Re-imagining place, home and belonging *Up in the Air*

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Abstract

By offering a close reading of Jason Reitman's film *Up in the Air* (2009), the demands on and the invisibility of place, home and belonging in the contemporary moment of global mobility are explored. How do we re-imagine place, home and belonging in the 'mobility turn' and, in particular, mass commercial air travel? By examining the interrelated relationship between place and non-place, mobility and immobility, home and the homeless, flux and stasis, the analysis attempts to show the relational and contingent nature of social and geographical interactions 'up in the air'. It is proposed that even the most intrepid travellers grow weary of the road and want to return home.

Keywords: global operators, home, mass air travel, mobility, non-places, omnitopia, place, privileged homeless, *Up in the Air*

Introduction

Mobility suggests flow and potential. If thrown 'up in the air', things suddenly gain new possibilities because the outcome is unpredictable. Life seems different viewed from up there or 'on the move' than close-up down here, in relative stasis. If humans have traditionally forged a sense of belonging with place(s) (see Keith and Pile 1993), this bond is irrevocably shaken by the ease with which those 'high up' are becoming mobile globally, as opposed to those 'low down' (Bauman 1998: 86) who stay put in one place. To belong somewhere, to be committed to place, to have a place, seems outmoded and 'out of place' in the contemporary moment of mobility

where '[m]ore and more frequently, humanity literally lives in the air ... populat[ing] the atmosphere above our world with a swelling density' (Gottdiener 2001: 2).

But can place be relegated to a mere backdrop and relic of the past in the era of global mobility? Or should mobility be approached more prudently because 'moorings are often as important as mobilities' (Creswell 2010: 159)? In the analysis that follows I suggest that although mobility is the dominant metaphor, mobility is interconnected with mooring, just as routes are interweaved with roots. By failing to think place and mobility together we stand at risk of misinterpreting the human experience of both.

Although mobility is in no sense uniform (Cresswell 2010; Merriman 2012) it has become ubiquitous. Mobility still presupposes different things in different contexts, e.g., to be mobile in rural KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa amounts to something completely different from being mobile in transnational, corporate New York. It is more accurate to refer to 'diverse mobilities' (Urry 2000, 2007, 2010)[1] or 'multiple and intersecting mobilities' (Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006: 2). What becomes evident despite the increased emphasis on flux is the changing ways in which we interact, socialise and live in and with mobility. Of particular relevance here is commercialised air travel and the increasing number of people who are mobilised, as well as the associated changes in social rites and interactions brought about by mass air transport.

In an attempt to examine the changing state of social interactions and, by implication, the changed attitude towards place and belonging, a contemporary representation dealing with the theme, namely the film *Up in the Air* (dir. Jason Reitman 2009) is critically interrogated by means of a close reading and hermeneutic interpretive phenomenology. In terms of the choice of film at least two other examples compare thematically, namely *In the Company of Men* (dir. Neil LaBute 1997) and *Fight Club* (dir. David Fincher 1999), which both address the crisis of masculine subjectivity and the new mobile paradigm against the backdrop of a post-capitalist society.[2]

The analysis unpacked here proposes to inquire about the phenomenon of hypermobility, as depicted in the filmic text, with the purpose of unlocking some aspects of human experience with mass air travel. My interpretive dialogue links with Cresswell and Dixon's (2002: 1) study in *Engaging film: geographies of mobility and identity*, whereby they aim to 'deploy film as mimetic of the real world, such that people and places can be represented in as authentic a manner as possible' because film has the potential to 'allow investigation of the production of dominant ideologies' and can provide 'a site of resistance … open to critical scrutiny'. Given that mobility can be considered to be at the centre of the chosen film's depiction, a careful analysis of the film may offer useful insights into human experiences of belonging and mobility. In no way is it suggested that the image stands in for or

replaces reality, because 'every representation exacts some cost, in the form of lost immediacy, presence or truth' (Mitchell 1990: 121).

