# PLACE ITERATION AND INTEGRATION:

# HOW DIGITAL NOMADS NAVIGATE THE MOBILE WORKER PARADOX

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**Accepted for publication at *Administrative Science Quarterly***

## ABSTRACT

To access the benefits of mobility, digital nomads regularly disconnect from their physical locations, which should prevent them from forming a sense of place. Yet they need this sense of place to work effectively and thus continue their mobility. We study this mobile worker paradox through qualitative analysis of 73 interviews with 67 digital nomads, advancing a theoretical model with two paths by which digital nomads navigate this paradox. The model begins as digital nomads initially move to a new location, experiencing placelessness—enjoying freedom and being burdened by the lack of structure. Digital nomads use their freedom for nonwork adventuring and address burdens via work placemaking, resulting in a deep connection to their physical location—placefulness. Interpretations of placefulness differ by degree of wanderlust. High wanderlust individuals interpret placefulness negatively, uprooting to experience placelessness again in a cycle we term place iteration. Those with moderate wanderlust interpret placefulness positively and negatively, uprooting in search of balance. As they move, they combine desirable elements of placelessness and placefulness—mobile placemaking—allowing them to balance the benefits of both. This study enhances our understanding of digital nomads and mobile workers broadly, and contributes to literatures on place, paradox, and flexible work.

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Cultivating a *sense of place*—or being meaningfully connected to one's physical location (Cresswell, 2015)—is critical for positive work outcomes. Such connection to work locations helps workers make sense of their identities in the context of their jobs (Larson and Pearson, 2012; Ashforth, Caza, and Meister, 2024; Crosina, 2024), facilitates bonds with co-located peers (Garrett, Spreitzer, and Bacevice, 2017; Grey and O'Toole, 2018), and plays a role in the formation and evolution of a collective identity (Howard-Grenville, Metzger, and Meyer, 2013). The place literature posits that the length of time spent in a location is the most consistent predictor of a sense of place (Lewicka, 2011), likely because a sense of place is the result of repeated and accumulated meaning-making experiences within a particular location (Relph, 1976, 2008; Tomaney, 2016). Establishing a sense of place at work, then, requires significant time spent in that location. Conversely, frequently moving to new work locations (i.e., geographic mobility[1]) would thwart the formation of a sense of place at work (Weng et al., 2018), thereby restricting access to the benefits of a sense of place and eliciting negative consequences associated with its absence (e.g., stress, disorientation; Scannell and Gifford, 2017). The literature is clear that, under such conditions, people often feel detached from the reality of their lives (McKinzie, 2019), reduce their affective attachment to others that inhabit the physical area (Bonaiuto, Breakwell, & Cano, 1996), and experience a fractured sense of identity (Speller, Lyons, & Twigger-Ross, 2002).

Digital nomads, however, integrate mobility and work, foregoing a single, stable work location in favor of constantly moving to new locations (Woldoff and Litchfield, 2021). These

[1] Hereafter referred to as "mobility" for parsimony. Notably, we distinguish between geographic mobility and other types of mobility in the organizational literature such as internal mobility (within an organization; Ray, 2023).

individuals tend to be driven by a desire to travel and explore (Reichenberger, 2018), but as described above, satisfying this desire via constant mobility should preclude the formation of a sense of place and impede their work effectiveness. This scenario is problematic because their mobility is not only dependent upon their capacity to work but also on their ability to do so efficiently and effectively. As Woldoff and Litchfield (2021) explain, "Work is the foundation of the digital nomad community…To achieve their goal of location independence, nomads must have work that can be performed anywhere [successfully]" (p. 113, 115). Because the mobility that characterizes digital nomadism is at odds with forming a sense of place at work, mobility should pose a formidable barrier to work efficiency and effectiveness. The result of this tension between mobility and work is a paradox that likely applies, to some degree, to all mobile workers. Mobility should deprive workers of a sense of a place and accordingly harm their work effectiveness, and yet mobile workers need the benefits afforded by a sense of place to continue to be mobile. We term this the *mobile worker paradox*. Our research question is therefore: *How do digital nomads navigate the mobile worker paradox?*

Understanding how digital nomads navigate these tensions at the intersection of work, sense of place, and mobility is key to understanding the dynamics of this extreme but growing way of combining work and travel. It is estimated that there are around 40 million digital nomads globally, a number forecasted to rise to 60 million by 2030 (Bearne, 2023). American digital nomads now number over 17 million, representing a 133% increase since 2019, and over one in ten workers in the United States in 2023 described themselves as digital nomads (MBO Partners, 2023). Beyond our study's relevance to this large and growing group, understanding how digital nomads navigate the mobile worker paradox takes on added relevance given that a large share of workers (around 40% in the United States; Barrero, Bloom, and Davis, 2023) now spend at least

some of their time working outside of the office, as the digitization of work (Neeley, 2021) has spurred a rise in work-from-anywhere policies (Choudhury, Foroughi, and Larson, 2021) and hybrid work (Bloom et al., 2023). Similar to digital nomads, workers in such arrangements likely experience some of the tension between desiring mobility between work locations (e.g., coffee shops, home offices, and coworking spaces) and needing the work benefits that stem from a sense of place. As such, understanding how digital nomads navigate the mobile worker paradox is useful for understanding the dynamics of flexible work arrangements more broadly.

We examined this paradox using a qualitative, inductive methodology, which is well-suited for developing theory, particularly theory on processes (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Creswell, 1998). Using interviews with digital nomads and supplemental materials that sensitized us to the research context, we built a model that theorizes how digital nomads navigate the mobile worker paradox, contributing to our understanding of mobility and place, paradox, and work arrangements that incorporate mobility.

## PLACEMAKING AND MOBILITY

A *sense of place* is the perception that one has meaningful connections to a physical location, "meanings, both personal and shared, that are associated with a particular locale" (Cresswell, 2015: 14). A sense of place is created and strengthened through placemaking, the processes by which individuals foster meaningful connections to their physical environment (Relph, 1976; Schneekloth and Shibley, 1995). Individuals form these ties when they interpret the physical or social components of their location in positive ways, such as advancing their survival, security, goals, self-regulation, and belonging (Scannell and Gifford, 2010). Regarding the physical environment, a sense of place develops when a location provides the physical resources that individuals need to attain their goals (Stokols and Shumaker, 1982). On the social

side, a sense of place can form when the location provides opportunities for social encounters, thereby facilitating interpersonal bonds (Lewicka, 2011). Beyond the physical and social, developing routines within a location can also result in meaningful connections between person and location (Seamon, 1979). Placemaking processes like these lead to a subjective attachment to a physical location (Tuan, 1991; Scannell and Gifford, 2010; Lewicka, 2011).

The repeated exposure to and interaction with the people, objects, and symbols that underlie placemaking are thought to require prolonged physical presence in that location (Tomaney, 2016). Thus, developing a sense of place takes time (Relph, 1976, 2008). In support of this notion, studies on how people move through their physical environments via routinized and habitual patterns indicate that the sense of place that arises from this "place ballet" (Seamon, 1979) tends to strengthen over time (van Eck and Pijpers, 2017). In other words, the longer an individual stays in one location, the likelier they will be to engage in the processes that help form a strong sense of place there (Tuan, 1977; Lewicka, 2011).

Consequently, frequently moving to new locations (i.e., mobility) is thought to be antithetical to developing a sense of place (Relph, 1976). Researchers have argued that mobility mechanisms like technological innovation, travel, and globalization contribute to "feelings of insecurity and lack of control" (Gustafson, 2006: 22), disrupting the placemaking processes that cultivate a sense of place. Such mobility is a formidable barrier to forming a sense of place because individuals are not spending the time needed in a location to develop the routines and connections that give individuals a sense of place. People who are constantly mobile have been characterized as unrooted, transient, and disconnected from their physical environment (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977; Thrift, 1994), resulting in sadness and longing (Fullilove, 1996). The term for

this experience is placelessness[2]—a state in which people lack meaningful attachment to a physical location. Placelessness is typically characterized as undesirable (Cresswell, 2015; Relph, 2016), suggesting individuals would avoid mobility when possible.

## A SENSE OF PLACE AT WORK

The notion that a sense of place enhances personal and social well-being (Kasarda and Janowitz, 1974; Theodori, 2001; Lewicka, 2011) extends to organizational settings. Research indicates that a sense of place at work positively impacts worker well-being by providing a basis for work-related identities (Ashforth, Caza, and Meister, 2024; Crosina, 2024) and conveying organizational values (Lawrence and Dover, 2015). Correspondingly, a sense of place at work contributes to workers' commitment to their jobs (Weng et al., 2018) and is integral to institutional work (Lawrence and Dover, 2015). At the same time, when an individual's sense of place in a work location is disrupted, it can be disorienting, ultimately harming their well-being and work performance (Scannell and Gifford, 2017; Ashforth, Caza, and Meister, 2024). Moreover, when an organization or its members neglect the physical environment at work, the collective identity that a sense of place gives inhabitants can be lost, further highlighting its criticality for work effectiveness (Howard-Grenville, Metzger, and Meyer, 2013).

Given the importance of a sense of place for work effectiveness, organizations make substantial investments in placemaking by designing and constructing work settings to facilitate meaningful connections for the workers who inhabit them (e.g., Tyre and von Hippell, 1997; Beunza and Stark, 2004; Hernes, 2004; Elsbach and Pratt, 2007; Beunza, 2019). For example, organizations may display artifacts that symbolize aspects of the firm's culture in work areas,

[2] The placemaking literature has two definitions for the term placelessness. One describes a physical location that is objectively devoid of character or uniqueness (Relph, 1976), and another describes a person's perception that they have no sense of place (Cresswell, 2015). In this paper, we draw upon the second definition, describing an individual's perception when we refer to placelessness.

thereby signaling organizational values to workers and imbuing these locations with meaning (Pratt and Rafaeli, 2001; Elsbach and Stigliani, 2018). Part of how organizations shape workers' perceptions of organizational identity is immersing them in these symbolic artifacts (Hatch and Schultz, 2017). In this way, "whether they recognize it or not, managers contribute to place" (Guthey, Whiteman, and Elmes, 2014: 258). Workers also make contributions to placemaking at work. For instance, they can personalize their physical work areas (Byron and Laurence, 2015; Cameron, 2020) and craft the boundaries of their work area (Brown, 2009; Ashkanasy, Ayoko, and Jehn, 2014), thereby fostering meaningful connections with the location. When workers are not allowed to participate in placemaking, they view it as a threat to their sense of self at work (Elsbach, 2003). Overall, placemaking at work is typically a joint meaning-making venture between organizations and their members that tends to benefit both parties (Lew, 2017; Gonsalves, 2020).

## DIGITAL NOMADISM

Given the benefits of a sense of place and the undesirability of placelessness for worker well-being and performance, most work designs minimize or eliminate mobility. However, a growing number of workers prioritize mobility in the design of their work lives. These digital nomads work remotely while traveling full-time (Woldoff and Litchfield, 2021) and typically move to new locations every few weeks or months (Hannonen, 2020). Regardless of how frequently they change location, many digital nomads specifically choose this lifestyle for the personal and professional freedom it offers, allowing them to travel without being tied to one location (Reichenberger, 2018). These workers do not "rely on … a conventional office; instead, they can decide freely when and where to work" (Müller, 2016: 344).

