



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



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ABSTRACT

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

1. Introduction

This article is about *Airbnb* and the biopolitical dimension of its “sharing economies.” It is also an attempt to problematize the ways in which *Airbnb*’s rhetoric over community and hospitality incorporates ideas of home, place and life. Anyone roaming the Internet for tourism related purposes today is likely to be exposed to a vast array of smiling objectified bodies normally accompanied by inviting images of places. In tourism and on the websites through which tourism is displayed, promoted and organized, bodies and places are implicitly and explicitly linked to each other and often represent core elements in the production of meaning about a specific travel experience. Bodies are displayed, gendered, sexualized, racialized, trained and promised (Jordan, 2007; Jordan and Aitchison, 2008). The so-called “sharing economy”¹ of tourism is no exception to this. Accommodation rental platforms² like *Airbnb*, operate through expansive databases of hosting and guesting bodies engaged in the business of hospitality in their most intimate

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

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

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¹ In line with Frenken and Schor (2017: 4), we define the sharing economy as: “consumers granting each other temporary access to under-utilized physical assets (“idle capacity”), possibly for money”. The deployment of the term “sharing” to “sharewash” for-profit ventures like *Airbnb* has been criticised by Belk, 2017 and Ravenelle, 2017, among others.

² In this article, we use the terms “website” and “platform” as synonymous. However, this is not to suggest that they connote the same. Whereas a website may be defined as a set of related web pages located under a single domain name, the term platform has been used to describe companies that offer web 2.0 services and may additionally function as brokers in the exchange of, for example, services and labour. For a recent critique of the “platform” metaphor see Gillespie, 2017.

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

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

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

2.1. Reading the sharing economies of tourism

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

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

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

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

cities (Arias Sans and Quaglieri Domínguez, 2016; Cocola-Gant, 2016; Cocola-Gant and Pardo, 2017; Wachsmuth et al., 2018). This work shows how local and global governments are continuously challenged in adapting legal frameworks to grapple with issues that arise from the platform's practices, pertaining to tax evasion, licensing requirements, and gentrification, among others. While community groups and housing advocates in many Western cities have long been raising concerns on *Airbnb's* role in accelerating gentrification and the related displacement of residents, only recently have empirical studies been taking stock of *Airbnb's* presence *in* and impact *on* cities to inform future urban policy and planning (Gurran and Phibbs, 2017; Lee, 2016). Other critical work has examined social exclusion and racial discrimination on the platform, problematizing the acclaimed “open access” status of *Airbnb* (Edelmann et al., 2017). Bialski (2016), instead, shows how the *Airbnb* platform interface shapes a “regime of living” and how design elements and aesthetic regime affect the ways in which people and places are represented on the network and influence the practices of hospitality. Through the lens of “cultural capitalism”, O'Regan and Choe suggest that *Airbnb's* rhetoric around community and “sharing” has masked “the authoritarian-style social control that pits its users against socio-democratic consensus in communities with the pretence of setting them free from big government, over-regulation, and constraints on their freedom” (2017: 5). Reputational systems and background checks are named as just few of the many measures through which *Airbnb* exerts its power and ascribes to an ethos of *laissez-fair* platform capitalism. Cockayne claims, however, that whilst the “sharing” discourse underlying these emerging economies is highly contested and contradictory, it may also be “constitutive of the production of new sets of social meanings and collective structures of feeling [...]” (2016: 80). Along this line, Richardson describes the sharing economy as “a series of performances rather than a coherent set of economic practices” (2015: 127). The imagination of “community” as “a commons that might be shared in and out” (2015: 123) and something larger than the individual is vital in guiding the performances of the sharing economy. Among other empirical examples, Richardson refers to *Airbnb* to reflect on how performances of “sharing-through-community” largely rely on the platform's trust technologies and on how such technologies may both enable *and* obstruct “participation in community” by promoting only certain versions of trustworthiness (Richardson, 2015: 125).

Although rarely conceptualised, the notion of “community” appears throughout much of the abovementioned literature. The supposed underlying practices and constitutive elements of “community” in the sharing economies of tourism are manifold. In the context of *Couchsurfing*, for example, “reciprocity” (i.e. the obligation to compensate) seems intrinsic to hospitality and serves “as a contract that extends a binding moral code across the whole community” (Germann Molz, 2007: 67; also Chen, 2012; Lauterbach et al., 2009; Steylaerts and Dubhghail, 2012). “Trust”, as mentioned earlier, is a recurring concept that is proclaimed to set the “community marketplace” apart from impersonal, monetary market exchanges (Celata et al., 2017). The “sharing practices” that constitute a supposed community have also been placed under scrutiny. For example, Belk (2017: 249), citing the work of Bardhi and Eckhardt (2015), claims that sharing practices implying monetary compensation (referring to *Airbnb*, among other for-profit platforms) “do not build strong bonds or feelings of commonality”, whereas non-profit platforms based on general reciprocity tend to do so (see Roelofsen, 2018 for a rather different take on the relationalities produced through shared intimate spatialities of *Airbnb*). Belk also argues that sharing practices may foster a “great sense of community” depending on whether members are “sharing-in” (caring-based sharing within kinship and friendship groups) or “sharing-out” (the “sort of sharing” that is utilitarian-based and precludes intimate incorporation) (2017: 252).

Broadly inspired by this literature, we would like to take some of these critical reflections further and analyse the *Airbnb* platform in biopolitical terms. We do so by challenging in particular the ways in

which the *Airbnb* platform frames ideas of hospitality and community, and the related qualification and quantification of the digitized Self that are key to its workings.

2.2. Tourism and biopolitics

The notion of biopolitics and the “biopolitical turn” are at the core of many contemporary debates in the social sciences and the humanities but have been largely overlooked in tourism studies (on the biopolitical turn see, among others, Campbell and Sitze, 2013; Lemke, 2011). Incorporating all forms of politicization of life, biopolitics is presented by many as a form of sovereign power marked by the intention to manage people's lives and/or the very conceptualization of life (see, among others, Agamben, 1998; Rose, 2006). This rather negative understanding of biopolitics is often challenged by diverse presentations of “affirmative biopolitics,” where the biopolitical is recognized as an alternative domain of empowerment (see, among others, Berlant, 2011; Braidotti, 2015). What all these views share, despite their differences, is the recognition of the importance of biopolitics in the formation of new subjectivities and acknowledge Michel Foucault as the initiator of the contemporary academic interest in biopolitics. They also take into consideration new conceptualizations of the body and of “the human” in relation to the emergence of biotechnologies and the technological management of people's lives (on the so-called “biopolitical imperative” in geography see Minca, 2015).

