they attribute to gaining cultural and personal experiences through international travel, which they consider favorable for experiencing alternative life arrangements and gaining a deeper sense of self. Of course, digital nomads are not the only workers with a great mobility potential: journalists and military personnel, international tour guides, seasonal workers, NGO workers, and corporate executives can also adopt hypermobile practices. These practices remain, however, contingent on their professions and are not exclusively shaped by "free choice," an element strongly emphasized in digital nomads' discourses.

As is the case for other lifestyle migrants and global nomads (D'Andrea 2007; Kannisto 2016; Korpela 2019), digital nomads express an opposition to the social system of their countries of origin, generally affluent industrialized nations. Their refusal to live a settled life questions the ontology of sedentarism (Wood 2015; Korpela 2019) and blurs binary distinctions – home/workplace, productive time/vacation – traditionally used to understand place-based ways of life and their indicators of social position, as well as their differentiation of tasks, spaces and time periods. Digital nomads disembed (Beck 1992) themselves from an unsatisfactory work/life balance in favor of the freedom and self-realization. In their narratives, travel is not a place-based activity but rather a self-focused experience and a founding element of identity. Turned into a lifestyle, mobility allows digital nomads to create their own life circumstances, defining their lives as an individualistic project of self-realization (Giddens 1991).

Scholars interested in contemporary forms of transnational, non-conventional mobility (eg. Benson and O'Reilly 2009; Cohen, Duncan and Thulemark 2015) have used the notion of lifestyle to explain the sociocultural valorization of mobile lives as a sign of fundamental changes in the construction of identity, sociality and relations to place and space. In particular, Cohen, Duncan and Thulemark (Duncan, Cohen and Thulemark 2013; Cohen, Duncan and Thulermark 2015) have developed the concept of lifestyle mobilities as a theoretical lens for framing voluntary, ongoing travel that is mid-way between tourism and migration, such as digital nomadism.

In my research subjects' explanations, disengaging from sedentary life enabled them to develop a new system of values, in which minimalism, uncertainty and risk replace material accumulation, stability and comfort. I argue however, that focusing solely on their discourses conceals the privileged preconditions that enable this possibility, namely the high standards of living, education and favorable visa regimes of their countries of origin. Celebrating the ethos of freedom as the potential to move is not sufficient to escape the prevalent socio-political order, even though some digital nomads view their experience in such terms. In order to provide a more holistic picture of their lifestyle, we must pay attention to the economic strategies that enable digital nomads' transnational agency, as well as the practical challenges and new forms of responsibility inherent to their mobile life. Building up on Thompson (2018a), I argue that, instead of a complete challenge to the system, digital nomadism is rather an opportunistic adaptation to the conditions created by the impacts of neoliberal ideology of entrepreneurial freedom (Harvey 2005). I push this argument forward by providing novel ethnographic evidence on how their self-realization project meets the ideology of entrepreneurialism, allowing them to take advantage of privileged nationalities to navigate the global inequalities of the capitalist system.

Despite its rich implications both for the present and future of work and for the transformation of international travel, anthropological research on digital nomadism is still in its infancy (Mouratidis 2018, SELF-CITATION 2018). Sociologists have so far focused on understanding digital nomads' prioritization of leisure (Reichenberger 2017; Thompson 2018a), as they mostly define themselves in relation to their passions and interests rather than the professional activity that enables their way of life. Other scholars have usefully stressed how the promised freedom of this lifestyle demands a significant amount of meta-labor to cope with the environmental constraints of the temporal and social context in which it takes place (Bonneau and Enel 2018). Researchers in information systems and computer science have highlighted the link between digital nomadism and the creation of new orders of worth (Schlagwein 2018) as well as its link to the rise of the gig economy and the normalization of precarious employment (Sutherland and Jarrahi 2017, Nash, Jarrahi, Sutherland and Phillips 2018; Thompson 2018b). I aim to contribute to the ongoing discussion, offering an ethnographic exploration that contrasts digital nomads' sociocultural imaginaries of (in)mobility with the new set of responsibilities necessary for maintaining their ethos of freedom.

I first briefly review the use of the concept of the nomad as a figure of opposition and self-actualization, in both metaphorical and empirical terms. Next, I explore the nexus between the transnationally mobile lifestyle and theories of individualization. I then introduce my methodology and empirical case study. In the following sections, I report digital nomads' discourses about self-identity and contrast them with the specific economic strategies they use to

sustain and structure their continuous mobility, including geoarbitrage, minimalism and the commodification of network capital.

From analog to digital: the nomad as an embodiment of freedom

The nomad is as an archetype of extreme mobility – of the body or of thought – seducing anthropologists as well as researchers in other social sciences: philosophy, tourism and mobility studies, and information and communication sciences. In each of these areas, nomads present both a threat and a source of wonder for sedentary societies (Peters 1999, Cresswell 1997, Kabachnik 2010). On one hand, the nomad stands as a marginal and marginalized subject. On the other, philosophers use them as an idealized metaphor of limitless freedom and critical resistance to the demands of the nation-state (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, Braidotti 1994; Grisoni 1976, Kaplan 1996), because the nomad's homelessness challenges the system of accountability imposed by a regime of stability and fixation.

