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The non-nationals: The emergence of a transnational elite in and around foreign-based headquarters of MNCs

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Introduction

Within international management it has become somewhat of an aspirational ideal that a truly global corporation should have no national home base (Ghemawat 2011). MNCs should transcend their national administrative heritage and become ‘placeless’ and stateless transnationals by moving their main global headquarters to neutral and strategically relevant locations (Birkinshaw, Braunerhjelm, Holm & Terjesen 2006). In practice, most MNCs and their main headquarters still remain firmly rooted in their home countries (Ghemawat, 2011; Strauss-Kahn & Xavier, 2009).

However, there are indications that many MNCs are moving in the direction of a growing dispersion of headquarter activities with the use of foreign-based divisional and regional headquarters (Barner-Rasmussen, Piekkari & Björkman 2007; Benito, Lunnan & Tomassen 2011; Birkinshaw et al. 2006, Forsgren, Holm & Johanson 1995). The number of European Regional Headquarters for instance has increased by 76% over the past decade alone and a similar rise can be observed in the Asia-Pacific region (Nell et al. 2011). Today most headquarters are located in developed countries but going forward the number being placed in emerging countries is predicted to increase (McKinsey Global Institute, 2013).

Regional or divisional headquarters are organizational units with a formal mandate to manage a region or a division within the MNC’s global structure, here termed foreign-based headquarters. They are often located in central, technologically advanced, internationally-oriented, metropolitan hubs where other MNC headquarters are similarly located, where there is easy access to major airports with direct flights across the globe and an international work force.

In this paper we explore how the transnational professionals who manage and staff such foreign-based headquarters, develop a sense of community and identity based on an idea of being non-national which is closely linked with the ‘placelessness’ of the organizations in which they work. As such the paper aims to contribute to new perspectives on global elites in the context of MNCs addressing the sub-theme call for submissions exploring the emergence of transnational communities.

Global cities and transnational professionals

The concept of the ‘global city’ (Sassen 1991) is useful here to depict the types of locations that have become typical hubs for MNC headquarter activities. ‘Global cities’ are cities which become to some extent socially and culturally detached from the local national context while simultaneously becoming increasingly engaged with transnational networks. Such cities are “globally engaged, in continuous flux, driven by changes in technology and transportation, and inhabiting, in a sense, a discontinuous Utopian space” (Moore 2004, p. 9). Global cities are rife with what Anthropologist Marc Augé (2008) has described as non-places as opposed to the sociological notion of place associated with the idea of a culture localized in time and place. Non-places in Augé’s conceptualisation are spaces created by super-modernity and globalization such as shopping malls, motorways, business hotels, airports etc., which are both everywhere and nowhere at the same time (ibid.).

Global cities are not only characterized by such non-places amongst which you might include international organizations that have a significant presence here. They are also closely associated with the transnational professionals who live, work and form communities in this space (Beaverstock, 2002). These professionals are intimately linked with cities through their work and globe-trotting lifestyles (Moore, 2004). Their career paths are increasingly boundary-less with respect to both organizational and national context (Thomas et al. 2005). They concentrate where they have access to both international career opportunities as well as the professional networks necessary for them to prosper in global environments, which are shaped, not the least, by multinational corporations. In so doing, transnational professionals play a significant role in furthering the global orientation of the cities they inhabit as Beaverstock (2002) argues.

The phenomenon of self-initiated career migration and the associated dynamic interplay between individual, organizational, and global environmental factors is largely neglected in the literature on international management, expatriation and global careers (Baruch et al., 2009, Thomas et al. 2005). While a great deal of sociological, and other social

science, research has been carried out exploring low skilled labour migration, we know much less about the highly skilled migrants that are key players in an ever more globalized economy (Kennedy 2005). Moore (2004), Kennedy (2005) and other sociologists such as Nowicka (2006) in particular have made notable contributions to our understanding of the new phenomenon of the transnational professional. In her book *Transnational Professionals and their Cosmopolitan Universes* Nowicka (2006) shows how such mobile people create their own spatial and cultural universes with distinct local and global consequences. However, we learn little about the organizational contexts, which partly drive mobility and significantly influences and conditions what it means to be a transnational professional. Or correspondingly, how transnationals in turn influence these organizational contexts. This dialectic and mutually constituting relationship as it is played out in the context of global cities is a key focus area of this paper.