As noted above, the literature on tourism and biopolitics is relatively scarce and sporadic (see Diken and Laustsen, 2004; Ek and Hultman, 2008; Lisle, 2016; Minca, 2009, 2011; Minca and Ong, 2016; Simpson, 2016; Sin and Minca, 2014; Veijola and Jokinen, 1994; Veijola and Valtonen, 2007). Despite the increasing “management of bodies” operated by the authorities and the industry on tourists and tourist workers, a full debate on this aspect remains to be developed. As mentioned above, in this article we aim at contributing to the existing literature by reflecting on the biopolitical dimension of the sharing economies of tourism, and how these affect ideas of home, community and hospitality. In previous work, we have explored the biopolitical in tourism by focussing on the tourist camp and on questions of health and body management in totalitarian regimes. On that occasion, we have claimed that a biopolitical understanding of tourism is essential to appreciate its contemporary attempts at redefining the threshold between real and imagined bodies, bodies at work and on display, often presented as if they were frozen in space and time (Minca, 2009). We have also reflected on the relationship between the biopolitical in tourism and the concept of community (Minca, 2011). The global travellers' interest in visiting “local” communities and collecting a wealth of “experiences” – it was suggested – reveal a desire for an unmediated contact with a practically infinite number of differentiated “hosts” and the penetration of a complex cultural “contact zone” (see Pratt, 1991), which may extend to other people's private space. Tourists have long been invited by the conventional tourist industry to penetrate these spaces, deal with “hosts” with no name or identity and attend performances of cultural essentialism. However, here we would like to take that reflection on the biopolitics of hosting further and investigate the broader implications of *Airbnb's* proposal to go far beyond this veil of anonymity by individualizing (and ranking) the heroic figure of the host. Both “guests” and “hosts,” in their encounters, are in fact placed by the platform in a putatively transparent cultural relationship based on trust and hospitality. In the *Airbnb* narrative, slogans inviting to penetrate these geographies of “local culture” refer to hypothetical real and trustworthy travellers entering a contact zone together with equally real and trustworthy “local” subjects. This is not just about sharing the traditional “local hospitality” by encountering the pre-packaged and stereotyped performances of selected local residents. What the *Airbnb* website promises is much more; it consists in providing the experience of unconventional travel by facilitating “hosts” in (literally) opening up their most intimate spaces, together with their neighbourhoods and

their cities, to strangers/guests; by introducing them to their “closest pals,” by inviting them to their favourite cafés or local lounges:

“When you stay in an *Airbnb*, you get more than a home. You get a neighbourhood. A city. The local coffee shop is yours, too. You’re not an outsider, a lonely tourist taking the same photos as countless others. Wherever you go with *Airbnb*, you live there. Even if it’s just for a night.”

Airbnb

The biopolitical operates on this platform in several important ways. The trope of authenticity marking the *Airbnb* rhetoric of global hospitality is accompanied by ethical hints related to the penetration of the living spaces of others. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has critically discussed “the process of becoming an ethnographic object,” often resulting in “the paradox of showing things that were never meant to be displayed, ‘exhibitions’ whether of objects or people, display of artefacts” (1998: 2). The sharing economies of tourism appear seriously affected by such a politics of display, “which not only compresses the life world, but also displaces it, thereby escalating the process by which a way of life becomes heritage” (1998: 7). People becoming part of the *Airbnb* global network tend in fact to “perform themselves” as hosts and/or guests: the hosts, in particular, are somewhat expected to act as local cultural mediators, read the local landscape for their guests, impersonate the typical “local resident.” But what is new here is that they are expected to do it in their homes, in their private spaces. What arguably emerges is a new geography produced by the proliferation of the new figure of tour-guide-resident. For *Airbnb*, the hosts’ daily lives are supposed to be exposed and “open” to the gaze of (reviewed and ranked) visitors who *actually penetrate* their most intimate spatialities. Life, the everyday life of individuals, is qualified and put into circulation via the platform. The bodies of hosts and guests, in the political economy of *Airbnb*, are thus at the same time a real-world referent and an abstraction: a biopolitical horizon where both are subject(ed) to a timeless and spaceless narrative of relational endeavour.

However, a second biopolitical element exists in contemporary tourism that is worth considering, and in particular in relation to *Airbnb*: the nostalgic ideology of a presumed lost community.

“For so long, people thought *Airbnb* was about renting houses. But really, we’re about home. You see, a house is just a space, but a home is where you belong. And what makes this global community so special is that for the very first time, you can belong anywhere. That is the idea at the core of our company: belonging. [B]elonging has always been a fundamental driver of humankind. [W]e’ve created a symbol for us as a *community*...It’s a symbol for people who want to welcome into their home new experiences, new cultures, and new conversations. We’re proud to introduce the Bélo: the universal symbol of belonging.”

Airbnb, italics added

The platform’s narrative is rooted in a travel culture in which the promise of “living like a local” is reiterated time and time again, with the guests invited to become part of an experimental community-in-the-making. Communities of travellers share a specialist literature and normally exchange materials, experiences, hints, etc. through social media like Facebook, Twitter and *Airbnb*’s forum. What is particularly striking in this innovative form of tourism/hostessing is *Airbnb*’s emphasis on a new communitarian and somewhat utopian travel culture of encounter. However, despite such rhetoric of togetherness and sociality, what the members of these temporary collectives of strangers actually have in common is merely the *Airbnb* platform that translates them into a new kind of citizenry. Driven as they are by a subtle pseudo-romantic vibe about “the local,” the platform claims indeed to instil a specific culture-of-being-together and a set of hypothetical “community values” at the core of the *Airbnb*’s world of hospitality.

