The Superhost. Biopolitics, home and community in the *Airbnb* dream-world of global hospitality

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A B S T R A C T

This article intends to contribute to the existing body of critical scholarly work on the sharing economies of tourism. Focussing on the *Airbnb* platform, it investigates the biopolitical spatialities that emerge from its qualification and quantification of bodily performances of hospitality. Drawing on the work of Roberto Esposito, the article challenges the notion of "community" pervading the rhetoric of the platform and crucially influencing the ways in which travel, hospitality and home are reconceptualized. It does so by analysing some of the key technologies and calculative rationalities that drive the making of these global "communities", and give rise to the champion of the *Airbnb* world of hospitality: the Superhost. We reflect on how ideas of community and hospitality translate into a metrics of care, "localness" and belonging, and on how specific practices related to the "spatialities of the home" are central to the qualification/quantification of life and of living spaces generated by the platform. We conclude by suggesting that, by exploring these sites and concepts, it is perhaps possible to unravel how these new geographies of hospitality are operationalized through the giving of "what is proper" – the intimate spatialities of the home – on the part of the hosts in order to become members of a greater Self, the *Airbnb* global community.

1. Introduction

This article is about *Airbnb* and the biopolitical dimension of its "sharing economies." It is also an attempt to problematize the ways in which *Airbnb*'s rhetoric over community and hospitality incorporates ideas of home, place and life. Anyone roaming the Internet for tourism related purposes today is likely to be exposed to a vast array of smiling objectified bodies normally accompanied by inviting images of places. In tourism and on the websites through which tourism is displayed, promoted and organized, bodies and places are implicitly and explicitly linked to each other and often represent core elements in the production of meaning about a specific travel experience. Bodies are displayed, gendered, sexualized, racialized, trained and promised (Jordan, 2007; Jordan and Aitchison, 2008). The so-called "sharing economy"[1] of tourism is no exception to this. Accommodation rental platforms[2] like *Airbnb*, operate through expansive databases of hosting and guesting bodies engaged in the business of hospitality in their most intimate

spaces: *the home*. Their websites show smiling, healthy, and welcoming bodies (metaphorically) waiting on their doorsteps to invite you in. Those bodies-on-display are there to represent the ideal host, or, the "idea of hosting"; their inviting images have become a sort of implicit benchmark for how hospitality should be performed and how the hosts involved in these sharing economies should approach and appeal to their potential guests.

The "Superhost" – the champion of the *Airbnb* world of hospitality – is thus constructed as a biopolitical horizon. That is, the incarnation, identified via the algorithms of that specific platform, of all the qualities requested to succeed and emerge in *Airbnb*'s global community of hospitality. Platforms like *Airbnb* have in fact turned the labour of care of "other" bodies in the private sphere into exchange value, engendering more individualized and "tailor-made" travel experiences, together with the temporary/ephemeral experience of belonging to unknown and distant places (see e.g. Germann Molz, 2012; Steylaerts and Dubhghaill, 2012 on *Couchsurfing*). They embody a booming form

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of tourism hospitality and supposedly speak to the demands of the "post-tourist," a figure on a quest for more meaningful travel experiences in everyday and homely environments produced and/or evaluated by peers (Russo and Richards, 2016; Russo and Quaglieri Domínguez, 2016; for a different definition, Feifer, 1985). The *Airbnb* platform, we argue, is also driven by an intimate connection between individuals and places. Place is presented via the tropes of home, the local, belonging and "community." At the core of *Airbnb*'s operations lies a set of presumably affective relations between complete strangers comprising a putative global community of hosts and guests (see Airbnb). These individuals are reviewed and ranked into a specific metrics; they are, we suggest, translated in the language of biopolitics.

In the following pages, we thus claim that in the "sharing" economies of tourism the exposure of individual hosting bodies (and their rankings) in relation to place may be analysed adopting a biopolitical perspective. Such perspective in fact allows taking into consideration both the incorporation of people's lives into *Airbnb*'s travel political economy and the related implications in terms of their performance of home (see Roelofsen, 2018). With this article, we wish to contribute in particular to the body of work that critically addresses the sharing economies of tourism by eliciting the power constellations and the (body) politics that transpire through one of its most popular digital platforms where textually and visually detailed life stories and private spaces of millions of hosts and guests are on offer. We do so by critically analysing the ways in which the *Airbnb* platform operationalizes the key concepts of home, community and hospitality by digitally creating a world of real-and-imagined "hosts" and "guests" where a specific set of intimate relationships is put on display in the name of a newly conceived global culture of hospitality. We thus first discuss some of the key literature on the tourism sharing economies. Secondly, we reflect on existing work on the biopolitics of tourism in relation to the concept of community, inspired in this by the work of Italian political philosopher Roberto Esposito. Thirdly, we engage with several sites of *eva*luation at the core of the *Airbnb* machinery. We analyse them in terms of their relation to the putative *bios* and *geos* of the affiliates, that is, the associated representations of "life" and – literally and figuratively – "the place" of the individuals involved in this global imagined collective. Here, we introduce the abovementioned figure of the *Superhost*, since paradigmatic of how *Airbnb* understands "homes" as part of a global competition for care and hospitality. We accordingly reflect on how ideas of community and hospitality are translated by *Airbnb* into metrics of (bodily) care, "localness" and belonging. We conclude by suggesting that, by roaming these sites and networks, and by reflecting on the technologies and calculative rationalities that underlie the "becoming of" the *Superhost* it is perhaps possible to unravel how these spaces of hospitality are qualified through the systematic incorporation of intimate relations between the bodies of strangers, and how these relations may shape new understandings of travel, community and "home."

