



### 4.3 mobile media and digital nomadism

The nomad is regularly invoked as a key metaphor for our contemporary flexible and mobile lifestyles and identities. Before the large-scale spread of digital ICTs, media theorist Joshua Meyrowitz writes that we share so many characteristics with nomadic people that we can characterize ourselves as “hunter-gatherers of an information age” (Meyrowitz, 1985: 316). Meyrowitz adopts this idea from media theorist Marshall McLuhan<sup>1</sup>, and reiterates it in a later article called “Global Nomads in the Digital Veldt” (Meyrowitz, 2003). Cultural studies researcher Paul Du Gay describes how the Sony Walkman is 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). MIT professor in architecture and media arts & sciences William Mitchell coins the term “electronomadic” to describe how people in the present world in which bits and atoms collide increasingly inhabit externalized wireless networks as a kind of shield or fabric that envelops the body, similar to Aborigines who carry very little and live off what the natural infrastructure provides (Mitchell, 2003: 44, 159-161). Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman states “[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 this leads geographer Tim Cresswell to note “[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, communications researcher David Morley feels that theories of transformations in transport and communications networks have led to (often romanticized) accounts of *nomadology* (Morley, 2000: 3, 230). And media historian and social theorist John Durham Peters establishes 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 who study the influence of mobile media technologies<sup>2</sup>. I critically assess the underlying assumptions and their merit for understanding the influence of mobile media on space, time, and place, social relations, and identity. While there is certainly something very attractive and almost instinctively apt about describing the influence of mobile media technologies in terms of a new kind of nomadism, I do feel this is problematic. My critique boils down to a number of points that I group under three headers. I question “digital nomadism” (a) as an empirical claim; (b) as a theoretical construct; (c) and for its neglect of political dimensions of mobility.

For clarity's sake we should differentiate from the outset between those who engage in what is called 'nomad thought' or 'nomadology', and those who invoke the nomad 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 social phenomena in relation to mobile media technologies, mobility, post-/late-/liquid modernity, globalization, and so on. The first seeks a new foundation - an *episteme* - for theorizing identity vis-a-vis dominant sedentary strains of thought<sup>3</sup>. The second is making an *empirical* claim: "postmodern people are like nomads". Since the nomad frequently features in studies about the impact of communication technologies in general, and mobile communication in particular, I focus on scrutinizing the second type of argument. Although this type of argument is an empirical one, authors often draw inspiration and vocabulary from nomadic thinkers<sup>4</sup>. It is therefore necessary to briefly look at nomad thought.

Deleuze and Guattari are the founders and main proponents of nomadology (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). They extensively dwell upon characteristics of nomadic life. But 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 sedentary state in order to liberate thinking about identity itself. Against Euro-centric "arborescent" models centering around rooted territories and organs of power in "striated space" they posit the nomad who is characterized by deterritorialized "rhizomatic" outward movements in "smooth space". The nomad is invoked to overcome thinking about subjects and identities as essentialized and fixed *being*. Such 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 centrifugal spatial trajectories, as part of temporary "packs". Moreover the nomad's relation to technologies and things is not one of 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 in a sense is 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 “to act as a permanent deconstruction of Euro-centric phallo-logocentrism” in thinking about identities. “Nomadic subjectivity is about the simultaneity of complex and multi-layered identities” that are tied to locations and situations and seeks to incorporate differences which do matter. Although her use of the nomad is similar to Deleuze and Guattari, she sees the search for transformative thinking about identities occurring in feminist thought way 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 describes the duality of Romantic thought as both homesickness and the desire to be at home everywhere<sup>5</sup>.

The first, says Peters, corresponds to *exile*, the second to *nomadism* (Peters, 1999a: 29). Where *exile* “locates the home in a homeland that is distant and for the time being unapproachable”, *nomadism* “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. He is permanently homeless in his nostalgia for a home that always recedes behind the spatio-temporal horizon of elsewhere and in another time. In the nomadic 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. Her mobility is not a traumatic rupture from the *Heimat* but signifies a permanent becoming of her subjectivity.

Peters is most sympathetic with the diaspora trope that steers between these two extremes. Worth noting is his reference to cultural anthropologist Benedict Anderson who stresses the importance of forgetfulness for collective identities (Anderson, 1991: 199)<sup>6</sup>. This theme of forgetfulness and memory in identity construction is interesting for my investigation. 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 facilities<sup>7</sup>. 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, notions of identity and being a person arise out of the need for *narrating* 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!]**.