It is also acknowledged that a cinematic rendition is translated through the director's viewpoint (amongst others), hence is always already an interpretation. In this instance, the film's screenplay by the director Jason Reitman and Sheldon Turner is an adaptation of a novel by Walter Kirn, likewise entitled *Up in the air* (2001).[3] For Reitman 'the movie is about the examination of a philosophy. What if you decided to live hub to hub, with nothing, with nobody?' (Tobias 2009). Evidently the film's theme resonated with the young director: 'This is the most personal movie I've made and could be the most personal movie I'll ever make' (Thompson 2009), urging him to participate in the film's promotion by creating a documentary entitled *Lost in the Air: the Jason Reitman press tour simulator*. Reitman also confesses a kinship with the main protagonist's (Ryan Bingham) lifestyle: 'And it's funny, because Ryan and Mark [character from *Juno*] are both kind of projections of me, so it's interesting to explore the ways I'm not growing up. … I am a child in a mid-life crisis' (Kernion 2009). In fact, many of Bingham's peculiar rituals in terms of flying are the director's own: 'That's very much me. I'm an obsessive flyer. I choreographed every second, every frame of how George packed, how he went through security, how he chose a line' (Interview with Jason Reitman 2009).

Reitman also decided to use people who had lost their jobs at the time of filming during 'one of the worst recessions on record' (ibid.): 'I used real people for the firings. And that just seemed like the right thing to do' (Tobias 2009). In this sense, the film incorporates elements of the documentary genre to construct meaning. Given the contested relationship between fictional narrative film and documentary (see Cresswell and Dixon 2002; Walley 2011), this is not to suggest that the documentary genre has a more privileged relationship or access to reality. It does suggest that Reitman aims to provide credibility to his version in the aftermath of the 2008 recession: 'I realized that the scenes I had written for the firings weren't accurate to the times, and I wanted them to be as authentic as possible' (Kernion 2009).

The film is generally satirical, with a tragic twist for the protagonist, Ryan Bingham – a high flyer (almost literally 'living in the air') who barely finds time to touch the ground. Bingham, flawlessly portrayed by George Clooney, is a corporate 'downsizer' ('termination engineer') for the Career Transitions Corporation (CTC). The name of the corporation is already meaningful in terms of mobility. Bingham acts as an angel of death ('mak[ing] limbo tolerable' and 'ferry[ing] wounded souls across the river of dread'), bearing bad news to the unfortunate ones who are in the firing line. Most of the film takes place 'up in the air' during flights on aeroplanes, at airports traveling to and from destinations, or in hotel rooms and bars while on the move. In flight, suspended in the relative safety of the airplane cabin, Bingham enjoys the solitude of no commitments, long-term planning or unnecessary baggage.

He has perfected his mantra for firing people, and as a motivational speaker he has internalised the pros of travelling light. Bingham's 'What is in your backpack?' speech aptly summarises his itinerant life philosophy, opening with: 'How much does your life weigh?'[4]

Yet, as Bingham realises with crushing consequences, being in place (up in the air) can also mean being out of place, i.e., excluded and solitary. It is only after he meets his female match in a hotel bar that Bingham makes an uncharacteristic attempt to cross the threshold of home again and try to find an earthly place of belonging. When he fails to enter the gap between home and not-home, he is finally banished to constant departures and never-ending arrivals. In short: the film proposes that even the most intrepid travellers get weary of the road and want to return home. In Bingham's case the door of home does not open again, which means he has to return to the road, or in this case, to the air. He goes from privileged homeless (a consumerist lifestyle choice of the neo-liberal agent) to vagabond (having no say in his state of excommunication).

In the discussion that follows, the notion of place is briefly unpacked after which the growing presence of non-places and omnitopias is brought to bear on the film's depiction of 'up in the air' as non-place. The analysis then shifts to notions of home and place-making practices in the 'new era of global mobility' (Adey 2010). The concept of home, as represented in *Up in the Air*, is interpreted as a multidimensional issue (Mallett 2004). It is argued that the relational tension between those who are place bound and those in mobile flow creates the spatial politics of recent times. The film's portrayal of the differences in attitude towards home, between Bingham and his family and co-workers, serves as a clear example of how these spatial politics play out in everyday lives. Throughout the analysis, the relational tension between place-making and mobility is considered together, because 'in an epoch of flows, networks ... it is more than ever necessary to explore what remains bounded' (Antonsich 2009: 801). Where there is flow, stasis is sure to follow.

