Embracing perpetual liminality: The construction of provisional homes and the compulsion of “moving on” among global professionals

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- This is an early draft, please do not circulate -

Introduction

Mobility and the notion of living in a fluid present have become central motifs of modern culture (Nkosi 1994; Nowicka, 2007). When looking at the normative significance of mobility (Presskorn-Thygesen, 2015), it may be noted that in certain working contexts such as in academia or multinational corporations, a nomadic, migrating lifestyle has become an imperative for career development and success (Rodda, 2015). Critical scholars warn however that the normative demand to be mobile may result in self-defeating outcomes, as mobility presents “the limitless possibilities never possible to accomplish” (Baerenholdt, 2013: 27; see also Jeanes et al., 2015). They moreover point out that even though being on the move can be stimulating and enriching in many ways, it can also be accompanied however by turbulence and friction, especially when people are entrapped in a compulsory logic of permanent movement. Against this background it is interesting to observe that a steady rise in mobility is not only in the interest of multinational companies for whom the development of globally competent managers has become a highly ranked HR priority, or for universities who have started to compete internationally for outstanding scholars.

Employees themselves increasingly consider a global network rather than a single organization as an appropriate location for developing their competencies and building up their careers (Saxenian, 1996; Thomas et al., 2005). They particularly emphasize the enjoyable and inspiring environment that an international assignment offers, considering it as an adventure, an
opportunity to satisfy their curiosity and to reinvent themselves (Richardson & Zikic, 2007). Despite these promises for self-determination and ‘fresh energy’ (Arthur et al., 1999; Marshall, 2000), an international move is not without its perils. In fact, there is some hardship associated with moving around extensively. Each time when relocating to a different country, for example, global professionals have to put themselves ‘at stake’ as they are constantly under close evaluation of being a foreigner. When returning to their home country, they often find no suitable positions and even have to face downward career mobility. In reference to their private lives they report difficulties in keeping up personal relationships as they travel from one location to the other. While new relationships remain fairly short and superficial, existing relationships in the home country suffer from regular absences and a lack of intimacy (Suutari, 2003). Also starting or maintaining a family under conditions of mobility is not an ideal scenario. Even moving with a partner in a dual-career couple model brings a number of unique challenges and complexities (Morley & Heraty, 2004).

In light of these difficulties associated with global mobility, the question arises why global professionals still continue to actively seek opportunities for moving to yet another country when they could avoid some of these hardships by settling down in one place. In this paper I will explore this question by drawing on the concept of perpetual liminality, which has so far been framed rather negatively in the literature as infusing uncertainty, anxiety and stress in people’s lives. Through a first preliminary analysis of life story interviews where global professionals from academia and the business context describe how they construct provisional homes that allow them to ‘move on’ any time, I hope to illustrate however how perpetual liminality becomes a state that is embraced rather than despised. Going a step further, I even argue that people turn their experience of perpetual liminality from a necessary evil that needs to be endured into a compulsion that cannot be resisted. This endorsement of perpetual liminality can be assumed to have identity implications as well, since the social environment of global careerists – people with whom they constantly negotiate their self-image – keeps changing frequently and in some instance even radically. In the following I will give a brief overview on the literature of global career mobility and its implications before elaborating upon the notion of perpetual liminality. After a short description of my methodological set-up I will present some first interview observations and discuss them in light of some implications of perpetual liminality.
on the identity constructions of globally mobile professionals. Rather than ending with a clear conclusion, I will close the paper with some questions for discussion.

**Recent developments in global career mobility and its implications**

Historical evidence suggests that academics have been internationally mobile for thousands of years, with Sophists from the Greek-speaking world being some of the earliest academic travelers (Ehrenberg, 1973; Richardson & Zikic, 2007). Also in the trading context, a small and privileged population of mobile expatriates has existed since the early days of nation-states (Cohen 1977; Dulles 1966). This being said, the phenomenon of massive transnational mobility is relatively novel which explains why global professionals have only recently started to feature systematically in social research. When looking at the rise of global careers more broadly, it could be argued that careers are becoming a substantial part of the wider globalization phenomenon (Baruch et al., 2013). International work experience is an important way for individuals to develop their career capital (Dickmann and Harris 2005) as it is turning into a widely expected prerequisite for professional career progression (Colic-Peisker, 2010). Today, business managers, technical experts, academics, artists, journalists, NGO and humanitarian aid workers, diplomats and professional service providers – to name just a few – work in an array of transnational settings (Colic-Peisker, 2010; Faulconbridge and Muzio 2007). In the literature they have been referred to as ‘skilled transients’ (Beaverstock 2002; Iredale 2001), transferable ‘human capital’ (Solimano 2006), mobile ‘human talent’, or ‘transnational knowledge workers’ (Colic-Peisker, 2010). In the ‘contemporary condition’ of globalization (Appadurai 2003), these people are considered as relatively privileged, sought after career professionals who do not migrate out of economic or political concerns, but instead, seek to improve – among other things – their professional and social status (Colic-Peisker, 2010).