The link between movement and freedom, which was absent in the first anthropological accounts of nomadic populations, becomes the most prominent feature of the geographic metaphor of the postmodern nomad. Thus the nomad becomes a hero of postmodernity (Peters 1999, Noyes 2004, Salazar and Smart 2011, Engebrigtsen 2017), inaugurating a new way of thinking about identity beyond the conventional modes that prefer "roots over routes" (D'Andrea 2006: 107). The "liquid society" (Baumann 2000) is the revenge of the nomads, the only ones capable of mastering the fluid existence imposed by global neoliberalism, which is dominated by risk, uncertainty and individualism. Similarly, the notion of the "turning point of mobility" (Urry 2000, 2007) proposes mobility as an ontological context and a hermeneutical key for understanding the postmodern condition (Hannam 2009). Highlighting the positive connotations attached to mobility, "nomadic metaphysics" (Cresswell 2002) is a theoretical paradigm for interpreting power structures, the construction of identity and the micro-geographies of everyday life (Cresswell 2011: 551).

The most significant attempts to apply the features of the metaphorical notion of nomad to empirical analysis emerge from ethnographic studies on tourism and leisure migration. For example, analyzing the counter-cultures related to techno music and New Age spirituality, D'Andrea (2006; 2007) develops a theory of neo-nomadism, reflecting on the entanglement between hyper-mobility and the formation of subjectivity. Another example of extreme mobility is the full-time homeless travelers described by Kannisto (2016), who have given up the security provided by the nation-state to embrace life on the margins. Marginality and alternative values are the common feature of these two examples of global nomads, although, apart from them, scholars have used this expression to describe a host of heterogeneous and not necessarily countercultural travelers: backpackers, neo-nomad hippies, as well as third culture children and elite business class travelers (Richards and Wilson 2004; Richards 2015; Langford 2001).

The celebration of the nomad as an embodiment of freedom seems to become reality in the sciences of communication. At the crossroads of the two great trends of globalization - mobility and the digital - it becomes a

metaphor in which "permanent connection, and not movement, is the critical factor" as hinted by Castells (The Economist 2008). The advent of the digital nomad was prophesized by Makimoto and Manners (1997), who pictured a way of life of the future facilitated by portable technologies, in which everyone would be free to travel around the world while remaining connected to his or her job. A few years later, Meyrowitz (2003) predicted that, thanks to communication technologies, society would return to primitive nomadism, with its overlapping of different activities and social spheres. The global nomad dispenses with physical co-presence as a determining factor for interaction. Being permanently connected allows digital nomads to maintain their relationship networks while shifting around multiple residences (Richards 2015). Technology changes the way they work, socialize and dwell, blurring the boundaries between personal and professional life. The development of transport systems and the disintermediation of the tourism industry, which allows people to arrange their own travel through online platforms, add the last piece so that displacement is no longer a response to the changing conditions of the environment, as it was for the analog nomad. Rather, displacement is the result of free choice and the foundation of new mobile practices

Lifestyle mobilities and individualization theories

Researchers have developed three theoretical lenses to talk about transnationally mobile non-conventional lifestyles, which overlap in important ways albeit highlighting different aspects (Korpela, 2019): lifestyle migration (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009; Korpela, 2014), neo-nomadism/global nomadism (D'Andrea, 2006; 2007; Kannisto, 2016), and lifestyle mobility (Duncan, Cohen and Thulemark, 2013; Cohen, Duncan and Thulemark, 2015).

Common to these phenomena is the quest for a different – or "alternative" – way of life to be achieved "elsewhere" In this quest, voluntary mobility is perceived as a gateway to better opportunities and quality of life, formulated as a better work/life balance or an escape from high living costs, consumerism or insecure living conditions (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009: 609-610). All three types of mobile lifestyle involve people from affluent industrialized nations who hold passports that allow them to move around the globe easily. However, they differ in their mobility patterns and the value they attribute to a home as place of residence and marker of territorial belonging. The working definition of lifestyle migrants defines them as "relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that, for various reasons, signify for the migrant a better quality of life" (Benson and O' Reilly 2009, p. 609). Empirical research shows however that they are predominantly retirees and that they place emphasis on relocating to a new country, generally in places with low costs of living and mild climates. They generally make a home, often as a secondary residence, and for this reason have been variously labeled residential tourists (Huete, Terán, Martínez 2008; Huete 2009), amenity migrants (Moss 2006; Gosnell and Abrams 2009) and residential migrants (Huete and Mantecón 2011). Global nomads and lifestyle travelers are instead figures of opposition who opt for multi-residential practices and continuous mobility to different destinations. The neo-nomads/global nomads described by D'Andrea and Kannisto reject the state-market regime and the economic commitments attached to the idea of home and citizenship (consumption, property, possessions and taxes paid) (Kannisto, 2016, p. 227), in favor of a cosmopolitan culture of feeling at home wherever they are. The destabilization of home and away is also characteristic of lifestyle mobilities (Cohen, Duncan and Thulemark, 2015), in which mobility becomes a way of life, either because the place

of residence is frequently changed over time, or because it becomes itself mobile. Empirical examples of this concept include rockclimbers, canoers and hitchhikers (Duncan, Cohen and Thulemark, 2013), full-time RVers (Forget, 2012), grey nomads (Onyx and Leonard, 2005) and circus workers (Terranova-Webb, 2010). The quest for the company of like-minded people, albeit in different geographical locations, is a common feature of these diverse types of mobile person. Lifestyle mobilities is a useful theoretical lens for examining the digital nomad, although its emphasis on leisure fails to account fully for the role of remote employment and its consequences for the future of work.