What if we all end up in the same place?

Place is most often considered to be a priori – a given. It is something we receive without having much say in the matter, such as being born in a particular place, for example. Our control over the givenness of place seems limited. Subsequently, place exists for most without any consideration – a mere matter of fact.

Although a given, place deserves our attention. As Bingham's disillusioned would-be brother-in-law, Jim, announces after a bout of cold feet before his marriage: 'We all end up in the same place.' Jim makes reference to the inevitability of death – the final resting place – the place where we all are equally immobilised. It is also the ultimate static point that Bingham attempts to avoid at all cost. For Bingham, to move is to live and lack of movement translates to death. This becomes quite evident

from his 'Backpack speech' delivered at a Goal Quest XX challenge event: 'The slower we move the faster we die. Make no mistake, moving is living.'

Bingham's antipathy towards remaining in one place reveals current preferences for flux, which is often promoted to the detriment of locality and immobility. He is annoyed when asked by his sister, Julie, to take photos of a cut-out picture of her and her future husband, Jim, in various places because they cannot afford a honeymoon trip – almost as if the reminder of the local, in the form of his sister, is intolerable. Despite Bingham's insistence on frictionless mobility it 'cannot fully capture and address the ambiguities and frictions involved in people's mobile working lives' (Costas 2013: 1470). Costas' analysis of global mobile workers reveals the complexities of mobility that include disorientation, ambiguity, experiences of monotonous spaces, as well as feelings of instability and loneliness. In spite of the emphasis on potentiality and flow, to be human even for the 'kinetic elite' (Costas 2013) means to be 'implaced' (Casey 1998: x). In other words, to always already be somewhere or, in Aristotle's terms, 'the where of things is place' (Lang 1998: 28). For Aristotle 'place constitutes the formal limit and directionality of the world' and in 'an important sense [it] caus[es] motion' (ibid: 10, 28). This is a crucial point to consider especially in a context where ubiquitous mobility tends to relegate the significance of place to stasis or stagnation. If place is the cause of motion, mobility is only possible or relevant because there are places to move from and return to.

In Bingham's case he initially shows no attachment to any particular place in the traditional sense. For him, up in the air is home and he admits as much: 'All the things you probably hate about travelling – the recycled air, the artificial lighting, the digital juice dispensers, the cheap sushi – are warm reminders that I'm home.' Travelling is his preferred place. He is a 'lifestyle traveller' (Cohen 2010, 2011) who pursues travel indefinitely as a consumerist lifestyle choice. What identifies the lifestyle traveller as a unique social identity is the quest for a 'lasting change for home outright' (Cohen 2011: 1551). Similarly, Bingham wastes no time in one place and even when he has to stay over at 'home' in Omaha he seems out of place – a permanent tourist. When asked about his home he admits: 'I don't know much about the place.' He laments that in the past year he spent 322 days on the road and 43 miserable days at home. His home (a rented one bedroom) appears uninhabited – like a hotel room it shows no presence of its owner. In other words, home is perpetually problematised and homecoming prolonged.

Not only is home problematised, lifestyle 'travelers [also] mak[e] themselves at home in mobility' (Molz 2008: 335). They achieve a sense of home through 'embodied and embedded … everyday practices while on the road' (ibid: 337). In Bingham's case he packs with precision – almost as if he is performing a Zen-like ritual. He travels light, as all lifestyle travellers do (Cohen 2010, 2011) (using updated rolling luggage that requires no check-in) and spends no unnecessary time

in a queue waiting to check in luggage, because he considers it a waste of time. With dazzlingly precision he is able to explain to co-worker Natalie Keener (Anna Kendrick) how much time is wasted checking in luggage: '35 minutes a flight. I travel 270 days a year. That's 157 hours. That makes seven days. You're willing to throw away an entire week on that?'

