

4.3 “digital nomadism”: a critique

The nomad is regularly invoked as a metaphor for our present technologically mediated mobile lifestyles and identities. Even before the large-scale spread of personal and mobile ICTs, media theorist Marshall McLuhan wrote in the context of electronic mass media that “[m]an the food-gatherer reappears incongruously as information-gatherer. In this role, electronic man is no less a nomad than his paleolithic ancestors” (McLuhan, 1994: 283). Echoing this argument, media theorist Joshua Meyrowitz called us “hunter-gatherers of an information age” (Meyrowitz, 1985: 316). A decade later with the rise of personal and portable media, cultural theorist Paul Du Gay described how the Sony Walkman was promoted as an indispensable possession for the sophisticated young “urban nomad”, that “self-sufficient urban voyager, ready for all weathers and all circumstances and moving through the city within a self-enclosed and self-imposed bubble of sound” (Du Gay, 1997: 16, 23-24, 39). The nomad reached zenith with the advent of digital media technologies. In their book “Digital Nomad” Makimoto and Manners predicted that portable digital technologies will usher in a “New Nomadic Age” (Makimoto & Manners, 1997: 2). MIT professor in architecture and media arts & sciences William Mitchell coined the term “electronomads” to describe people in a world in which bits and atoms collide. Individuals increasingly inhabit externalized wireless networks as a shield or fabric that envelops the body, just like Aborigines who carry very little and live of what the natural infrastructure provides (Mitchell, 2003: 44, 159-161). Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argued “[w]e are witnessing the revenge of nomadism over the principle of territoriality and settlement” in our present “fluid stage of modernity” in which “the settled majority is ruled by the nomadic and extraterritorial elite” (Bauman, 2000: 13). On a more critical level, geographer Tim Cresswell noted that “[r]ecently, ways of thinking that emphasize mobility and flow over stasis and attachment have come to the fore. As the world has appeared to become more mobile, so thinking about the world has become *nomad thought*” (Cresswell, 2006: 43). Similarly critical, communications researcher David Morley wrote that theories of transformations in transport and communications networks have led to often romanticized accounts of *nomadology* (Morley, 2000: 3, 230). Media historian and social theorist John Durham Peters established that “[t]he nomad is explicitly a hero of postmodernist thinking” (Peters, 1999a: 33). In this section I look at invocations of the ‘digital nomad’ by authors studying mobile media technologies. Understanding the influence of mobile media on space, time, and place, social relations, and identity in terms of nomadism is attractive and seems almost instinctively apt. But how valid is it really? And why is the nomad so regularly used in the first place? My critique boils down to a three connected points. I question ‘digital nomadism’ (a) as an empirical claim; (b) as a theoretical construct; (c) and for its neglect of political

dimensions of mobility. In the conclusion I propose a tentative answer to the question why the nomad is such an attractive metaphor.

From the outset we must differentiate between what is called 'nomad thought', and the use of nomadism in a literal and/or metaphorical sense to theorize an empirical reality. The first adopt a mode of thinking about postmodern subjectivities and identities that seeks to disengage itself from earlier conceptions of identities as fixed, authentic, and rooted. The second use actual nomadism as an exemplary way of life in order to theorize the influence of (mobile) media technologies on social phenomena. The first seeks a new knowledge foundation - an *episteme* - to theorize identity vis-a-vis dominant sedentary strains of thought¹. The second is making an *empirical* claim: "contemporary people are like nomads". Since the nomad so frequently features in studies about ICTs in general, and mobile communications in particular, I focus on the second type of argument. These arguments often draw inspiration and vocabulary from nomadic thinkers². It is therefore necessary to briefly look at nomad thought.

Deleuze and Guattari are the founders and main proponents of 'nomad thought' or 'nomadology' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). They extensively dwell upon characteristics of nomadic life. Yet it is not their aim to claim that we have become like nomads. Instead they oppose - in their unfathomable idiom - the 'nomadic war machine' to the centralized sedentary state in order to liberate thinking about identity itself. The nomad is invoked to overcome sedentary thinking about subjects and identities as essentialized and fixed *being*. Sedentary thinking posits individual subjects who, paradoxically, cannot exist as truly different in itself but only as the expression of otherness: the state, the territory, universal truth. Deleuze and Guattari develop a way of thinking about nomadic subjectivity that has no permanent or rooted essence. This nomadic subject is developed through ongoing *becoming* along 'rhizomatic' centrifugal spatial trajectories, as part of temporary "packs". The nomad's relation with technologies is not the traditional subject versus object but composed of man-machine assemblages. Interestingly, this nomad is not the hypermobile person we like to recognize in contemporary road warriors, portable gadget freaks, or global migrants. In fact Deleuze and Guattari assert that the nomad is not even characterized by movement in the sense of *displacement*. That would make mobility always relative to sedentary territories, and subjectivity subordinate to fixed and stable identities. Rather the nomad is

¹ Or perhaps it is more apt to speak of an *anti-episteme* to avoid suggesting that nomadologists seek just another rooted essence.