2.3. For a critique of community

Political philosophers have been challenging the meaning of community from a number of critical perspectives (see, among others, Esposito, 2010, but also Agamben, 1993; Nancy, 1991), perspectives that may help interrogating the biopolitical in tourism. Italian political philosopher Roberto Esposito, in particular, in his influential *Communitas*, claims that “thinking community” has become the humdrum and mantra of many political discourses today, a zeitgeist that ties together “the failure of all communisms with the misery of new individualisms” (2010: 1). Community-thinking is often led by a promise of a better tomorrow in the making, located in some remote horizon. For many communitarian philosophies – including the organicist sociology of *Gemeinschaft* or American neo-communitarianism – community “is a full, or a whole, or even a good, a value, an essence, which can be lost and then re-found as ‘something that once belonged to us’ and that therefore can once again belong to us.” (Esposito, 2010: 2). But community, in the Western traditions that Esposito so carefully re-constructs,

“cannot be thought of as a body, as a corporation [...] in which individuals are founded in a larger individual. Neither is community to be interpreted as a mutual, intersubjective ‘recognition’ in which individuals are reflected in each other so as to conform their initial identity; as a collective bond that comes at a certain point to connect individuals that before were separate” (2010: 7).

Esposito’s genealogical account shows how the original meaning of “*communitas*” instead referred to a totality of individuals united not by a common property/quality, but by a common *munus*, a due gift. *Munus* in fact means “gift,” but a gift, “distinguished by its obligatory character, implied by its roots *mei-* which denotes exchange” (2010: 4). Accordingly,

“The contentious result of this etymological journey with respect to the various philosophies of community cannot be ignored. As the complex though equally unambiguous etymology [...] demonstrates, the *munus* that the *communitas* shares isn’t a property or a possession [*appartenenza*]. [...] on the contrary, is a debt, a pledge, a gift to be given [...]. The subjects of community are united by an ‘obligation’ [...]. This is what [...] expropriates them of their initial property (in part or completely), of the most proper property, namely, their very subjectivity.” (2010: 6–7)

What is then the ontological horizon of the *Airbnb* community-of-tomorrow? The *Airbnb* promise of an imagined (coming?) human consortium often makes reference to a utopian “local” space where the individual traveller may become part of a larger collective Self. To belong to a community, according to *Airbnb*’s Hospitality blog, is something all humans should aspire once again. To connect to local strangers and visit their places is a key element in re-establishing the “lost community” to which “we once belonged” (*Airbnb*).

But if, to speak with Esposito, community is a subtraction of what is “proper,” of what we put in “common,” then “being of a community” is the condition by which we lose something that belongs to us in order to be with others – with whom we share precisely this loss of the “proper.” Accordingly, the boundaries of the home – the everyday spatialities of the proper – are thus endlessly (re)negotiated and informed by the value and the circulation of the *munus* – the giving of what-is-proper – that morphs with every singular encounter of hospitality generated by *Airbnb*.

The novelty of *Airbnb* does not consist in the fact that travellers visit other people’s homes. Travellers have been doing this already for a long time, in various forms related to what we normally call cultural tourism. However, while in more conventional forms of cultural tourism the radical difference between guests and hosts is emphasized and is part of the structure of “the encounter,” here we are promised a temporary becoming-the-other based on a specific ontology of place

and belonging translated by the *Airbnb* language into the matrix of biopolitics. This *matrix*, we will claim, is the result of the *Airbnb*'s *metrics* that produces detailed and quantifiable rankings concerning both hosts and guests. In this configuration of travel and encounter, what emerges is a clear tension between the rhetoric of community and individual experience, on the one hand, and the quantifiable metrics that qualifies people's profile and lives into competitive rankings, on the other. We believe this tension to be key to the functioning and the understanding of the sharing economies in tourism and, in particular, of the *Airbnb* machinery/platform.

Whilst referring to Rousseau as the most relevant forerunner for most communitarian contemporary ideologies, Esposito suggests the Rousseauian community tends to produce "an individual universalised, which is the general will, and a universal individualized, which are small homelands" (2010: 55). In this sense, communitarian thinking "appears to be oriented toward an inevitable authoritarian tendency" (Esposito, 2010), since generated by a new mythology of the absolute. This is why we trust that a biopolitical reading of *Airbnb* may provide important insights into how these sharing economies work and are converted into forms of "value" based on a *universally individualized* behaviour, identity and bodily manifestations of care and hospitality, but are at the same time promoted via a *universal individualized* mythology of community.

3. Airbnb

In roughly 10 years after its inception, *Airbnb* has attracted millions of hosts and guests worldwide, becoming one of the sharing economy's "darlings," with earnings of about \$100 m in 2017 (Hook, 2018). The platform promotes itself as "the world's leading community-driven hospitality company" that connects travellers (guests) with local hosts (Airbnb). Guests may book a room within a host's home, with the host typically present throughout their stay, or, an entire accommodation, also termed "remote hospitality" (Ikkala and Lampinen, 2015: 1036). In its recent Global Brand Campaign, *Airbnb* juxtaposes itself to the standardized services of "modern tourism," somehow adhering to the age-old critique of the commodification of cultures and tourism experiences (see MacCannell, 2013 [1989]). The platform claims to be alternative to mass-produced and impersonal travel experiences, by offering the possibility of sleeping and living *in* the spaces where "real life" supposedly takes place and experience what it means to "live like a local." While the actual hosts are not required to be local residents, they are implicitly expected to contribute to the guests' "local experience" through their caring labour in the home, by "showing the guests around," or by taking them to local events and outings through the new *Experiences* programme (formerly known as *City Hosts*, Airbnb). This commends the hosts to bring their personality, and social- and affective capacities into production in their bid to provide a peek into "real life." Although hosts enjoy a large degree of freedom, *Airbnb* nonetheless abundantly instructs them through "educational programmes," hosting guidelines and support groups in an attempt to improve skills and services to a "standard of hospitality." These include, for example, the *Host Mentor Program* and *Host Toolkits*, or other "support initiatives," such as the *Community Centre* and the *Airbnb Citizen Centre*, featuring countless "home sharing clubs" worldwide that locally "advocate for fair home sharing laws in their communities", or the yearly *Airbnb Open* festival, host meet-ups, and host-discussion boards and host-newsletters (Airbnb). The categories of "host" and "guest" are thus virtually interchangeable, since hosts can simultaneously use the platform as guests and vice versa, something putatively disrupting the validity of more conventional dualistic structures characterising the broader hospitality paradigm (Germann Molz, 2012: 89; Nejezchleba, 2011; Veijola et al., 2014).