The Study - transnational professionals in Amsterdam

The study on which this paper is based was conducted in one of these metropolitan hubs in a European context, namely Amsterdam in The Netherlands. The focus was MNCs originating anywhere in the world with for instance European or divisional headquarters in Amsterdam. As of 1st of January 2012, more than 2,200 international companies had established offices in the Amsterdam Area. Nearly a quarter of these premises were foreign-based headquarters. Within Europe, Amsterdam is second only to London when it comes to attracting corporate headquarters of MNCs¹.

The advantage of low corporate tax, Amsterdam's status as major transport hub and the presence of other MNCs within the same industry are key factors for setting up headquarter activities in Amsterdam along with access to a pool of international, highly educated, experienced and talented professionals representing many different nationalities and languages. The city is home to a productive workforce from 178 different countries and an ever-increasing inflow of workers from other EU countries². Attracting the right people from diverse backgrounds is thus possible in Amsterdam both by way of the transnational professionals already living there and the city's attractiveness as a place to relocate to.

Twenty-one qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with transnational professionals working in MNC headquarter organizations and living in Amsterdam at the time of interview (spring 2012). Most of them were on local permanent contracts and although

1 amsterdam inbusiness - the official foreign investment agency of the Amsterdam Area

2 amsterdam inbusiness - the official foreign investment agency of the Amsterdam Area

many of them had their relocation paid for by the first company they worked for in Amsterdam, they were typically not relocated internally from main headquarters or elsewhere within the MNC as with traditional expatriate assignments. Only a few came on a classic expat assignment originally and ended up staying on local contracts. Others again originally moved to Amsterdam for non-work reasons, some as students and others with a partner. They represent a growing group of international managers and staff whose 'expatriation' is often self-initiated as described above (Baruch et al., 2009, Thomas et al. 2005). Although largely overlooked in classic literature on expatriation and global careers these professionals who move across both organizational and national boundaries, are important for MNCs because it internationalizes the labor pool and increases diversity without the need for costly and risky international assignments (Thomas et al. 2005).

The approach used in interviewing was unstructured and exploratory based on encouraging the interviewees to describe their experiences and views on the issues in focus as openly as possible, allowing them to freely interpret questions and pursue themes that they regarded as central. In this paper we therefore also 'let the data talk' as much as possible by providing quotes based on which we explore and discuss interesting themes in the rich interview material. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed and coded. The interviewees are anonymous and in the analysis we generally do not present quotes linked with specific companies.

Appendix 1 provides an overview of the interviewees including their country of origin, their current and previous employment in MNCs, years of international experience and the locations where they have lived and worked. Collectively they represent experiences from over 30 different international companies, come from 14 different countries and have an average of 9 years of international experience. The interviewees were typically in their 30's and 40's at the time of interview and there is an almost equal distribution of men and women in the sample (11 men and 10 women).

In the following we explore four broad themes that emerged in the analysis of the data. Firstly, we explore the way foreign-based headquarter organizations are experienced as non-places with no dominant national group or cultural influence creating the conditions for fostering a shared non-national identity amongst transnationals based on detachment and difference. We then move on to explore further aspects of the neutralized characteristics of such organizational non-places. Thirdly, we explore elitist aspects of the way transnationals construct a shared identity in relation to such organizational contexts and in the last part of the

empirical analysis we explore the role of mobility and fluidity in identity construction and sense of community.

Foreign-based headquarters as organizational non-places

One of the key themes evident in the interviews is the extent to which foreign-based headquarter organisations in Amsterdam are described as highly culturally diverse environments (although there is an element of regional bias). These foreign-based headquarter organizations are experienced as being relatively immune to influence from the national context in which they are located, except on matters of regulation, labor law etc. *“It’s like leaving the Netherlands when you go to work”* as one interviewee put it. Foreign-based headquarter organizations are in other words staying aloof from the local national context and in so doing becoming essentially ‘placeless’ as also suggested by Redding (2007).