² There are also authors who try to bridge nomadology and empirical research. An example is cultural anthropologist Anthony D'Andrea who - inspired by Deleuze & Guattari and Braidotti - conceptualizes "neo-nomadism" as an "ideal-type of postidentitarian mobility" in order to investigate "the cultural effects of hypermobility on self, identity and sociality" among Ibiza party-goers (D'Andrea, 2006).

immobile because he never departs from anywhere but inhabits whichever place he is in (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 387-467). Feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti uses the notion of 'nomadic subjectivity' in thinking about identities "to act as a permanent deconstruction of Euro-centric phallo-logocentrism". Nomadic subjectivity posits the possibility of simultaneous and multi-layered identities. Nomadic subjectivities are tied to specific locations and situations and acknowledge that differences matter. Although her use of the nomad is similar to Deleuze and Guattari, Braidotti pre-dates the use of nomadism in the search for transformative thinking about identities in feminist long before they philosophized it. She explicitly acknowledges that this nomad is a non-existent mythical figure, a political fiction, that enables her to think through and move across established categories based on sedentary notions of identity. Contrary to the migrant and the exile, whose identities are tied to home territories, nomadic subjectivity relinquishes and deconstructs any sense of fixed identity (Braidotti, 1998).

In a critical genealogy, John Durham Peters unwraps and clarifies some recurring elements in nomadic thought. He compares the notions *exile*, *diaspora* and *nomadism*, and traces the lineage of these mobility concepts back to biblical and Romantic legacies. Unlike *exile* and *diaspora*,

nomadism dispenses altogether with the idea of a fixed home or center. Whereas exile often occurs in relation to some looming authority figure who wields power over life and death, nomadism can involve active defiance of or furtive avoidance of the sedentary authority of state and society (often to the peril of actual nomadic societies). If diaspora suggests a geographically dispersed network, the concept of nomadism suggests a face-to-face community, usually linked by ties of kinship stemming from a real or imagined common ancestor, that travels as a unit. [...] For nomads, home is always mobile. Hence there is a subtle doubleness here: being at home everywhere, but lacking any fixed ground.

(Peters, 1999a: 19-20)

Harking back to German Romantic author Novalis, Peters unravels the duality of distance versus nearness in Romantic thought: suffering from permanent homesickness *and* the desire to be at home everywhere³. Homesickness corresponds with *exile*. The desire to be

³ Interestingly, this exact same duality is found in Baudelaire's depiction of Monsieur G., the early modern urban archetype of the passionate anti-blasé *flâneur*: "To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world" (Baudelaire, 1964). This continuously mobile and restless *flâneur* keeps seeking that odd, fleeting quality Baudelaire calls 'modernity': "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable". The *flâneur's* identity is

at home everywhere corresponds with *nomadism* (Peters, 1999a: 29). *Exile* “locates the home in a homeland that is distant and for the time being unapproachable”. *Nomadism*, by contrast, “denies the dream of a homeland, with the result that home, being portable, is available everywhere” (Peters, 1999a: 31). When extended to debates about identity, “exile goes together with notions of a primordial identity and nomadism with constructed identity” (Peters, 1999a: 31-32). In the exile trope, people are alienated from their cultural sources since they are removed from their primary home. They are permanently homeless in their nostalgia for a home that always recedes behind the spatio-temporal horizon of elsewhere and in another time. In the nomad trope, any claim of a fixed identity (and its loss) is considered illusory since there is no such thing as a territorial home. The nomadic subject is liberated from homesickness. His mobility is not a traumatic rupture from the *Heimat* but signifies a permanent becoming. Peters is most sympathetic with the diaspora trope, which steers between these two extremes. Worth noting is his reference to cultural anthropologist Benedict Anderson. Anderson stresses the importance of forgetfulness for collective identities (Anderson, 1991: 199)⁴. This theme of forgetfulness and memory in identity construction will recur later in this dissertation. Mobile media increasingly act as an external memory. Instead of memorizing internally, we write away our appointments, contacts, and personal memories of events to our external devices in the form of notes, photos, tags, and videos. We always carry this external memory with us, or otherwise can access this external memory via semi-permanent connections to various online networks and external storage facilities⁵. The question is: what does that mean for our ability to both remember and forget, and consequently for our identity as *narrative*? After all - again with Anderson - identity stems from the need to *narrate* that which cannot be remembered. For instance that you and that picture of a naked baby are one and the same (Anderson, 1991: 204). I'll come back to this in the final part about identity **[doen dus!]**.

From this condensed overview of nomadology we now turn to invocations of the nomad in

only established through reflexivity. He reaches an understanding of himself and the world through external mediation by means of the visual spectacle that the city provides. Chroniqueur of early modern urban life Walter Benjamin similarly points to this theme of homelessness and distancing in the construction of modern identities through the gaze: “For the first time, with Baudelaire, Paris becomes the subject of lyric poetry. This poetry is no hymn to the homeland; rather, the gaze of the allegorist, as it falls on the city, is the gaze of the alienated man. It is the gaze of the flaneur, whose way of life still conceals behind a mitigating nimbus the coming desolation of the big-city dweller. The flaneur still stands on the threshold - of the metropolis as of the middle class. Neither has him in its power yet. In neither is he at home. He seeks refuge in the crowd” (Benjamin, Jennings, Doherty, Levin, & Jephcott, 2008: 104).

⁴ “To Herder’s dictum that every people has its own folkways and history that must be remembered on pain of rootlessness they [followers of nomadic thought] counter with Renan’s formula that collective identity emerges out of forgetfulness (Anderson 1991)” (Peters, 1999a: 32, my addition in brackets).