Now I turn to some examples of invocations of the nomad in mobile media studies. According to Leopoldina Fortunati, time and space are the new frontiers of increased social productivity. The mobile phone has a privileged role in enlarging the surface of space and the duration of time (Fortunati, 2002: 514). She notes that in public situations most people prefer to interact via their mobile phones with the people they already know (“chosen socialness”) over interacting with strangers who are physically present (“chance socialness”). She calls this “nomadic intimacy” (Fortunati, 2002: 515-516; For an application to the use of mobile phones in tourism see White & White, 2008: 196). Social networks take over primacy from physical places: “people react to the lack of informative immediacy of the place, strengthening communicative immediacy with their social networks by means of the mobile” (Fortunati, 2002: 515). 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 have consequences for subjectivity and identity as well. Travel and mobility normally lead to a certain anxiety and temporary loss of autonomy. The mobile phone's *phatic* function, i.e. the act of 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 now I want to put my critique on hold and first look at some other occurrences of nomadism in mobile phone studies. Someone who more than once invokes the nomad to describe our contemporary technologically mediated way of life is media theorist Joshua Meyrowitz (Meyrowitz, 1985: 315-317; 2003). In his article "Global Nomads in the Digital Veldt", Meyrowitz reiterates his earlier argument from "No Sense of Place" (1985). Meyrowitz writes "as 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 nomads'" (Meyrowitz, 2003: 91). He draws a parallel between two modes of societal organization: current globalized post-modern society and past nomadic societies. Both types of social organization are characterized by overlapping experiences and blurring of social roles. Because in nomadic societies everybody lived close to each other, no separate social roles existed. There were no distinctions between workplace and home, between labor and leisure. Different types of social activities overlapped (Meyrowitz, 2003: 92). Further, leadership in these societies was not mystified but based on merit. Meyrowitz sees the same kind of blurring of boundaries between social roles and spatiotemporal definitions of social situations occur 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 this new nomadism means a non-stratified and non-segregated way of organizing social relations and society brought about by electronic media. In the context of south-Korea Shin Dong Kim notes that the mobile phone is an aid in informal and ad-hoc outdoor gatherings. He evokes an archetypical businessman who goes out in the evening and changes his directions according to where the fun is, leading him to conclude 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" (R. Ling & Yttri, 2002: 155). The nomad here is invoked to portray highly flexible and mobile people who optimize their travels and (urban) experiences<sup>8</sup> Just like in Fortunati's argument, 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. "Our nomadic future" is the name of a special report in *The Economist*. Situated in the north-American context, these articles look at 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 urban nomads who frequent coffeeshops and libraries that offer Wi-Fi<sup>9</sup>. These are the oases or watering-holes for the "techno-Bedouins" who live a permanently connected life through their smartphones and laptops. A common term for such a place in-between work and leisure is "third place". According to *The Economist* it is the permanent connectivity, not the portability of gadgets, that makes us nomads. Echoing the argument by William Mitchell mentioned above (Mitchell, 2003), this type of digital nomadism is not about dragging a lot of technologies along. Urban 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 her city. Manuel Castells is quoted saying "permanent connectivity, not motion, is the critical thing". This conception of nomadism is somewhat different than the ones above that 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<sup>10</sup>. The founder of Moveon.org says "there can't be any

clumps of people in physical offices” because they might turn into cliques or “power centres”. In an effective organisation “there mustn't be insiders and outsiders”. Therefore he made a rule that no two people anywhere may share a physical office. This new nomadism combines the autonomy of the old ideal of telecommuting with mobility, allowing “a gregarious and flexible work style”<sup>11</sup>. 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 a particular increase in demand for “third places” in addition to first place (home) and second place (work). Travel patterns change too 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 says when mediated interaction takes on precedence over co-present face to face communication, strong ties prevail over weak ties. Our nomad also undergoes shifts in subjectivity, identity, and culture. This is especially visible in rapidly changing language. Before, people took the time and care to clarify their thoughts in linguistic expressions. 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”. 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 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 practise Katz calls “random reinforcement”<sup>12</sup>. Similarly, Sherry Turkle warns for 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 and sip 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’ practises 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”.

I could go on with many more examples<sup>13</sup>. Important to remark is that the digital nomad is evoked not in the least by various corporations selling mobile technologies and touting a highly flexible mobile lifestyle<sup>14</sup>. But now I want to turn to my critique.