By becoming mobile *within* and *between* places (Erskine and Anderson 2014), lifestyle travellers like Bingham are provided with constant opportunities for new discoveries – more precisely, for discovering new selves within new places. The lifestyle traveller may even experience a temporary sense of belonging within a new place, but after a while the novelty wears off because '[p]laces' pace of change do not correlate with lifestyle travellers' pace of establishment and need for novelty' (ibid.). Places merely provide an outlay for mobilities to manifest and become meaningful within (ibid.). In the 'globalized system of capital' it means the traveller is 'never quite in a place, but never quite free from a place either' (Benynon 2008: 15). Linked to this is the idea that 'mobile people are co-present in more than one place' (Smith 2005: 237), which implies a state of 'omni-locatedness' (Casey 1993, 1998) and multi-locality (Gielis 2009). Bingham is happiest when he belongs nowhere and everywhere, with no particular place to be. It becomes obvious when he reacts passionately against the call by his boss Craig Gregory (Jason Bateman) to implement Natalie's plan of firing people via videoconferencing instead: this would put an end to his travels and means he would be stuck in one place – an unthinkable condition for the lifestyle traveller.

The freedom of the non-place 'up in the air'

Locality is displaced by air travel with the creation of 'an indifferent sameness-of-place on global scale' (Casey 1998: xiii) or non-places, as delineated by Marc Augé (1995). Non-places are not relational, historical or concerned with (local) identity in any way (ibid: 77–78). Examples of non-places are airports built in uniform 'nowhere architecture' (Koolhaas in Gottdiener 2001: 59); hotel lobbies which all smell similar ('faux plus homey equals faumey' in Bingham's terms); supermarkets, malls and motor highways sprawling at a rapid pace. 'As anthropological places create the organically social, so non-places create solitary contractuality' (Augé 1995: 94) by turning individual identity into the shared identity of becoming the passenger, customer or driver. Non-places are 'places without place' (Baumann 2000) and therefore places that are disconnected from a *genius loci*, or so the initial discourses on non-places argue. More recent sources tend to challenge the notion that non-places bypass the local by making detectable the invisible labour on which the consumerist lifestyle of non-places floats. As Sharma (2009: 142) notes, 'non-

places are also places of labor'. The labour is often performed by invisible 'asylum seekers, fugitives and immigrants' (ibid: 140). Localised, these invisible labourers keep the spectacle of the non-place intact by sustaining 'the consumptive and cultural practices enacted by customers' (ibid: 134). No doubt, high flyers (such as Clooney's character) remain oblivious to localised labour, rather opting to keep the consumer spectacle intact. Bingham prefers faceless services (see Menzies 2005) because these make no demands on him. By doing so a sense of disconnectedness, both physically and emotionally, is maintained.

In the genre of the 'road film', the road, the highway and the car often figure as non-places of insularity that espouse fantasies of freedom (Archer 2008: 137). This is especially true for male characters pressurised by the demands and responsibilities of familial life and society. The road becomes a transitional space between the home and the workplace. It is depicted as an 'in-between site' (ibid: 138) where the solitude provided by the enclosed motorcar provides a temporary escape for the business traveller.

Reitman's focus on air travels shows that the aeroplane and air travel have similarly become insular non-places. Reitman's film also shows an interesting gender-inversion in the character of Alex Goran (Vera Farmiga), a fellow frequent flyer who dispels the masculine hegemony of the business traveller. In fact, if one character can be singled out who uncritically embraces the non-committal limbo of the non-place 'up in the air', it is Alex. She completely internalises the 'road' as a non-place of suspended morality and commitment by relegating her indiscretions to a mere 'parenthesis' in her life.

It is not only the capsule of the aeroplane that contains or suspends social interactions, but also terminal space. Terminal space is transitional by nature (Gottdiener 2001), allowing for continual movement (echoing Bingham's motto 'moving is living') and creating an opportunity for atomised interactions (Wood 2003: 328) while in transit. Terminals are generic environments which absorb the uniqueness of local places and assimilate otherness (ibid: 328–329) into similitude. Within terminal space one becomes anonymous – no one and everyone – it does not matter. For this reason, terminal space is a non-place; it is also an omnitopia or 'perceptually ubiquitous place' (ibid: 325).