In the past, research on global career mobility has almost exclusively focused on the study of expatriate managers and their adjustment in the context of international assignments (Thomas et al., 2005). These international assignments were considered as one-time or even once-in-a-lifetime overseas experiences, where people would repatriate permanently back to the home country after finishing the assignment (Suutari, 2003). Several things have changed however in the landscape of global career mobility over the past few years. First of all, global career mobility is no longer a matter of a single career event as more and more employees
engage in repeated transfers to different countries, thereby increasing the intensity of global mobility (Mayrhofer & Reiche, 2014; Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen, & Bolino, 2012). Another new aspect includes that an increasing number of professionals is taking the opportunity to be proactive about their international careers, meaning that they do not wait for their employer to send them to an overseas assignment (Inkson et al., 1997; Richardson & Zikic, 2007; Suutari and Brewster, 2000).

Also the motives for going abroad seem to have changed. Economic incentives for instance used to play a bigger role in the past, when companies typically provided attractive financial awards to people who moved abroad. Traditional expatriates moreover benefitted from cost-of-living and taxation differences across countries which had positive effects on their standard of living (Stahl et al., 2002; Suutari and Brewster, 2000). More recently, the focus has shifted towards people’s personal interest in internationalization and a related search for new and challenging experiences. Globally mobile professionals see working abroad as an opportunity for personal development, learning and career advancement, even though the latter is often claimed to play a subordinate role in their decision to take on an overseas position (Thomas et al., 2005). Instead, successful adjustment to a new cultural environment is framed as key variable in the international experiences (Mayrhofer & Reiche, 2014), including the learning of a new language (Morley & Heraty, 2004) or improving one’s command of English as a catalyst for opening up global connections (Rodda, 2015). Based on these developments in the landscape of global career mobility it could be argued that a ‘new generation’ of globally mobile professionals is on the rise that is different from yesterday’s elite cadre of global executives (Thomas et al., 2005), thereby drawing attention to different aspects of the mobility phenomenon.

When looking at the implications of extensive global career mobility, one can observe both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, globally mobile workers are often given new roles which are associated with greater responsibilities, prestige (Harvey, 1985; Shaffer et al., 2001) and career opportunities. They moreover report developing characteristics such as flexibility, open-mindedness and self-confidence while learning new languages or becoming familiar with different cultures. In less optimistic accounts, they face difficulties in finding suitable tasks and creating interesting career tracks upon repatriation (Caligiuri and Lazarova, 2001), so their experience abroad may not be rewarded in their home country (Derr and Oddou, 1991; Oddou and Mendenhall, 1991). Also when moving abroad, people have to constantly proof
their worth by showing special skills or bringing certain advantages which legitimate their position (Suutari, 2003). Due to the essentially unique character of every international move and the heterogeneous body of knowledge which is relevant only to specific countries, the possibility of cumulative learning is limited, so people have to start at zero again each time they move to another country (Richardson & Zikic, 2007). Further challenges include culture shocks, difficulties to adjust, as well as the hurdles of maintaining close relationships over distances which may lead to isolation and homesickness. Being constantly on the move can also disrupt family life. People with children express particular concern about providing them with a home base and the necessary stability for their personal development, especially when they have to undergo various school changes (Nowicka, 2007). Concerns are also raised regarding the accompanying partner’s employment status and his or her possibilities for self-development and growth. Lacking an organizational affiliation and social support network may result in loneliness and diminished self-esteem of the partner (Briody & Chrisman, 1991; Loomis, 1992; Richardson & Zikic, 2007; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001), which can have a negative spillover effect again on the international assignee’s well-being and his or her work performances (Aryee, Luk, Leung and Lo, 1999; Harvey, 1985; Shaffer et al., 2001; Tung, 1982). All these troubles and potential downsides draw attention to the question why global professionals would still seek a series of overseas position rather than settling down in one place. In the following I will elaborate on the notion of perpetual liminality, which may help to explain the phenomenon.