### *critique*

My critique moves on three planes. First I argue that 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? My strategy is as follows. When we take digital nomadism as a literal claim the argument reads: postmodern people are nomadic people ( $A=B$ ). To refute this, we have 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 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 modelled after makes the argument implausible from the start.

But we must not dismiss it too soon. Perhaps we do share some general attributes with



nomadic people that make a fruitful metaphorical comparison. So let's return to the above invocations of nomadism. A number of implicit assumptions are made about nomadism which are extended to present mobile phone practises. 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. As said, I will assess these arguments both from the perspective of 'real' nomadism, and from the perspective of the digital nomad.

First - as is assumed is the case for 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). And 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 a anxiety-ridden break from sedentary normalcy. Just like nomadic life, mobility is incorporated into everyday practises, 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. Yet from the perspective of 'real' nomadism, hypermobility 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 trip <sup>15</sup>. 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 (*burto*) (see also Drent, 2005: 62-63) <sup>16</sup>. 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 State <sup>17</sup>. 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 bring 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 they knew 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 hypermobility 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, and 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, describes how the leader of his group continuously inquires with strangers what the circumstances are at their next destination. Drent mentions how 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, nomadic life is characterized to a large degree by dependence on place and time schedules, as well as uncertainty and lack of communication<sup>18</sup>. This severely undermines the first assumption of nomadism as hypermobile way of life independent from place and time.

Inversely, from the perspective of the digital nomad, how accurate is the claim of supposed nomadic hypermobility? 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. Recent research from the converging fields of systems biology and social networks counters the idea that we have become free-flowing nomads. González, Hidalgo, and Barabási tracked the trajectories of 100,000 cellphone users for six months. They use 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 thus spend the bulk of their time in only a few locations which they regularly frequent<sup>19</sup>. From a very different discipline, yet leading to the same conclusion, is the locative media art project called ‘Amsterdam Realtime’ by Esther Polak and Jeroen Kee at Waag Society<sup>20</sup>. A diverse group of Amsterdam residents were given a GPS receiver in combination with a mobile internet-enabled device that directly uploaded the GPS geo-coordinates to a central server. At the exhibition space these GPS data were visualized as individual traces. People’s physical movements throughout the city could be viewed in (almost) realtime. During the course of the two-month project, gradually a recognizable map of the city of Amsterdam 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 it appeared that during the week they carried the device the majority of the participants did not venture very far from their neighborhood and only traveled between a small number of places. Most of us lead a surprisingly regular and local life.

Second, according to Fortunati, Meyrowitz and The Economist social roles are no longer tied to physical co-presence. Social relations are based on connectivity instead of physical proximity with other people. Meyrowitz claims the boundaries between social spheres - such work and home, public and private, male and female spaces, child and adult realms, leaders and followers - are more permeable, more transparent. The organization of current society is characterized by a blurring of social roles. We have returned to a nomadic overlapping of experiential spheres. Yet this hardly seems an adequate description of the nomadic society we encountered. 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. The perceived need for nomadic thought as a way to challenge fixed and essentialized identity categories attests to that.

Third, and here we see a clear parallel with nomadic thought, personal identity is

experienced less in terms of “sacred” places like the home. Connected hypermobility through the mobile phone increases our sense of security and being at home everywhere. Fortunati’s use of the term ‘modal personality’ suggests that identity shifts from residing in some essential substance to identity as a conditional possibility. Meyrowitz claims that “fewer of our activities and 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 idiosyncrasies of individuals (Meyrowitz, 2003: 99). From the perspective of actual nomadism the idea of a desacralized home may even 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 for diversion from the group norm. Yet on this point I admit I do not stand strong... However, from the perspective of the digital nomad I hold that the emphasis on idiosyncratic “identities by choice” is very one-sided. The image that arises is that of an individual who no longer carefully collects, domesticates, and stores her experiences internally as part of a personal narrative. She whimsically constructs an ad hoc identity and outsources all this to her digital ‘cloud’. I think this is not an adequate description of contemporary technologically mediated identities, for reasons I shall elaborate in the third section of the dissertation. **[beetje slap zo, ff paar hints geven]**