Omnitopia means all places become the same place or 'everyplace' (ibid.). They '[do] not reside elsewhere, but everywhere' (ibid: 10), as is poignantly illustrated when Bingham is asked: 'How's Dallas?' and he flippantly replies: 'Same as every place else.' Omnitopias are dislocated from somewhere (a home, a husband) and provide a cover for carelessness and fantasies of escape. In this regard, Bingham demonstrates a calculated detachment towards the 'trappings' of marriage. When

Natalie asks him whether he wants to get married, he adamantly answers 'Never' and adds: 'I just don't see the value in it. All right, sell it to me.'

The casualness with which Bingham and Alex enter into a relationship underscores the emotional distance and calculated risks that come with living up in the air. Both characters are conveniently stripped of any familial attachments in the transient space of the airport lounge. They are seemingly freed from their everyday identities to engage in a 'pliable and chameleon-like' (Gottdiener 2001: 38) fashion with strangers.

In contrast with those who are incessantly on the move and have the luxury of entertaining flights of freedom are those unfortunate souls suspended or 'trapped' between destinations, as depicted for instance in *The Terminal* (dir. Steven Spielberg 2004).[5] In these extraordinary cases the terminal turns into a place, even a home. This corresponds with the place attachment formed by long-haul drivers with certain truck stops. Although the truck stop falls into the category of the non-place, some truck drivers reportedly even feel a sense of home when visiting familiar truck stops, because they 'serve as a temporary grounding within an existence typified by constant movement' (Kozak 2012: 294). Reitman's film similarly suggests that the non-place up in the air has become home to Bingham, which corresponds with likeminded hypermobile individuals everywhere.

Even so, it must be noted that the image created in the film of hyper-individuals cocooned in self-banishment does not illuminate all social relations and interactions in the new era of mass air travel. In fact, the networked social life between those who are emotionally close, yet geographically removed, does not inevitably wane. This requires new ways of thinking about 'caring at-a-distance, as well as socialising at-a-distance', and challenges 'conventional notions of what it is to be *close*' (Larsen, Urry and Axhausen 2006: 7). It may be more correct, then, to state that global mobility leads 'both to disconnecting and reconnecting' (ibid: 1). Staying in touch is, on the one hand, easily maintained through networked communication, e.g., e-mails, text messages, etc. The valued face-to-face encounter on the other hand becomes an event that needs careful planning and follow-up. We are adapting to new demands of staying in touch with new skills, which is both more convenient than before, and more challenging.

The film emphasises disconnection and failed attempts to reconnect, and in this regard corresponds more closely to the sceptical analysis of Robert Putnam in *Bowling alone* (2000). According to Putnam, mobility and new communication technologies have led to a reduction in community involvement locally, and a lack of social cohesion all round. In this respect, Bergmann and Sager (2008: 3) enquire: 'Does mobility affect the identity and the mental state of human beings?' If so, what is to be gleaned from this insight? Reitman's portrayal of Bingham provides a

meaningful portrait of the new mobile species or 'global operators' (Bauman 2003: 102) that frequent non-places up in the air.

The global operator meets his match

Zygmunt Bauman (2003: 102) identifies 'global operator[s]' as the new elite 'escap[ing] local discomforts' by not being bound to local loyalties. These are 'nowhere m[e]n' who form part of a 'transcontinental tribe of wanderers' (Iyer 1997) and are disconnected from societal trappings such as home, mortgages, family, relationships and any type of local responsibility:

> We are the transit loungers, forever heading to the departure gate. We buy our interests duty-free, we eat our food on plastic plates, we watch the world through borrowed headphones. We pass through countries as through revolving doors, resident aliens of the world, and impermanent residents of nowhere. Nothing is strange to us, and nowhere is foreign. We are visitors even in our own homes.

Bingham, like many contemporary frequent flyers, has 'adjust[ed] to [life] spent in air travel … creat[ing] or amplify[ing] a new social character – the uncaring detached, self-contained individual armed with a laptop, walkman, credit cards, cellular phone, Palm Pilot and business agenda' (Gottdiener 2001: 34). It is not surprising, then, that Bingham approaches Alex with the following opening line: 'Are you satisfied with Maestro?', which ensues in a wrestling match of compared notes on frequent flyer miles and car hire outlets.