A unique feature of digital nomadism is that it is driven jointly by the need to work and

the desire to travel. From one perspective, this combination is symbiotic, in that work generates the financial resources to cover the expenses associated with constant relocation. Though, from the perspective of the place literature, this combination presents a paradox, referring to concepts that are opposing, but interdependent (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Schad et al., 2016). For work to support mobility, it must be performed effectively, which is bolstered by a sense of place. However, the mobility inherent in constant relocation should interfere with, if not entirely undermine, the formation of a sense of place, which theory would suggest is associated with lower levels of worker well-being and performance (Scannell and Gifford, 2017). The management literature has posited how individuals navigate paradox via strategies like paradoxical thinking, shifting between competing demands of a paradox, and allowing oneself to be comfortably uncomfortable with the discomfort of paradox (Lewis and Smith, 2022). However, it is not clear if digital nomads use these strategies or different strategies to navigate the mobile worker paradox. In light of this, we conducted a qualitative, inductive study to understand how digital nomads navigate the mobile worker paradox.

## METHOD

We used a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2014) in a sample of workers who identified as digital nomads to answer our research question.

### Data Collection

*Exploratory data.* Early in the data collection process, the first author attended a gathering of digital nomads at a restaurant in a large city in the southern United States. The event was hosted by a global network for digital nomads and provided an opportunity for digital nomads to connect for leisure and fellowship. The three-hour meetup was attended by

approximately 20 digital nomads, and the first author had informal, unstructured interviews with nine of them. Because this event took place early in the data collection process, these interviews were exploratory, as we sought to learn more about the lived experiences of digital nomads. The first author inquired about how they decided to become digital nomads, their life and work as a digital nomad, and the challenges of being a digital nomad. Immediately after leaving the event, the first author documented the details of these conversations and shared the notes with the author team[3]. These initial conversations provided first insights into the experiences of digital nomads. For example, it was through these exploratory conversations that we learned workers can identify as digital nomads, regardless of the frequency with which they change location, as attendees at this event who described themselves as digital nomads changed location every few days, weeks, months, or in some rare cases, years.

*Primary data*. We collected our primary data from a sample of digital nomads recruited via posts in online digital nomad forums and direct messages on blogs or social media websites. Because our informants were geographically dispersed and working across organizations and occupations, we also used snowball sampling (Naderifar, Goli, and Ghaljaie, 2017), asking informants at the end of each interview for recommendations of other digital nomads who might be willing to participate. This yielded a primary sample of 58 digital nomads. Of these, 28 informants were traveling alone, 18 were traveling with a partner and interviewed together (i.e., nine couples), and 12 were traveling with a partner who did not participate in the interview. The areas where these informants lived and worked also varied. Thirty-two informants were currently backpackers living in traditional dwellings like houses, apartments, or hostels throughout their travels, 17 were "vanlifers" (i.e., those who live and work from a van), six were "RVers" (i.e.,

[3] A sample of the notes taken immediately after these informal interviews is available in the Online Appendix.

those who live and work in a recreational vehicle), and three lived and worked on a boat. Some digital nomads' habitations changed over time. For example, at the time of their interviews, two informants were vanlifers but spent prior years backpacking while living in traditional dwellings, one informant was a vanlifer but spent prior years on a boat, and three informants who were living on boats had previously been vanlifers. Informants included freelancers, entrepreneurs, and salaried individuals, who worked in a variety of professional occupations, including engineering, digital marketing, social media management, computer programming, social work, journalism, education, and academia. Table 1 displays further characteristics of this sample.

The first and third author conducted the first two primary interviews together, each of which were followed by an extensive debriefing on the content of the interview. All subsequent interviews were conducted by the first author, who used a person-centered interview approach to facilitate informant disclosure (Rogers, 1951). Each member of the author team read all of the transcripts, and the author team met at least once every ten interviews to discuss the emerging model and interview protocol. Appendix A presents the interview protocol, including notations about how the protocol evolved over the course of the study. With these informants, we conducted 58 semi-structured interviews ranging from 25 to 116 minutes and averaging 71 minutes. Further, we conducted four follow-up interviews to ask about long-term placemaking in a subgroup of informants who had been nomadic for at least ten years. These re-interviews were 22 to 40 minutes long and averaged 33 minutes. Finally, we conducted two member checks (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) with informants who provided feedback on the emergent model.

In total, we conducted nine exploratory interviews, 53 semi-structured interviews, two member checks, and four follow-ups, totaling 73 interviews with 67 digital nomads.

*Sensitizing data.* To further sensitize ourselves to the research context, the first author

reviewed nontechnical resources (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), including blog posts, articles, social media posts (e.g., from Instagram or the "DigitalNomad" subreddit), YouTube videos documenting the lives of digital nomads, a book frequently mentioned by informants called *The 4-Hour Workweek* (Ferriss, 2007), and a documentary about digital nomads recommended by an informant (Silva-Braga, 2007*)*. Information gleaned from these resources supplemented the interview data and deepened our understanding of digital nomads' experiences (Rouse and Harrison, 2016). For example, informants often posted videos of their daily work routines on YouTube or posted Instagram pictures of their work areas (for examples of the sensitizing data, see Appendix B). Altogether, data collection occurred over three years.

**Data Analysis**

Although code generation and constant comparison are iterative processes that necessitate a nonlinear research methodology (Locke, Feldman, and Golden-Biddle, 2020), we present our data analysis process in stepwise fashion for clarity and afterward describe some of the analytical iterations made. First, we carefully read and re-read interview transcripts and assigned labels to portions of text that closely reflected informants' own words (i.e., open coding; Charmaz, 2014; Locke, Feldman, and Golden-Biddle, 2020). For example, the quote, "[You feel] restricted by that white picket fence," (Andy[4]) was coded as "restricted by white picket fence." The first seven transcripts were open coded by each of the authors independently, who then convened to discuss the codes in detail. Subsequent transcripts were read and discussed by all of the authors but formally open coded only by the first author.

After open coding, we clustered thematically similar open codes into themes whose labels reflected the nature of the thematic similarity (i.e., axial coding; Corbin and Strauss,

[4] Informants were anonymized, then randomly assigned pseudonyms based on their gender identity.

2015). For example, the open codes "restricted by white picket fence," "settled is stuck," and "feeling trapped" were thematically similar because they each dealt with a sense that the connections informants had to one location were constraining. Thus, we grouped these open codes into the theme, "placefulness interpreted as confining." As the themes emerged, it became apparent that some open codes were not relevant to the emerging theoretical story. For example, "seeing into the future" was a first-order code referring to envisioning life as a digital nomad before becoming one. Because the process of becoming a digital nomad was less germane to our research question, we did not cluster this code into a theme in our final model. We categorized themes into aggregate dimensions to further organize our data (similar to the "aggregate dimensions" described by Vuori and Huy, 2016; "aggregate constructs" described by Carton, 2018; and "theoretical categories" described by Petriglieri, Ashford, and Wrzesniewski, 2019).

Further, we identified data-driven connections between themes (i.e., selective coding; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) that helped us identify not only relationships between the themes but also the temporal sequence in which they occurred (Grodal, Anteby, and Holm, 2021). For example, we identified a connection between "placefulness interpreted as boring" and "placelessness" via uprooting based on informant statements that made this connection explicit, such as Timmy's quote where he explained, "Whenever it's not challenging anymore is when you move on." In all, we were able to build a model featuring constructs—as well as theoretical connections between the constructs—that was truly grounded in our data.

Another step in our iterative process was abstracting our findings up to a theoretical level. For example, we noticed running threads throughout our data and analysis: 1) Our informants wrestled with the tension between wanting mobility and needing to work, 2) the behaviors and experiences they described represented two responses to this tension (i.e., to the mobile worker

paradox), and 3) the key mechanism determining their response was how they interpreted placefulness, which was driven by between-informant differences in degree of wanderlust. As part of this process, we also developed and discarded working hypotheses (Grodal, Anteby, and Holm, 2021), or, more precisely, data-informed hunches and speculations. For example, we assumed digital nomads might minimize their work engagement given our *a priori* impression that such free spirits may not value work; however, we found that work was actually a central part of their lives, both in terms of their love for their jobs and the function their job had in enabling their mobility.

In practice, our approach was iterative, with data and insights from analysis driving us back and forth between each level of analysis, reshaping our protocol, and sharpening our emergent model over time. For example, we initially thought placemaking was one theme but began to realize that there seemed to be two different kinds of placemaking—work and mobile placemaking—and, thus, split placemaking into two themes. As another example, we noticed a tension between the freedom of being in a new location and the need for familiarity that emerged as a theme from the first seven formal interviews; so, we inquired more deeply about this in subsequent interviews. Additionally, although we initially included questions in our research protocol about the decision to become digital nomads, we found that this topic was of less relevance to the informants themselves; thus, we inquired less about this topic as the interviews progressed. In this way, informants' perspectives were integral to the development of the model.

*Analyzing differences in informants*. During our analysis, we observed noteworthy variation in how informants described their sentiment about travel. As we describe in the findings below, some informants used intense language to express a visceral passion for travel and a deep aversion to remaining in one location, while others spoke positively of travel and

expressed a desire to travel, but in a more tempered way. The word "wanderlust" frequently surfaced as informants described their love for travel, which we came to conceptualize as an individual difference referring to a passion for travel and aversion to staying in one location. As such, informants who described their love for travel using extreme and visceral terms were labeled "high wanderlust," while those who expressed a more tempered perspective were labeled "moderate wanderlust." Of note: while wanderlust in the population outside of digital nomads ranges from low to high (Schibik, Shields, and Schibik, 2024), the levels of wanderlust prevalent across our informants were high and moderate. The absence of any informants with low wanderlust reflects the reality that such individuals would be unlikely to choose to become digital nomads, and if they did, would be unlikely to adopt this lifestyle beyond short-term.

## FINDINGS

In alignment with the paradox we identified in our introduction, we found that digital nomads experienced a tension between the desire for location-based connections that facilitate work effectiveness and their desire for mobility, which often involved severing such connections. Our findings begin with digital nomads initially moving to a new location, wherein they experience *placelessness*—enjoying freedom and being burdened by the lack of structure. Digital nomads leverage their freedom to engage in nonwork adventuring and address burdens via work placemaking, resulting in a deep connection to their physical location—*placefulness*. Interpretations of placefulness differ by degree of wanderlust. High wanderlust individuals interpret placefulness as wholly negative, uprooting to experience placelessness again, and repeat through this process in a cycle we term *place iteration*. Those with moderate wanderlust interpret placefulness both positively and negatively, uprooting in search of balance between the benefits of placelessness and placefulness. As they move, they combine desirable elements of

placelessness and placefulness via *mobile placemaking*, allowing them to balance both. Below, we describe the model, depicted in Figure 1, using quotes from informants. We provide additional quotes that represent the data underlying our model in Table 2.

**Place Iteration**

For all informants, navigating the mobile worker paradox began by uprooting to a new location for the first time as a digital nomad.

**Experiencing placelessness.** Informants described their arrival to a new location such as a hostel in Bali, a home rental in Spain, a van in a California forest, or a sailboat off the coast of Oregon. Although their physical locations varied, their initial interpretations of these locations were very similar. Lizzie succinctly described her experience as "walk[ing] away from the known into the truly unknown." Likewise, Jen described this initial feeling as "totally out of my comfort zone," which was echoed in Robbie's description of being in "unfamiliar situations [and] unfamiliar settings." This sense of the unknown seemed to be an inherent aspect of being in a new location. As Patricia explained about going into new environments, "It's going to be unfamiliar." In essence, informants felt no connection to the location; they felt *placeless*.