⁵ The distributed accessibility of external services and storage from anywhere is also called ‘cloud computing’.

mobile media studies. We shall see that similar themes recur here. Leopoldina Fortunati uses the term “nomadic intimacy” to describe how people in public situations use their mobile phones to interact with people they already know (“chosen socialness”) rather than interacting with strangers who are physically present (“chance socialness”) (Fortunati, 2002: 515-516) ⁶. Our sense of being part of social groups is no longer based on belonging to fixed places but increasingly about belonging to communicative networks. As a consequence, people tend to suffer less from nostalgia, the sense of loss of one’s own relationship with ‘sacred’ places like home, and familiar territory. “So, the use of the mobile phone ends up by reinforcing profane space, constructing a space without addresses, without precise localizations, playing down the specifically geographical and anagraphical aspect. Last of all, the use of the telephone, and especially of the mobile phone, ends up by attenuating the social inertia given by the home’s being immobile in space, to the point that the mobile phone in itself becomes a true mobile home” (Fortunati, 2002: 520). These spatio-temporal and social changes shape subjectivity and identity. Travel and mobility normally lead to temporary loss of autonomy and anxiety. The mobile phone’s *phatic* function, that is being in touch rather than the actual content of the conversation or message, enables us to rapidly regain stability. “[T]his modal personality strengthened by the mobile phone is a personality that manages to reduce uncertainty. [...] It is the possibility of contacting its own communicative network at any moment that has the powerful effect of reducing the uncertainty that mobility brings with it.” (Fortunati, 2002: 523). Such a personality often displays aggressive attitude and behavior, Fortunati adds. Finally, she argues that the mobile phone favors the development of a democratic society, because “the mobile has granted the same communicative rights to nomadic persons and those that are sedentary or immobile” and in addition “it has extended individual access to mobile communication also to members of the family [wives and children] up to yesterday ‘invisible’ with the fixed phone” (Fortunati, 2002: 525, my addition in brackets). For Fortunati, the digital nomad is no longer dependent on fixed places but feels at home anywhere and is always in control.

For now I want to put my critique on hold and first look at other uses of nomadism in mobile phone studies. In an article called “Global Nomads in the Digital Veldt” Meyrowitz reiterates his earlier argument about us being “hunter-gatherers of an information age” (Meyrowitz, 1985: 316) and applies it to digital media technologies (Meyrowitz, 1985, 2003). He draws a parallel between contemporary globalized post-modern society and past nomadic societies. “[A]s we are moving swiftly into a new era of globalization and wireless communication, we are also spiraling backward, in some key ways, to the earliest form of human association: nomadic hunting and gathering. We are, in short, becoming ‘global

⁶ For an application of this notion to mobile phones and tourism see (White, 2008: 196).

nomads” (Meyrowitz, 2003: 91). Both types of social organization are characterized by overlapping experiences and blurring of social roles. In nomadic societies everybody lived close to each other. No separate social roles and situations existed. There were no distinctions between workplace and home, between labor and leisure. Further, leadership in these societies was not mystified but based on merit (Meyrowitz, 2003: 92). Meyrowitz sees the same blurring of boundaries between social roles and social situations in the present age. “A key feature of the electronic era is that most physical, social, cultural, political, and economic boundaries have become more porous, sometimes to the point of functionally disappearing” (Meyrowitz, 2003: 97). For Meyrowitz, the digital nomad organizes social relations in non-stratified and non-segregated ways.

In the context of south-Korea Shin Dong Kim notes that the mobile phone is an aid in informal and ad-hoc outdoor gatherings. Kim evokes the archetypical businessman who goes out in the evening and changes his directions according to where the fun is. He concludes that “[t]his man is happily making a ‘nomadic’ life, riding a taxi with his gun-like ‘handphone’” (Kim, 2002: 71). In a similar vein, Ling & Yttri refer to a study about Parisian youth who go out on a “nomadic search for parties and happenings” (Ling & Yttri, 2002: 155). In these cases the nomad stands for highly flexible and mobile people who optimize their travels and (urban) experiences ⁷ Here, the digital nomad is spatially mobile, socially connected, and has an opportunistic and flexible mindset and refuses to be tied to any specific place or circumstance.

The digital nomad also rears its head in more popularizing literature. The Economist published a special report called “Our nomadic future”. Situated in the north-American context, The Economist asks how digital mobile technologies change our work, our relation to place, our social relations, and our identity. The introductory article “Nomads at last” depicts a new breed of urbanites frequenting coffee shops and libraries with free Wi-Fi ⁸. These are oases for “techno-Bedouins” who live a permanently connected life through their smartphones and laptops. According to The Economist it is the permanent connectivity, not the portability of gadgets, that makes us nomads. Echoing William Mitchell’s argument

⁷ Interestingly, in this same volume Chantal de Gournay revokes her earlier analysis from 1994 of the mobile phone as contributing to an “emergence of nomadic trends in society”, because - according to unsourced statistics - daily distances traveled have barely increased, although they are more evenly spread over the day (De Gournay, 2002: 194).

⁸ Sources: “Nomads at last” http://www.economist.com/specialreports/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=10950394, “Labour movement” http://www.economist.com/specialreports/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=10950378, “The new oases” http://www.economist.com/specialreports/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=10950463, “Location, location, location” http://www.economist.com/specialreports/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=10950439, “Family ties” http://www.economist.com/specialreports/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=10950449, “A world of witnesses” http://www.economist.com/specialreports/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=10950499, “Homo mobilis” http://www.economist.com/specialreports/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=10950487.

mentioned above (Mitchell, 2003), digital nomadism is not about dragging lots of technologies along. Nomads “are defined not by what they carry but by what they leave behind, knowing that the environment will provide it”. Often these urban nomads do not even use laptops but only a smartphone. Is this digital nomad your stereotypical corporate executive who travels the world? Not at all. This new nomad may never even leave the city. Manuel Castells is quoted saying “permanent connectivity, not motion, is the critical thing”. This conception of nomadism thus is somewhat different than the ones above, which also emphasize corporeal mobility.