The material discussed in this article is the result of a research project based on a qualitative analysis of the *Airbnb*'s digital platform over a period of 3 years (2014–2017). To unravel how elements of "life"

and biopolitics are incorporated by the platform, we have directly engaged with the different web applications used by the platform. We have observed over time how such applications were re-designed to "optimize" the platform's workings as well as our performances as hosts and guests. Additionally, we have carried out a qualitative content analysis of the *Airbnb* website and affiliated blogs, which included both user-generated-content as well as material published by the platform itself. We have also explored emerging "travel ideologies" as expressed through promotional material, hospitality guidebooks, blog posts, discussion boards, and policies produced by the platform. We have studied the *Airbnb* "business model" and what Bialski (2016) defines as *Airbnb*'s ideological and aesthetic regime, which dictates the functioning of the platform and creates standards, rules and regulations about how "homes" and places may be shared and with whom. We have also reviewed in detail the platform's exchange mechanisms, structuring logics and key algorithms. Algorithms, Kitchen contends, work in context and their effects "unfold in contingent and relational ways, producing localised and situated outcomes" (Kitchin, 2017: 25): although the lines of code that underlie the *Airbnb* machinery may be invisible, their effects are real and conducive of what Kitchin and Dodge (2011) have termed *code/space*.

In order to better align our methodology to the main theoretical points on the biopolitics of tourism that our project attempts to advance, we have also studied *Airbnb*'s role in the organization of social and spatial practices of hospitality in everyday life. For over two years, we have extensively participated in the *Airbnb* hosting and guesting exercise ourselves, paying close attention to our "shared" embodied experiences in place, the home (see Roelofsen, 2018). We have hosted a total of 26 stays in our own "homes," stayed with 24 "listings" in different cities and countries and conducted in-depth interviews with 17 hosts and/or guests in several European cities. With our interviewees, we have discussed their (embodied) experiences of hospitality and have raised questions on what it meant to be drawn into a sharing economy of reputation and "quality." We have asked participants to illustrate their embodied experiences in "sharing" their spaces of intimacy, to reflect on the related questions of trust and vulnerability but also on their practices of reviewing and rating the Other, and how these have influenced the ways in which they selected future hosts and/or guests. The results of these interviews are not referred directly in the present article, since here we mainly reflect on the working of the online *Airbnb* machinery and its metrics. However, they still remain an important background element in supporting our main argument (we analyse these interviews in another article largely focussed on our auto-ethnographic experience in conducting fieldwork [see Roelofsen, 2018]).

4. Digital selves, digital others

The tourist's body continuously interacts with technologies such as cameras, smart phones, portable computers, navigation- and digital devices, significantly influencing how people travel and produce travel accounts. These interactions have become illustrative of how "the digital is reshaping the production and experience of space, place, nature, landscape, mobility, and environment" (Ash et al., 2016: 11). The travelling and hosting bodies in tourism are also increasingly digitized *through* technology: *digital bodies* arise from vast amounts of detailed data generated through a range of devices that record people's movements through space, geolocations, behaviour, communication, appearance, and many other aspects of their daily lives (Lupton, 2017). The individuals generating this information are not, however, the sole beneficiaries of these processes of *datafication*; personal information has become bestowed with commercial and managerial value serving a digital data knowledge economy (Lupton, 2017). While *Airbnb* is not a digital "device" in the conventional meaning of the term, its website and mobile application operate on digital devices and are fed with personal information people knowingly and unknowingly share about themselves. "Data is the lifeblood of the business," according to Riley

Newman, Head of Data Science at *Airbnb* (Rosebush, 2014). This is a particularly intriguing slogan if one considers how digitized lives and homes on the platform are given value. How does this “lifeblood” exactly fuel a sharing economy? What technologies, models and frameworks process these data to give rise to an *Airbnb* “community”?

In the following paragraphs, we reflect on several tools that the platform’s website incorporates in giving shape to the *Airbnb*’s digitized bodies. These tools supply and harvest data on individuals and their everyday spatialities, creating and recreating “digital data assemblages” (Lupton, 2016, 2017) of *bios* and *geos* alike. *Airbnb* uses such assemblages to monitor, control and discipline interactions on/through its platform, as well as to modify, privilege or reject specific bodies and spaces through a myriad of practices.

4.1. Signing up to the community

As soon as hosts and guests sign up on *Airbnb*, their digital embodiment as member of a broader “community” of travellers takes place, drawing on/in their (intimate) spatialities and practices. Community is presented here as a rather traditional form of getting together, of being present in, and part of, a real and imagined space of belonging. This communitarian pathos, to speak with Esposito, however clashes with the ways in which these putative communities are formed and include (or exclude) its citizens. Signing up and simultaneously profiling one’s Self in fact marks the moment in which individual bodies and spaces – in order to enter the *Airbnb* community of hospitality – become exposed to practices of observation, calculation, qualification, and comparison. Hosting and guesting subjects are voluntarily digitized through a variety of profiling practices that conform to the website’s “digital trust infrastructure” (Sundararajan, 2016: 60–61, 147) and prescribed aesthetic appeal. The profiling practices are driven by *Airbnb*’s emphasis placed on truth and authenticity and supposedly engender a “trust-worthy” community and set of spaces.

Creating a world where everyone can truly belong anywhere requires a foundation of trust. So, as *Airbnb* continues to grow, it’s vital we collect and publish the standards that have always underpinned this global community, both to convey our values and guide behaviour. This is a living document—we’re constantly rethinking our approach as we learn from the community what’s best for *Airbnb*.

Airbnb

The online manifesto entitled “Standards and Expectations” underpins the requirements for being part of such a community and includes paragraphs on *Safety*, *Security*, *Fairness*, *Authenticity*, and *Reliability*. These standards convey what *Airbnb* deems to be the “values” which should guide their users’ behaviour in order to build the “foundation of trust” upon which the platform rests (*Airbnb*). The *Airbnb* “trust-infrastructure” extends “trustworthiness” from people to places through reviews and ratings of homes. As the *Airbnb* hosts/guests do not physically get to meet each other prior to the check-in, questions emerge about the actual *bios* and the *geos* users are “really” dealing with throughout their online communication and about their real intentions. This is what the platform defines as “stranger-danger” (*Airbnb*):

“Stranger danger’ is a natural human defense mechanism; overcoming it requires a leap of faith for both guests and hosts. But that’s a leap we can actively support by understanding what trust is, how it works, and how to build products that support it.”