The three theoretical lenses used to analyze these phenomena emphasize individual agency and, to different extents, engage with sociological theories of individualization (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), relating the consumption of transnational mobility to fundamental changes in lifestyle choices associated with late modernity (Benson and O'Reilly 2009; Hoey 2005). Giddens defines a lifestyle as "a more or less integrated set of practices that an individual adopts not only because they meet utilitarian needs, but because they materialize a concrete chronicle of the identity of the self" (Giddens 1991: p. 81). Lifestyle choices embody individual aspirations, values and attitudes (Stebbins 1997) and emerge in post-traditional societies, where an individual's life is not so heavily determined by his/her position in society (Giddens 1991). Benson and O'Reilly (2009) encapsulate these forms of mobility under the lifestyle umbrella term, allowing them to focus on people's lifestyle trajectories and understand their choices as a process of individualization and the search for meaning. This focus has however received some criticism, as it conceals the structural constraints that influence transnational agency (Hayes 2014; Korpela 2019). In a recent article, Marie Korpela (2019) proposes to pay more attention to structure and destination, an approach she develops in the analysis of bohemian lifestyle migration, a countercultural trend led by bourgeois expatriates with artistic and creative aspirations.

According to individualization theorists (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), late modernity is characterized by the dissolution of historically prescribed forms of dominance and support, such as status and class (Beck 1992). The dissolution of traditional guidelines leaves individuals with the need to redefine their selves constantly in relation to their social context, an ability known as reflexivity (Giddens 1991). Reflexivity compels people to choose who they want to be and turns their identities into projects of self-realization: the project of the self (Giddens 1991). The project of the self is founded on an ethos of freedom, a potential of the self to be anything it wants to be, which is expressed through a greater degree of consumer choice and desire for distinction (Benson and O'Reilly 2009: p. 616; see also Retaillé 1998). Choosing a lifestyle can be regarded as an outcome of the reflexive project of the self, because it implies a reflexive power of choice and a feasible range of options. In this framework, choosing mobility as a way of life appears as a building-block of self-realization that triggers the creation of new epistemologies of value (Salazar 2018).

However, while the idea that individuals have such an extensive freedom of choice is undoubtedly appealing, it is necessary to consider that individualization comes as a possibility but also a burden. This aspect has been often overlooked in analyzing lifestyle mobilities. Social differentiation in late modernity can be liberating, but it demands

in exchange a new type of social commitment to its risks and burdens. As Bauman contends "individualisation consists in transforming human identity from a given into a task - and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences (also the side-effects) of their performance" (2002: xv). Beck highlights three dimensions of individualization: disembedding, or removal from prescribed social forms and commitment, the actual "liberating dimension"; disenchantment, marked by the loss of traditional security with respect to guiding norms and knowledge; and reintegration, a re-embedding represented by a new type of social commitment (Beck 1992, p.127-128). Re-integrating into a new system entails a new set of responsibilities, the flipside of the ethos of freedom. Under this ethos, the individual holds the authority to act and is in turn compelled to assume risks and tasks that were previously cared for by a shared social structure. "Opportunities, dangers, biographical uncertainties that were earlier predefined within the family association, the village community, or by recourse to the rules of social estates or classes, must now be perceived, interpreted, decided and processed by individuals themselves" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 4). In regard to the modern nomad, s/he has "no choice but to choose" (Giddens 1991: 81): individualization becomes a systemically driven compulsion to run the individual life like an entrepreneurial project (Gordon 1987: 300). Not by coincidence, digital nomads, as freelancers and self-employed knowledge workers, are a paradigmatic social figure of this risk society (Kesselring 2016: 78).

Researching digital nomads: combining ethnography and netnography

Because of their extreme mobility, digital nomads are difficult to study through conventional ethnographic techniques alone, since this approach requires the researcher to interact with participants in a given time and place. While digital nomads' physical travel spans nearly the entire globe, the majority of their social and business interactions occur through communication technologies and social media. These platforms provide an easily accessible ground of connection to a globally dispersed group, offering virtual gathering spaces for a community of practice (Wenger 1998), where members can share their experiences and concerns with the goal of improving their mobile living-and-working strategies through sharing advice. Digital nomads' sociality develops in a blended world, resulting from the meaningful interaction between offline and online social spheres (Hine 2008; 2015). Responding to this hybrid configuration, I have adapted offline research strategies to the online environment, combining conventional ethnography with a netnographic approach (Kozinets 2010; 2020). On the one hand, I have conducted fieldwork in Chiang Mai, Thailand and Barcelona, Spain for an overall period of 4 months. On the other, I have used netnographic research (Kozinets 2020) – including online immersive engagement and video-interviews – and content analysis of interviews, articles, and personal blogs circulated through the Internet. Since 2016, I have immersed myself in four digital nomads' groups on Facebook, private forums for members only. At the time of joining, I introduced myself and fully disclosed my research objectives and affiliation, launching a call for participants who had location-independent jobs that they were using to travel. Through one of these forums, specifically addressed to a family audience, I recruited volunteers through snowball sampling and recorded thirteen semi-structured video call interviews. During the following two years, I continued to observe, in a non-intrusive way, the life trajectories of the participants I interviewed in the first two rounds. Simultaneously, I regularly highlighted and saved Facebook conversations on common topics of discussion, and later coded them for analysis. When quoting fragments from