The nomad has a different relation to labor. New businesses do no longer need an office since people can work from anywhere. Face to face meetings between co-workers of new organizations now often take place in cafés instead of an office. Managing such new organizations requires new rules. The founder of Moveon.org believes clumps of people in physical offices could result in new stratifications. In an effective organization “there mustn’t be insiders and outsiders”. Therefore he made a rule that no two people anywhere may share a physical office ⁹. New nomadism combines the autonomy of telecommuting with corporeal mobility, allowing “a gregarious and flexible work style” ¹⁰. Nomadism changes architecture and urban spaces too. Private enclosed spaces with a singular function are being replaced by semi-public places with multi-functional purposes. There is an increase in demand for “third places” in addition to first place (home) and second place (work). Travel patterns change because digital nomads move in a daisy-chain pattern, hopping from one place to the next while remaining connected. At the social level, nomadism tends to reinforce ties to people who are already close (friends and family) at the expense of attentiveness to strangers encountered physically. Rich Ling is quoted saying that when mediated interaction takes on precedence over co-present face to face communication, strong ties prevail over weak ties. The modern nomad also undergoes shifts in subjectivity, identity, and culture. This is especially visible in linguistic changes. Before, people took the time and care to express their thoughts in words. Now it is only speed that matters, not clarity. According to linguist Naomi Baron this is worrying, since “the dominant mindset of nomadic culture is that language does not matter” ¹¹. There are more downsides to this nomadic lifestyle. Silicon Valley trend-watcher Paul Saffo aptly phrases: “anybody who works for himself has a tyrant as a boss”. James Katz notes that the “historical re-integration” of our productive and social

⁹ This is interesting in the light of our later discussion about the playfulness of new media technologies, in which setting artificial rules is one of the defining elements.

¹⁰ Sun Microsystems chief executive Jonathan Schwartz however says he has fewer “flesh meetings”. This counters the idea discussed in the former section that communications technologies and physical travel are complementary instead of substitutes. The explanation could be that Sun has a very technologically savvy workforce.

¹¹ This touches upon our question about the relevance of narrativity for understanding current identities, a question to which we turn in the last part.

spheres leads to more pressure because there are no limits on personal productivity. People feel inadequate compared to the opportunities they have. Just like gamblers, a 'CrackBerry' addict may keep checking his email day and night craving for an occasional reward, a practice Katz calls "random reinforcement"¹². Sherry Turkle warns about permanent anxiety caused by addiction to always-on technologies. The notion of "publicness" too might be under strain. Individuals in third places who flip open their laptop or whip out their smartphones, while sipping from a latte with their earbuds in, are hollowing out these traditional meeting places. The report takes a very technology-driven stance. Societal changes are seen as inevitable. The logic of individual 'nomadic' practices is extended to society at large. The present "wireless world will soon be upon us", it is said, because "technology underlies all of the changes in today's nomadic societies". In a deterministic vein it is claimed that "the lesson of history is that what the geeks and early adopters do today, the rest of us will probably end up doing tomorrow or the day after. It is the pioneers that set the direction; the mainstream will follow in time".

We could go on with many more examples¹³. As a final remark, the digital nomad is evoked not in the least by various corporations selling mobile technologies and touting a highly flexible mobile lifestyle¹⁴. But now we turn to our critique.

critique

Our critique moves on three planes. First, the idea of digital nomadism has little to do with real nomadism. Further, as a theoretical notion it is flawed for several reasons. Finally, a generalized theory of nomadism fails to take the political aspects of hyper-mobility into account.

a. empirical

Have we indeed acquired (aspects of) a nomadic lifestyle as a result of our mobile technologies? When we take digital nomadism as a literal claim the argument reads: postmodern people are nomadic people ($A=B$). To refute this, it suffices to show that nomads are different from us ($B \neq A$) or that we are not nomads ($A \neq B$). As a metaphor (we are like nomads, $A \approx B$) the claim is a bit harder to refute. After all, metaphors transpose similarities from one phenomenon to another in order to shine a fresh light on one or both

¹² This is an example of how our interactions with technologies acquire 'playful' characteristics as a game-of-chance, though clearly not of the celebratory kind. More about 'playful technologies' in the next chapter.

¹³ One more: BBC's tech reporter Bill Thompson addresses similar issues in an article called "In search of the neo-nomad": <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6467395.stm>.

¹⁴ See for instance the report "Defining the Digital Nomad" by Dell at <http://www.digitalnomads.com>.

phenomena. A and B share some common attributes (i, ii, iii) but are not necessarily the same. The way to address this is to ask first whether nomadic people indeed have these attributes, and second, whether we also have these attributes. If both are indeed true, the next question becomes whether these proposed similarities warrant the claim A is like B? Phrased pragmatically, what do we actually gain from this comparison?

If we take the claim literally (we have become nomads), all we must do to disprove it is show that 'real' nomads are different from 'digital nomads'. So which nomadic society to choose from? Nomadic societies differ widely in economic subsistence, social structure and culture. There are nomadic hunter-gatherer societies (e.g. central-African pygmies, Australian aborigines), nomadic cattle-rearers (e.g. west-African Fulani, Mongolian, Siberian and Nordic herders), nomadic long-distance traders over land (e.g. Saharan Tuaregs), nomadic seafarers (e.g. Indonesia's *orang laut*), and even nomadic farmers ("swidden cultivators"). Monotheistic desert tribes riding on horses and camels probably share as little with forest-fouraging pygmies with their pantheon of spirits as do modern urban citizens. Lack of precision in pointing out which type of nomadic society the digital nomad is modeled after makes the argument implausible from the start.