Riley Newman and Judd Antin, *Airbnb* Engineering & Data Science, 15 March 2016

The rationale guiding the platform is that trust may supposedly be “generated” with a set of tools that remove anonymity through self-profiling practices and verification methods. These include biometric information, such as passports and driver’s licenses, supplemented by phone numbers and credit card details digitally verified in real time by the technology *Jumio*. Additionally, users may sync their profiles with

profiles on other social networks such as *Facebook* or *LinkedIn* to strengthen their credibility. What follows is a step-by-step process by which hosts and guests textually and visually detail their profiles through a written autobiography and pictures, videos and symbols. The hospitality toolkit for hosts proposes more specific ways in which to construct and represent one’s “authentic” online Self, as to draw in “guests with similar tastes and interests,” preventing both host and guest from having “disappointing experiences” (*Airbnb*). Hosts are encouraged to be open about what makes their space, personality and social environment so particular. In our qualitative analysis of the website, we have come across hundreds of online profiles that include political convictions, religious beliefs, hobbies, and details concerning gender, sexual preferences, health, and hygienic practices. *Airbnb* suggests the profile to be also a space where to describe daily routines, outstanding material assets present in the home, and the expectations regarding behaviour and beliefs of fellow users, among other things. It is not difficult to see how this process of community-making is fundamentally based on what people are willing to give “of the proper”, that is, the part of the intimate self that each host is willing to sacrifice and offer to the platform in order to be included in its communitarian dream world. The production of the Self through such profiling practices shows how digital bodies are supposed to represent “real” and truthful bodies, an Avatar of each individual’s actual *bios* necessary to enter a (digital) community of fellow hosts/guests. Only after being digitized, hosts and guests are able to get in contact, arrange to meet in “real life” and eventually participate in the process of reciprocal assessment in relation to the intimate spatialities of the home.

4.2. The reputational turn in tourism

The assessment and qualification of tourist accommodations have become an embedded practice in the culture of travel, dating back to the popularisation of the *Grand Tour* (see Baka, 2015). In the past decade, however, the Internet and social media have instigated a significant power shift, with governmental bodies and tourism authorities normally assigning these standards of “quality” being challenged (or even replaced) by millions of web-savvy consumers willing to have their say on “qualities.” Travellers have arguably gained more agency in determining the circulation of information about quality, by sharing their experiences in the form of “digital word of mouth,” significantly reshaping how people decide where to travel, where to stay, where to buy, what to do, and whom to engage with (see e.g. Gretzel and Yoo, 2008). Moreover, the contemporary practice of “qualifying” in tourism extends far beyond the material aspects of traditional forms of tourist accommodation, and gradually encompasses the full experiential, emotional and social fabric of destinations, drawing in the affective and immaterial labour that underlies tourism.

The growing number of “likes,” stars, badges, and reviews has revolutionized the ranking modalities of quality in tourism facilities, destinations, and their reputation. Reputation, unlike “quality measurements,” does not refer to “objective” standards established by institutional bodies; it rather rests on how *something* or *someone* is assessed by individuals or groups online. In the past decade, the prevalence of the “reputation economy” has followed the onset of Web 2.0. The *online feedback and ratings mechanisms* that drive many platforms in the sharing economies allow individuals to express their feelings and opinions about their purchases, interactions, transactions, services and many other aspects (Hearn, 2010). For Alison Hearn (2010: 423), “the ‘inherent quality’ of a person’s achievement is an historical and cultural construction, as, indeed, is reputation itself.” As such, reviews/ratings express what is socially desirable and “proper” within a specific (imaginary, digital) community. However, contributions to the making of reputation of others is a form of free labour not necessarily serving the interest of the individuals expressing feelings and opinions, but rather serving the interest of the platforms or other individuals’ reputation (Hearn, 2010). For Tiziana Terranova, the

provision of “free labour,” as we will see later, is a fundamental moment in the creation of value in the digital economies, which are “an important area of experimentation with value and free cultural/affective labour. It is about specific forms of production (Web design, multimedia production, digital services, and so on), but is also about forms of labour we do not immediately recognize as such: chat, real-life stories, mailing lists, amateur newsletters, and so on. These types of cultural and technical labour [...] have developed in relation to the expansion of the cultural industries and are part of a process of economic experimentation with the creation of monetary value out of knowledge/culture/affect” (Terranova, 2000: 38). This contribution to the platform may be seen as another way of endlessly generating the *munus*, the gift of the proper to the common that Esposito identifies as key to the realisation of any *communitas*.

However, the constitution of reputation, Hearn notes, is based on an on-going process conditioned by its very mode of production, a process at times also “marked by relations of power based on forms of identity such as race, sexuality and gender” (2010: 423–424). For Germann Molz (2007), review technologies incorporated in a platform are used to police and discipline utopian “global communities” of travellers, while review-and-ratings mechanisms in tourism have increasingly become parameters of moral behaviour and quality of online- and offline relations. These parameters are based on normative views of “good hospitality,” or “core values” of hospitable subjects, and indirectly inform what it means to be a “good” citizen in a community of travellers (Airbnb). The practice of observing each other for the sake of “generating trust” has been coined as “collaborative surveillance” or “social surveillance” (Germann Molz, 2014b). Users come to accept as axiomatic – suggests again Germann Molz – that practices of surveillance are a means to keep the “community” secure. At the same time, it is because of “shared values,” interests, viewpoints and life philosophies (i.e. like-mindedness) that users consider their community as generally trustworthy (Germann Molz, 2014b).

One key biopolitical element of this sharing economy thus comes to the fore: being surveilled and allowing the platform (and an army of strangers) to penetrate your home and your most intimate spaces is a necessary condition in order to be included in this digital community as a host, and to be able to benefit from its circulation of value. Practices of trust-building and surveillance, we suggest, thus produce a particular biopolitical community-in-the-making, continuously re-establishing and shifting the boundaries of what is acceptable and what is not. It is not just meaningful social relations that are drawn into the mechanisms of the *Airbnb* economy, but also the deeper spatialities that hosts and guests inhabit and render “valuable” through their mutual embodied performances.