**Burdened by lack of structure.** Placelessness was associated with informants feeling disconnected and without a sense of permanence and predictability in a way that had negative consequences for their work. Some of these issues were practical. For example, informants described having to address administrative concerns that arose from working without the structures, routines, and knowledge of place that are built over time, which interfered with their productivity. To illustrate, informants often explained that they didn't know how reliable the Wi-Fi was, so they could not anticipate when it would function as accurately as they could if they had worked in the location over an extended period of time. Becky remembered a time when a

thunderstorm disrupted her Wi-Fi service just before a critically important work call. The only place she could get cellular service was outside in the downpour, so she spent the call standing in the driveway of her hostel, covering her head with a binder, trying her best to remain dry and do her job well.

Other issues with placelessness were perceptual. For example, informants described how working from new locations made them feel as though boundaries between work and nonwork were disorganized, constantly changing, and difficult to define. For some, this was burdensome because resisting the temptation to engage in leisure required discipline to stay focused on work. Michael admitted, "As much as I love having no schedule, it'll often take me longer to accomplish tasks than it would if I were in an office," saying explicitly that the propensity to distraction is a "downside to … freedom." In contrast to being pulled away from work, other informants found themselves burdened by working long hours. Christina described her mindset during this time:

> I'm going to provide so much value and work so hard. I'm going to work on weekends, even though I don't want to and shouldn't have to, I'm going to work twelve-hour days." [I did] all of these things because I wanted to prove myself and I didn't want to lose my job … I had no boundaries at all.

Finally, many informants perceived forgoing the meaningful social connections with colleagues as burdensome. For instance, Sarah described how she believed that being remote and mobile made it difficult for her supervisor to appreciate how many hours she was working, explaining, "I'm not really able to display to [my supervisor] how tough it is. He can't know what my job entails … if I were there in person, I'd be in the office 20 hours a day and that would be noticeable." For her, social isolation was burdensome because it led to anxiety about how she was perceived by her supervisor. Overall, the informants indicated placelessness was associated with burdensome administrative concerns, chaotic boundaries, and social isolation.

**Work placemaking.** Experiencing the burdens of placelessness thus led informants to establish "roots" (Laura), "necessary structure" (Diana), and "connection" (Amelia) to their locations, primarily to facilitate work effectiveness—in other words, placemaking. As Robbie explained, "This non-structure is a problem. But, for me, it's something that where I've tried to figure out, 'Okay, how can I have structure?'"

First, informants identified aspects of their location that were or were not conducive to work. For example, Kim explained examples of this task, saying, "I want to find a nice cafe that I can work from or a nice coworking [area] or place where I can stay … All the basic stuff that you have to find in a new place." Joe recalled intentionally seeking advice from others, "I just asked [locals] tons of questions about … How do you make sure you can work and make sure there's Wi-Fi?"

After selecting the physical location for their work, they set about making it feel more like a work location by imbuing it with work-related meaning. Many informants did this by configuring objects with work-laden meaning like laptops and phones in a way that, to informants, was reminiscent of a prior office they inhabited. As Rachel explained, "It's literally the exact same thing [as my office in an organization], it's just in a different location and a different office." Other informants had a short list of requirements that when met, imbued a location with work-laden meaning for them. Ryan explained the items that he considered necessary for infusing work-related meaning into a location, saying, "[I need] my laptop and phone for 4G, a bit of electricity, and a coffee machine." For him, these objects, associated in his mind with work, began to infuse the location with work-related meaning. Likewise, via a similar process, Teagan explained, "I've established myself with my work setup."

Informants also began establishing temporal boundaries to separate work and nonwork.

After determining when she wanted to be done with work, Brittany prevented herself from accessing her work after that time, saying, "I have to shut my computer at 5 p.m. … so I have that separation and those boundaries. Those intentions are definitely helpful to keep my state of mind, but also have a nice work relationship." This was an especially important aspect of work placemaking for informants who worked from the same physical location in which they lived. Gemma explained a ritual she and her husband developed to temporally transform one location from work-related to non-work-related:

> Our challenge personally was more related to work life separation … People said, "Don't put your desk in your bedroom." But in the RV, you don't have those separate spaces. It's too small. So my husband worked on the sofa and I would work at our kitchen table. … And we would have trouble knowing when it was time to stop working. We would just keep working, or just sit down right after dinner and work some more … We actually put a ship's bell—we affixed it to the wall—and at 5 or whatever, we would literally ring the bell to signal to ourselves that we were done working, and it was time to be done. So that's what we did to try and create some of that separation.

Finally, informants strengthened the work-related meaning of their physical work location by communicating that meaning—that it was designated for work—to others. One informant (Meredith), for example, would physically close an imaginary office door to signal to her roommates that her previously undefined location had now transformed into a work location. She even requested they "knock" on the imaginary door if they needed something during work hours. For Meredith, "draw[ing] boundaries" communicated that "just because I don't have an office doesn't mean that I'm not working" and helped her minimize distractions to her workday. Another informant, Jen, hung "Do Not Disturb" signs on her door while she was working as a signal to others that she was now existing in a specific, demarcated place of work and not just an undefined area with porous boundaries (see Appendix B for a picture of these signs).

Overall, informants formed connections with work-laden meaning between themselves and their physical location by inserting and arranging artifacts they perceived had work-related

meaning into the location they selected, creating rules around work and nonwork time, and conveying the work-related meaning to others, thus developing a sense of place where they worked. Diana explained how having a dedicated area and desk helped her feel like she was at work: "I've got a desk in my van, I've got a little area where I can work … [I] basically have my own office." In doing so, informants began to see their work location facilitate their work effectiveness. Evelyn said the effect of structuring her week to have large windows of work time had a positive impact on her productivity:

> [I] end up probably working more hours. More than eight hours a day, for sure. When you're in an office, you'll work "eight hours a day," but you only work for like six, four to six, or something. And you're dicking around for the other two. But this is like eight straight hours of work. Very productive, 100% work, no distraction, eight hours.

**Enjoying freedom**. Although placelessness came with burdens, informants also explained that placelessness enabled them to enjoy freedom. One informant described how being unconnected to work relationships freed her from social obligations like "[making] small talk … with Susan in HR about her stupid cats" (Meredith). Teagan described how the freedom of being disconnected from norms or rules about work hours allowed her to tailor her work schedule and tasks to her preferences, saying:

> You can work your schedule out however it works best for you. Like if you're somebody that works really well first thing in the morning, you can wake up early and get started. If you're somebody who really needs to sleep in and would rather start working a little bit later, you can do that.

Similarly, Rachel enjoyed not being supervised, explaining, "It's kind of like you have that flexibility. There's no one sitting next to you, watching you." Associated with placelessness, some informants reported feeling a renewed positivity about their work, recalling, "Just being able to set my own rules took a lot of stress away" (Michelle). Indeed, to informants, freedom was an inherent aspect of placelessness. As Christina described, "To choose how I want to live,

where I want to live, what I want in my life, what kind of lifestyle … That, for me, is freedom." Digital nomads were able to use such freedom to explore their location.

**Nonwork adventuring.** While the burdens of placelessness were associated with work placemaking, the freedoms of placelessness allowed informants to engage in nonwork adventuring— exploring beyond the emerging boundaries of where they worked. As Rich explained, "I think with the freedom of movement, I just started to move my schedule around. If I want to go to a museum in the middle of the day, I can do that. That was huge." For example, Becky explained, "We can go surf, we can go hike, we can go meet some friends for lunch, we can [do] whatever."

Nonwork adventuring, spurred by the freedom of placelessness, was also facilitated by digital nomads' work placemaking efforts. The more that informants engaged in work placemaking, the more it allowed them to engage in nonwork adventuring. To explain, establishing a sense of place in their work location (via work placemaking) not only helped them perceive that their work was more effective but also provided a base from which they could further explore the geographic area that surrounded their work location. In other words, the freedoms of placelessness along with the sense of place at work facilitated nonwork adventuring. Joe explained:

> It's certainly fun to transition from just being in the van to this playground around us … It feels snug to be in the van, but it feels so nice to be able to get out of our space and just enjoy it and everything. I think that's a big part of the nomadic lifestyle … Finding a balance between being away in nature where it's a retreat … but also incorporating that working lifestyle in normal everyday life allows us to have a good balance and have a good connection in order to complete our work.

Similarly, Melissa highlighted how the structure she and her husband created around their work allowed them to explore:

> We're trying to keep it pretty normal where we're working for a block in the day … [It

> appeals to us because] I think a big part of it is us getting our work done at the same time so that we can go play … and take advantage of the places that we're in.

**Experiencing placefulness**. Informants reported that, by virtue of their nonwork adventuring, they began to build and deepen meaningful connections with the physical location outside their work location. Combined with work placemaking, both work and nonwork locations began to feel predictable, normal, and familiar—an experience we refer to as *placefulness*. Dan explained this gradual transition from nonwork adventuring to placefulness:

> At the beginning [it] was more like a great vacation, because when you're going on a vacation, … you see nice places, you meet new people, and you do a lot of activities … It's something special, but then after some time, it becomes normal.

Similarly, Michelle explained, "If you want to stay [in one place] for a while, it becomes a routine thing that's in the background."

**Interpreting placefulness**. As we explain in detail shortly, informants interpreted placefulness differently based on their level of wanderlust—their desire for travel and aversion to staying in one location.

**High wanderlust.** Some informants felt immense wanderlust, meaning they felt an extremely strong, almost intrinsic compulsion to travel. Informants with high wanderlust described their desire for mobility in visceral language. For instance, Andy described wanderlust in terms of addiction and craving:

> It's really hard to wake up and realize I'm not going to have my mind blown today … I would equate it to an addictive drug. You're trying to get that high again … but you build up a tolerance for all this beauty … [It's a] pretty small time window before we start looking for the next place. We don't make it through a full season in the desert before we start craving somewhere else.

Similarly, Mitchell explained that craving travel was part of his personality, saying, "I crave it I crave it now… Digital nomads have the flexibility to have that crazy adventurous trip if they want to live again … it comes back to what your personality type is and what you crave."

Essentially, these informants had an incredibly strong desire to be mobile.

**Interpreting placefulness as confining and boring.** Informants with high wanderlust interpreted placefulness as wholly negative, describing it as confining and boring. Themes of confinement surfaced as many described placefulness in terms of feeling trapped or stuck. This was evident in Michael's description of how he felt in a familiar location: "I just felt caged. And I felt limited. And I felt like I was not free." Sarah said,

> Whenever I feel like I've been somewhere too long, I do get this feeling of [being] stuck… I wish I could meet people or see new things or have a refresh. It really refreshes your view on life when you change your environment and the different people that you're talking to each day. That is what I really cherish about traveling and so traveling and working in that way.

Informants with high wanderlust also interpreted placefulness as "boring" or "stagnant." For example, Timmy explained how the boredom of lacking novelty and challenge indicated that he overstayed in one location:

> It's basically how much newness is still happening. Is the challenge over? Like, the first month in China, there's not a language, there's not a letter on the sign, there's not a sound or a gesture that is familiar. There's nothing to hold on to. Absolutely everything is different in your world … Then you figure it out. And then after a while … you are in your comfort zone. And then after that you're bored. Whenever it's not challenging anymore is when you move on.