these discussions, I contacted posters to obtain their consent. I use pseudonyms throughout the study to preserve confidentiality. The exponential growth of these social media forums[1] and a research process sustained over a long period with different peaks of intensity are best leveraged through the use of naturalistic and non-intrusive analysis techniques, such as periods of *lurking* and limited interaction (Bruckman 2006; Kozinets, Dolbec and Earley 2014). During these periods, I kept an immersion journal (Kozinet 2010) to track the data gathering process. Over the same period, I conducted content analysis of podcasts, online articles, and personal blogs written by digital nomads. In 2017, I conducted two months of fieldwork in Chiang Mai, Thailand, a popular hub for digital nomads, where I had the chance to encounter one of the families and extend my connections. I familiarized myself with the organization of the local community, participated in various events and kept a fieldwork diary gathering notes on the dynamics of socialization, the descriptions of the workspaces, and fragments of casual conversations. I also carried out twenty-one semi-structured interviews.

This combination of methods has allowed me to identify digital nomads from two different age groups: a mid-career group and an early career group. The mid-career group (32-49 years old) were mostly people traveling with partner and/or children. Their choice for mobility was motivated by a quest for a better life-work balance, a preference for travel and a critical stance against the conventional mode of life and its pattern of accumulation. Participants from the early career group (under 35 years old), whom I mostly encountered in Chiang Mai, were launching careers in digital professions, motivated by a desire for freedom, professional fulfillment and discovery. Interview data from approximately 50 people were used in this study. While I have focused on the specific challenges faced by families elsewhere (SELF-CITATION 2018), in this paper I aim to provide a broader outline of the phenomenon, without specifically differentiating the two groups.

Who are the digital nomads?

Research participants came from advanced capitalist countries (the United States, the UK and Europe), with the exception of a Chinese participant who had studied in the US. Although online observations suggest that digital nomadism is not bound to "Western countries" per se, all the interviewees held "strong" passports and explicitly described their passports as facilitating their mobility strategies. Although, their income varied because of age and status differences, they could all be considered middle-class individuals, meaning that in their country of origin they lived a comfortable life, with stable housing, educational opportunities and disposable income for travel and leisure. All participants except one held a university degree. At the time of the interviews, they had traveled between five months and eight years (with an average duration of two years for the whole group). Many of them had no permanent residence in their home country, where their only roots were the presence of relatives and a storage space where they kept some of their belongings. Most of them envisioned their mobility choice as permanent, although, during the course of my study, a few participants settled down, either returning to their country of origin or opting for an

[1] At the time of writing, the largest of these groups has 119,000 members, up from 6,000 when I joined. The newer female-oriented community, now has 58,471 members, and the local Chiang Mai one has about 35,000 members. Local forums generally seem to be more active and oriented to solving practicalities and organising gatherings, while general ones address questions related to the lifestyle and its challenges.

expatriate life in Europe or South-East Asia. This finding suggests that this form of mobility might evolve into migration, likely toward lower-cost destinations.

My participants described themselves as "slow travelers" and moved seasonally between three to five destinations a year, the length of their stay largely determined by visa regimes. Their itineraries were primarily dictated by the possibility of enjoying what each one considered favorable climate conditions. In the case of Chiang Mai, for instance, most participants planned their stay around "burning season," a period between February and April when air quality plummets due to dry weather and forest fires for agricultural development. Other important factors influencing mobility were Internet connection, the cost of living and the presence of a community of like-minded people. They traveled intensively by plane and alternated long-haul displacements with shorter trips to explore the countries they visited.

Not all participants self-identified with the "nomad" label: the identification varied according to their demographic and professional experience, although in all cases they highlighted their potential for movement when they talked about their identity. For the older and professionally more established participants, this opportunity emerged when they adapted their existing professional skills to enable them to work remotely and thus enjoy maximum flexibility and a better work/life balance. Those with advanced computing skills, such as programmers or web designers, had an easy transition to remote work. When defining themselves, these participants preferred to call themselves "location-independent," which they considered less of a buzzword than "digital nomad." However, they in fact participated in the online discussions of the nomadic community and followed similar routes. Traveling in most cases with their families, they combined work with the homeschooling of their children (SELF-CITATION 2018). Members of the Chiang Mai group, with three exceptions, consisted of millennial men and women whose desire for a travel lifestyle had inspired them to build a digital profession. They had chosen Chiang Mai for its vibrant community of like-minded people, for the possibility to participate in professional and social networking events, and for the reduced cost of living. The latter enabled them to live cheaply while they acquired digital skills and learned how to make them financially profitable, a practice referred to as bootstrapping.[2] Income in this younger group was less stable and depended largely on piecework through platforms such as Upwork or Fiver.

On the whole, participants I met in both research environments were self-employed knowledge workers, some of whom had fixed clients, while others worked through platforms, sometimes speaking of themselves as "solopreneurs". Five participants in the mid-career group were entrepreneurs. The digital professions represented included programming, digital marketing, online teaching, translation, virtual assistance, professional coaching, online sales and administrative management. In many cases, participants tried to diversify their income through passive streams of revenue, usually from self-publishing, affiliate marketing or e-commerce sites. Some participants were public figures who used social media to monetize their nomad life experiences, creating podcasts or leading retreats. Participants also used social media to market their services, to create new business opportunities and to keep in touch with distant friends and relatives.