But perhaps we do share some general attributes with nomadic people to make up for a fruitful metaphorical comparison? Let us return to the invocations of nomadism presented above. A number of implicit assumptions are made about nomadism which are extended to present mobile phone practices. We can schematically group these into three interconnected points. (i) The (potential for) corporeal mobility, and weakening of geographical place and scheduled clock time. (ii) The blurring of distinct social roles that rely on a clear definition of a social situation. (iii) Flexible and overlapping subjectivities and identities. We shall assess these three arguments both from the perspective of 'real' nomadism, and from the perspective of the digital nomad.

As is assumed for 'real' nomads, geographical places and distinct temporal moments are no longer important for mobile phone users. Fortunati says "[p]hysical space [...] is emptied of significance" since the mobile phone creates "space without addresses, without precise localizations" (Fortunati, 2002: 515, 520). The use of the mobile "has also changed the spatialization of time", ending up "supporting social thoughtlessness about time" and a "loss of diastemic [i.e. with discrete intervals] awareness in the administration of time" (Fortunati, 2002: 518, my addition in brackets). According to Meyrowitz "we, as global nomads, are able to violate the rules of physical movement and physical limits" (Meyrowitz, 2003: 97). Further, corporeal mobility no longer means an anxiety-ridden break from sedentary normalcy. As in nomadism mobility is incorporated into everyday practices, because "the mobile has also extended to dynamic space the same communicative prerogatives as static space" (Fortunati, 2002: 525). The Economist articles portrays the

nomadic worker who is no longer tied to a specific desk and working hours but instead prefers to temporarily throw out her anchor at multifunctional “third places”. This nomad is at home anywhere. However, from the perspective of ‘real’ nomadism, hyper-mobility and independence from place and time are not matters of choice and freedom. I collaborated in a locative media project called NomadicMILK. In December 2006 the project team travelled to Nigeria for an exploratory fieldwork trip¹⁵. Part of the project involved working with Fulani cattle herders in the central Nigerian Plateau State. Fulani are (semi-)nomadic pastoralists within the margins allowed in the present-day Nigerian social and political context. They often do not have legal ownership over land the way sedentary people do. We learned that in Nigeria sedentary farmers encroaching on land often block traditional Fulani pathways (*burtol*) (see also Drent, 2005: 62-63)¹⁶. Conflicts are very common. Both before and after our fieldwork research in 2006 very bloody conflicts occurred, killing many people in the Jos area of Plateau State¹⁷. However, many fruitful trade relations exist between (semi-)nomadic cattle-rearers and sedentary farmers (see Drent, 2005: 39, 95). Following a group of young Fulani herders in the field one day, I witnessed how farmers invited them to guide their cattle to freshly harvested plots to graze off the remaining stumps of corn and sorghum crop, and fertilize the soil with cow dung. After the cows had finished grazing, the Fulani took them to a next field where another farmer would be almost ready with his harvest. This mobility pattern relied on close communication and timing between sedentary and nomadic people. The digital nomad thesis tends to neglect how factors such as political context (the “plural legal situation” (Drent, 2005: 28, 33)), economic tensions and interdependencies with sedentary people, competition over fresh grounds with other nomadic groups, religious duties such as Ramadan, and contingencies like the weather and the mood of the leader of the herd, shapes the mobile life of nomads. The generalized assumption of a free-flowing, self-chosen nomadic hyper-mobility with little dependence on places and time is simply not true in the case of Fulani. These nomadic pastoralists make a year-long seasonal and circular transhumance. They rely on fixed routes. Other than the permanently connected digital nomad, their mobility is often shaped by *a lack of information and communication*. Teammate Ab Drent, an anthropologist who earlier had travelled with a group of nomadic Fulani in northern Cameroon for nine months, recalls how the leader of his group continuously inquires with strangers about the circumstances of their next destination. One

¹⁵ The initial fieldwork in Nigeria was done by locative media artist Esther Polak, anthropologist Ab Drent, and me. See NomadicMILK project at <http://www.nomadicmilk.net>.

¹⁶ Some of this information is also based on a conversation with a PARE (Pastoral Resolve, a pastoralist community organization) spokesman in Kaduna.

¹⁷ Causes of violence are a complex mix of conflicting modes of subsistence, religious and ethnic antagonism, and political factionalism, often phrased in terms of “indigenous” versus “non-indigenous” inhabitants of the region (see HRW, 2001). A real-world struggle between ‘sedentary’ and ‘nomadic life’, it seems.

time, another herder deliberately gave misinformation to his group of Fulani about the condition of the road to keep competition away from fresh grazing grounds (Drent, 2005: 64). In conclusion, actual nomadic life is characterized to a large degree by dependence on place and time schedules, as well as uncertainty and lack of communication. This severely undermines the first assumption of nomadism as a hyper-mobile way of life independent from place and time.

