Erika Polson’s book, *Privileged Mobilities*, opens with a vivid description of what it feels like to attend a gathering of expats at a trendy neighborhood bar in Paris for the first time. This section of the bar is a lively space filled with well-dressed millennials from Canada, the United States, Spain, Germany, and Singapore who drift in and out of conversation with acquaintances and newcomers as they migrate around the room. Some of these international, college-educated professionals have lived in Paris for the past 5 years, others arrived as recently as 2 hr earlier. Some attendees plan to return to their home countries after a temporary stay, while others plan to stay in Paris or move to another country. However, all attendees have relocated to Paris for the same purpose: for perceived professional and lifestyle opportunities.

This gathering and others Polson documented during her extensive fieldwork was organized by *Internations in Paris*, a meetup group on the website meetup.com that uses the digital platform to organize in-person events. In addition to *Internations in Paris*, at least two other groups such as *Expats Paris* and *American Expats Paris* also use meetup.com to digitally organize lunches, parties, or cocktails among strangers. As Polson’s research illuminates, the use of digital platforms to gather internationally mobile, middle-class professionals is not exclusive to expats currently living in The City of Lights.

Articulate and rich ethnographic accounts of privileged mobility, where professionals arrive in an international city alone, meet other mobile professionals, and piece together a sense of social integration and personal attachments to urban spaces are at the center of this book. Multi-sited online and offline fieldwork in Paris, Singapore, and Bangalore from 2008-2014 and years of living as an expatriate in Spain inform Polson’s study. In addition to multi-sited ethnography, Polson engages in a discourse analysis of international human resource guides and publications that advise transnational corporations on cultivating and maintaining a mobile, “globally minded” workforce.

Studies of digital media use among migrants and recent immigrants tend to focus on a hybrid sense of belonging to “here” and “there” simultaneously—using digital media to connect to homeland, maintaining geographically dispersed or otherwise inaccessible social networks, or employing digital media to foster a sense of familiarity in unfamiliar locations (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, & Livingstone, 2014; Lingel, 2011; Madianou & Miller, 2013; Wallis, 2013). Studies of digital media use among transnational elites or within global labor markets and culture industries tend to focus on leveraging digital technologies to manage labor relations and workflow (Christopherson, 2006; Curtin & Vanderhoeft, 2015).

Polson’s study adds to these conversations and the emerging field of “digital migration studies” (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2018) by focusing on the ways that global professionals utilize digital media to orchestrate encounters with people and place, thus negotiating what it means to be “local” or to temporarily belong. The author focuses on meetup groups primarily but also analyzes the use of Google Maps by single expat women to manage their differential mobilities in Bangalore (Chapter 4).

Throughout the book, Polson uses the term “digital place-making” to emphasize the offline and online processes of producing place as well as fostering feelings of belonging in place. Related to this focus, one of the outstanding features of this book is the author’s critical attention to questions of what it means to be “mobile” and “global” and how these conditions or statuses are constructed, negotiated, and lived by mobile professionals.

In Chapters 2 and 3, participants grapple with interpreting what it means to be “global,” signaling globality to various audiences, and the cultural capital associated with their “potential as global” within international corporate cultures. These chapters in particular highlight the ways in which interpretations of and pride in being global are partially shaped by logistic needs of transnational corporations. As Polson explicates, corporations need to maintain a mobile, flexible, and fluid managerial class and critiques corporate ideologies that celebrate employees who “no longer demand the security of ‘home’” (p. 78). As Polson points out, these perceptions of pride and capital are internalized by professional migrants in that they become invested in the mind-set and lifestyle of “global mobility,” even if they ultimately settle down in a particular location after a short stint of international travel.
Furthermore, Polson is careful to address the idea that terms such as “global” and “international” are often equated with Western or European locations and experiences. In the introductory chapter, Polson addresses her own Eurocentric and US-focused lens and notes the limits of “reflexivity” in ethnographic work, which is evident throughout the book. However, the author’s research in Singapore (Chapter 3) specifically was evocative of many significant avenues for further research that address professional migration and experiences of emerging global middle classes from diverse perspectives and contexts.

One of the many provocative ideas Polson posits is that a new type of local place is being created through globalization, one that focuses on social encounters and communicative interactions more than a sense of permanence or stasis. In this sense, Polson suggests that mobile communities of migrating professionals are akin to virtual communities in that they share certain defining qualities such as loose formations of individuals brought together by common needs, identity fluidity, and being structured by the affordances of the digital platforms they utilize. In addition to “virtual offline communities,” Polson considers expat meetups as new institutional forms that reproduce social class by bringing people out of online networks into offline encounters. Almost paradoxically, these ad hoc institutions that are motivated by desires for community and social connection seem to be shaped by opportunistic individualism, transience, and inconsistent or nonchalant participation and investment. All of which support Polson’s claims for rethinking flexibility and mobility as cornerstones of place, social connection, and belonging.

Abridged drafts of several chapters appearing in this book have been previously published. In particular, “A Gateway to the Global City: Mobile Place-making Practices by Expats” published in New Media & Society (2015) elaborates on Polson’s conceptions of “digital place-making” and a “mobile sense of place” as well as the evolving conditions influencing the formation of a globalizing middle class. However, the book expertly weaves the findings presented in these preceding articles into a compelling exploration of the professional and personal social spaces in which new modes of belonging and experiences of globalization are being worked out by transnational managerial professionals.

**Interview With Erika Polson**

**GH:** Underlying your analysis of expats in Paris, Singapore, and Bangalore you emphasize the development of “mobile localities” or “mobile sense of place.” You expertly critique what it means to be mobile, but what does it mean to be “local” now? And does social media play a role in this as well?