The concept of non-places is useful here to describe spaces created by super-modernity, globalization and urbanization (Augé 2008). Spaces which are both everywhere and nowhere at the same time and characterized by detachment from national and cultural contexts. You could argue that foreign-based headquarter organizations of global companies located in metropolitan hubs come to share similar features in order to be everyone’s and no one’s simultaneously. In Amsterdam they are typically located in corporate office parks close to the airport, some of them even at the airport in office complexes there. Thus further emphasizing the extent to which they constitute and almost merge with other non-places such as airports.

Another indication of the aloofness from the local context can be found in the staffing. Local Dutch managers and staff employing headquarter functions are typically in the minority to varying degrees, unless the company is Dutch by origin or the role involves especially serving the Dutch market. The norm seems to be that the majority of staff is from a mixture of backgrounds, although often European, American, Canadian or Australian. The few Dutch amongst them tend to be very internationally orientated and often have international experience. A case in point is the only Dutch interviewee in our sample. In addition to working in Amsterdam, she has worked in London, Sydney, Geneva and Dublin. All for different MNCs, none of which are of Dutch origin.

The obvious absence of local Dutch managers and staff makes these organizations quite unusual as expressed in the following quote:

“That would never happen in England. I mean you go to work and there is just not even one English person at your job. That would be the weirdest thing ever. [...] That is just bizarre. Yet here in Amsterdam it’s normal.”

The way this phenomenon is characterized as ‘bizarre’, even by someone for whom it is normal, illustrates the extent to which these foreign-based headquarters in metropolitan places like Amsterdam can become non-places populated by a diverse group of people with few national or cultural ties to the locality in which they live and work.

The highly international make-up of management and staff creates a particular environment, which is greatly cherished and praised by all the interviewees. Here is how one interviewee describe the experience of working for a MNC European headquarter in Amsterdam for the first time:

“It was fantastic, I mean walking down a corridor you would hear French and German and Spanish and Italian. It was really nice. You worked really long hours, worked hard, played hard, but you got a really lovely community of people out of it because everyone was away from home. It was an eye-opener for me. It was something I was in awe of, I thought it was just fantastic.”

It is clear here that a diverse organizational environment is experienced in extremely positive terms. High levels of diversity combined with the shared experience of being ‘away from home’ fosters a strong sense of community. Simply working in this environment, and being part of the community it furthers, is described as creating openness to diversity and flexibility, which is one aspect of how the transnational professionals construct a sense of elite distinction and identity. Another interviewee describe the positive experience of international environments like this:

“I’ve been lucky enough to be working for international companies the last few years and basically with people from various places and I insist on having this sort of multicultural vibe around me. Otherwise I just get bored. I got an Arab sitting next to me in the office and we joke in Arabic – I know a few words due to my mum’s Arabic background. And then we got a Slovenian, Russian, Polish and Slovakian. Germans behind me. Brits. Three meters in front of me we’ve got the south European team, the Latins, basically the French, Italians, Spanish etc. You know we just joke around, with

languages and whatever and it's very very relaxed. People coming from various places they are a lot more flexible. You know they have this frame of mind that they can deal with different cultures, different ways, different mentalities."

The insistence on 'having a multicultural vibe around me' and the description of 'people from various places' as more flexible illustrates an identification dynamic (Jenkins 2000) with elite characteristics as the slight hint of superiority in the quote indicates. Rather than an 'us' based on shared national or cultural background, it is an 'us' based on shared detachment and displacement from both. It's draws on the ideal of the melting pot as a repertoire for identification, where cultural distinctiveness is both celebrated and transcended at the same time. A sense of exclusivity and superiority is present in the way the interviewees describe their love of being part of these international environments, which resembles the way urbanites sometimes view themselves as superior to provincials for instance. To be able to be part of, fit in and succeed you need to be open, curious and flexible.