Likewise, Meredith felt stagnant in one location, saying,

> When we first came to Mexico we were in Cancun, then we went to Playa Del Carmen. I had time to come here to Sweden and spend some time here. We went to Belize, and then we settled down in Mexico City … It's hard for me to be stagnant … I'm never happy just being still. I think motion creates emotion, so I'm trying to move and experience the world so I don't get bored.

For informants with high wanderlust, the confinement and boredom inherent to placefulness made them want to leave their current location. Indeed, descriptions of wanting to leave a location are marked by a tone of urgency such that it almost seems that informants who were high in wanderlust needed to flee once they experienced placefulness. This was evident in

Mitchell's description of how it felt to be in a location for an extended period of time: "Now I'm feeling a little antsy. Now I gotta move. It's like I gotta move." James explained why he wanted to leave a location wherein he had developed placefulness, saying, "I was really actually feeling trapped. Like I needed to just break out and leave." Essentially, these informants felt that placefulness meant being tied down. Consequently, they attempted to avoid being connected to a location by uprooting to a new location, immersing themselves in placelessness once more. For some informants, this involved moving to a new city or a new country. For instance, Tommy initially road tripped from Maine to Mexico to California to Florida, and is now on a boat so he can travel to different ports easily. Other informants uprooted and accessed placelessness by changing their mode of transit, switching, for instance, from backpacking to vanlife or vanlife to living and working on a boat (i.e., boatlife). Ryan, who had done backpacking, boatlife, and vanlife, explained this flexibility:

> [I have] my boat and [I'll] buy a smaller one that's easier to sail … so I [have] a smaller one so I can travel more easily. Or I don't feel like traveling too much now, I'll just stay in this town for a few more weeks. Or staying in is getting old, I'll buy a van now. Or van is fun, but I'd like a little bit more space and I don't like driving every day, so how about a yurt. Yurt sounds fun. No, let's go with a truck, okay.

In all, informants with high wanderlust leveraged uprooting to escape feeling confined and bored and by uprooting, informants were able to access placelessness once again, beginning the cycle anew. Over episodes of this cycle, informants iterated between placelessness and placefulness by engaging in work placemaking and nonwork adventuring when they arrived which led to placefulness, and then uprooting in search of placelessness once more.

**Place Integration**

Not all informants interpreted placefulness as uniformly negative. For some, placefulness was an ambivalent experience, which prompted a different response than place iteration. In

particular, while continuing to be mobile, these informants synthesized the benefits of placefulness and placelessness via *place integration*.

**Moderate wanderlust.** In contrast to the high wanderlust described by some informants, others described what we came to understand as *moderate wanderlust*. These informants still harbored a desire for mobility, but contrary to those who described this longing using intense, visceral language (i.e., addiction, craving), these informants explained their desire for travel in more tempered ways like having gotten "a bite from the travel bug" (Diana). John expressed, "I decided that I don't want to live in a single place for a long time and I like to have this opportunity to see the world, to meet different people and have different experiences." Although these informants had a substantial desire to travel, they did not describe this desire in the same extreme and almost compulsive ways as high wanderlust informants.

**Interpreting placefulness as confining and comforting.** Like those with high wanderlust, informants with moderate wanderlust also found placefulness confining. For example, Megan explained "I felt a bit stuck and suffocated." Like Megan, Donnie described that he "felt confined … it really just felt like claustrophobic."

However, unlike those with high wanderlust, informants with moderate wanderlust also described the experience of placefulness as comforting. Ashley had recently developed placefulness in her current city and said, "It's just more comfortable. … I love traveling and I love being adventurous and crazy. I still need that comfort level at some point in time." Similarly, Evelyn explained, "You're very secure. You know where you're going to go to sleep every night, you know you've got showers, you've got clothes, you've got anything [you need]." Megan summarized this sentiment saying, "There's a comfort in knowing what to expect." Explaining why he had a positive interpretation of being in a location for an extended period of

time, David said, “It sounds silly, but just a familiar bed to sleep in or a neighborhood that I know very well and I can come back and I can say I just know where everything is.”

Essentially, while those with high wanderlust interpreted placefulness as entirely negative, those with moderate wanderlust interpreted it ambivalently. Heather articulated this duality:

> You build a little circle of friends in that place. Going to the gym or going to the nearby grocery store, whatever it is, you get comfortable. And so it’s always this desire to travel on the one hand and then the comfort that you create being in one place [on the other].”

As such, for informants with moderate wanderlust, the ambivalence of their interpretation of placefulness motivated them to find more stable ways to experience both placefulness and placelessness than by iterating back and forth between the two. Matt explained:

> You want to develop a lifestyle—a long, a more permanent, location independent lifestyle. It’s not tenable to be traveling constantly for years for the rest of your life, in terms of moving daily, weekly, even monthly, really. Most people, the great majority of people find, including myself, that traveling can wear on you for so many reasons. All the planning that’s involved, the lack of routine, which then leads really leads to a severe lack in productivity if you’re not careful.

Robbie asked himself: “How do you make it sustainable? What are you doing and what do you need to change to make it be something that is viable? Where you continue doing what you want to do four years from now?” In other words, these informants uprooted in search of balance between placelessness and placefulness.

**Mobile placemaking.** Informants with moderate wanderlust still enjoyed travel. For example, Amy explained, “[I’ve recently been to] Chiang Mai … India … New York … [changing locations] allows you to live life to the fullest.” Informants also did not want to be confined to a location that was too familiar. Amelia explained, “I always joke and say, ‘As soon as I have to stop using my GPS to get around, then I know it’s time to go.’” As such, they also continued to uproot. However, informants with moderate wanderlust uprooted in search of

balance that would allow them to experience the freedoms of placelessness and the comfort of placefulness.

As they traveled, these individuals engaged in *mobile placemaking*—a form of placemaking based on engaging in mobility in ways that integrate the comfort that comes from placefulness with the freedom that comes from placelessness.

*Making comfort portable.* Informants integrated elements of comfort into their mobility by making comfort-related aspects of their lives portable. One way they accomplished this was by developing a work placemaking plan that could be applied across locations to expedite the work placemaking process. For example, to make work placemaking more efficient, Robbie shared how he eventually figured out that he needed to find a coffee shop that was going to be predictable across multiple locations:

> I hated trying to find a new coffee shop in each new city that I went to … There's Starbucks everywhere around the world … Starbucks is the perfect office for me. Somewhere where I don't have to have a coworking space, I don't have to pay for something. I know the layout. I know that it's set up like an office … That has been a huge part of my life. In fact, so much so that even now back in the States, I love to go just to a Starbucks and work. That is my office.

Like Robbie, Becky figured out the elements of her work environment that made her comfortable and effective, saying, "I realized I need a coworking [space]. I need even a private room in the coworking [space], if that's an option." By minimizing placemaking administration, informants made it easier to be comfortable, even in a new location. Amelia described how minimizing placemaking administration enabled her to settle more quickly, saying, "I settle in a lot faster now because I just know once I unzip the compression bags, I'm like, 'Okay, I'm home.'"

Another way informants made comfort portable was by selectively gathering objects that facilitated comfort as they moved. For instance, Rachel described how the objects she brought with her gave her comfort:

> We have three unnecessary comfort items that we've been bringing with us. Like this pashmina means a lot to me … so I'll use it to like do yoga and meditate or just have it out. We have a Google Home, which might sound kind of weird, but we would say, "Play rain sounds," or, "Play music," and that [audio] was just something from home. The third item was a little bit of Tennessee—the Homesick candles. It was nice to just feel normal. [Be] in this Airbnb, light a candle and have little things that we don't really need to bring just to feel comfortable.

Diana similarly explained how certain objects brought comfort while mobile:

> I have a weighted blanket. I've got my eye mask. I've got my headphones that I listen to and I listen to Harry Potter. I've been listening to the same Harry Potter audiobooks for the last 10 years, but it's the habit I can take with me even though my environment is constantly changing. So, in a way, it's the constant of having all of the things that make me comfortable, but I can still go out and do all these other things.

For vanlifers, RVers, and boatlifers, having their home with them everywhere they went was associated with a sense of continuity. Nicole explained how the efforts she made to craft her van fostered comfort, saying:

> I feel like we have "home" in the van. It's like a protected safe space where you know that it's yours … It's a space where you belong more than anyone else. In our mind was that all the [cities] that we were, we didn't necessarily belong. We were actually entering someone else's space … But then at the end of the day, we could always return to this space that was ours and we belonged in that space. I still feel like that when we go into our van. Like even the smell is the same.

In other words, despite constantly traveling, having her home be a van that could travel from location to location provided Nicole with comfort. Similarly, Nancy shared, "It's really amazing to be able to go see new places and adventure and have the familiarity of knowing that you're going back to your own bed and your own home and your animal is there." In essence, informants can bring their house with them to multiple locations.

Informants also made comfort portable by traveling with others. Some nomads were traveling with partners, whose constant presence provided comfort. For instance, Joe shared how traveling with his wife provided certainty, saying, "It's definitely sticking together year-round for the long-term …You just have this certainty that you're sticking by each other's side."

Likewise, Ashley shared how traveling with her partner provided consistency, saying, “Having people in your life that are consistent is really important for your mental sanity. Even nomadic people way back in the day were traveling together. They weren’t alone. I had my boyfriend.”

Other informants used relationships with fellow travelers to provide them with a sense of placefulness across locations. For example, Charlie explained how he had seen groups of friends who would travel from location to location together: “You’re choosing your neighbors or choosing your neighborhood. And you can choose it for a day or a week or a month. Some people travel together for months.” Similarly, John shared how he intentionally cultivated a virtual community that he could connect with no matter where he was located: “I started to gain [an] international network of friends and colleagues … I started to participate in those Facebook or Slack communities.” Emily summarized the role of these social ties that traveled across locations, saying, “We have each other, and that continuity makes the chaos manageable.”

*Making freedom grounded*. Informants also found ways to feel freedom even in familiar locations. One method was making uprooting more efficient, which helped them feel free in familiar locations because they knew leaving was an easily accessible option. For example, Steph did not need to do as much research before moving if she had fewer items:

> People online will tell you, “Before you move somewhere, you’ve got to research and all this stuff.” But the way we move, we brought a suitcase each, a backpack each. Really, when you move like that, you don’t need to do too much research.

Similarly, Martin explained how he used to carry large suitcases and questioned if lugging them around made moving cumbersome, asking, “Is [having so many bags] really going to be sustainable for a long period of time?” His luggage now consists of a medium suitcase and duffel bag, saying, “I would love to downsize to something like a carry-on, something even smaller.” As such, even in familiar locations, informants felt free because they could easily relocate.

Another way that informants made freedom grounded was occasionally altering their travel itinerary to return to familiar locations or slow down their pace of travel. Ashley explained, "I knew I needed to slow down because I was feeling very empty and exhausted. All the travel is great and stimulating, but I was starting to resent travel because I missed having a bit more of routine." Like Ashley, Gemma also slowed her pace over time:

> We went really quick when we started, because we were excited … We would work during the week and then move every Saturday, and my husband told me, "I'm going to burn out if we keep doing this, so we have to find something else." So we ended up moving every two weeks, so that we would have a full weekend in between to do whatever we wanted to.