4.3. The Superhost

After the stay has taken place, both hosts and guests receive an automated message in which they are invited to review/rate each other and their experience. *Airbnb* operates on a “two-way rating” logic by which reviews and ratings remain undisclosed until both hosts and guests have completed the process, in order to avoid retaliation for possible negative reviews, or pressure to write particularly positive (or negative) reviews as a response to their own assessment (see Bridges and Vásquez, 2016). A myriad of practices and performances that hosts undertake before, during and after a stay, are measured, rated and ranked, both by the guests as well as the platform’s algorithms. For example, the platform produces specific metrics by monitoring and measuring individual hosts’ “Response Rate”, i.e. *if* and how fast they respond to a guest’s online enquiry. In a similar vein, a host’s “Commitment” rate – i.e. the rate of acceptance, declination or cancellation of reservations – is drawn into metrics. These metrics, along with the ratings and reviews that the hosts receive from their guests after a stay, are publicly displayed on their profile pages (i.e. the number of total reviews received, their response rate in percentages and their response

time in hours). What is more, the various ratings that hosts receive from guests are averaged and converted into “stars” (from 1 to 5) displayed in their respective listing(s) and concurrently appearing in search indexes.

The platform in particular encourages guests to rate their hosts along a set of “hosting standards” subdivided in the following 7 elements: overall experience; accuracy; cleanliness; communication; check in process; location; and value. While some of these standards incorporate several material, aesthetical and locational aspects of home, they also constitute a subjective set of (affective) practices and embodied performances on part of the host. Being qualified as “optimally” communicative, for example, is the result of how quickly a host responds to enquiries and requests; this shows that they are “attentive and considerate” (Airbnb). “Accuracy”, on the other hand, is determined by the hosts’ ability to digitally represent their home (both visually and textually) in ways that resemble the “exact” specificities of the accommodation. Hosts are accordingly encouraged to upload high-definition pictures of their homes and to be explicit about “unexpected factors” and what they consider no-go spaces within the home, and on what they would like their guests *not* to do in their homes. Other rated elements like “check-in” process, “cleanliness”, and “amenities” equally imply a set of embodied practices that expects hosts to be apt, hygienic, attentive, clear, available, and “authentic”. Another, rather obscure, element that is rated by guests is the “overall experience”. *Airbnb* suggests that hosts may receive an optimal rating on this element through performances that make guests “feel welcome” and “at home”, for instance by “avoiding confusion”, “making small gestures” and “personalising each guest’s experience to suit their travel needs and personality” (Airbnb). Another element – “location” – requires guests to indicate if the neighbourhood was experienced as appealing, safe, convenient, and desirable. Guests are also encouraged to assess the value for money on a scale of 1-to-5 and whether they would recommend the host’s listing by selecting a “thumb up” or “thumb down.”

Evidenced by stellar reviews and ratings, hosts who have become particularly good at providing hospitality in their “proper” intimate spaces are awarded a *Superhost* badge, which is then attached to their own *Airbnb* online profiles. These individuals must have hosted at least 10 trips and have never cancelled a reservation in the preceding year. They must also maintain a 90% response rate or higher in promptly communicating with their (potential) guests. *Superhosts* uphold at least 80% 5-star ratings, but only if they have been reviewed by at least half of their guests. These systems of measurement and the resulting metrics, ostensibly try to define the “quality” (or *value*) of an individual and/or place, according to a set of “hosting standards”. Consequently, it provides parameters for comparison (through calculations quantifying their reputation) that “govern” the network in specific ways. Notably, these metrics interrelate with other market designed search-ranking algorithms that privilege some hosts, guests and homes over others, creating (temporary) privileges for those holding a higher “status”; such rankings also influence future transactions and, with them, the performances of hosts, guests, and the related homes. In exceptional cases, *Airbnb* may decide to subject underperforming users to (financial) penalties, to (temporarily) deactivate or remove listings/profiles and, in so doing, determine who is in *and* who is out of this global community of travellers. The metrics generating these putative new communitarian spaces are also constitutionally founded on implicit but effective horizons of inclusion/exclusion and visibility/invisibility: not only hosts and guests are invited to present the best and more valuable aspects of their persona, but they may also end up discriminating each other, since in the early stage of negotiation between hosts and guests questions like age, health, nationality, sexual orientation, skin colour may be key in selecting the people who may sleep in their homes (on digital social exclusion and racial discrimination on *Airbnb* see Edelman et al., 2017). The Superhost is thus the ultimate product of a digital platform supported by what Esposito would possibly describe as a contemporary romanticised version of a Rousseauian community. The Superhost,

again, represents a biopolitical horizon, an *individual universalised* according to the sacred “7 elements” that dictate the requirements for a 5-star identity stripped of any subjectivity, while at the same time promoted via a *universal individualized* mythology of community.

However, while the platform tends to present Superhosts as stellar human beings who excel in performing hospitality at their home, our fieldwork has also shown on numerous occasions the complete absence of hosts and the related performances of hospitality. Particularly when renting an entire home, interactions and communication with the host were oftentimes entirely missing or took place only electronically. In such cases, the relevant instructions were communicated by email or SMS, and in several instances, access to the accommodation was enabled through WiFi- or code-operated door locks, or keys left for us in mailboxes. On other occasions, hosting duties were delegated to partners, friends, family members, tenants, or contracted employees working for property management services such as *Guesty* and *Iamb&b*. These and similar companies form a whole new support economy to “strengthen” and “professionalize” the sharing economy of hospitality, raising questions on how corporations capitalize on these new forms of hospitality.

In many ways, the phenomenon of absent hosts seems in clear conflict with the communitarian rhetoric of the platform: not only is each individual digitized before getting access to such community, but in many cases the members of this idealized space of hospitality do not even meet. In other words, what has emerged from our analysis is that all too often, despite the platform promising potential *Airbnb* guests a “home-away-from-home”, a significant part of the advertised homes is deprived of any “local” life and contact with the residents. Such homes, by fundamentally lacking the everyday embodied practices, social relations and lived experiences that normally make “home” (Blunt, 2005; see, also, Roelofsen, 2018) point to yet another underlying paradox of the platform: namely, its promise of and capitalization on the life of the “locals” whilst –at the same time – enabling landlords and investors to erode precisely that local life by competing with, and at times excluding, precisely those local residents whose hospitality is promised by the platform to its community of travellers. Speaking again in terms of *munus*, the gift to the community is so extreme here that there is very little left of the communitarian “being-togetherness” so celebrated by the platform; in some of these cases, the result is digitized tourists staying in empty homes and dealing with the standardised instructions left by “local managers” often working for large investors who have quickly learned how to capitalise on this powerful mechanism. What remains here of the nostalgic idea of community advanced by the platform?