**Perpetual liminality as a characteristic of global career mobility**

In recent years, organizational scholars have become increasingly interested in the concept of liminality, which was originally proposed by the French ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep (1909) to describe situations in which a person goes through a rite of passage from one identity position to another (Budtz-Jørgensen et al., 2016; Johnsen & Sørensen, 2015; Ybema et al., 2011). Victor Turner (1967; 1977) further developed the concept, emphasizing that liminality designates a state of being ‘betwixt and between’ two different existential positions. This can present a particular challenge to the enactment of identity (Ybema et al., 2011), as people find themselves in a social limbo of being ‘no longer’ and ‘not yet’ classified. In the literature, two different types of liminality have been distinguished: ‘transitional liminality’ and ‘perpetual liminality’. The former refers to a time-constrained phase in-between two situations, describing
the transformational change from an old to a new identity position. This notion goes back to Van Gennep’s original conceptualization of liminality as only a temporary state signified by a distinct three step process: a) separation from a previous position, b) transition where a person is cast into a radical threshold with indeterminate boundaries, and c) reincorporation of a new status or identity. By that definition, transitional liminality is restricted to a certain time of going through a transformation process (Budtz-Jørgensen et al., 2016; Johnsen & Sørensen, 2015). In contrast to that perpetual liminality pertains to a more lasting, prolonged experience of in-betweenness, a permanently liminal condition in-between two or more social categories (Ybema et al., 2011).

And indeed, when looking at working relations and career paths typical of today’s ‘liquid’ organizations, it will become evident that liminal positions are on the rise. Perpetual liminars are workers who step across hierarchical, professional and organizational boundaries on a day-to-day basis, casting and recasting themselves for different audiences while establishing and maintaining multiple relationships. Along those lines, Budtz-Jørgensen et al. (2016) introduce the notion of the ‘liminal career’, that is a career in which individuals need to cope with ambiguous work relations, unclear work expectations and uncertain career prospects. One characteristic of the liminal career is that people always have to be on the move to the next step, always seeking new skills and looking out for new challenges. Staying flexible, mobile and adaptable in order to prepare for the unexpected allows them to turn from “career planning” to “career improvisation” (Inkson, 2006: 557).

Likewise, a liminal career involves the optimization of future possibilities where employees may be keen to cultivate a broad repertoire of different competences, skills and identities in order not to become too specialized in one area, which would make them less adaptable to the changing conditions and requirements in a particular field. So rather than narrowing the ground in terms of what they will possibly try in the future, the focus is on exploring different career routes and being on the outlook for new possibilities and skills (Budtz-Jørgensen et al., 2016). In other words, employees will try to enact themselves as “polyvalent resources rather than as specialists employable only in strictly defined fields or tasks” (Weiskopf and Loacker, 2006: 407). In that sense, being in a liminal career involves navigating between different imagined career possibilities.

It could be argued that perpetual liminality becomes even more encompassing for global professionals who sequentially move from one country to another for their careers, thereby
becoming an endless source of performativity across quickly changing environments. As Bauman (2000) notes, the challenge for mobile professionals is to achieve ‘fitness’ in terms of adaptability where one is permanently open for potential expansion in whatever direction (Johnsen & Sørensen, 2015). As a consequence, however, actors may inhabit a social ‘no man’s land’ (Ybema et al., 2011) which Turner (1967) frames as the downside of liminality. He points out that (permanent) liminality may infuse ambiguity, uncertainty and anxiety with the detrimental consequences of stress and break down (Johnsen & Sørensen, 2015). Since people are under constant pressure to adapt to changing work conditions, to continuously cultivate required competences, and to accumulate as many different career experiences as possible, they also have to endure unpredictability and precariousness (Kalleberg, 2011; Sennett, 2011; Standing, 2011) which may result in self-fragmentation (Mirvis & Hall, 1994).

In this paper I take a particular interest in how global professionals deal with this experience of perpetual liminality. By exploring in particular their ‘home making practices’ under conditions of mobility, I try to illustrate how they embrace liminality as a desirable state rather than opting for a more stable condition.

**Methodology**

This paper is based on a preliminary analysis of 9 pilot interviews with individuals from academia and the business context who have worked and lived in at least three different countries outside of their country of birth or upbringing. The contacts for those first interviews were established through my own social network, while further participants will be approached through referrals or established communities such as InterNations (a global network of expatriates). With a better understanding of who will be “interesting” research participants, I will then reach out more widely to potential candidates for my study. In total, I expect to conduct around 30 interviews.