For Gemma and her husband, slowing down similarly provided a chance to rest and explore the area they were in.

At first blush, one might assume returning to familiar locations or staying in one location for longer would make informants feel confined. However, informants saw these decisions as freeing because it was their choice to slow down. As Robbie explained:

> If you are allowed to do something, then you're okay staying in one place, because you still feel like, 'Hey, tomorrow if I wanted to, I could [leave] … I like this place, but nobody's telling me I have to be here.' This is the difference between business travel and regular travel. [With] business travel, somebody's telling me where to go, how long I have to stay, be in this hotel, go there. That's not the same as me saying, "I want to go here, here's what I want to do.' I know I still have to work. I'm still doing the same things, but I get to choose what to do. It's a huge, huge difference.

For some informants, this meant returning to a familiar location instead of going to a new location every time they relocated. David explained how returning to a location where he had already developed connections helped provide a sense of placefulness when he needed it:

> That mental exhaustion of having to adjust to a new place all the time became too much and that's why I had to stop and get a base even though I still travel … It's just less thought I have to do. It's just very nice to come back to [this city] and my brain doesn't have to think of all these things and it can actually just focus on normal stuff or actually not think for a bit and just chill. As opposed to having to go through the whole checklist of all the things I now need to figure out every time I land somewhere.

Like David, Kim described how returning to a location provided a dose of familiarity, saying, "It helps if you go back to a certain place. It's not only the logistics and stuff, it's like you're also familiar with their culture and the social aspects of life."

**Balancing placelessness and placefulness.** By integrating the desirable aspects of placelessness and placefulness—freedom and comfort—informants with moderate wanderlust were able to achieve the balance that they sought in uprooting. As these informants engaged in mobile placemaking over time and across locations, they began to perceive that their mobile placemaking efforts gave rise to a sense of *balance* between the placelessness and placefulness, regardless of their location. Informants described how, via mobile placemaking, they were able to achieve a balance that resolved the tensions caused by mobility. For example, Matt explained how mobile placemaking enabled him to stay balanced and leverage mobility to maintain the connections that he wanted:

> I try to find a balance. I think about what's important to me, what kind of relations are important to me. I have a really strong relation with a place. The place is Japan … But it's not like I like to visit Japan because of my relationships with people there … My great friends are in Australia … I have a cycle of going to Australia to foster my relations with friends, then I go to Japan to foster my relation with the place, and build my cycle that way around things that I like to have connections with.

Similarly, Joe explained how experiencing mobility and familiarity enabled him to find balance:

> [Returning to my office periodically] brought that sense of balance every four months, compared to just being solely on this journey on the road remotely. And I think every traveler will tell you at the end of the day it comes down to balance. Everybody loves being away in nature, but they also love coming and getting back to a store, going out to a meal, or coming back to their comforts, families, theaters. There's something about it that having a balance is the key to all of it. It's like everything.

Finally, David explained how discovering balance through mobile placemaking solved tension between mobility and work:

> I didn't see that there was any way to combine the two [mobility and work]. I just thought

> it was one or the other. And so that got me all confused until I pretty much realized that that's not the case because I don't need to be one, I don't need to be the other. This is just my life. It's just my life. I live it how I want and I can take the best of both worlds and put it together and there's nothing stopping me from doing that.

In essence, mobile placemaking showed informants that perceptions of placelessness or placefulness did not need to be based solely on the degree to which they had meaningful connections to their immediate physical location. This represented a key shift in how informants came to perceive placefulness or placelessness: rather than only deriving this perception from their immediate physical surroundings, they derived this perception from the comfort they made portable and the freedom they made grounded. This shift was reflected in Jen's description of a digital nomad mindset:

> Being a digital nomad is a mindset. And it's a just potential lifestyle or theory of living. It doesn't necessarily mean that you have to be on an island in Thailand living out of a backpack. Like if you can live anywhere in theory, and you have the mindset that you can go anywhere you want at any time, that to me is being a digital nomad.

In all, whether informants were in a new location or familiar location began to matter less for whether they felt placelessness or placefulness, and they were able to be mobile and maintain a balance between placelessness and placefulness concurrently. This is evident in Bree's description of what she loves most about being a digital nomad:

> Just the enjoyment of waking up in the morning and opening my eyes and really loving wherever I've parked … There's something magical about seeing sunrises and sunsets in all these different parts of the country, and seeing all the different topography, seeing all the different wildlife, and the trees, whatever grows. I like that change while still being in my home. I need to get that sticker made for the back of my trailer that says, "No matter where I roam, I'm already home."

## DISCUSSION

Our qualitative analysis yielded a model, presented in Figure 1, of how digital nomads navigate the *mobile worker paradox*—the tension wherein mobility is desired but contingent on the ability to work effectively, an ability which is thwarted by the deleterious effects of mobility

on workers' sense of place. We posit that mobile workers experience placelessness when they arrive at their first new destination, an experience characterized by them both enjoying freedom and feeling burdened by lack of structure. In response to this experience, these workers engage in nonwork adventuring and work placemaking, respectively, actions which lead them to experience the opposite of placelessness—placefulness.

From here, the experiences of mobile workers diverge. Depicted on the left side of Figure 1 is *place iteration*, a process in which digital nomads oscillate between placelessness and placefulness, with placelessness driving them to build connections to a location via work placemaking and nonwork adventuring, and placefulness driving them to sever those connections via uprooting in search of placelessness. This repeated iteration between placelessness and placefulness addresses the mobile worker paradox because workers can be both mobile via repeated uprooting and effective at work via work placemaking in each location. Essentially, place iterators navigate the mobile worker paradox with agility, such that when they experience placefulness, they can quickly uproot to experience placelessness, and when they experience placelessness, work placemaking enables them stay productive. In this way, the problems presented by the paradox are only experienced in short bursts, which enables the worker to continue in their mobility without being overcome by its challenges. This is an approach to navigating paradox by *escaping tension via iteration*.

Depicted on the right side of Figure 1 is *place integration*, a process in which, rather than uprooting to seek placelessness, digital nomads uproot to seek balance. Specifically, they integrate the freedom of placelessness and comfort of placefulness via mobile placemaking. These individuals navigate the mobile worker paradox by making comfort portable and making freedom grounded, ultimately balancing placelessness and placefulness. In other words, place

integrators reduce the tensions of the paradox by engaging in behaviors that allow them to blend elements of placelessness and placefulness across locations. By reducing these tensions, place integrators can remain mobile without repeatedly being subject to the challenges presented by placefulness and placelessness. This approach represents a lasting solution to the mobile worker paradox by *minimizing tension via integration*.

The identification of these dual processes prompts a key question: What determines which process digital nomads use to navigate the mobile worker paradox? As displayed in Figure 1, we theorize that digital nomads' degree of wanderlust determines how they interpret placefulness and thus, whether they engage in place iteration versus integration. Wanderlust has mostly been studied in the tourism and hospitality literature and generally refers to an individual difference reflecting a desire to explore the world, seek adventure, and experience novelty (Irimiás and Zoltán Mitev, 2023; Mokhtarian, Saloman, and Redmond, 2001). The desire associated with wanderlust can be satisfied by novelty of new destinations and exoticness of the mode of travel (Vogt, 1976). Perhaps unsurprisingly then, wanderlust arises from frequency of prior travel and predicts future travel (Shields, 2011), and such travel facilitate personal benefits such as life satisfaction, subjective well-being, personal growth, and life skills (Stone and Petrick, 2017; Wang, 2017; Sthapit, Björk, and Coudounaris, 2023).

In our study, those high in wanderlust interpreted placefulness as wholly negative, feeling bored and confined by it, driving them to uproot into placelessness once again (i.e., place iteration). However, those with moderate wanderlust interpreted placefulness with ambivalence, experiencing confinement alongside comfort, which drove them to synthesize placefulness and placelessness (i.e., place integration). Of note, digital nomads in our sample did not experience what would be considered low wanderlust; they still harbored considerable desire to explore and

travel. However, this desire for travel among those with moderate wanderlust was notably lower than those with high wanderlust, for whom the desire to be mobile was exceptionally elevated. A key insight from identifying high versus moderate wanderlust as the mechanism that drives place iteration or integration is that there is no one best path *per se*; rather, both represent effective ways to navigate the mobile worker paradox over time and across locations.

## Theoretical Contributions

In theorizing how digital nomads navigate the mobile worker paradox, this study meaningfully contributes to our understanding of the tension between mobility and place that mobile workers experience. Specifically, we contribute to the literature on place and mobility at work, paradox in organizational settings, and flexible work arrangements.

**Place and mobility at work.** The primary contribution of our work is developing a theory explaining how the tension that lies at the intersection of a sense of place, mobility, and work effectiveness is resolved. Within the processes of place iteration and place integration, our theorizing identifies the ways that digital nomads interpret placelessness and placefulness, and the placemaking and uprooting behaviors they enact in response to them as they navigate the mobile worker paradox.

*Placelessness as freeing*. Our theorizing indicates that placelessness is more complex and multivalent than previously conceptualized. Upon moving to a new location, the digital nomads we studied experienced the unpleasant side of placelessness that the place literature has long associated with mobility (Bonaiuto, Breakwell, and Cano, 1996; Speller, Lyons, and Twigger-Ross, 2002; McKinzie, 2019). In the case of digital nomads, these burdens included administrative headaches, murky boundaries, and social isolation. However, in tandem with these downsides, placelessness, by virtue of its inherent lack of meaningful attachments to a

location, gave digital nomads a sense of freedom that they experienced positively. Indeed, the freedom that came from not having an established sense of place exerted a fairly constant pull on many digital nomads, contributing to their desire for mobility. By discovering a bright side of placelessness, one that can exert a strong effect on some individuals, we provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics involved in placelessness.

*Placefulness interpreted as boring and confining*. Our theorizing also opens a window into a more complex characterization of a strong sense of place (i.e., placefulness)—one that can be negative or ambivalent. In alignment with the notion in the place literature that a sense of place is "assumed to be a good thing" (Lewicka, 2011: 218), we found that digital nomads with moderate wanderlust experienced placefulness as comforting. At the same time, they and the other digital nomads in our sample also associated placefulness with the feeling of being constrained. Moreover, those with high wanderlust further found placefulness downright boring. That some workers experience a sense of place so negatively challenges the assumption that a deep sense of place is a good thing and indicates that how people experience placefulness is shaped by a number of individual and situational factors.

*Placemaking as multidimensional*. Traditionally, placemaking has been viewed as a set of actions that facilitate meaningful connections between people and their physical environment (Relph, 1976). Our findings extend the usefulness of placemaking as a construct by highlighting how it is enacted in and across contexts. First, we discovered how work placemaking gave digital nomads that ability to engage in another form of placemaking outside of work: nonwork adventuring. In doing so, we break new ground in our understanding of placemaking by showing how its enactment in one domain can affect its prevalence in another domain. Second, we identified a form of placemaking that digital nomads used across locations (i.e., mobile

placemaking) that shaped their overarching experiences with and perceptions of placefulness and placelessness. Mobile placemaking diverges from the existing conceptualization of placemaking (a one-to-one process between a person and their immediate physical location) in that it builds across locations (a one-to-many process between a person and multiple locations). We believe this insight represents a meaningful step toward a more comprehensive understanding of the nature and consequences of placemaking for mobile workers.