[2] Bootstrapping means to start up (an Internet-based business or other enterprise) with minimal financial resources.

Mobility and identity

> Travel is who I am, and this is not negotiable (Adriana, 40, video interview, September 2016).[3]

Three years ago, Adriana's passion for travel led her to begin working remotely. Since then, she and her husband had lived in five countries and visited four others. As she recounted in our interview, this change in lifestyle was enabling her to reach a holistic balance among the different areas of her life: work, leisure, family. She had capitalized on this search for balance in her business consultancy, in which she helped other women to "build the lifestyle they desire." She met with clients for four hours a day, mainly by videoconferences. In addition, she spent time maintaining her visibility on the social media sites where she found her clients, who were English-speaking and often American like her. Starting her multi-residential adventure made everything in her life fall into place, allowing her to escape from a lifestyle that made her "unhappy" and "to live a life on her own terms."

The quote that introduces this section highlights how, for digital nomads, travel becomes an identity marker, an essential component of their possibility for self-expression. The interview extracts underline a key theme in digital nomads' talk: the ethos of freedom. This ethos of freedom is expressed as a potential of the self to be (or do) anything it wants (see Korpela 2014). It is fundamentally about reclaiming agency and the power to choose, but it can be fully understood only in relation to its opposite (Rojek 2010), as the full realization of freedom is based on liberation from perceived obstacles or restrictions. In digital nomads' discourses, freedom is often evoked in reference to the system they are opposing: "the 9-to-5 routine," "the rat race," the "script." Digital nomadism is thus a comparative project (Korpela 2019) that involves a narrative of escape from the social system and the specific work culture of the respective countries of origin, which are presented in negative terms, while a project of transnational mobility is presented as positive and liberating.

A desire for an improved work/life balance was a recurrent reason evoked by research participants to justify their alternative lifestyle choice. When I talked to Pat (36, video interview, August 2016), a digital marketing entrepreneur, he had been traveling the world for 3 years with his spouse and children. Before embracing mobility, he worked between 60 and 70 hours per week in an office, plus commuting time. Desiring to spend more quality time with his family, he asked his company to allow him to work from home. When they refused, he left the company. The company could not find a replacement and ended up hiring him as a contractor at a much higher salary. As he explained to me, the initial impetus was the desire to work from home. Only later did he realize that he could combine this work with a "learning journey."

Participants viewed a sedentary, routine life as disempowering, as it cuts down on the choices that everybody is expected to make, trapping the individual in a series of expectations for professional and economic success. Suzy, a British woman who had been traveling for six months with her husband, a community manager and digital marketer, and their 6-year-old daughter, commented:

[3] The data provided after each interview extract report the pseudonym of the interviewee, her/his age at the time of the interview, the technique of data collection, and the month and year the interview took place).

> 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, 35, video interview, September 2016).

As Suzy's words highlight, long working hours were jeopardizing personal life and the couple was under increasing pressure to move up the social ladder. Despite this condition, however, the established path created a comfort zone, in which there were few decisions to make. This established path was explicitly referred to by some participants as a form of "script," which one participant described as "the way you are supposed to believe that things are supposed to go. And if they do not, it is a failure" (Pat, 36, video interview, August 2016).

Abandoning a fixed residence embodies for participants not only a form of freedom and agency, but also a search for a system of values alternative to the "rat race," an endless competition to achieve material rewards in an undefined future. It is also an occasion to question the value system imposed by a stable life. "The script" (Pat, 36, video interview, August 2016) is a predictable social path, based on the accumulation of material goods and status markers – a diploma, a well-paid job, a mortgage, a car – triggered by social competition. In participants' discourse, sedentarism and mobility signified two opposed orders of worth (see Schlagwein 2018), where the first symbolized material accumulation and moral stagnation, while the second was experienced as a path to vital transformation, at all levels. Research participants highlighted the symbolic importance of those "fateful moments" (Giddens 1991) that defined the transition: the decision to quit the corporate workplace and sell their material possessions, two moments in which their freedom and their power of action expressed themselves in opposition to the mainstream culture of their country of origin. These breaks symbolized a leap into the void where minimalism, the unknown and uncertainty would replace material accumulation, stability and comfort.

Mobility puts the subject at the center of a project to create his or her own life circumstances, as it enables self-development, expression and self-actualization (D'Andrea 2007). Traveling out of one's comfort zone is considered a "big catalyst for personal development" (Richard, 38, video interview, August 2016), a freed space for exploring one's limits and capacities. Richard, who was traveling with his family, was a nomad with strong skill set and income-earning potential. He had been on the road with his family for nine years, thanks to the proceeds of an online software he developed, which had allowed him to invest in real estate in one of his favorite destinations. He lived in it with his family part of the year and rented it out the rest of the year to fund the family's lifestyle. Since beginning their travels, Richard and his wife had explored other businesses aside from his main source of income, including becoming motivational speakers and retreat hosts to inspire other families to adopt a similar travel lifestyle.