Research participants were invited to share their experiences of the various different national and cultural contexts where they have worked and lived along their life and career journeys. They were moreover asked what these places meant to them and what had motivated them to move from one place to the other. I also asked some broader question about what work means to them and what their understanding is of having a career. While all interviews were audio-taped, most of them were also video-taped. Playing with the idea that research methods in
social science – rather than capturing ‘reality as it is’ – elicits ‘performances’ by research participants, I actively invited interviewees to imagine that this could become a documentary film about their life. By positioning themselves as the protagonist in such a documentary, I pointed out their agency in how they would like to present themselves, what they would like to share and what they would rather keep to themselves.

All interviews, which lasted between 60 and 130 minutes, were fully transcribed. A full analysis of the interview material is yet to be conducted. If research participants move countries again during the course of the broader study, follow-up interviews will be conducted to also capture the experience of re-adjustment to a new national and cultural setting.

Overview of participants

<table>
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<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Pseudo Name</th>
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<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Countries abroad</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
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<td>31</td>
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<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>Singapore, Caribbean (US), Sweden</td>
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Some First Observations/ Preliminary Results

Based on the question why global careerists – despite all hardships associated with international relocations – continue to actively seek opportunities for moving from one country to another, in the following I will describe three different (reported) practices through which interviewees
embrace the state of perpetual liminality associated with their mobility, namely the practices of ‘constructing provisional, mobile homes’, ‘moving on swiftly’ and ‘turning mobility into a compulsion’. After describing those three practices, and how they help to sustain rather than defy a state of perpetual liminality, I will discuss some of their potential identity implications.

**Constructing provisional, mobile homes**

Global careerists gave the impression that perpetual liminality was a welcome condition in their overall mobile lives, something which they actively nurtured through the practice of ‘constructing provisional, mobile homes’ rather than opting for more permanent dwellings or installations. Interviewees reported how they constructed these provisional homes when moving to a different country, namely by setting up, tearing down or replicating certain things easily across national borders. Likewise, they indicated that their new homes were not only provisional, but in some instances even mobile in the sense that they could take their “home” with them, a bit like turtles who carry their homes on their back. It could be argued that this practice of constructing provisional, mobile homes allows global careerists to never fully settle in one country, but to remain in a state of liminality – ready for the next move, which then again may impact their sense of identity and belonging.

It might not be surprising of course that people, when traveling and moving around extensively, reflect more carefully upon the notion of home, especially since mobility can pose a serious threat to it. When reflecting upon this notion in the interview situation, global professionals – rather than localizing their home in geographical terms – first mentioned their immediate families (i.e. partner and/ or children) as the most important element for them to feel at home somewhere. They pointed out that immediate family was an important source of stability, an unchanging element in a life full of changes:

Now I think the notion is that home is where my kids and my husband are, but that is still sort of in flux. Home is here [pointing to her heart]. I think that’s most important because I don’t know where God takes me next [laughing]. (Sophie, Assistant Professor)

By defining her home as her immediate family or something within herself, Sophie implies that her home is not bound to a specific location or closed territory. Instead, her family remains a
mobile element in this home-making practice, as the family can ‘easily’ move along with her and in fact, has moved with her several times already in the past, and not without some injuries:

Sophie: Our son has developed quite a lot of health issues the past year. Like asthma and an infectious disease on his skin, so I’m currently going to a homeopath with him, which I think is really helpful.

Interviewer: And you think it was stress related?
Sophie: Of course, I mean, we were about to divorce and we had just moved to a different country.

Even though Sophie admits that she does not want to move anymore, she expects that she and her family will move again rather soon, probably to another country even – this time for her husband’s career. Due to the provisional set-up which they live in at the moment, and their immense experience with moving, Sophie is not too concerned that they will ‘manage again’.

Next to their immediate family, interviewees also mentioned bringing along objects or material things that they held close and dear as a way of quickly establishing a sense of ‘home’ when moving to a foreign country. It is worth noting that the objects which global careerists mentioned as ‘good companions’ were all rather light and transportable, making it easy to carry them along:

I brought a lot of light things that I could take, like cook books. Because I quite like to cook. In Australia I had quite a big collection of cook books, but again, it’s also what I associate with this image of having a house. (Elitsa, PhD)

The objects or things that people carried along with them were usually no luxury goods, but instead things that carried an emotional value and had a comforting role. If these ‘comforters’ were small enough, they were even carried along during short term travels, when staying in a hotel for example:

I travel with my own tea leaves and I travel with my own, you know, Radio. I need these things. I call my husband every day at least once. So I need to travel but I need my tea leaves and I need my Radio 4. (Emma, Full Professor)

As much as Emma “needs to travel”, an activity which she claims to truly enjoy, she also has her traveling habits which involve listening to her favorite home radio program and drinking her own
tea. These ‘easy to carry’ items allow Emma to take along a sense of home with her, regardless of how extensively she travels. So to a certain extent, these elements that constitute home – people, relationships and objects – are movable and do not have to be constructed anew for every country relocation. So rather than making a new location seem unique, setting up the same provisional home in every country renders each place similar and somewhat transitory/liminal.