*Worker-led placemaking*. The organizational literature has begun to position placemaking in work settings as a joint effort between firms and workers, with firms typically leading the process (Ashforth, Caza, and Meister, 2024; Crosina, 2024). While emerging research has highlighted how independent workers can lead the charge in creating holding spaces for identity work (Petriglieri, Ashford, and Wrzesniewski, 2019), how these efforts impact a sense of place and are used to strengthen (e.g., work placemaking) or sever connection (e.g., uprooting) to a physical location is unclear. Our theorizing, which proposes that some workers repeatedly create a sense of place in the new locations to which they travel, challenges the notion that organizations play a necessary role in placemaking. Indeed, the work placemaking we observed in a given location and the mobile placemaking we observed across locations were initiated and executed by digital nomads who typically had little or no organizational support in doing so. Although we observed this worker-led placemaking among a sample of digital nomads, it stands to reason that it occurs in other work settings where organizational support for placemaking is constrained (e.g., home offices). As such, our findings shift our understanding of the "who" behind placemaking at work from an organization-led collaboration between firm and worker to a process that occurs even in the absence of organizational support.

**Paradox**. Broadly, a paradox represents "persistent contradictions between interrelated

elements" (Schad et al., 2016: 6). In the organizational sciences, scholars have advanced theory on several fronts that captures the ways in which organizations and workers navigate the various paradoxes they face (Lewis and Smith, 2022). In theorizing two processes through which digital nomads navigate the mobile worker paradox, our model deepens and extends this body of knowledge on work-relevant paradoxes, and how workers navigate them. First, we explicitly name and define the mobile worker paradox—the contradiction between the interrelated elements of mobility and work, such that mobility requires minimal connection to place, but is dependent upon the worker's continued ability to work, which requires some semblance of connection to place. In identifying and articulating the mobile work paradox, we open up a new line of inquiry in paradox theory that is centered around the tensions that mobile workers face.

Second, one approach to navigating paradox is by persistent iteration between paradoxical elements over time (Smith and Lewis, 2011), termed the *temporal separation* approach in prior studies (Poole and Ven de Ven, 1989). Until now, this has mostly surfaced in *organization*-level studies on paradox as ambidexterity, change, or innovation (Schad et al. 2016), possibly because organizations, more than workers, have historically had the discretion to have agile responses to their environments (Duncan, 1976; Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997; Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004). Our study reveals that individuals can also engage in place iteration, escaping the tensions of the mobile worker paradox by nimbly switching back and forth between placelessness and placefulness over time. Digital nomads, with their extreme discretion over where they work, are uniquely positioned to do just that. As such, we contribute to the paradox literature by demonstrating temporal separation as an individual approach to navigating paradox.

Similarly, the paradox literature has outlined a synthesis approach to navigating paradox, traditionally conceptualized as resolving a paradox by bringing in new perspectives or ideas that

reduce the tension or alter the paradox in a way that it is no longer paradoxical (Poole and Ven de Ven, 1989). Alternatively, place integrators minimize the tension of the mobile worker paradox by fusing the contradictory concepts that underlie it via mobile placemaking. In this way, the paradox is addressed when digital nomads integrate its two sides, diminishing the tension rather than simply escaping it. We thus expand upon the synthesis approach by showing that synthesis can, via mobility, occur by engaging in behaviors that synthesize the two poles of the paradox, instead of bringing in totally new perspectives or ideas.

Finally, by theorizing place iteration and place integration as ways that digital nomads navigate the mobile worker paradox, we answer calls to advance the paradox literature by further explaining "the how, when, and why of managing paradox" (Sparr et al., 2022: 27). In particular, by focusing on how workers solve the mobile worker paradox, we shed light on the psychological processes (i.e., microfoundations) involved in navigating paradoxes. Such insights are meaningful given that the preponderance of paradox research has focused on its presence at the organizational level (Schad et al., 2016). Regarding these microfoundations, we propose that wanderlust is a key individual difference that drives how one approaches navigating the mobile worker paradox. Different levels of motivating factors relevant to the paradox (in this case, wanderlust) can act as a switch that determines how they approach the paradox. Alongside recent research that has highlighted how surface-level individual differences shape how people attempt to solve work-related paradoxes (e.g., gender underlying the equity paradox; Conzon, 2023), our findings show that more malleable, values- and motivation-based individual differences are necessary to consider as well.

**Flexible work arrangements**. Research on the role of place in organizations and its effects on employees has largely been developed under the assumption that workplaces exist

within the physical boundaries of organizations (Milligan, 1998; Elsbach, 2003; Lew, 2017). However, increasingly prevalent flexible work arrangements require or allow employees to work outside of the organization's physical footprint, often in spaces not necessarily designed for work (Spreitzer, Cameron, and Garrett, 2017; Malhotra, 2021). Organizational leaders have questioned or criticized people's ability to work effectively from various remote locations (Bloom et al., 2023; Elliott, 2024) and used such doubt as motivation for demanding that their employees work at stationary co-located offices (Datta, 2022; Sherman and Whitten, 2023). By describing the mobile worker paradox and theorizing two paths through which digital nomads navigate it, our model sheds light on the black box at the intersection of mobility and work. In doing so, we extend our conceptual knowledge of the dynamics and consequences of flexible work design, ranging from the high levels of flexibility exercised by digital nomads to the more moderate forms of flexibility afforded by hybrid work arrangements. From a practical perspective, this understanding should be useful to leaders seeking to maximize the benefits of work arrangements that incorporate mobility while minimizing the disruption that mobility and its accompanying placelessness can have on work.

**Transferability and an Agenda for Future Research**

Our research lays the theoretical groundwork for future research on the dynamics and implications of this paradox for both digital nomads and for all workers, regardless of their ability to enact mobility.

**How do hybrid workers experience and navigate the mobile worker paradox?**

Because our informants represent an extreme group of workers in that they work outside of physical organizational boundaries, their desire for mobility was enacted by repeatedly choosing to move from one location to another. However, for most workers who have high or moderate

wanderlust, it is likely unfeasible to become digital nomads. Nevertheless, these workers likely still experience the mobile worker paradox and enact their mobility in more limited ways (e.g., taking an afternoon to work from a local park that they have never visited)—ways that still necessitate placemaking. We can imagine place iteration and place integration unfolding as workers exercise flexibility to access the freedom of placelessness, moving between open office spaces, home offices, coffee shops, coworking facilities, city parks, and vacation rentals. However, the work placemaking, nonwork adventuring, and mobile placemaking activities likely differ for workers who are less mobile compared to digital nomads such as hybrid workers who are part-time in an office and part-time out of the office. Thus, there is an opportunity for future research to examine how the mobile worker paradox and its corresponding processes manifest for workers who are not digital nomads, yet yearn to be mobile and enact mobility into their work. Doing so would deepen the theoretical conceptualization of worker mobility and illuminate potential constraints faced by these workers that do not surface for digital nomads. Thus, examining placemaking among all types of workers, especially those with some flexibility to enact mobility, represents a compelling direction for future research.

In addition, our theorizing includes the assumption that mobile workers have high discretion over their mobility in terms of how frequently they move and where they move to. Yet, many workers in jobs with a high frequency of travel such as consultants, truck drivers, or home repair technicians, lack discretion over the where and when of their mobility. These workers likely experience mobility differently: rather than freedom (since they did not choose their mobility necessarily), being placeless may be experienced purely as a burden. How they engage in placemaking and experience a sense of place may be different than digital nomads. Thus, we encourage future research into the experience of mobile workers who have less

discretion over their mobility.

**How does wanderlust shape how workers experience their jobs and careers?** Our model identified wanderlust as the key determinant of how digital nomads interpret placefulness, and thus whether they navigate the mobile worker paradox via place iteration versus place integration. Despite its importance in this process, wanderlust has rarely been studied in organizational research. Given that mobile work has existed since the dawn of work and that its prevalence has grown rapidly over recent decades due to advances in technology, the dearth of research on this individual difference represents a significant oversight. We believe that now is the time to rectify this oversight, given that adjacent fields have developed conceptualizations and measures of wanderlust (e.g., Irimiás and Zoltán Mitev, 2023; Shields, 2011). Utilizing, adapting, and applying existing knowledge of wanderlust has the potential to provide new insights into what drives career changes, which workers are most affected by work arrangement changes, when mobility will most affect worker productivity, and the types of workers best suited for jobs that involve business travel. Such efforts could expand our knowledge of an individual difference that likely plays an important role in shaping the work experience of contemporary workers.

Additionally, the variation of wanderlust within our sample was constrained to its upper range, as informants reported either high or moderate wanderlust, with none describing low wanderlust. Clearly, to fully understand the role of wanderlust for workers, it should be studied in samples of workers that include those with low levels of this individual difference. Moreover, we assume that like many other individual differences (e.g., narcissism, Kausel et al., 2015), people likely hold both trait- and state-levels of wanderlust, with the former remaining stable over time while the latter fluctuates in response to stimuli (Tasselli, Kilduff, and Landis, 2018).

Crucially, our study did not capture changes in wanderlust among digital nomads over time. Indeed, it is possible that reductions in wanderlust might resolve the mobile worker paradox by diminishing the desire for mobility. However, the factors that would drive such changes in wanderlust, and their implications for how workers experience the mobile worker paradox, require additional theorizing and testing to establish. Addressing these issues could provide further insight into the role of wanderlust in the mobile worker paradox and whether, paradoxically, travel itself (and positive and negatives experiences within travel) might satisfy and ultimately reduce an independent worker's urge to keep traveling.

**What are the career implications of place iteration and integration?** For most digital nomads, becoming mobile workers is a career choice (Woldoff and Litchfield, 2021). Given that the mobile worker paradox often stems from a voluntary career choice, a question emerges as to the ultimate effects of this paradox on their careers. When studying the implications of worker decisions and actions on careers, management researchers have tended to focus on the concept of career success, conceptualized in two different ways—subjective and objective (Judge, Cable, Boudreau, and Bretz, 1995; Ng et al., 2005; Spurk, Hirschi, and Dries, 2019). Objective career success captures the extent to which one attains career accomplishments that are widely seen as markers of success in the eyes of others, such as salary raises and promotions. Subjective career success is perceptual, and refers to people's own satisfaction with what they accomplish in their career. When place iteration and integration are viewed through the lens of their potential effects on these two types of career success, some interesting and perhaps competing predictions emerge. On the one hand, it could be argued that because place iteration requires repeatedly dealing with the work-related inefficiencies associated with placelessness, that it would lead to lower levels of subjective and objective career success than place integration. However, it could

also be that because place iterators will travel to a greater number of locations than place integrators over their working lives, they are ultimately more satisfied with their careers as a result of doing so. Moreover, in jobs where performance is partly driven by factors such as cultural intelligence, the potentially higher and more varied cultural experiences accessed by place iterators may lead them to higher objective career success than place integrators. As these possibilities illustrate, there is an opportunity for future theoretical and empirical work on the linkages between the two processes for navigating the mobile worker paradox and career success. This research will also be of meaningful practical relevance, given that employee career success tends to relate to higher levels of organizational performance (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, and Barrick, 1999).