4.4. Calculative rationalities of life and home

“Data Isn’t Numbers, It’s People”

Riley Newman, Head of Data Science at *Airbnb* (*Airbnb*)

David Beer in *Metric Power* (2016) explores the deeper logics of big data and shows how the presence of metrics in our everyday lives has tremendously intensified in the last 15 years. A growing amount of data is voluntarily or unknowingly collected on *what* we do and *how*, and the metrics that capture this information increasingly play a role in our lives (Beer, 2016). Lupton (2016: 2) describes self-tracking as a practice in which people regularly monitor, record, and measure elements of their behaviour and/or their bodily functions. As noted above, *Airbnb* hosts and guests are incentivised in various ways to produce data feeding into the metrics on which *Airbnb* thrives. However, we contend that the incentive to rate-and-review goes beyond building reciprocity and trust. Although reviewing-and-rating is neither obligatory nor compensated, to be reviewed and rated positively is vastly important, to some extent *essential* to stay “alive” in this “sharing economy” community. A trustworthy digital Self does not merely rest on documented forms of identification and auto-biography; it emerges through

testimonies of both hosting and guesting performances occurred during their interactions. As guests, we were continuously “nudged” by *Airbnb* to rate and review our stays with *Airbnb* hosts. No less than 4 emails with reminders to review and rate were sent out by the *Airbnb* platform from the moment of departure to a week and a half after our stay. We would then normally receive the 5th “nudge” by *Airbnb* two weeks after our stay when the review-and-rating-period had come to an end. This message asked for the last time to provide a review of our stay, specifying that it will not be disclosed. Such nudging-culture not only insisted in providing the “lifefood” necessary to operate the *Airbnb*’s machinery, it also investigated the reasons for us *not* rating and reviewing as typical *Airbnb* citizens.

The hosts’ “dashboard” and “statistics tool” are examples of built-in applications inspiring a culture of self-tracking among hosts/guests, and implying the necessity to perform introspection and self-improvement. By showing less-than-perfect reviews/ratings hosts are encouraged to clean their homes more thoroughly, to be clearer and faster in communicating, to be more accurate and truthful, and to accept more reservations. The platform’s expectation that hosts should be working towards a Super Self are underpinned by a “notion of incompleteness and a set of moral obligations concerning [...] contemporary ideas about selfhood and citizenship” (Lupton, 2016: 68). In our case, such ideas are contextualized with reference to the sharing economy, implying a kind of global citizenship concerned with sharing virtually everything that one embodies or owns, in ways that supposedly “enable greater efficiency and access” (for an enthusiastic endorsement of this logic see Botsman, 2015).

Taking on biopolitical lenses, the above described standards and measurements somewhat reflect what Foucault (2003: 249) has famously introduced as two distinct forms of power: a disciplinary power, aimed at the individual (host and/or guest); and a regulatory power, aimed at the level of the community (of *Airbnb* citizens). While the first form of power should increase the (economic) productivity of the individual, the second is concerned with preventing the community from risk and protecting it from potential danger. Both forms of power adopt their own instruments and operate with different objectives but together they form interrelated components of a “political technology” that controls as much the individual as the workings of the community. *Airbnb*’s interfaces and digital technologies as sources of both disciplinary and regulatory power. In establishing “quality,” the *Airbnb* community facilitates self-discipline and self-regulation. Hosts and guests are continuously encouraged through emails and notifications to provide opinions on their experiences, and improve their performances through self-tracking. According to the promotional material, *Airbnb* operates review-and-rating systems to assist “the community [of hosts and guests] to make better decisions” (*Airbnb*). Daily interactions among users of the platforms are monitored by *Trust and Safety Teams* that offer customer support – and are a self-proclaimed “community’s vanguard” (ibid.). The trustworthiness of hosts and guests is presented in the form of an aggregate of their respectively assessed behaviour and of their social relations with other members of the *Airbnb* “community.” At the same time, it operates as a machinery collecting information on individuals and their places, in order to quantify their qualities and incorporate them into a true (bio-geo)metrics.

In relation to travel, thus reviews and ratings generate actions and reactions and have effectively become co-constitutive of the multiple identities of tourist destinations and of new kinds of place-making (see Baka, 2015: 151). The struggle over which tourist places are made/unmade and booked/shun increasingly thus depends on the ordering devices that “weigh” their quality via reviews and produce rankings. Such subjective opinions are rendered objective by mathematical algorithms used by the hospitality platforms, which convert into calculative rationalities and related metrics the reputational economies of its affiliates. Like other networks in the sharing economy, *Airbnb* thrives within the “reputational turn” by drawing the qualitative features of the millions of *geos* and *bios* into quantitative ones in order to circulate

them in the travel market and constitute the “*Airbnb* global community”.

“A booking is more likely to be confirmed when the host and guest preferences are a good fit. That’s why our search algorithms are designed to match guests to spaces that are right for their trip, and hosts to booking opportunities that are right for their hosting preferences.”

Airbnb

The myriad factors identified and labelled through *Airbnb*’s “match-making” algorithms rely on the evaluation of hosts’ and guests’ previous bodily performances of/in space with other bodies to create a relationship between data and individuals. These performances range from providing and keeping a home clean to the communication skills of hosts and guests. This process signifies a “systematized standard of recognisability,” aimed at achieving a degree of “Sameness” (Braidotti, 2013: 26) or, in the *Airbnb* language, the “best matches.” This match-making system presupposes that subjective opinions may produce an objective statistical average in relation to which all hosts and guests are assessed and assigned to a designated position within “the community.” This community therefore operates according to selective forms of inclusion and exclusion, related to endless measurements and the constant incorporation of new subjective opinions after every *Airbnb* stay. This “reputational” and algorithmic turn in tourism has significant consequences for how people, spaces and places are shaped, perceived, booked, included, excluded and visited. Since the body’s performance in tourism becomes encapsulated in such sophisticated systems of measurement, it produces a particular “matching” spatiality and set of social relations. Moreover, the “individual user is incapable of really experiencing the effect that algorithms have in determining one’s life as algorithms rarely, if ever, speak to the individual. Rather, individuals are seen by algorithm and surveillance networks as members of categories” (Cheney-Lippold, 2011: 176). As Beer (2016: 118) notes, what or whoever is captured in these systems of measurement becomes subject to the outcomes that those very measurements produce.