The above-mentioned narratives shift the purpose of travel from a place-based experience to a "reflexive project of self" (Giddens 1991), where travel and mobility become the differentiating elements that separate nomads from other individuals. Mobility is the element around which they reorganize their own biographies and materially manifest the lifestyle they have chosen in opposition to other equally feasible options. Being highly mobile, however, requires creativity to face the challenge of maintaining financial security while working remotely. One must draw on

entrepreneurial skills, such as self-responsibility, capacity to adapt to new situations, risk taking and capacity to be productive. In short, the mobile life project of digital nomads has to be run like an entrepreneurial project (Gordon, 1987) and relies on an ideology of entrepreneurialism that is the hallmark of neoliberalism (Harvey 2005). This aspect is often praised in popular entrepreneurial literature, which celebrates the freedom and flexibility of the "gig economy" (Thompson 2018a). Freedom from the workplace means surely more time to dedicate to passion projects, as in the case of Richard. However, for many early-career millennials who rely on less stable employment and piecework, it means exposure to precariousness, availability on demand and the blurring of the boundary between work and leisure time.

The connection between traveling as a way to force oneself to learn entrepreneurial skills was frequently highlighted especially by early-career nomads. Fleur, for instance, a Chinese nomad I met in Chiang Mai, was working hard to fashion her traveling self, unearthing her skills to launch an Amazon fulfillment e-shop that would eventually, she hoped, give her the freedom to pursue her true passion of becoming a yoga teacher.

> [Getting out of my comfort zone] challenges me to grow in every aspect. To learn things I have no idea about. [Travel teaches me] to really embrace fear, to think creatively and come up with solutions that will make stuff happen. I love growth. I really like to grow in different areas that I'm not good at. So it's kind of just unearthed my entrepreneur nature that I had no idea I had before (26, China, interview, November 2017).

As shown by this interview extract, discovering one self's entrepreneurial nature was for many the first commitment in becoming a digital nomad. This step was easier for participants to take when they were already out of their comfort zone, as happens in a mobile life.

Geographic arbitrage and new responsibilities

> I'm my own boss. When I came here I had the freedom because of a low-cost of living, to explore and invent my own gig. So, incredible freedom, the ability to be creative, like, I don't have the pressures of a real job, that takes up my time, 60 hours a week, you know? What are the other benefits? Freedom is the most important one. You know, some digital nomads, their dream is to make a lot of money. It's a lot of "have to make this much per month" etc. I've never been very interested in making money […]. I was always more interested in doing something useful and helpful. I feel like I can do that here, but I don't have to work as much, or work as hard. I can survive on 10 hours a week (Dina, 52, interview, November 2017).

> We started out teaching online. My partner teaches 3-4hrs in the morning, and I did some teaching 10-15hrs/week (on the weekend). For us, it was great to be finished our (obligatory) workday by 8:30 am and have the rest of the day ahead of us to do whatever we want. We chose to start growing an additional business. I had the power to make that decision. If I choose to work a 7hr weekend night and take the rest

> of the week off...it's MY choice. If I choose to work a crazy month so that I can pay off 6 months' worth of rent and spend the next month learning Spanish or kitesurfing...I CAN. I can scale up my living and live on the beach for 3 months, and scale down my living and spend a year in Chiang Mai or Merida etc. […] I fiercely retain control over my most valuable asset...my TIME!!!" (Alan, online conversation).

As shown in the above quotes, according to my participants, freedom and flexible time management in the workplace were a pre-condition for a "good life." Lifestyle mobility offered them a way to feel in control, as they could decide how much time to dedicate to work and leisure. We must not overlook, however, the structural circumstances that allowed them to express this freedom, as most of the participants spent part or most of their time in countries with low costs of living, in South-East Asia, Mexico or Eastern Europe. Living in low-cost locations allowed these digital nomads to assume the risk of entrepreneurship, to take time "to invent" or "bootstrap" their own "gig," or multiply their income-generating activities by creating new businesses. Alternating destinations with different costs gave them the opportunity "to scale up" or "to scale down" their living expenses and outsource some of their daily tasks, such as cooking or house chores. This practice is known as geographic arbitrage (or geoarbitrage), a term popularized by Tim Ferriss (2007) in his best-selling book *The 4-Hour Workweek*, mentioned by many as a manifesto of the digital nomad trend. The term was mentioned for the first time in *Forbes Magazine* and consists in taking advantage of an income generated in higher-cost locations by relocating the day-to-day expenses to countries with a lower cost of living (Karlgaard 2004, 2006), a possibility for people whose jobs are location-independent. Geoarbitrage is one of the pivotal elements of Ferriss' "lifestyle design" (Ferriss 2007), a project based on the idea that everyone has the power to choose how to live his or her life. Lifestyle design consists in gaining greater control of one's time by moving to a lower-cost location and automating income-generating tasks or outsourcing them to people in developing countries with lower labor costs. This economic strategy allows people to leverage the geographic differential in the cost of living and stretch the purchasing power of an income earned in stronger currencies. As argued by Hayes (2014), in addition to being an ethos for maximizing utility and material well-being, geographic arbitrage is the individualistic correlate of corporate offshoring, "whereby corporations take advantage of lower labour costs in developing countries and sell finished products to higher-earning labourers in high-cost geographic regions" (Hayes 2014, p.1962). Geoarbitrage is an opportunistic strategy that uses the systemic privileges offered to certain nationalities to navigate the global map to their own advantage. It offers an individualistic exit strategy to the growing inequalities of affluent industrialized countries. Hayes compares geographic arbitrage with the cultural logic of "flexible citizenship" (Ong 1999, p.6), which encourages subjects "to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political economic conditions." Geographic arbitrage allows digital nomads to negotiate a flexible position with respect to the rights and duties of specific nation-state regimes.