Inversely, from the perspective of the digital nomad, how accurate is the claim of supposed nomadic hyper-mobility? Digital nomadism is invoked as a departure from spatio-temporal routine. However, recent work shows that most people are creatures of habit. They regularly visit the same places and structure their day according to fixed time-schedules. Research from the converging fields of systems biology and social networks counters the idea that we have become free-flowing nomads. One study tracked the trajectories of 100,000 cellphone users for six months. The researchers used mathematical random walk and diffusion models to compare human mobility patterns with animal trajectories. Other than random animal movements, individual human trajectories show a high degree of temporal and spatial regularity. “[W]e found that the return probability [the probability that a user returns to the position where he/she was first observed after t hours] is characterized by several peaks at 24 h, 48 h and 72 h, capturing a strong tendency of humans to return to locations they visited before, describing the recurrence and temporal periodicity inherent to human mobility” (González, Hidalgo, & Barabási, 2008: 781, my addition in brackets). Most people spend the bulk of their time in only a few locations which they regularly frequent¹⁸. From a very different discipline, though leading to the same conclusion, is the locative media art project ‘Amsterdam Realtime’ by Esther Polak and Jeroen Kee at Waag Society¹⁹. A diverse group of Amsterdam residents were given a GPS receiver and a mobile internet-enabled device. Their GPS geo-coordinates were directly uploaded to a central server. These GPS data were visualized at the exhibition space as individual traces. Participant’s corporeal movements throughout the city could be viewed in (almost) realtime. During the course of the two-month project, a recognizable map of the city of Amsterdam gradually emerged from these cumulative traces. On an aggregate level the movements followed predictable and logical patterns. The busy main arteries were used heavily and the residential areas remained mostly dark. On an individual level however, the majority of the participants did not venture very far from their neighborhood. In the week they carried the

¹⁸ See article and data visualizations: http://www.nd.edu/~mgonza16/Marta'sHomepage_files/nature2008/research.html. An easier read on tracking mobile phones mentions this research: “Mobile phones expose human habits” June 4 2008 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/7433128.stm>. More about the work by Barabási: <http://www.barabasilab.com>.

¹⁹ See project website at <http://realtime.waag.org>.

device they only traveled between a small number of places. Most of us lead a surprisingly regular and local life.

Then what about the blurring of social roles? According to Fortunati, Meyrowitz and The Economist, social relations and roles are based on connectivity instead of physical proximity to other people. We have returned to a nomadic overlapping of experiential spheres. Yet this hardly seems an adequate description of actual nomadic societies. In our experience with Nigerian Fulani herders, men and women, young and old people, occupy clearly separate realms. Boys and young men go out into the field to graze the cattle, women sell *nono* at the market (milk). Drent describes how Fulani nomads perceive two different positions in the hierarchy. The male elderly head of the group represents the group to the outside world but does not take pastoral decisions. The *Jawro* is an honorific title given to men over 34 years old that “can not be bought, given, designated or inherited” but is acquired by experience and merit in herding cattle. To external people, the group is called after the name of the *Jawro*, not the official leader (Drent, 2005: 47-48). Inversely, the assumption that in our present society social roles are blurred is dubious. They may have moved away from former typical sociological categories. But not disappeared. Ironically, the perceived urgency of ‘nomadic thought’ as a way to challenge fixed and essentialized identity categories attests to that.

Are personal identities indeed more flexible and experienced less in terms of “sacred” places like the home? Fortunati uses the term ‘modal personality’ to suggest that identity shifts from some essential substance to identity as a conditional possibility. And ‘nomadic intimacy’ through the mobile phone increases our sense of security and being at home everywhere. Meyrowitz claims “smaller parts of our identities are tied to, or shaped by, specific locales or fixed roles. As we face an abundance of easily located information in cyberspace, we are more likely to abandon efforts to gather all we might want and store it in our homes and businesses. Instead, we tend to “store” many items where we found them (“bookmarking” the sites, perhaps), just as nomads leave herds of game and clusters of berry bushes in their natural habitats to be accessed when needed” (Meyrowitz, 2003: 96). Integration of experiential spheres at the level of the group is accompanied by a fragmentation and segregation at the level of the individual, who is now faced with a dizzying array of choices. This leads to a new recognition of individual idiosyncrasies (Meyrowitz, 2003: 99). From the perspective of actual nomadism the idea of a desacralized home may actually be true. Anthropological evidence about Pygmies in Congo shows that they maintain a separation between an informal social space inside the village and a religious space residing in the forest outside of their man-made profane territory (Tuan, 1977: 113-115). However, the conclusion that nomadic life is characterized by hyper-individualized idiosyncrasy seems unlikely. It is close to a truism that in tightly-knit bands there is little

tolerance towards straying from the group norm. From the perspective of the digital nomad, the emphasis on idiosyncratic “identities by choice” is one-sided. The image arises of individuals who no longer carefully collect and store their experiences internally as part of their personal narrative. They whimsically construct ad hoc identities and outsource their ‘selves’ to their digital clouds. But is this really an adequate description of contemporary technologically mediated identities? Instead of sticking to fixed conceptions of, say, ‘home’, shouldn’t we redefine their meanings? Maybe the mobile phone space itself becomes a dwelling place, as Fortunati indeed suggests? And while the maneuvering space for making individual choices seems to have increased, new restrictions and forces come to press on people’s shoulders. Individual choice may have become a new social pressure, leading some to speak of the “tyranny of choice” (Schwartz, 2004). The thoroughly social character of ICT’s also impose new norms and behaviors on individuals.

theoretical

How solid is the digital nomad thesis theoretically? First of all, it draws a completely a-historical parallel between two modes of organizing society. The nomad appears an attempt to capture the dynamics and fluidity of our present time. To do so it must paradoxically posit the a-historicity of nomadism itself by framing the mutability of our current society into a *phase* or *state*, a frozen slice of time. Take the following sentence by Meyrowitz: “[t]hose ancient nomadic societies that have survived into current times give us a window into the nature of our deep past” (Meyrowitz, 2003: 91). Or a bit further: “[o]n a basic behavioural level, however, we have returned in many ways to the overlapping experiences and role blurrings of nomads” (Meyrowitz, 2003: 95). Historians and anthropologists would stagger. As if nomads have stood still in time since the ice age... This rhetorically places other people into another age, an earlier stage of development²⁰. Precisely the capacity for flexible adaptation to varying environments lauded in ‘nomadism’ are denied to nomadic peoples themselves. Inversely, even if sci-fi dreams of time-machines would ever be realized, could we truly go back in time and shed the weight of historical knowledge? Obviously, it is not a literal claim of sameness but one of likeness. Of course we haven’t really returned to the same nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle as thousand of years ago. Rather we are *like nomads* from the past. This analogy still remains weak. As argued, the supposed similarities between postmodern societies and nomadic societies are shaky. There is no uniform nomadic way of life. And in many more ways we *are not like* nomadic people. Media influences involve not a restoration but a modification. At most they bear some resemblances with past practices but *they are different*. Paradoxically, phrasing this unique