**Conclusion**

This paper challenges the notion that in the context of work, a sense of place and mobility are incompatible, and develops a theory of how mobile workers resolve the tensions between place and mobility as they relate to work. Our model proposes that this mobile worker paradox can be navigated either by repeatedly iterating between the extremes of placelessness and placefulness or by engaging in a mobile form of placemaking that spans across relocations. Critically, we theorize that both place iteration and place integration represent ways to address the mobile worker paradox and that high versus moderate wanderlust affects the key mechanism—how placefulness is interpreted—that determines why mobile workers utilize one solution versus the other. Overall, our work provides a foundation for future tests of the nature and consequences of how workers experience the tension between a sense of place and mobility inherent in jobs that have flexibility or variability in terms of where work is accomplished.

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# TABLES

## Table 1. Informant Information

| Pseudonym | Gender | Location during Interview | Travel Companions | Interviewed with partner? | Estimated Age | Current Occupation(s) | Employment Arrangement | Compensation | Years as Nomad | Modes of Travel | Travel Intensity | Wanderlust (High v. moderate) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| John | M | France | Partner and kid | N | 30 | Software developer | Organization | Salaried | 4 | Backpack | Months | Moderate |
| Michael | M | Mexico | Solo | | 35 | Marketing consultant | Freelance | Project-based | 7 | Backpack | Months | High |
| David | M | Spain | Solo | | 40 | Tour company founder | Entrepreneur | Salaried | 21 | Backpack | Months | Moderate |
| James | M | Serbia | Solo | | 25 | Sales | Organization | Project-based | 2 | Backpack | Months | High |
| Meredith | F | Sweden | Solo | | 40 | Strategic marketing, journalist, author | Freelance and entrepreneur | Salaried and pro | 0.5 | Backpack | Months | High |
| Robbie | M | Idaho | Solo | | 40 | Programmer | Organization | Project-based | 10 | Backpack | Months | Moderate |
| Jen | F | Miami | Solo | | 35 | Author, digital real estate, life coach | Entrepreneur and organization | Project-based | 8 | Backpack | Months | Moderate |
| William | M | Minnesota | Solo | | 30 | Web developer | Organization | Project-based | 1 | Backpack | Years | Moderate |
| Charlie | M | New Mexico | Partner | Y | 35 | Influencer, web developer | Freelance | Project-based | 3 | Van | Months | Moderate |
| Patricia | F | New Mexico | Partner | Y | 35 | Influencer, web developer | Freelance | Project-based | 3 | Van | Months | Moderate |
| Joe | M | California | Partner | N | 30 | Influencer, remote office manager | Organization and freelance | Salaried | 6 | Van | Days | Moderate |
| Tommy | M | Spain | Colleagues | N | 25 | Influencer | Freelance | Project-based | 5 | Boat; Van | Weeks | High |
| Dan | M | Germany | Solo | | 30 | Software developer | Organization | Project-based | 3 | Van | Weeks | Moderate |
| Matt | M | Puerto Rico | Solo | | 36 | Graduate student, web developer | Freelance | Project-based | 9 | Backpack; Motorcycle | Weeks | Moderate |
| Donnie | M | Mexico | Partner | Y | 40 | Fishing guide, house-sitter, web designer | Organization and freelance | Project-based | 7 | Backpack | Months | Moderate |
| Lizzie | F | Mexico | Partner | Y | 40 | House-sitter, remote teacher | Organization and freelance | Project-based | 7 | Backpack | Months | Moderate |
| Nancy | F | Idaho | Solo | | 30 | Influencer, temp worker | Organization and freelance | Project-based | 2 | Van | Days | Moderate |
| Ryan | M | Morocco | Solo | | 35 | Software developer | Organization | Project-based | 0.5 | Van; boat; backpack | Days | High |
| Andy | M | Washington | Partner | Y | 45 | Game design | Entrepreneur | Project-based | 10 | Boat; Van | Days | High |
| Michelle | F | Washington | Partner | Y | 45 | Graphic designer | Freelance | Project-based | 9 | Boat; Van | Days | High |
| Kim | F | Spain | Solo | | 30 | Programmer | Organization | Project-based | 7 | Backpack | Months | Moderate |
| George | M | California | Partner | Y | 35 | Online retail | Entrepreneur | Salaried | 7 | Van | Months | Moderate |
| Angie | F | California | Partner | Y | 35 | Public relations consultant | Organization | Project-based | 7 | Van | Months | Moderate |
| Brenda | F | Canada | Solo | | 30 | Freelance writing, social media marketing | Freelance | Project-based | 4 | Van | Weeks | High |
| Kenneth | M | Wisconsin | Solo | | 30 | Influencer, van builder | Freelance and entrepreneur | Project-based | 3 | Van | Weeks | High |
| Melissa | F | California | Partner | N | 30 | Marketing consultant | Entrepreneur | Project-based | 0.1 | Van | Weeks | Moderate |
| Amy | F | Hawaii | Partner | N | 40 | Non-profit director | Organization | Salaried | 5 | Backpack | Weeks | Moderate |
| Steven | M | France | Solo | | 30 | Programmer | Entrepreneur | Project-based | 4 | Backpack | Weeks | Moderate |
| Amanda | F | Michigan | Solo | | 28 | Social media marketing | Freelance | Project-based | 3 | Backpack | Months | Moderate |
| Lewis | M | France | Partner | Y | 25 | Remote teacher | Organization | Project-based | 3 | Backpack | Months | High |
| Steph | F | France | Partner | Y | 25 | Remote teacher | Organization | Project-based | 3 | Backpack | Months | Moderate |
| Laura | F | Georgia | Solo | | 30 | Writer | Freelance | Project-based | 3 | Backpack | Months | Moderate |
| Eddie | M | Texas | Partner | Y | 25 | Influencer | Freelance | Project-based | 3 | Van | Weeks | Moderate |
| Nicole | F | Texas | Partner | Y | 25 | Influencer | Freelance | Project-based | 3 | Van | Weeks | Moderate |
| Ashley | F | Texas | Solo | | 25 | Public policy | Organization | Project-based | 1 | Backpack | Months | Moderate |
| Mitchell | M | Canada | Solo | | 35 | Author, digital marketing | Freelance and entrepreneur | Project-based | 2 | Backpack | Months | High |

**Table 1. Informant Information (cont.)**

| Pseudonym | Gender | Location during Interview | Travel Companions | Interviewed with partner? | Estimated Age | Current Occupation(s) | Employment Arrangement | Compensation | Years as Nomad | Modes of Travel | Travel Intensity | Wanderlust (High v. tempered) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Christina | F | Singapore | Partner | N | 30 | Remote teacher, software developer | Organization | Salaried | 7 | Backpack | Months | Moderate |
| Sarah | F | New York | Partner | N | 30 | Author, non-profit manager | Organization | Salaried | 13 | Backpack | Months | High |
| Phillip | M | Wisconsin | Partner | Y | 45 | Author, influencer | Freelance | Project-based | 8 | Van; backpack | Days | High |
| Emily | F | Wisconsin | Partner | Y | 45 | Author, influencer | Freelance | Project-based | 8 | Van; backpack | Days | High |
| Heather | F | Germany | Solo | | 30 | Social media marketing | Freelance | Project-based | 2 | Backpack | Weeks | Moderate |
| Rich | M | New York | Solo | | 30 | Freelance writer | Freelance | Project-based | 4 | Backpack | Weeks | Moderate |
| Becky | F | California | Partner | N | 25 | Marketing consultant | Entrepreneur | Project-based | 1 | Backpack | Months | Moderate |
| Megan | F | New York | Solo | | 25 | Social media marketing | Entrepreneur | Project-based | 1 | Backpack | Months | Moderate |
| Adam | M | New Mexico | Partner | Y | 35 | Writer, influencer, photographer | Freelance | Project-based | 4 | Van | Days | High |
| Samantha | F | New Mexico | Partner | Y | 35 | Writer, influencer, photographer | Freelance | Project-based | 4 | Van | Days | High |
| Brittany | F | Michigan | Solo | | 25 | Remote social work | Organization | Salaried | 1 | Backpack | Weeks | Moderate |
| Teagan | F | California | Solo | | 25 | Social media marketing | Entrepreneur | Project-based | 2 | Backpack | Months | Moderate |
| Martin | M | Portugal | Partner | Y | 25 | Music producer | Organization | Project-based | 0.2 | Backpack | Months | High |
| Rachel | F | Portugal | Partner | Y | 25 | Copywriter | Organization | Salaried | 0.2 | Backpack | Months | Moderate |
| Timmy | M | London | Partner | N | 40 | Software engineer | Organization | Salaried | 10 | Backpack | Months | High |
| Amelia | F | Illinois | Solo | | 60 | Life coach | Entrepreneur | Project-based | 9 | Backpack | Months | Moderate |
| Dani | F | Florida | Partner | N | 35 | Accountant | Organization | Salaried | 4 | RV | Days | Moderate |
| Evelyn | F | Montana | Solo | | 30 | Project Manager | Organization | Salaried | 2 | RV | Days | Moderate |
| Gemma | F | Texas | Partner and kid | N | 40 | Social media management; blog | Freelance | Project-based | 11 | RV | Days | Moderate |
| Diana | F | Colorado | Friends | | 40 | Cybersecurity | Organization | Salaried | 2 | RV | Weeks | Moderate |
| Bree | F | Colorado | Solo | | 35 | UX designer | Freelance | Project-based | 3 | RV | Days | Moderate |
| Robin | F | Pennsylvania | Partner | N | 30 | Administrative assistant; breathing coach | Organization and freelance | Project-based | 4 | RV; Van | Days | Moderate |

**Table 2. Representative Quotes**

| Aggregate dimensions | Second-order themes | Representative quotes |
|---|---|---|
| Place Iteration | Experiencing placelessness | I have no idea the layout of the [place]. Even that amount of that control where people are just used to walking into their grocery store, they know where everything else. You don't get that. You get any sort of this routine, stability. (Nancy) |
| | | [Describing his arrival to a new location for the first time]: My first time in Mexico … I was completely disconnected. (Michael) |
| | Burdened by lack of structure | You think that you're going to be in an apartment with great Wi-Fi. Maybe it goes out and then you don't know who to call to get it going again. You're supposed to be on a call or something. This stuff happens all the time. … It's a little bit frustrating. (George) |
| | | You have to be disciplined because it's really easy to not want to work and get away with it because you don't have a boss going, "What the fuck are you doing?" (Patricia) |
| | Work placemaking | I've got a dedicated workspace—a desk in my van. (Diana) |
| | | I've had much better personal boundaries. I don't work on weekends. I don't work past 6pm … I don't work before certain times. (Christina) |
| | Enjoying freedom | [If you're like] "I don't want to work and I'd like to chill on the beach" … You can just close your laptop and just go to the beach. (John) |
| | | It means freedom. Freedom to do whatever the heck I want to do, and not waste my life working for other people. (Meredith) |