These digital nomads' freedom of choice was bound by some practicalities, which influenced their mobility: the need for good connectivity, convenient and affordable accommodations, shared workplaces and, last but not least, the proper visa. Research participants lived mostly in rented apartments, hostels or hotels, sometimes using housesitting websites to reduce accommodation costs. These accommodations generally contained all of the furnishings they needed for daily life. Consequently, my participants could travel with very little luggage. This

circumstance allowed for a detached and flexible relationship to material possessions (Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould 2012), in which objects were appreciated for their instrumental-use value rather than for the status conferred by their ownership. The freedom to choose a relatively minimalistic lifestyle was matched however by new responsibilities and ties. Typically, participants traveled on tourist visas – valid for three or six months, depending on the country. They continuously had to leave the country to renew their visas (the so called *visa run*) and faced questioning or denial at the border if they tried to enter repeatedly. Border controls and visa regimes affected their potential to move and put them in a vulnerable position in regard to immigration laws, due to the fundamental ambiguity of their position, as they worked *from* a place, rather than *within* it.

Participants also faced responsibilities concerning the education of their kids, medical care and retirement planning, compelled to handle needs that, in fixed forms of citizenship, are often handled—at least in part—by the state. As Hayes points out, "Geographic arbitrage and transnational lifestyle mobility may be the neoliberal variant of the formerly place-based forms of citizenship of the Fordist welfare state regimes of the twentieth century" (Hayes 2014, p. 1963). Most research participants bought private medical and travel insurance. The thirteen families I interviewed, as well as many others active on online forums, were directly responsible for educating their children. As a side note, my research with families showed that this need translated into a very classical gender-based division of roles, where the woman was in charge of education and the man was the main source of income. For nomads who did not have children, the urge to travel influenced their decision to start a family. Some of those who had a more stable income tried to save as much as possible and invested in assets that could sustain their retirement. Nevertheless, discursively, these responsibilities were still framed as a choice:

> 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 (Pat, 36, video interview, September 2016).

On the other hand, the constant concern for being productive and the need for economic security make the travel-work-leisure balance a complicated equation to manage. Working from a hotel located at a beach paradise can be as alienating as doing it from an office. Research participants mentioned the difficulty of organizing their schedules when working across different time zones, the fight against procrastination, and the lack of physical proximity with colleagues. A research participant, who managed a medical laboratory remotely, lived every day twice – she spent the night working remotely with the United States and the day enjoying her family and whatever environment she happened to be living in (she was in Mexico when I first contacted her and we met again in Chiang Mai a year later). To launch her drop-shipping business, Fleur (26, China, interview, November 2017) had to get up in the middle of the night to make phone calls to her suppliers on the other side of the world. The organization and self-discipline necessary to manage these circumstances structured the nomads' social functioning and were a frequent topic of conversation.

The commodification of a personal story: self-branding and network capital

> You are constantly saying goodbye to people who are off on the next part of their journey. You're going to spend a lot of time on your own, doing your work that is structured around you. It can go wrong though; you can have medical problems […] you're probably going to find things like meditation, kind of like a necessary part of your life, because you need high levels of self-discipline. (Daniel, 34, interview, November 2017).

Community construction was a major challenge to digital nomads' individualized project, as their occupations did not facilitate physical interactions with colleagues, and the erratic and frequent relocations produced a sense of isolation, increased by language and cultural barriers at the destinations. Their sociality blended online and offline environments. Online sociality played a crucial role in building social and professional connections, but the search for offline social relationships, friendship and intimacy remained essential. Consequently, the presence of a cosmopolitan community of like-minded people was another factor that oriented the global mobility patterns of my participants.

In popular destinations such as Chiang Mai, Ubud or Lisbon, returning nomads hosted regular meetings, or "meetups," offline gatherings organized through social media. People I encountered at these meetings expressed the "sense of belonging to a movement," the "feeling of being acknowledged and accepted," of "form[ing] part of a revolution." I encountered two kinds of such social events: networking events, such as weekly lunches or parties, and skill-sharing events, which allowed individuals to display their expertise and promote their self-brand (see Hearn 2008). A central ambiguity of these meetings was the constant blurring between work and leisure, friendship and business, an element critically highlighted by one digital nomad is his blog: "The line between business networking and friendship is non-existent, as the handfuls of people on the planet who can relate to your lifestyle also happen to be possible joint venture partners and/or clients" (Manson 2013). This exposes the basic contradiction faced by these travelers: on the one hand, they were searching for an alternative lifestyle. On the other, this new lifestyle depended on a freelance-based industry of digital services, some of which marketed the lifestyle to newcomers.