2. Biopolitics, community, and the sharing economies of tourism

2.1. Reading the sharing economies of tourism

In the past decade, myriad platforms that facilitate tourism's sharing economies have emerged and become popular, inspiring a rich body of scholarly work (see Cheng, 2016 for an overview). Anthropologists, sociologists, economists, geographers and the like have taken on different perspectives in conceptualizing the sharing economy (see Dredge and Gyimóthy, 2015, 2017) and have drawn attention to the effects that this new economic "logic" brings forth. Paula Bialski and Jennie Germann Molz are among the pioneering scholars (see e.g. Germann Molz, 2007; Bialski, 2007) who have carried out empirical studies on these emerging economies, by focusing in particular on the (then) non-profit platform *Couchsurfing*. Germann Molz' work (2007, 2012, 2013, 2014a) has shown how hospitality may be re-conceptualized in its interplay

with networking technologies. Hospitality, Germann Molz argues, "becomes a central part of our networking practices, and [hospitality] is itself increasingly networked", giving rise to "networked hospitality" (2014a). Bialski, instead, has explored how such networking technologies enable strangers to forge mobile friendships while sharing the intimacies of their lives in what Bialski calls "intimate tourism" (2007; 2012). Since hospitality exchanges indeed generally take place between strangers in intimate settings, like the home, other studies have drawn attention to questions of communication and trust between peers in on- and offline environments (see e.g. Bialski and Batorski, 2010; Lauterbach et al., 2009; Picard and Buchberger, 2013; Ronzhyn, 2013; Rosen et al., 2011). This literature often rests upon the common belief that establishing contact through networking technologies and engaging in exchanges with distant strangers carries a greater "risk" than participating in the more "formal" offline economy (see, e.g. Lauterbach et al., 2009: 346; Celata et al., 2017: 352). While users are encouraged to give the most accurate biographical accounts of their respective selves online (Ronzhyn, 2013), technologies also enable them to manipulate their online identities and possibly hide malicious intended behaviour. It is therefore not uncommon that users of these platforms face uncertainty and anxiety in dealing with strangers online (Germann Molz, 2012: chapter 6). According to Germann Molz, the reputational mechanisms that populate the sharing economies such as *Couchsurfing* are thus operationalised precisely to afford "a level of trust… that makes it possible to host, share or barter with complete strangers" (Germann Molz, 2013: 222). To increase the supposed reliability of future exchanges, users are motivated to actively participate in the self-regulation of peer-to-peer exchanges by feeding information into digital reputation systems. While some work indeed highlights the contentious nature of the platforms' networking technologies and reputation mechanisms (e.g. Celata et al., 2017; Germann Molz, 2013, 2014b; O'Regan and Choe, 2017; Slee, 2013), however, an overwhelming amount of studies is merely focused on the efficiency of such technologies, heralding them as crucial elements in establishing "trustworthy communities" (e.g. Bridges and Vásquez, 2016; Ert et al., 2016; Fradkin et al., 2015; Gunter, 2018; Liang et al., 2017; Sundarajan, 2016; Teubner et al., 2017). This literature offers little reflection on these technologies' capacity in excluding and marginalizing users from participating in these very "communities". By equating "trustworthiness" with a positive or negative assessment of people's past behaviour *and* of users' ability to profile themselves favourably, many of these interventions seem to overlook other and perhaps more fundamental ways in which trust is generated and experienced (see, e.g., Möllering, 2001). We will return to the question of trust and the use of the term in *Airbnb* later.

The surge of *Airbnb* as possibly one of the most impactful and debated platforms of the sharing economy in recent years has been accompanied by a proliferation of academic interventions. Again, many of these interventions appear to be largely concerned with the "effectiveness" of the mechanisms underlying its sharing economy, oftentimes compared to "normal" capitalist economies. For example, the fields of tourism studies, tourism management and business studies have thoroughly investigated the potential (economic) impact of *Airbnb* on traditional businesses and labour, and on travel behaviour (see e.g. Fang et al., 2016; Guttentag, 2015; Oskam and Boswijk, 2016; Sigala, 2017; Tussyadiah and Pesonen, 2015; Zervas et al., 2017). Other work in these fields has analysed *Airbnb*'s disruptive "business model" and marketing practices (see e.g. Brochado et al., 2017; Guttentag, 2015; Liu and Matilla, 2017; Varma et al., 2016; Wang and Nicolau, 2017).

For how valuable the abovementioned interventions may be in offering new insights into the growing impact of the platform, we prefer to engage here with a growing body of critical literature on the sharing economies of tourism that has analysed the controversial operations of *Airbnb* and their social and spatial impact. Recent interventions have for instance investigated the controversies concerning the role of *Airbnb* in disrupting housing markets and in producing social displacement in