²⁰ See for a critique of “allochronism” and the “denial of coevalness” in ethnography (Fabian, 1983, 1991).

difference in terms of sameness or likeness by grasping back to familiar concepts is to make exactly the centripetal move that nomadology tries to avoid.

Not only is the digital nomad a-historical, it also rests on false conceptions of space and place. In her work “For Space” (2005) geographer and philosopher Doreen Massey criticizes three common reductive views of space. “The imagination of space as a surface on which we are placed, the turning of space into time, the sharp separation of local place from the space out there; these are all ways of taming the challenge that the inherent spatiality of the world presents” (Massey, 2005: 7). As a metaphor to capture our shifting relations to space, time and place, nomadism refers rather narrowly to people being freed from geographical and temporal constraints. This assumes that space is an entity ‘out there’, a surface waiting for humans to cross and conquer²¹. It also turns space into time. It defines distance in temporal terms as the speed with which we can transmit information and communication. The idea that a particular place is no longer relevant for the social roles and communication processes departs from the view that places used to have essences. Place once was “closed, coherent, integrated as authentic, as ‘home’” (Massey, 2005: 6). Then mobile media came along and caused a decline of this singularity and unicity of place. Mobile media turned us all into nomadic drifters. Both at loss for a fixed place and at home anywhere. Nomadism presupposes that space and place once were entities to which we stood in opposition. Rather than an external resource that can be subdued, space has always been a product of our placements and movements in the world. After Massey, space is the product of interrelations, heterogeneous, and always under construction (Massey, 2005: 9-12). Rather than mourning the loss of clearly defined local place or celebrating our liberation from parochial place, we should accept that places have always been “events” characterized by “throwntogetherness”, the “unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now” (Massey, 2005: 140).

In emphasizing (the potential for) corporeal movement of people, nomadism takes a one-sided view of mobility. The metaphor doesn’t capture how mobile media technologies play a role in other mobilities, like the ones we discussed in the former section: physical mobility of objects and imaginary mobility (see for this point also Kakihara & Sorensen, 2001: 33-34). Interestingly, the spread of the nomad itself as a metaphor says more about the mobility of ideas than about the influence of new media technologies. In an article in Indonesian newspaper Kompas, F Budi Hardiman, a teacher at STF Driyarkara & Universitas Pelita Harapan, argues that the social cohesion in Jakarta is getting too weak because of the “nomad mentality” (*nomad-mental*) of its inhabitants²². Most urbanites are on

²¹ Fortunati literally says “[t]he mobile phone has a privileged role in enlarging the surface of space and the duration of time (Fortunati, 2002: 514).

²² Source: “Menuju Kota Tak Berkita, Sketsa tentang Jakarta” (Towards a city that isn’t ours: sketch of

the move driven by a “pathological predator passion” for money: “what do i eat tomorrow?” or “whom do I eat tomorrow”? Jakartans are not rooted and never at home in the city. They don’t care about their fellow-citizens nor about the city itself and its communal places.

Hardiman argues in a humanistic vein that the city is the arena of civilization where people have finally ended their nomadic life. In a word-play, he urges for people to not only live in the city but also *do* the city, join as a member (*meng(k)ota*) and live together with other people as a “we” (*meng(k)ita*)²³. Only then does the city become a home where people shape their character, attitude, and lifestyle which distinguishes them from village people. Interestingly, Hardiman invokes the nomad negatively as an uprooted being. The nomad’s journey to rapidly urbanizing south-east Asia transforms him from a liberated connected individual to an alienated self-centered opportunist.

Another weakness of the nomad metaphor is that it is oblivious to medium-specifics. If McLuhan and Meyrowitz already apply nomadism to the pre-digital era of electronic media, then what is particular about digital portable media? Meyrowitz lumps together all kinds of ‘electronic media’ (Meyrowitz, 2003: 95). Television, computers, internet, mobile phones; all contribute to a blurring of social boundaries. Meyrowitz fails to recognize their often widely varying influence on society. What may be true for the influence of television may not be true for the mobile phone. His argument places the mobile phone in a long heritage of media technologies that obliterate our “sense of place” (Meyrowitz, 1985). Multiple mobile phone studies however point out that the mobile phone is used in specific spatio-temporal contexts (Diminescu, Licoppe, Smoreda, & Ziemlicki, 2009; Ito, Okabe, & Anderson, 2009; Ito, Okabe, & Matsuda, 2005; Ling & Campbell, 2009; Nyíri, 2005). As argued earlier in this chapter, and even stronger in the next, in mobile media practices *location does matter*.

political

Nomadism as a generalized account of postmodern hyper-mobility remains blissfully unaware of how mobilities are thoroughly unequally divided. Doreen Massey speaks about “power geometries” in the politics of mobility.