Global professionals moreover pointed out that home was not only defined by the ‘four walls’ of a flat or a house. Instead, pleasant surroundings, landscapes, architecture and a good infrastructure of certain amenities were considered as equally important for developing a home-feeling when moving abroad. Especially facilities that generate feelings of familiarity and security such as supermarkets, restaurants, cinemas or fitness studios were said to play an important role. It was above all the elements that made people’s life appear normal, where they could establish some or their daily practices (cultural habitus) in a foreign place, that were cherished:

For me, home is not so much about a certain geographical location, it’s rather a place where I meet friends, where I go to work, a place where I have my wife, a place where I eat, where I go shopping, you know, where I spent my time. (Paul, Business Manager)

Since most cities, at least in the Western world, offer similar infrastructures, it becomes easy to repeat habitual social interactions and to replicate daily routines:

I started doing salsa when I was traveling. Because somebody told me when I was traveling to various countries and it was so difficult to set up, somebody said: “Start learning salsa.” I said: “Why?” “Because when you go to any country you can dance salsa or you enroll in salsa classes. Then you open up a completely different circle of friends. I was in Poland and Italy, I did that everywhere. […] Another thing that I have to do almost every day is watch some Indian songs on youtube or whatever. At least one a day, Indian Bollywood music. If I don’t do that, I feel like something is missing in my life. (Amit, Business Manager)

Two interviewees moreover reported religious practices as something which offered them emotional support during the ‘trauma’ of resettlement. These practices were also particularly helpful for global professionals in terms of connecting quickly and easily with a local community in which they felt less ‘foreign’. Being familiar with the norms and rites of that group helped them to easily ‘check-in’ and ‘check-out’ to these existing networks as Sophie describes:
I became a Baha’i in Australia. I really felt I wanted be part of that community. I wanted to have that feeling of belonging, especially because, I mean, I was 18 at the other side of the world. This really helped me to ground. That helped me to, you know, that gave me a bit of an anchor. In South Africa I also connected to the Baha’i community. I was picked up from the airport by people that became my Baha’i parents basically there. Thailand the same thing, I also went through the Baha’i community. Of course there were big cultural differences between the Baha’is in Asia or in Africa, but at the same time we were all doing similar things. Baha’i activities like youth or children groups are set up in the same way everywhere. So it didn’t matter where my experience came from. So I learned a lot and it was a safe haven. (Sophie, Assistant Professor)

Performing the same mundane activities in every new place helped global professionals to feel as much at home as possible during their stay abroad, while not having to commit substantially to a particular country or social context. By setting up provisional, mobile homes they connected different places and times by simply ignoring the differences between them, thereby rendering them as replaceable, transitory and liminal. While the ability to establish a provisional home (feeling) quickly may seem to provide stability and familiarity in a foreign place, the provisional character of it actually facilitates extensive mobility, making the ‘moving around’ appear easy and unproblematic. In this way, liminality is constantly sustained.

**Moving on swiftly**

Another reported practice through which interviewees embraced the state of perpetual liminality associated with their mobility was the practice of ‘moving on swiftly’ from one place to the other without greater struggles or any hard feelings. This idea of moving on swiftly also correlates with some descriptions in the literature, where globally mobile workers – along metaphors of network, flow and liquidity (Bauman, 2000; Castells, 1996; Urry, 2000) – are depicted as moving around in a fluid-like manner and as easily floating between countries, places, offices, etc. In a similar manner, some global professionals described their own mobility as traveling ‘easy’ and ‘light’:

> I find it easy to pack up and I am quite a master of how I move myself from here to there in a fairly cheap, economical way. (Matteo, PhD)
I try to have less and less stuff. Because every time I have to move it’s a hassle to move a lot of stuff and I think I don’t need so much stuff, like material stuff. My computer, my phone and things I can carry light. (Luuk, Management Consultant)

This ability to move swiftly and easily has compellingly and somewhat romantically been presented – both in my interviews as well as in the literature – as a matter of being autonomous, self-determined and ‘never possess[ed]’ (Sartre, 2003: 628) or constrained by others:

At the moment, I’m a bit like a wanderer. I don’t have a set place. I don’t have anything set. I’m wandering from one place to another, to another, to another. I can’t say at the moment where I will go after that (Tutul, Full Professor)

The notion of the wanderer, it could be argued, marks the escape from a supposedly dull, bureaucratic and confining stability of places towards flexibility and creativity. From a more critical perspective it was likewise observed that global professionals who move from one country to the other seem to have ‘cool’ loyalties and ‘thin’ solidarities to different and constantly changing groups, both in the private and the professional sphere, which is expressed as well by Amit in the following quote:

At some point I want new friendships. It’s not only about new people; it’s also about a different set of people with a different mindset. In Germany, for example, my colleagues were wonderful, really. They’re smart, extremely nice and helpful. But at the end of the day we were always talking about work. Also in Switzerland after one-and-a-half years I was like: “Ok, now I know the culture, I know how it works, I need something different”. (Amit, Business Manager)

Amit’s comment about wanting to meet people with different mindsets indicates that the hyper-flexibility of constantly moving from one context to another, and the ability to move rather swiftly as well, can quickly lead to a sense of boredom with the status quo, where people feel like ‘they have seen it all’, and they become ready for the next experience. In the literature this has interestingly been valorized as embodying the ideal of adaptability within a global world, attributed to people who live within and who benefit from cultural multiplicity and contradictions (Zachary, 2000).

Scholars who look upon extensive mobility more critically, however, point out that globally mobile professionals seem to lack of sense of local commitment and belonging, often
embracing individualism at the expense of a wider community (Lasch, 1995). Bauman (1998) particularly admonishes that global workers withdraw from local affairs which according to him makes them unaccountable. The following quote by Emma may underline this impression that global professionals do not commit themselves to establishing long-term relationships:

What I’ve always had is the ability to make friends quickly and then shed friends quickly and this carried on throughout my adult life. There was almost no one by the age of 30, almost no one I knew that I’d known really before the age of 26. (Emma, Full Professor)

This quote about the ease of connecting and disconnecting when meeting new people possibly indicates Emma’s lacking need for interpersonal security as well as her ability to make quick and painless adjustment when moving to a new setting. By moving on so swiftly, it could be argued that globally mobile workers integrate advantageous features of nearness and distance, of involvement and indifference (Halsall, 2009). In any case, the ability to move on swiftly keeps global professionals in a state of ‘constant readiness’ for the next move, the next adventure. This inherent readiness then becomes a source of permanent liminality, as it prevents people from becoming more rooted in any one place.

**Turning mobility into a compulsion**

A third practice through which global careerists expressed their endorsement of perpetual liminality – rather than decrying it as an unpleasant state – was through the practice of turning mobility into a compulsion. Even though this compulsion is somewhat described in negative terms, associated with ‘addiction’, a ‘virus’, feeling ‘haunted’, etc., one does not get the impression however that global careerists see their compulsion as something that should be treated or cured. To a certain extent it appears that global professionals cannot understand their own inclination of moving to a different place again and again, especially in circumstances, when they have experienced some considerable hardship during a relocation or when they feel that their curiosity or ‘hunger’ (another metaphor that was used) for new experiences should be satisfied by now, but it isn’t.

Sometimes global professionals mentioned that moving across countries was easy or possible for them mainly because they were single and had no family obligations, as these things might inhibit mobility. Like a ‘real addict’, however, Matteo expects that he would even find
ways around that ‘problem’ so that he could continue his compulsive urge to be mobile regardless of the circumstances:

I think it’s sort of addictive. When you start experiencing so many different countries or places, different ways of living, I think my past eight years have been a mirror of the fact that you get itchy feet and I wish to see something different. I think I might feel the urge to move around [even more]. Now I have the luxury of moving because I have no kids. As soon as you have other people to care for, that might make things a bit more complicated. But I guess even then I could figure out ways of moving if I wanted to. (Matteo, PhD)

By framing moving as a ‘luxury’, it becomes clear that Matteo will not easily let go of this lifestyle that he has developed over the past eight years, where he has moved from one country to another.