### *theoretical*

How solid is the digital nomad thesis theoretically? One aspect I take issue with is that it draws a completely a-historical paralel between two modes of organizing society. The nomad appears to me an attempt to restore a sense of equilibrium within the ongoing dynamics of historical time. It tries to frame the mutability of our current society into a new (old) *phase* or *state*, a frozen slice of time. To do so it must paradoxically posit the a-historicity of nomadism itself. 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 development<sup>21</sup>. Precisely the capacity for flexible adaptation to varying environments lauded in ‘nomadism’ are denied to nomadic peoples themselves. And, inversely, as if we can go back in time... It can be countered that it is not a claim of sameness but of likeness. Of course we haven’t really gone back to the same nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle as thousand of years ago. Rather we are *like nomads* from the past. However, this analogy remains weak. As I have tried to show, 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. Influences of media are not a restoration but a modification. At most it bears some resemblances with past practises but *it is different*. In my view, to phrase this unique difference in terms of sameness or likeness by going 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” 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 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 conquer<sup>22</sup>. 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. As an attempt to describe a shift 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).

By 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 inhabitants<sup>23</sup>. Most urbanites are on 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. In the western humanist tradition the author argues that a city is an arena of civilization where people have finally ended their nomadic life. In a nice play with words, the author urges that people must 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*)<sup>24</sup>. Only then does the city become a home where people shape their character, attitude, and lifestyle which distinguishes them from village people. Clearly, the nomad is invoked negatively as an uprooted being. His travels to the context of rapidly urbanizing south-east Asia transforms him from a free-flowing connected individual to an alienated self-centered opportunist.

The open question remains whether (mobile) media technologies function as a chasm or as a bridge? According to The Economist the digital nomad must be defined by (the potential for) permanent connectivity instead of corporeal mobility. ‘Always-on’ communication recreates a sense of proximity and co-presence independent of distance and temporal constraints. I contend that this image of nomadic close connectivity is infused with the rhetoric of perfect communication. 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). In the 1920s, visions of communication hovered between fear of its persuasive power as propaganda, and the hope about its ability to open up worldwide understanding. In addition, modernist artists explored the impossibility of communication to reach outside the abyss of solipsism, while philosophers considered its role in the disclosure of otherness and the orchestration of participatory action (Peters, 1999b: 19). In the 1930s and 1940s a conceptual distinction between face to face communication and mediated communication arose. Communication theory viewed communication as the coding, transmission, and storage of information, and initially focussed primarily on signals instead of meaning. A second post-World War II strand of thought valued its therapeutic role for self-expression at both interpersonal and international levels (Peters, 1999b: 22-26). The paradox arose between mediated communication as both entrenching people further into solipsism and clearing the fog between inter-human contact. I think the permanently connected nomad symbolizes what is considered lost in and through mediated communication: nearness, transparency, and perfect mutual understanding between individuals. Our complex modern communication technologies made us lost and alienated in the "lonely crowd". The nomad is a return to this alleged ideal state before we fell from grace. The nomad may have returned to small-scale tribal communication. The serious downside is that this tribalization may mean the end of humanist ideals of universal communication and 'publicness' as the shared ground for engaging in mutually meaningful dialogue. To these issues, the nomad stands powerless.

In his argument about the blurring of social boundaries Meyrowitz lumps together all kinds of 'electronic media' (Meyrowitz, 2003: 95). Television, computers, internet, mobile phones, Meyrowitz does not distinguish between the media-specificities of these technologies and 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; R. S. Ling & Campbell, 2009; Nyíri, 2005). In mobile media practises, *location does matter*. This will be the focus of the next chapter about locative media.

### *political*

Nomadism as a generalized account of post-modern hypermobility remains blissfully unaware of how mobilities are thoroughly unequally divided. In the politics of mobility Doreen

Massey speaks about “power geometry”. “For different social groups, and different individuals, are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these 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 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). There are people, the ‘jet-setters’, who are hypermobile and in charge of time space compression. There are people who move a lot but are in control themselves, such as refugees and migrants. There are people who are “on the receiving end of time-space compression” such as the working-class pensioner (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 the highly mobile cosmopolitans, Manuel Castell's “global elite” in the “space of flows”? Are they the migrant workers who travel a lot and keep in touch via their mobile phones? Are they the immobilized people who consume the world through their mobile devices and are virtually and imaginary 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 and 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 permanently 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*

I have argued 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 digital nomadism than just to dismiss it as false. What we have here is the classic tension between



abstracted knowledge and the understanding people have of themselves. Cultural anthropologists call this distinction *etic* (observers perspective) and *emic* (insiders perspective). Nomadism is widespread and powerful in people's own perception of their lives. It is infused with moral connotations. On the one hand nomadism means a Romantic liberation from the time-disciplined sedentary life behind the desk. On the other hand it has connotations of drift, rootlessness, and increased uncertainty in our highly complex "risk society". According to 'real' nomadic practise I return to our 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). Following Liisa Malkki, Cresswell argues there have been two conflicting views on 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. This distinction shows how mobility and nomadism are imbued with symbolic connotations and values. It also is a healthy antidote to the danger of getting trapped in a celebratory (e.g. Braidotti..) or dismissive (e.g. the thesis of 'Liquid Modernity' by Bauman, 2000) attitude towards (neo-)nomadic lifestyles as a metaphor for post-modern identities and actualities.