Data analytics, flexible big data tools and data science techniques thus play a vital role in predicting and influencing hosts’ and guests’ decisions and bookings. The *Airbnb* website incorporates algorithms that produce routines, evaluate and make decisions without human oversight or authority. The calculative rationalities underlying the platforms’ price-setting algorithm are based on the assumption that hosts are rational agents in their decision-making, and that, instead of merely “sharing” their homes, they are in direct competition with each other and willing to monetize their everyday spatialities via a myriad of categories and hierarchies (the neighbourhood, its architecture, its natural surroundings). Community, in this sense, is managed as a true biopolitical technology. It operationalises – via its imaginative rhetoric – a mechanism that incorporates elements of people’s everyday life to expose them to its affiliates. What is more, it translates such real life elements into a quantifiable self, in this way determining what people should or should not do and how in their homes. Community, to recall Esposito once again, here becomes a form of regulatory power, but also a silent normative tool, particularly effective in the ways in which it translates into manifestations of self-discipline on the part of its willing acolytes.

5. Conclusion

The main purpose of this article was to highlight the importance and the pervasiveness of the biopolitical in the “sharing economies” of tourism, and the *Airbnb* platform in particular. We would thus like to conclude by reflecting on the biopolitics inherent to the quantifications and qualifications of *life* and *home* produced and established by *Airbnb* and on how this is reflected in its specific interpretation of “community”. In the *Airbnb* global community, we have suggested, the social and affective life of individuals, as well as their *living space* – where they

rest, get nourished and may lay bare their intimacies and vulnerabilities – have been “incorporated” as objects of technological intervention and regulation, and opened up to commercial interest. Life and home have become part of a new “sharing” economic discursive formation.

The sacrifice of the “proper” privacy and intimacy is the *munus* that hosts and guests are willing and asked to give to become part of the *Airbnb* community, something often neglected in the literature on the “trustworthy communities” of the sharing economy. We would like to suggest that, in line with Esposito’s reading of community, this *munus* consists precisely in the elements of everyday life – the “proper” – put into circulation, drawn into systems of measurement and given value by *Airbnb*.

In the world of *Airbnb*, the *munus* – again, the proper sacrificed in-the-becoming-of-community – is thus tied up to submitting and re-negotiating one’s most intimate, affective space and practices: the home. Hospitality in the *Airbnb* sharing economy allows for turning the inside (the home) out, since it is also the outsider who contributes to (re-)determine the borders of the home while sharing the spaces of intimacy with the host (see Roelofsen, 2018). The extent to which hosts are expected to give up the proper, their home, is supposedly decisive in creating feelings of belonging on part of both hosts and guests and, simultaneously, informs the reviews and rating following each stay.

The *Airbnb* community, we maintain, is thus somewhat the product of a subtraction and of the related need for compensation, and this is why it is fundamentally different from the imperative of reciprocity highlighted by a large part of the existing literature abovementioned. When read with the analytical lenses offered by Esposito’s work, rather than a “return” to a long lost local community where we presumably already “belonged”, the platform’s global community of hospitality appears as founded on the continuously evolving sacrifice of the proper, a sacrifice measured by the stellar ratings of the sacred “7 elements”. According to its logic, the *munus*, again, the subtraction of the private and intimate spaces of the home, represents in the platform the *quality* of each individual. This quality is manifested through myriad practices and bodily performances of hospitality that are literally “datafied” and fed into *Airbnb*’s algorithmic(s). These are translated into the “ranking” of each individual, a quantified testimony of this *munus* to the community. A host’s or guest’s “reputation” or “rank,” in this neo-communitarian biopolitical spatiality, are thus supposed to represent not only inherent qualities of individuals (based on being trustworthy, hospitable, hygienic, responsive etc.), but also their ability to provide an “overall experience” of their everyday “local life.” Local individual life and the related public and private spatialities are then presented, qualified and ranked via the platform. People’s lives are put in circulation as a value by the metrics that “reduce” them to the communitarian language of *Airbnb*.

The metrics play another key role often overlooked by the relevant literature: that of pre-empting unwanted behaviour, unwanted bodies and unwanted places, and consequently ruling out what is “objectively” considered inadequate. While the metrics – being considered objective – are supposed to represent a certain “veracity” about a person or place’s authenticity and performance, at the same time they tend to obscure the social and cultural context of the relevant practices and processes. Their procedures, in fact, avertedly create hierarchies (and inequalities) between users to provide incentives and optimize their behaviour and performances by increasing their respective visibility and “value” in the *Airbnb* global “community”.

“The biopolitical” performs here as a qualifying machine, operating strategic “cuts” in the body politics of hosts and guests constituted by the platform. The culture/life of “others” is in fact often qualified via specific rankings of people (and their bodies) on display, or by means of the actual penetration (again, selectively operated) of people’s “quotidian.” Indeed, whilst more conventional forms of tourism tend to use bodies and faces of unnamed people in their promotional materials, the *Airbnb* platform provides, on the contrary, a clear and certified identity for the ranked host/guest. However, in both cases, guests are promised

unmediated encounters with local representatives (often described as “authentic”), and deep experiences of penetration, in a respectful but nonetheless pervasive way, of their daily living spaces.

Whether physically present at home or not, the *Superhost* thus represents the most qualified “bio” in this global community of hospitality, the universalised individual at the core of the platform’s communitarian mythology of the absolute (again, see [Esposito, 2010](#) on this). It is capable of fulfilling a number of key expected “qualities” clearly laid out in *Airbnb’s* terms and conditions, and “hospitality manuals.” These outstanding hosts are those “who have distinguished themselves by reaching and maintaining specific performance goals” (*Airbnb*) operationalized through bodily practices “objectively” measured by a network of peers. The *Superhost* is thus a biopolitical horizon, a new kind of human putatively incorporating all the qualities of the platform, the celebrated body of the digitized Self, the only proper citizen of the *Airbnb* global community, a community endlessly in the making.

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