This notion of actively seeking cross-cultural experiences, rather than just moving for the sake of a job or an opportunistic career opportunity, is also expressed by Martin, who regrets that he did not even seek more extreme relocation experiences:

[There is] this idea that you have caught like a travel virus. Still, I very much like traveling. And even now sometimes I think I should have done even more… I mean, I already lived in different countries but I feel like I should have moved to even crazier countries in a sense. No offence, but you know, like more exotic destinations, culturally much more separate from my own. (Martin, PhD)

Some interviewees acknowledged that their mobile lifestyle was not always easy for bystanders, especially for parents or family members whom they had left behind when they set out to their international voyage. And yet, by highlighting their compulsion, addiction, virus, or just the fact that they had ‘caught fire’ that would not stop burning, they also refute any responsibility for their possibly neurotic pattern:

My mom was crying at the airport, but I think she is still crying at the airport. My mom even gets a bit nervous by herself in a different city, while I flourish. But they [my parents] were the cause. I mean I was fourteen when they took us for six weeks backpacking in Turkey. So I always said to them: “You know, you started the fire”. (Sophie, Assistant Professor)
Like a mobility junkie who has come off the addiction and who is now ‘incredibly grounded’, Emma, who has for many years in a row lived in the same country and is not planning to move abroad again either, still claims that she needs a small dose of mobility in regular intervals:

If I go about six weeks without getting on a plane I do start to get sort of twitchy. So I think I need to be on a plane at least once every two months [...] I feel I’m incredibly grounded now, but I can become very easily untethered so I have to always re-ground myself. (Emma, Full Professor)

Being grounded, it seems, is nothing that comes to Emma naturally. Instead, she has to consciously re-ground herself when too untethered, almost like a therapeutic intervention that is necessary to ensure that she does not ‘sail off’ to other grounds one day. Curiously, when turning mobility into a compulsion, perpetual liminality becomes the condition that provides peace, security and stability, while standing still and becoming rooted is framed as going against one’s own nature which may then become a threat to the person’s well-being. Therefore, trying to hold up travelers might not be a promising endeavor:

I could say “Oh I have done so many things, lived in so many countries, so many experiences“ and I still feel somewhat empty, like I have not done enough. I’m still hungry. For me it’s not over. [...] I really feel like my life has just started, so far it was all preparation. Its haunting me, it’s really haunting in a way, if I just sit idle for a few weeks or whatever... It comes in the form of a big need for learning new things, living different lives, being able to say “been there, done that“. (Amit, Business Manager)

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper I have explored how global professionals who move from one country to another – supposedly for career reasons – set themselves on a path of constant mobility which keeps them in a state of ambiguity, a constant limbo between different worlds and an oscillation between attachment and detachment. While the first relocation for an overseas assignment may have been motivated by a “good opportunity” for going abroad, or the curiosity of exploring a different country and culture in an adventurous way, it seems that global professionals – once they are on an international track – cannot resist a certain pull effect that steers them from one country relocation to the other. Even when confronted with the hardships related to a mobile lifestyle and a competing desire for “settling down” at some point, people still expected to relocate again at
some point in the future. In order to explain this subscription to mobility despite all the costs associated with it, in this paper I draw on the concept of perpetual liminality. While the concept has so far been framed rather negatively in the literature as infusing uncertainty, anxiety and stress in people’s lives, in my study I noticed that global professionals seem to embrace rather than despise perpetual liminality, namely through three different practices: ‘constructing provisional, mobile homes’, ‘moving on swiftly’ and ‘turning mobility into a compulsion’. It could be argued that in this way, people turn their experience of perpetual liminality from a necessary evil that needs to be endured into a compulsion that cannot be resisted. Given that perpetual liminality as the new and ‘comforting status quo’ can be expected to have identity implications as well, in the following I will try to discuss some of these potential implications.

Since global career mobility sets in motion questions of identity and belonging more broadly (Jeanes et al., 2015), in the literature we already find some engagement with identity in the mobile age. Scholars have argued for instance that mobility gives rise to new forms of hybridized, multiple and translocal identities which are not bound by the notion of a stable, unitary place (Küpers, 2015; Sheller and Urry, 2003; Urry, 2003). Instead, discontinuity, short-term planning and a ‘we shall see’ mentality become integral parts of a person’s biography (Nowicka, 2007). Also career paths are less obvious for globally mobile people (Morley & Heraty, 2004) as they enter new cultural worlds each time they enter a different country, both with regards to the local culture of an organization and that of a larger society. In both worlds, they must negotiate their social status and their sense of self as they are expected to belong while at the same time being othered on the bases of for example their ethnic background or their professional training (Neiterman et al., 2015). This again gives rise to a sense of liminality or ‘in-betweenness’ (Zabusky & Barley, 1997) for mobile workers as they experience their status as unclear, ambiguous and outside of definition (Ybema et al., 2011). In fact, liminality allows for a simultaneous sense of being flexible, multi-cultural and free, while also feeling uprooted, confused, or even schizophrenic. The very nature of a nomadic identity is one that is perpetually compiled and amended as new reference points are added to its roots (Rodda, 2015).