Flexible, globally minded, cosmopolitan internationals are thus constructed as the in-group characterized by both openness and a certain degree of exclusivity and elitism at the same time as we shall explore further in later sections. As will all insider identifications it implies an exclusion of those who are deemed to be outsiders (Jenkins 2000) in this case the locals or more precisely those without international experience or experience of being part of international environments. The criteria for inclusion appear to be unusually open in the construction of a non-national identity, because the very foundation of community is difference in the first place. All kinds of difference can potentially be accepted and assimilated as long as the person in question is able to become flexible and changeable relatively quickly. This means that it is also possible to be a local by nationality, in this case Dutch, and be considered to be a non-national without having ever worked or lived anywhere else than in Amsterdam. Here is how one interviewee describes such a Dutch person:

"He has transformed into that non-nationality. I mean you spend half your life in these environments. So a Dutch person in that environment spends half their life in a non-Dutch environment."

The quote illustrates how powerful the socializing effect of these 'placeless' organizations can be and how a new non-national form of identity is fostered amongst the people that spend their working lives in these spaces.

When people from different nationalities and cultures work together and interact with each other in organizational non-places they change and collectively they set in motion processes of culture change and construction of new types of community and identity. Thus in these intensely diverse organizational non-places, some form of common internationalized culture and way of behaving and interacting can be formed where national and cultural differences appear to fade into the background and are no longer recognized as such. Except as a curiosity to celebrate and have fun with socially, i.e. the spice that makes working life more interesting as we saw it described in earlier quotes. Here is how one interviewee describes the neutralization of national differentiations:

“When you put all these nationalities together they just become one nationality almost. [...] people almost try and take away their standout cultural features. They always try and neutralize themselves. There doesn't seem to be any nationality at all. Nothing stands out. You don't think for a second about nationalities, you don't even notice them actually”.

Here we get a clear sense of the degree to which foreign-based headquarter organizations become neutralized, non-national and ‘placeless’ social spaces where national distinctions can potentially be transcended and synthesized to the point that they are seemingly no longer readily noticeable. A space for positive encounters and the resulting emergence of shared community and identity is created, while differences are maintained and celebrated to some extent.

It is however also clear from the experiences reflected in the interviews, that this is a delicate balancing act, which seems to depend on some sense of ‘equal measure’ of people from different backgrounds. Differences are most easily transcended and synthesized in situations where everyone is different and on neutral ground and thereby equal and where there is no significant majority based on culture, nationality or location. Under those conditions, foreign-based headquarter organizations can potentially foster a non-national identity amongst people with different backgrounds who interact and work together in these organizational non-places.

The neutralized characteristics of organizational non-places

Non-places constitute neutral ground where no local nationality, culture or language takes precedence (Auge, 2008). As we saw in previous section, this is experienced as key by the

interviewee. For instance in the indication that is crucial that no one national group dominates in these organizational environments, be it the local nationality or the 'home' nationality of the corporation. In 'placeless', foreign-based headquarters it is furthermore a given that international business English is the organizational language – the closest a language can come to achieving neutrality. However, there are other less obvious aspects to these neutralized characteristics.

The interviewees generally describe the international organizational environments in which they work as pleasant and characterized by respect, politeness and professional consideration related to cultural awareness.

“In an international organization you are culturally aware in a way that you are aware that some things might be offensive or hurtful to your colleagues. You know they are from a different culture so they have different values and you are, I think, much more careful with that than when being in a mono-cultural environment. There is a lot of respect for each other, because you have to work together. You know that you are different and it's actually a lot of fun that you are different. But you also have to take it on so as to make it work. It means that you have to accept differences.”

As it is experienced, international environments are characterized by respect and carefulness in relations with others, which many of the interviewees described in contrast to their experience of 'mono-cultural' environments as it is termed here. Being careful what you say and do and behaving correctly, properly and respectfully towards everyone, is high on the agenda. It is as if the constant presence and awareness of difference creates a culture of treading extremely carefully. This is part of the neutralizing effect of non-places.