**EP:** When I first began this research project, it seemed like I was observing a growing movement of people really trying to live out the social possibilities of globalization as a mode of belonging. While cosmopolitanism was not new, the ability to flexibly use digital media to bring people together based on geo-location was helping these “international” groups to form, making the cosmopolitan ideal more tangible. (And of course, this made it more available to critique. As I point out in the book, we are talking about a rather privileged group of migrants: people with the education, language skills, savvy with cross-cultural communication, experience in industries that translate across borders, politically-powerful passports, and enough economic capital to move and get started in a new country—even if sometimes just barely. So, the rhetoric of openness was always at odds with the more subtle exclusions). Anyway, one thing that was important to this moment is that these groups were able to easily organize and publicize their formation, and thus to find each other, through online platforms (such as meetup.com and internations.org), and from there, access information to get together in bars and restaurants. It was a way of staking out some sort of belonging in the city.

The fact that these practices could be, and were, implemented in cities around the world through the same digital platforms is related to that “mobile sense of place” that you reference in the question. However, it was important to people that these groups made them feel like they were somehow “local.” It’s something I heard over and over again. The so-called citizen of the world concept was underlying a lot of these mobilities and yet many people were finding it was really lonely out there once they actually tried to live it. They wanted to be able to feel at home anywhere in the world. On the one hand, it sounds ridiculously elite, but yet we can see that the sentiment has only grown since then, and this definitely points to new meanings around being local now, in relation to geo-social media and other location-based media.

Today we have apps like Airbnb marketing the idea that you can “live like a local,” meaning that you don’t have to actually live abroad to spend some days in a flat in a “real” neighborhood. It’s funny because during my research—and this was especially true in Paris—the expats were really clear about the fact that they were NOT tourists. They could be quite insistent on this. And now, as temporary mobilities have continued to expand, suddenly no one wants to be seen as a tourist. There are all these new efforts to produce that idea of being “local”—whether the Airbnb flat; booking an Uber to get directly to a new destination without getting lost (and without having to mangle a language while trying to communicate with a taxi driver); using a dating app to meet up with residents for a night out;
or using any of the thousands of other apps that produce information and access in relation to one’s location—made easier now with smartphones and plans that work almost anywhere. This is challenging all sorts of previous claims to local belonging. I did the research that became *Privileged Mobilities* right at the cusp of this new moment, when expatriates were early adopters of the technologies and technological practices that enabled them to build this sense of local relation. As these practices develop and expand, a lot of stress is building around how the “local” is defined.

**GH:** Your discussion of community boundaries and the ways that boundaries between local and “international people” emerge is intriguing. The expat encounters begin to seem so insular—where expats predominantly interact with one another online and offline. How would you describe the role of interacting with pre-existing local communities in shaping a sense of belonging for mobile professionals? Does digital media play a role in these relationships at all?

**EP:** One of the things that struck me most in terms of the relationship between expats and locals was how the “international community” was a space utilized by local people, as well, but in a way that created new rules of engagement in comparison with other contexts. Sometimes residents of the host society had lived abroad previously and wanted to continue to mingle with foreigners after returning home; other times residents wanted to build up their global cultural and social capital (perhaps to improve their English-language skills, gain experience in cross-cultural communication, or build up a social network that included foreign professionals), which might serve them in their own globalizing cities. In this way, the international community was a space where locals and expats could hang out, exchange in a culture all its own.

Many expats had friendships with local people outside of the international groups. And yet, they still sought out the groups as a way of having a connection to something where they felt more equal, less like they were always a step down in terms of language, history, cultural awareness.

Digital media were important to creating these boundaries, particularly in how organizers wrote about the groups in the general descriptions and event invitations. In specifying various characteristics of the group, organizer text also made clear which kind of people would be welcome, whether expats or locals. However, it was really interesting how local cultures still really influenced the cultures developed in the international communities. In the book, I point out a lot of differences that emerge in the different groups across country contexts, even as these are cross-cutting other aspects that are highly cohesive.

**GH:** Your case studies, and the language that you use to discuss them, highlight how people are negotiating offline and online spaces and interactions. Are you arguing that it’s still important to differentiate between online networks and offline encounters? Or how should we think about relationships between online and offline spaces in light of your study?

**EP:** Good question, and this is one where things have evolved a bit since the research was conducted. We’re clearly a long way from when people were imagined as having different identities online and offline, and also from the idea that online/offline are somehow separate “worlds.” Yet, I would say that in terms of communication, online and offline were still operating somewhat separately, and differently, in this study. Organizers and participants were putting a lot of information into the platform, and this information was there to be digested in private before participants attended events. In some scenarios, I describe the online discourse as setting a tone that is carried over into events, and that tone helps create a certain sense of community and communication style within a particular location. [This was really noticeable, for example, when I accidentally arrived at location of an expat meetup an hour early, and the bar was being used for a speed dating event. I very quickly understood something was off.] In such situations, there was a sense of overlap where the stability of the online communication was important to create the norms and routines that would become tangible in a less stable physical location.

Sometimes there were really distinct differences between online and offline communication, for example when people used the online profiles and communication functions for strategies that could be carried out at offline events. One example is how some women sought each other out to make plans to attend together to feel more comfortable. In some cases, it was that layer of comfort alone that enabled a woman to decide to attend. So, while I would definitely say that in this research the “international community” was not separated into online and offline components, the communication that helped to create that community really did operate distinctly in digitally mediated versus face-to-face interactions.

With the growth of location-based smartphone apps in the time since this research, I’ve noticed that today most of these groups have smaller profile sections with much less information on them. People seem to spend less time perusing online information about groups and members, and perhaps make more decisions based on location and app suggestions.
Online and offline practices continue to merge, which is interesting to consider.

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