As Ybema et al. (2011) note, the concept of perpetual liminality is particular apt for addressing practices of identity formation in situations where actors go through periods of transformational change or where they find themselves in-between two identity positions for a prolonged period of time such as in the case of constant mobility. Bringing together the concepts
of perpetual liminality and identity can help to generate a better understanding of how global professionals maneuver through dynamic, complex and socially demanding situations related to their mobility. Since perpetual liminality can significantly disrupt a person’s internal sense of self, especially when social actors have to constantly re-position themselves across different cultural contexts and engage in constantly intense ‘boundary work’ (Hernes & Paulsen 2003), the question arises how these actors are able to construct a sense of self under such conditions, and how people can deal with this state of uncertainty, when conventional structures are suspended and replaced by liminal spaces and liminal time.

Ybema et al. (2011) observed that people who are faced with permanent liminality constantly shift identifications vis-à-vis a variety of different contexts, thereby indicating conflicting loyalties and obligations, and a constant switching from one identity to another, oscillating between sameness and otherness, proximity and distance, between being insiders on one occasion and outsiders on the other, whilst remaining in-between all the time. In that sense, perpetual liminars are boundary bricoleurs who switch their identifications by first drawing and then crossing certain lines of demarcation. They are ‘never complete’ and never fully part of something, which brings the “burden of otherness” and at the same time the “strength of weak ties” (Sturdy et al., 2009: 11). By positioning themselves across different identity discourses, a lack of attachment arises which interestingly – as the preliminary analysis of pilot interviews has indicated as well – may yet create stability for liminars because it allows them to keep their multiple and changing agendas in play (Iedema et al. 2004). Ellis and Ybema (2010) draw on the image of quicksilver as a metaphor for how perpetual liminars remain versatile, maintaining relationships with multiple groups and audiences, while not identifying with any one in particular. By weaving various incommensurable positions together rather effectively, these boundary bricoleurs defer closure on their identities, namely by positioning themselves across different boundary repertoires (Iedema et al. 2004; Ybema et al., 2011).

Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) made the interesting observation that a growing number of professionals are accepting liminality as an ever present condition, thereby effectively annihilating the social limbo that comes with it, or ending it altogether. Johnsen and Sørensen (2015) remain skeptical however regarding the claim that permanent liminality could imply the end of this very liminality. Instead they see permanent liminality as a condition in which the regular work situation is indefinitely suspended in a never-ending social limbo. While I agree
with Johnsen and Sørensen that perpetual liminality does not mark the end of liminality, in this paper I have tried to underline that the social limbo that comes with liminality is not something despised, but instead something that global professionals actively seek.

In fact, I have tried to put perpetual liminality into a different light, as it has mostly been framed in the literature as something problematic and harmful, a condition which leads to restlessness and breakdown. When taking a different view on the matter I am not saying that liminality is innocent or trouble-free, not at all. What I am trying to challenge, however, is the notion that liminality is a condition induced by outside forces, like a lack of career stability, quickly changing work environments, organizational restructurings, or liquid modernity more generally. In this study I actually show that perpetual liminality is a condition which global professionals embrace to a certain degree and they actively contribute to producing and maintaining it on an ongoing basis. Liminality seems to provide global professionals with a sense of being flexible, “ready” for the next change, and therefore in a good position to not miss out on any interesting opportunities for self-exploration, personal development and growth. Ironically, getting too settled in a particular location actually seems to cause distress and unease among the globally mobile. Once they get the feeling that they are becoming overly comfortable, accustomed and rooted in one place, they start getting ‘itchy feet’ and seek a new adventure or challenge.

Going forward I aspire to find a theoretical angle that may help me to better understand, explain and theorize this phenomenon of why global professionals would actively seek to remain in a condition of perpetual liminality. One idea would be to look at it through a psychoanalytic lens, namely by drawing on Freud’s (1914) notion of ‘repetition compulsion’ or ‘the compulsion to repeat trauma’. The idea behind that would be to possibly interpret the repetition of country relocations with all its hardship, pain and trauma as a compulsion to repeat learned, stressful patterns. One thing to be careful about this route however would be not to pathologize global professionals by saying that they are following some neurotic patterns. I am open as well to other ideas or suggestions for how my first observations could be theorized and what contributions could be made in this way to different literatures. Other things worthwhile to discuss would be how to continue the study, whom to interview next and with what particular focus. Any comments are welcome!
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