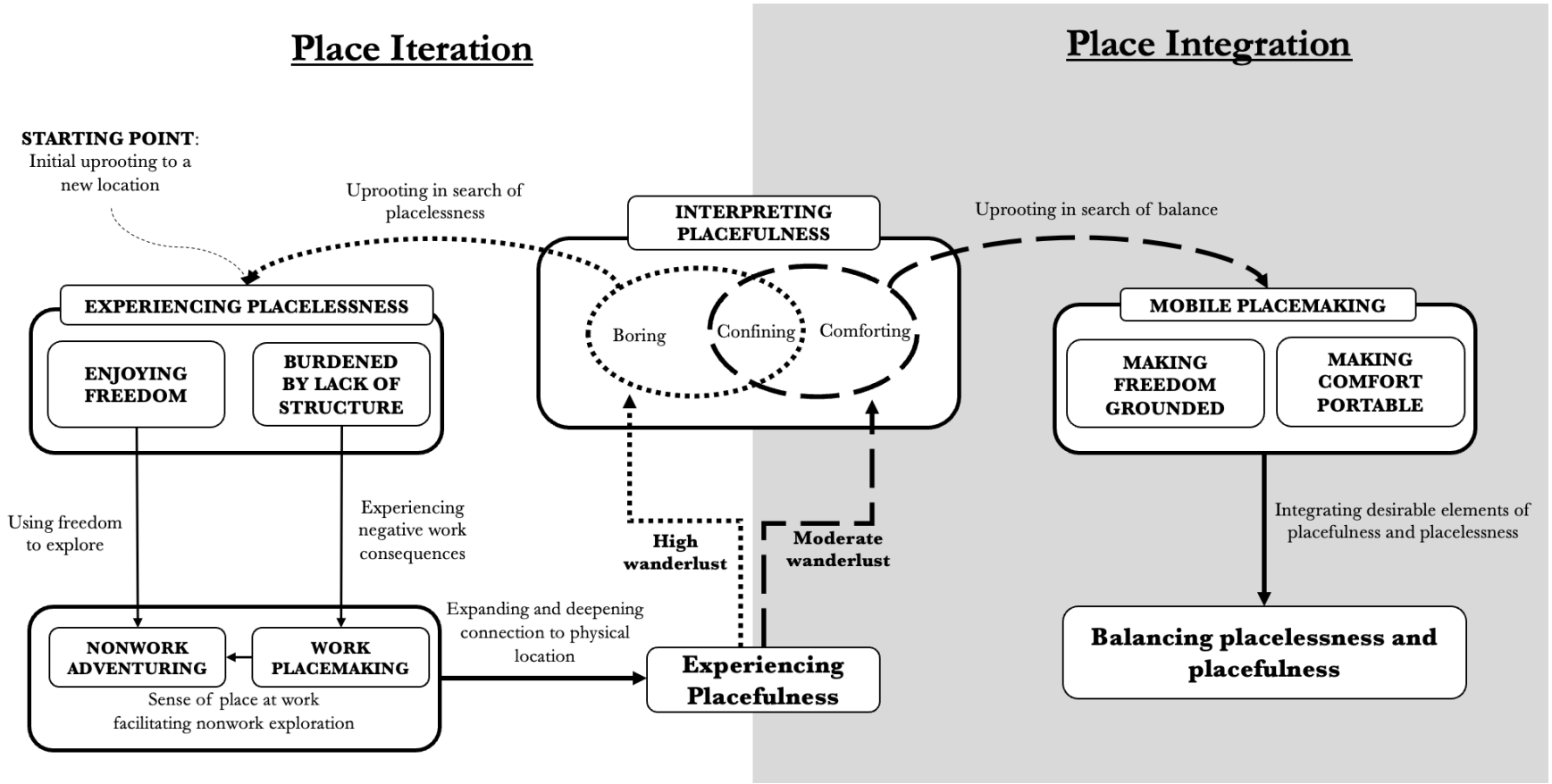
| Aggregate dimensions | Second-order themes | Representative quotes |
|---|---|---|
| | Nonwork adventuring | I think with traveling … [I] see like amazing, beautiful sides [of the world], and learn about different cultures and try different foods. (Amanda)<br><br>I do work, and let's say I figure out a problem … and I'm just super excited. Then I go out … to the [History] Museum, or I'll go to the [Art] Gallery and look at the art. That will get me in this incredible little zone and I'll feel great. Then that'll get me excited to go back to work. It's like this positive influence just building on each other … It's like this great rebound effect from going one to the other. I'll do something for work and I'll be excited about finishing a task or having something good at work, and then I'll feel okay that, "Oh, now I get to as a treat, I get to [do] whatever." (Robbie) |
| | High wanderlust | The more we do this, the more I crave that bit of change all the time. (Michelle)<br><br>We have become addicted to exploring. (Phillip) |
| | Experiencing placefulness | We stayed there in Mexico City for six weeks, I think it was. And then it became more familiar. (Meredith)<br><br>Colorado became home after a while … [the whole United States] started feeling stale to me. (James) |
| | Interpreting placefulness as confining | I think we're kind of experiencing [the trap] right now. We've been stuck in this marina … once we exceed two weeks in one spot, we start to get fidgety and then after three weeks, I think I get pretty darn cranky and hard to live with. It's just this underlying stress that just builds and builds and builds. (Andy)<br><br>My options kept feeling more and more limited. And that's what I mean when I say trapped. (James) |

| Aggregate dimensions | Second-order themes | Representative quotes |
|---|---|---|
| | Interpreting placefulness as boring | It's exhilarating. … [but then I feel] kind of bored. Like every day isn't as adventurous or as beautiful. (Lewis) |
| | | Constantly moving … putting yourself out in different areas of the world and different experiences … you don't stagnate. You don't get comfortable. (Kenneth) |
| Place Integration | Moderate wanderlust | A big component of [travel] is just our wanderlust. We just have a hard time letting the grass grow under our feet … We have a hard time staying in one place, and it's just who we are. (Gemma) |
| | | And I learned for myself, I do want travel to always be a part of my life, but the hardcore digital nomad lifestyle is not for me. (William) |
| | Interpreting placefulness as confining | I just didn't really want to be stuck anywhere, like anytime. (Heather) |
| | | [I would] get into it and learn everything about it … [but then] I didn't want to be stuck and trapped in that. (Michael) |
| | Interpreting placefulness as comforting | And I think that was probably the main ... the security and the comfort. You build up something and you create something that you're used to. (Amy) |
| | | When you [are in] a place that you already been before, it feels more homey to you or more familiar. (Kim) |
| | Making comfort portable | We can bring our house with us. (Charlie) |
| | | I found community on the road … I can show you. [Turns camera to point out of van window] The person I am dating is in that van. [Pans to another van] And that's a good friend of mine. I'm surrounded by my three closest people right now… [Traveling in a caravan,] you're in the same place, unified by doing the same thing. (Diana) |

| Aggregate dimensions | Second-order themes | Representative quotes |
|---|---|---|
| | Making freedom grounded | Eddie: The first year was like a breakneck pace of feeling obligated like, "Oh my God we'll never be back here," [but] the reality is there's always another thing …<br>Nicole: And probably the like last two years, we just slowed. Every memory is so tangible, I can go back and taste it, from smells and people everything because we committed [our] time and energy.<br><br>We moved into our Jeep Wrangler, and drove 2,000 miles through the interior of Mexico … then we went back to the States and we bought a 25 foot Winnebago. And that was like driving a big van. It was so easy to drive and that made a huge difference. And we started traveling a lot faster because it was just easier. The logistics weren't as hard. (Gemma) |
| | Balancing placelessness and placefulness | We'll just hang out in that spot … staying around one area, but you've got a whole world of possibility opening to you every day. Every day you could choose to go or stay or do something different and it makes every day into an adventure. (Charlie)<br><br>Now, I can develop my career, I can do what I want, which is travel, and I can save this incredible amount of money. I'm having my cake and eating it too. (Robbie) |

# FIGURES

**Figure 1. A Model of Navigating the Mobile Worker Paradox**



# APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

Introductions/Warm Up:
-First, what is your job? How did you decide to become a *(occupation)*?
-Can you share a bit about where you are currently?
-What does it mean to you to be a "digital nomad"?
-How do you describe being a "digital nomad" to others?
*-Can you tell us about your travel history? How important is travel to your life?*
*-What do you value in a career? How does your current work arrangement align with those values?*
*-Can you describe different types of digital nomads? If there are different types, why do you think there are different types?*
*-Are there any implicit rules to being a digital nomad?*
**-What are the lessons that those new to this lifestyle need to learn? Why are these important? How did you learn? What was the learning process like for you?**

Transition into Digital Nomadism:
*-How did you decide to become a digital nomad?*
*-How long did it take you to transition into the lifestyle?*
*-What, if anything, was unsatisfactory to you about life being becoming a digital nomad?*
-How, if at all, did you prepare to become a digital nomad? How did you communicate this to your supervisor, colleagues, or clients, if at all?

Being on the Road:
**-How often do you move from one location to another?**
**-What causes you to move?**
**-Has the frequency with which you move changed over time? If so, why? Do you see it changing again in the future?**
**-(If they mention homebase): What does a homebase mean to you? To have a homebase in some ways seems antithetical to being a digital nomad—do you agree? If so, how do you reconcile this tension?**
**-What are some of the most poignant memories of life on the road so far? Why do these stand out to you? (If the memory is not work-related): What are some of the most poignant work-related memories of life on the road so far? Why do these stand out to you?**
-In your opinion, what types of jobs are conducive to remote work? Are there particular people or personalities you see as well-suited for life as a remote worker? As a digital nomad? What is it about those people or personalities that make them well-suited for life as a remote worker or digital nomad?
*-Is there anyone in your life who applauds your lifestyle? If so, why? How does their applause affect you?*
*-Is there anyone in your life who criticizes your lifestyle? If so, why? How does their criticism affect you?*

Working from the Road:

**-What are the main downsides to being a digital nomad? How do you cope with or address those downsides? How did you figure out to address those downsides that way?**
**-How do you manage work from the road? How did you prepare to work from the road?**
**-What, if such a thing exists, does a typical day look like for you? How did you come up with the schedule/format?**
**-What does it mean to you to have a workplace on the road? Can you describe this place? Did it begin this way? If not, how and why did it evolve as it did? Is it still evolving?**
-How do you see your life and work evolving in the coming years?

Wrap Up
-Is there anything else you'd like to share?
-Is there anything that you've wanted to share today and haven't had a chance to?
-Are there any other digital nomads you know who may be interested in being interviewed? If so, would you be willing to share the recruitment email with them? Please keep in mind that you do not have to disclose that you participated in the course of sharing the recruitment email with them unless you choose to.

*Note*: Italicized questions played less of a role as the data collection process unfolded, while bolded questions played a more significant role.

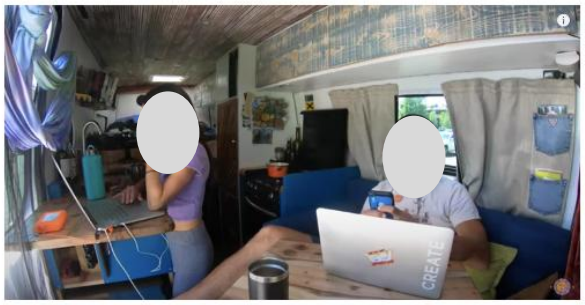
# APPENDIX B

Examples of the sensitizing data (used with permission of creators).

A digital nomad's laptop near a pool in Bali, Indonesia. *(Professionalizing space)*

A digital nomad works from her laptop overlooking a fjord in Iceland. *(Professionalizing space)*

A digital nomad works on her laptop from her van overlooking mountains. *(Professionalizing space)*



Two digital nomads work from their van. *(Professionalizing space)*


An informant shows "Do Not Disturb" signs used to project emergent workplace.