For different social groups, and different individuals, are placed in very distinct ways in relation to ... flows and interconnections. This point concerns not merely the issue of who moves and who doesn't, although that is an important element of it; it is also about power in relation to the flows and the movement. Different social groups have distinct

Jakarta”) Kompas August 6 2007, p. 41. This article can be found online at <http://www2.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0708/06/nasional/3738224.htm>.

²³ The word *kota* means city, *kita* means an inclusive we as opposed to *kami* as an exclusive us. The prefix *meng-* makes an active verb.

relationships to this anyway-differentiated mobility: some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it.

(Massey, 1993: 62)

The 'jet-setters' are hyper-mobile and in charge of time space compression. Refugees and migrants are people who move but with little control. There are people who are "on the receiving end of time-space compression", like working-class pensioners (Massey, 1993: 63). And there are Brazilian *favela* dwellers who contribute a lot to the worldwide flow of culture (football, music) but themselves are immobilized and imprisoned in it. So who are these global nomads? Are they highly mobile cosmopolitans, Manuel Castell's "global elite" in the "space of flows" (Castells, 1996)? Are they migrant workers traveling abroad and keeping in touch via their mobile phones? Are they the immobilized people who consume the world through their mobile devices and are virtually and imaginarily mobile? The digital nomad thesis often fails to distinguish between different mobilities enabled and constrained by power-geometries.

As a last remark, the nomad can be criticized from a critical feminist perspective for its perpetuation of a "phallo-centric" and technologically-driven notion of progress. This nomad fully embraces the dominant capitalist logic of speeding up the desire for ever-new products and services. Notwithstanding assertions that permanent connectivity, not gadgetry and hyper-mobility, are what counts, the digital nomad strongly retains a male-biased flavor. Toys for the boys. The nomad also reaffirms Enlightenment ideals of hyper-individuality. It re-boxes old identity notions of total personal freedom and autonomy in a trendy term. Rather than perpetually questioning fixed identity categories, as the nomadologists have it, this technologically-driven utilitarian nomad is happy to maximize his own freedom of movement and to optimize personal choices by exerting control. "Make the most of now!" (Vodafone). "Get more from your life!" (T-Mobile).

conclusion

We have seen that the 'digital nomad' has little to do with 'real' nomadism, that it is misleading as a metaphor, that it rests on shaky theoretical foundations, and neglects political dimensions of unequal access to hyper-mobile lifestyles. Yet there must be more to it. Why is the nomad such a fascinating trope for understanding media? One recurring question is whether media technologies function as a chasm or as a bridge. In his book "Speaking into the Air" John Durham Peters traces the history of the idea of communication (Peters, 1999b). Peters brilliantly shows how in the late 19th century 'communication' became imbued with ideals of a perfect exchange of an individual's inner worlds and

thoughts with other individuals. “‘Communication’ is a registry of modern longings. The term evokes a utopia where nothing is misunderstood, hearts are open, and expression is uninhibited. [...] [a]n apparent answer to the painful divisions between self and other, private and public, and inner thought and outer word...” (Peters, 1999b: 2). The paradox arose between mediated communication as both entrenching people further into solipsism and clearing the fog between inter-human contact. I propose ‘digital nomadism’ tries to reconcile the radical newness of mobile telecommunications with lost ‘true’ communication. The image of nomadic connectivity and intimacy is infused with the rhetoric of perfect communication. The permanently connected nomad symbolizes what is considered lost in and through mediated communication: nearness, transparency, and perfect mutual understanding between individuals. The nomad symbolizes a return to the ideal state of small-scale tribal communication, before we fell from grace. ‘Digital nomadism’ is a deliberate a-historical trope that seeks both a new beginning and a return to a lost state of humanity. The serious downside of any kind of ‘tribalization’ however is that it goes against humanist ideals of universal communication and ‘publicness’ as the shared ground for engaging in mutually meaningful dialogue.

Following good nomadic practice I return to my point of departure. In “On the Move” Tim Cresswell argues that mobility has become a root metaphor for contemporary understanding of culture and society (Cresswell, 2006). Cresswell shows there have been two opposing views of mobility: sedentary metaphysics and nomadic metaphysics (Cresswell, 2006: 26-27). *Sedentary metaphysics* is an outlook on the world that implicitly takes fixed existence as the norm. It sees sedentary life as rooted, stable, safe, orderly, and rational. Mobility, and particularly nomadic people such as gypsies, wanderers and vagabonds symbolize chaos, disruption, fear, and a threat to society’s order. *Nomadic metaphysics* by contrast attaches many positive connotations to mobility. It is progressive, exciting, contemporary, and anti-establishment. Rootedness, stasis, and fixed boundaries are seen negatively as being reactionary, dull, and of the past. The distinction shows how mobility and nomadism are imbued with symbolic connotations and values. On the one hand nomadism means a Romantic liberation from the time-disciplined sedentary life behind the desk. On the other hand nomadism connotes drift, rootlessness, and increased uncertainty in our highly complex “risk society”. The distinction is a healthy antidote against the danger of getting trapped in all too easy celebratory (e.g. Braidotti) or dismissive (e.g. Bauman’s thesis of ‘liquid modernity’) attitudes. We should use this metaphor with the utmost caution. On the one hand identity indeed becomes a life-long ‘nomadic’ enterprise. I do argue that our current identities are characterized by constant movements between a number of tensions in life. Yet identities are and cannot be totally nomadic. We need infrastructural and institutional, as well as social and cultural moorings (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Mobile media act

as both as “lines of flight” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), and as anchor points to hold on to. I consider mobile media as both nomadic and sedentary: acting both as media of flight and as media of coherence.

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