The encounter confronts Bingham with a dilemma and he has to rethink his ideas about home, commitment and belonging. As a member of 'a rising class of itinerant elite who are bound by time-sharing practices' (Sharma 2009: 132), his attraction to Alex is congealed by their mutual admiration for efficacy and effortless mobility. Both are initiated into the practices of frequent flying, which has created its own culture with unique behaviours and rules that 'contrast with life on the ground' (Gottdiener 2001: 5). Bingham does the unthinkable, according to the rulebook of transient travellers, by falling in love.[6] In this regard his slippage embodies the paradoxes of the global operator's supposed de-terrorialised existence:

> As global operators they may roam cyberspace. But as human agents, they are, day in day out, confined to the physical space in which they operate … in the course of human struggles for meaning and identity. Human experience is formed … its meaning conceived, absorbed and negotiated, around *places*. And it is *in places* and *of places* that human urges and desires are gestated and incubated … in hope of fulfilment .... (Bauman 2003: 102)

Despite attempts to disconnect, it seems as if global operators cannot escape the reconnecting pull of place precisely because it is *in* and *of* places that human existence

endures. The pull of emplacement paradoxically becomes irresistible in the form of the undemanding Alex. In other words, it is precisely because Alex does not demand commitment or faithfulness that Bingham is fatally attracted to her. Unbeknownst to him, it is only because Alex does have a home, because she belongs somewhere that she can act so nonchalant and uncaring 'up in the air'. Bingham takes the bold step of 'coming down' and knocking on her front door in an attempt to cross the threshold and come home. Sadly, this stepping down holds grave consequences for him.

Even his ambition to accumulate ten million frequent flyer miles loses its meaning after Alex shuns his homecoming attempt. In the beginning of the film Bingham boasts: 'I'd be the seventh person to do it. More people have walked on the moon.' Bingham succeeds in accumulating ten million flyer miles, but the moment of achievement is not as glorious as he had imagined. In fact, his success in the air cannot outweigh his failures 'down there'. The consuming ambition of getting lifetime executive status and meeting the chief pilot, not to mention that his name would be put on the side of a plane, cannot lift his spirits. When the chief pilot asks him: 'Where are you from?' he replies wryly 'I'm from here'. He has lost his *position* ('within a territorial unity') in the world and now finds himself hauling aimlessly from one *situation* ('in the safe harbor of non-movement') (Virilio 1997: 127) to the next. His fate is sealed when his boss, Craig, announces after the videoconferencing and grounding debacle: 'We're going to let you sail and sail. Send us a postcard if you get there.' The intimation is that Bingham will never finally 'get there'.

The privileged homeless

In terms of a reference point, whether physical or social, home has traditionally functioned as an axis of convergence – a relational place. This implies that one can geographically be 'in place' but feel emotionally 'out of place.' Home is thus a complex intersection of geography and feelings of belonging. One does not necessarily have to stay home in order for it to signify as such, '[home] also must include the motion of leaving a place and returning to it' (Bergmann and Sager 2008: 23). In fact, home figures as an ambivalent place that can be both 'comforting or constraining, compelling or repulsive' (Morris 2009: 175). It is often the place of confinement that needs to be escaped in order to start the journey, yet in the end the life traveller is pulled back home again. In myth and religion, home is regularly associated with the final resting place but also as a place of original safety (see Morris 2009). So, in home, birth and death collide.

How is home to be reimagined at this junction of global mobility? Home has become a multidimensional and multidisciplinary project (see Butcher 2010; Mallet 2004; O'Connor 2010). The most productive way of approaching the complexity of home amidst transnational flows is to emphasise the relational and contingent nature of place. This proves far more fruitful than dealing with place-making and

mobility as binaries (see Cresswell 2010; Gielis 2009; Smith 2001). A sense of home is always multifariously opening towards other places that are absent.