I believe we must 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 paradoxes. Yet identities are and cannot be totally nomadic. We need anchorings and moorings, infrastructural and institutional as well as social and cultural (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Mobile media thus act as aides in creating "lines of flight" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), as well as being anchor points to hold on to. Therefore I consider mobile media as both nomadic and sedentary: acting both as media of flight and as media of coherence.

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<sup>1</sup> McLuhan writes "Man 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).

<sup>2</sup> This term is originally coined by Makimoto and Manners (Makimoto & Manners, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Or perhaps it is more apt to speak of an *anti-episteme* to avoid suggesting that nomadologists seek just another rooted essence.

<sup>4</sup> 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).

<sup>5</sup>Note that this formulation is almost exactly the same as Baudelaire's depiction of Monsieur G., the prototype of the passionate and anti-blasé urban *flâneur*.

The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. *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 - impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito. [...] Thus the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. Or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life. He is an 'I' with an insatiable appetite for the 'non-I', at every instant rendering and explaining it in pictures more living than life itself, which is always unstable and fugitive.  
(Baudelaire, 1964, my emphasis)

This continuously mobile and restless *flâneur* keeps seeking that odd, fleeting quality which Baudelaire names '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 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 also points to this theme of homelessness and distancing in the construction of the early modern identity 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 *flâneur*, whose way of life still conceals behind a mitigating nimbus the coming desolation of the big-city dweller. The *flâneur* 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)

<sup>6</sup>"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).

<sup>7</sup>This distributed accessibility of external services and storage from anywhere is also called 'cloud computing'.

<sup>8</sup>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 (Gournay, 2002: 194).

<sup>9</sup>Sources: "Nomads at last" [http://www.economist.com/specialreports/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story\\_id=10950394](http://www.economist.com/specialreports/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=10950394), "Labour movement" [http://www.economist.com/specialreports/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story\\_id=10950378](http://www.economist.com/specialreports/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=10950378), "The new oases" [http://www.economist.com/specialreports/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story\\_id=10950463](http://www.economist.com/specialreports/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=10950463), "Location, location, location" [http://www.economist.com/specialreports/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story\\_id=10950439](http://www.economist.com/specialreports/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=10950439), "Family ties" [http://www.economist.com/specialreports/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story\\_id=10950449](http://www.economist.com/specialreports/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=10950449), "A world of witnesses" [http://www.economist.com/specialreports/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story\\_id=10950499](http://www.economist.com/specialreports/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=10950499), "Homo mobilis" [http://www.economist.com/specialreports/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story\\_id=10950487](http://www.economist.com/specialreports/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=10950487).

<sup>10</sup>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.

<sup>11</sup>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.

<sup>12</sup>Here we see a another interesting example of game-like playfulness in our interactions with technologies, though clearly not of the celebratory kind. More about mobile technologies as playful in the next chapter.

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

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

<sup>15</sup>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>.

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

<sup>17</sup>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.

<sup>18</sup> One of the questions we were interested in with the NomadicMILK project was how new communication and transport technologies would influence nomadic mobility patterns. Motorbikes were already a valued means to get information about other places. Mobile phones started to appear as well, though not yet widespread.

<sup>19</sup> See article and data visualizations: [http://www.nd.edu/~mgonza16/Marta'sHomepage\\_files/nature2008/research.html](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>.

<sup>20</sup> See project website at <http://realtime.waag.org>.

<sup>21</sup> See for a critique of "allochronism" and the "denial of coevalness" in ethnography (Fabian, 1983, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> Fortunati literally says the mobile phone enlarges the surface of space and the duration of time.

<sup>23</sup> Source: "Menuju Kota Tak Berkita, Sketsa tentang Jakarta" (Towards a city that isn't ours: sketch of 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>.

<sup>24</sup> 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.

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