In constructing their community, digital nomads present a unique interplay between a celebration of the distinctive global nomad identity, self-entrepreneurial values and commodification. The desire to be part of a supposed counter-culture triggers a market of services and experiences that teach the lifestyle, sometimes giving voice to false experts and improvised gurus, as well as multilevel marketing schemes directed at newcomers (see Thompson 2018a). Some nomads seek constructed community through exclusive and expensive all-inclusive experiences (Thompson 2018a), such as co-living/co-working spaces and specific "work-and-travel" packaged programs, some of which offer to remote workers the possibility to travel together while facilitating accommodation and working spaces around the world. In addition, there is a flourishing market of international conferences, retreats and workshops, celebrating entrepreneurship and economic success as well as mindfulness and self-discipline. As pointed out by Thompson (2018a), these "commodified communities" fashion self-marginalized bubbles that transport a comfortable, middle-class environment to any location around the globe. Commodified communities show the explicit link between the self-realization project and consumption (Beck 1992; Bauman 2000; Giddens 1991). Despite their apparent rejection

of material accumulation, nomads' lifestyle design remains a consumer process, where mobility experiences and intangible assets replace tangible goods in the process of social differentiation.

Within the communities I studied – as in other travel-based communities – personal storytelling played a crucial role, as it constituted the way the self was presented to a potentially global, although fragmented and geographically dispersed audience. Sharing personal stories, lifestyle strategies and practical travel knowledge was, in the first place, a means of sociality and connection. However, I argue that the blurring of the professional and personal spheres in digital nomads' communities and the need to multiply streams of income turned digital nomads' personal biographies into potential commodities. Circulated through social media, the personal biographies of (allegedly) successful nomads inspired other people to try this lifestyle, influencing their movement. Having the legal information and contacts to live in a number of different countries, knowing how to carefully manage finances when traveling, being able to handle productivity when frequently changing workplace etc. are all competences emerging from a valorization of the mobile experience that can be commodified and exploited in the digital nomads' economy.

This process shows a commodification of what Urry defines as network capital, "the capacity to engender and sustain social relations with those people who are not necessarily proximate […] which generate emotional, financial and practical benefit" (2007, pp.196). For Urry, network capital is a concept that substitutes that of social capital in the era of mobility. Unlike social capital (Bourdieu 1986; Putnam, 2000), network capital is not influenced by geographic proximity, but rather is routinely sustained at a distance. Network capital is not exclusively bound to social relationships; it arises from the combination of eight elements, including the bureaucratic, economic, social and technological affordances that facilitate mobility (Martin 2017, p.1). It encompasses a set of competences that are both a prerequisite and a consequence of a mobile life, such as having the appropriate documents and contacts, the networking tools and the appropriate meeting places, the physical and financial access to communication devices, means of transportation, and time as a resource to manage the whole set (Urry 2007). The definition of network capital highlights the growing importance of information and communication technologies. Similarly to Bourdieu's notion of social capital (1986), network capital is inherently associated with power, as it is a privilege of hypermobile groups. In exclusionary mobility regimes, it can be used to influence the movement of others (Elliot and Urry 2010, p.11). Being dissociated from a specific place, network capital legitimizes individuals' mobility as a source of prestige and power. It produces "a distinct stratification order that sits alongside social class, social status and party" (Urry 2007, p.197). Finally, as shown by the case of the digital nomads, it can also be commodified and exchanged for other forms of capital – economic, cultural and symbolic.

Some of my research participants provided examples of creative strategies to diversify their income and exploit this network capital: Richard organized retreats for families who aspired to live a location-independent life, addressing topics such as remote income, education, community, and life fulfillment. Adriana wrote motivational books sharing her vision of travel, motherhood and entrepreneurship. Johnny recounted his entrepreneurial transformation in a blog and had an affiliated page on Amazon displaying his favorite reading and tech and travel gear. These are just a few of many examples. Books such as "The Digital Nomad Survival Guide" break down the practicalities for becoming a "suitcase entrepreneur." Although not all my research participants were involved in marketing their lifestyle, the

commodification of the personal story and network capital occurred in parallel with an increasing pressure for self-branding, a phenomenon that affects digital freelance professions in the knowledge economy (Gandini 2016). For Gandini, self-branding is not only a device for self-promotion, but also an instrument to secure employment by monetizing social capital within digitalized environments. It is a process of self-construction, through which "the reflexive project of the self turns into an explicit form of labour" under post-Fordist flexible capitalism (Hearn 2008, p.197). These considerations can be usefully applied to the commodification process described above, contributing to a deeper understanding of the links between entrepreneurialism and the digital nomads' world.

Final remarks

The digital nomads I worked with celebrated the freedom to travel around the world while working flexibly using portable wireless technologies. Geographical mobility and remote work were the two pillars of a lifestyle that enabled them to express agency and power of choice, as well as a desire to individualize their personal biographies. Despite some countercultural aspects, such as the demise of a "sedentary" way of life and work culture and a minimalist attitude toward property and consumption, digital nomads adapted to the logic of the dominant neoliberal order, with its emphasis on flexibility and entrepreneurialism. The counterpoint to the celebrated ethos of freedom is a greater sense of individual responsibility not only toward the construction of a personal biography, but also in respect to fading social welfare protections and the precariousness of the labor market. Moreover, the desire to be part of an alleged counter-culture led to a new class of commodities – first and foremost, the personal story of mobility and its network capital – and intensified processes of self-branding.

More ethnographic research is needed to assess the outcomes of this lifestyle for the future of work and the global division of labor. Ethnographers should observe how the digital nomads' geoarbitrage practices affect local communities and their economies. They should also analyze more carefully how digital nomadism articulates with the crisis of the nation-state and the emergence of cosmopolitanism.

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