This notwithstanding, it remains an important point of orientation in place-making activities. For if home becomes an endless journey to be found nowhere and everywhere, with no reference point (somewhere) can it still signify as home? Even though we may experience ourselves as creatures who are evermore on our way (the Heideggerian *Unterwegs*), intrepid travellers, the way and the journey still signify place. As Malpas (2007: 17) explains the journey (in Heideggerian terms): 'Thinking is thus always "on the way", but that which it is on the way toward is the place in which it already begins.'

Clearly, *Up in the Air* challenges conventional notions of home, since Bingham is 'homeless' for all practical purposes. He belongs to the 'privileged homeless' (Iyer 1997) or mobile elite. Edward Relph (1976: 51) anticipates this state of 'self-conscious and reflective uninvolvement, an alienation from people and places, a homelessness, a sense of the unreality of the world, and of not belonging'. In contrast to Bingham's preferred 'homeless' condition – a lifestyle choice – being homeless (e.g., a refugee, an immigrant) in the habitual sense cannot be considered privileged in any way. In this regard, Anita Hill (2011) demonstrates the importance of obtaining a home and, more precisely, of obtaining home ownership for many African Americans in the United States. Home without a place to stay does not mean much for these (mostly) homeless women. Therefore, to be 'homeless' as a lifestyle choice is not an option for those who do not have a home or who cannot own a home in a specific materialised sense.

There is in other words a real danger of 'generalising and homogenising the movements of diverse subjects' (Merriman 2012: 5) and even of romanticising the nomad and the migrant. Vagrancy is deemed as 'being out-of-place' or even stronger 'being without-a-place' (Cresswell 2004: 119–120). Also, the homeless – those 'out of place' – threaten those who are 'in place' and confirm the suspicion that 'mobile people [are] disruptive and morally suspicious' (ibid: 121).

Given his 'layover lifestyle' (see Kurlantzick 2007), Bingham is similarly mistrusted by his family who consider him an outsider that 'hasn't been around much' and 'basically doesn't exist' for them. His outsider status is accentuated when he has no role to play as the big brother at his sister Julie's wedding. In fact, when he actually offers (too late) to walk her down the aisle the task has already been given to the husband-to-be's uncle who has been 'very supportive' (unlike Bingham, naturally). In this regard, Relph's (1976) concept of 'existential outsideness' provides an insight into Bingham's contained and seemingly uncaring personality. To belong to the privileged homeless class requires a disconnection from home and family. It also requires the skill of constructing a meaningful life outside the standard parameters of sociability. The glamourised homeless state in transit exists as a foil to

home and a place of belonging. This is evidenced when Bingham is quite willing to forgo the freedom of the non-place in order to cross the threshold and commit when he meets Alex.

From tourist to vagabond

Perhaps Bauman's (1998) distinction between the tourist and the vagabond is a useful conclusion to this interpretive analysis. Bauman describes the tourist as an exemplar of the mobile elite, the one who travels at will and leisure, while the vagabond has less control over where and when s/he travels. It may be argued that the film portrays both predicaments (arguably flip sides of the same coin). Bingham moves from being a tourist (being mobile at will) to being a vagabond (no longer having a say in the matter); from belonging to the privileged homeless ('in place') to being ostracised and homeless ('out of place').

Although the conditions of the tourist and vagabond do not exclude one another, it is important to stress the drive for belonging within the 'mobility turn', i.e., to temper the longing of the tourist with the condition of the vagabond. We may constantly experience new challenges and opportunities, yet we do so by being located. This realisation is echoed in the last scenes of the film, when the interviewees who have been fired reveal that the only thing that has remained worthwhile in their lives is their families. The neoliberal order may have failed them, but not the places of belonging. Waking up with a wife, hugging a husband, playing with their children, in other words having a home, both geographically and socially, is what helped them survive the ordeal of losing their jobs. This underscores the fact that although home is sometimes experienced as stifling, it also acts as an enabler: 'To be located is to be within, to be somehow enclosed, but in a way that at the same time opens up, that makes possible' (Malpas 2012: 2).

Once the powerful messenger of death, Bingham becomes a fallen angel after his failed descent into the nether regions. He is doomed to travel alone with no hope of finding home soon. Initially isolating himself from family and commitment (his choice) he is finally excommunicated and reduced to a mere 'interlude' in Alex's life (not by choice). The master of interludes is relegated to a parenthesis. As he knocks on the front door of Alex's home she announces him to her family as 'Just somebody who is lost'. At that moment he becomes a vagabond deported to 'OUT-OF-THIS-WORLD exile beyond our earthly homeland' (Virilio 2012: 40). We see him standing perplexed in front of the destination board. He is free to go anywhere, which amounts to going nowhere. It is only if one has somewhere to go, or even flee from, that the destination matters.

The film ends with the following voice-over: 'Tonight, most people will be welcomed home by jumping dogs and squealing kids. Their spouses will ask about their day and tonight they'll sleep.' This is followed by a silent and detached view

onto the clouds from the aeroplane, with Bingham's voice-over: 'The stars will wheel forth from their daytime hiding places, and one of those lights, slightly brighter than the rest, will be my wingtip passing over.' One cannot but sympathise with Bingham's failed attempt at going home and, ironically, although mobile, being immobilised up in the air. His sojourn to find a place and someone to commit to has left him a changed man. We see how he transfers some of his air miles to his newlywed sister Julie and her husband Jim. He also writes a glowing letter of reference for Natalie, who is applying for a new job. Bingham has made the journey from being comfortably out of place 'up in the air', to being in place with Alex, just to find himself ultimately lost and out of place. In his case, as for many others, mobility did not occur without any weight or baggage. It only confirmed that being human comes with baggage, as we are 'implaced' creatures.

Notes

1   Urry's (2007, 7–8) understanding of mobility includes not only the capability to move from one place to another, it also refers to social mobility (e.g., upward or downward social mobility), virtual mobility and 'semi-permanent geographical movements' such as migration across continents.

2   LaBute's *In the Company of Men* cynically depicts corporate male camaraderie between the two main protagonists, Chad (Aaron Eckhart) and Howard (Matt Malloy), while 'away from home' for six weeks, setting up a new branch for their corporation. They plot to seduce and intentionally hurt an unsuspecting female co-worker, the deaf Christine (Stacy Edwards). The ethical vacuum left by spending so much time away from home corresponds with *Up in the Air*'s main character's moral suspension by avoiding commitment and family ties. In terms of global mobility, *Fight Club*'s main protagonist Jack (Edward Norton) travels all over America as a recall coordinator for a major motor-car company. He experiences alienation and emasculation as part of the consumerist corporate world. See Lynn M. Ta's interesting analysis of the film 'Hurt so good: *Fight Club* masculine violence, and the crisis of capitalism' (2006).

3   The screenplay, adapted by Reitman and Turner, differs considerably from the book, for instance Reitman created the two main female characters namely Alex (Vera Farmiga) and Natalie (Anna Kendrick).

4   Bingham's 'What is in your backpack?' is quoted here at length:

> How much does your life weigh? Imagine for a second that you're carrying a backpack. I want you to pack it with all the stuff that you have in your life ... you start with the little things. The shelves, the drawers, the knickknacks, then you start adding larger stuff. Clothes, tabletop appliances, lamps, your TV ... the backpack should be getting pretty heavy now. You go bigger. Your couch, your car, your home ... I want you to stuff it all into that backpack. Now I want you to fill it with people. Start with casual acquaintances, friends of friends, folks around the office ... and then you move into the people

you trust with your most intimate secrets. Your brothers, your sisters, your children, your parents and finally your husband, your wife, your boyfriend, your girlfriend. You get them into that backpack, feel the weight of that bag. Make no mistake your relationships are the heaviest components in your life. All those negotiations and arguments and secrets, the compromises. The slower we move the faster we die. Make no mistake, moving is living. Some animals were meant to carry each other to live symbiotically over a lifetime. Star-crossed lovers, monogamous swans. We are not swans. We are sharks.

5   The film is loosely based on the story of Meheran Karimi Nasserie, an Iranian refugee who spent the years from 1988 to 2006 at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris, after his refugee papers were stolen.

6   Bingham's overstepping of the rules of frequent flying by falling in love with Alex recalls the malicious plot of *In the Company of Men*, when Howard actually falls in love with Christine, while Chad remains detached and indifferent.

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