Interviewees who had experienced working in a more 'mono-cultural' environment at some point during their international career, reacted quite negatively to it and described it as much less pleasant, sometimes even offensive in different ways and in most cases they decided to leave within a few months. Thus, if an organization is experienced as too German, too Dutch, too Japanese, too American etc., transnationals clearly do not feel comfortable and the organizational environment is often experienced as less respectful.

Some interviewees talked about trust in a similar vein, described in contrasting terms by referring to those you would not trust. Again it was the case that if one single national group dominates too much, the interviewees feel they wouldn't be able to trust anyone. They are in other words more inclined to trust fellow transnationals. Trust is related to in-group

identification (Jenkins 2000), but here it is not along the lines of nationality or culture as generally assumed (Ghemawat 2011). What characterizes the in-group in diverse and international environments is something quite different. Namely that ‘we’ are all different from each other and equally so, as we also saw earlier. There is a sense of being united in difference and in an identity as expats, internationals, non-locals and non-nationals.

‘Less emotional’ is another aspect of the neutralizing effects of diverse and non-national organizational environments. As one interviewee describe it:

“It’s less emotional. I don’t mean that everybody is like cold or anything, but I mean... I think when you come to that level of multinational culture, what counts in the end is basically that your communication is very clear and basically the results. You have to be very clear with the team because you are all from different cultures. You get straight to the content, no fuss, no long speeches, no nonsense. In order to talk to a team where everybody is from different cultures you probably have to strip to the core of things and there is not so much rhetoric”

We see here how the ways of communicating become generic and seemingly stripped of signifiers such as rhetorical devices. Many interviewees talked about this necessity of clear, straightforward and simple communication in diverse and international organizational environments. In a similar vein to respect and carefulness in interaction, it seems to come about through the awareness of having to communicate with people of different backgrounds and languages. You cannot assume implicit understanding and you cannot assume ability to read between the lines.

Another aspect of this experience of ‘stripping to the core’ in diverse organizational environments is less gossip, bickering and waist of time compared with other types of organizational environments. Here as described by an interviewee, who used her experience of working for a brief period in an organization dominated by people of her own nationality as a contrast:

“The environment at work was also very different. People spent 50% of their time speaking about their bosses and about colleagues and being really nagging, negative and fatalistic. And not to the point. So there was a lot of waist of time. I never experienced that in international companies. There is no time for bickering and nagging. People are more straight to the point”

Again it's about a 'straight to the point' attitude and focus on the tasks and the results. One might argue that this could be equally true of any highly professionalized organizational environment, but the generic and neutral characteristics of international environments seems to further increase the effect. The fact that this pattern is so clearly evident amongst a group of interviewees who collectively represent experiences from many different international work environments, is telling. It illustrates the characteristics of neutral, no-nonsense, 'stripped down' and non-nationalized kind of organizational environments.

Superior professionals

As we saw earlier, there is a sense of elitism to the way transnationals construct a shared identity. For instance in the way fellow transnationals are described as more flexible and open. There is however also other aspects to this elitism described in terms such as ambition, talent, individualism, hard work and drive as we shall see in the following.

“What I found in an international company like that, is that people have been pulled from all over the world because they are suppose to be good at something. And the kind of people, that are working in that environment, sometimes are very much out for themselves. Because they have made the choice to move for a career, they have made a choice to do something for themselves and to develop themselves. And so sometimes I think they can be very individualistic, not really representing their national culture.”

This individualism and drive involved in making a choice to move from your home country for your career is another aspect of what constitutes a non-national identity. There is this sense of detachment linked with a strong driving force. Another interviewee describes something similar, but here linked with how people with such a drive influence their environments:

“They drive a lot of change as well. Because normally people who are expats they are here for a reason, they are good at what they do, you know. They try to drive and change their environments a lot”

It is interesting to note that when the interviewees talk about such aspects of what characterizes their fellow transnationals they do so in abstract terms taking great care to say

‘they’ when describing their fellow transnationals. Probably because it is not generally appropriate to speak directly of ourselves in such terms and risk sounding boastful or arrogant. Thus the sense of superiority is subtle and not directly expressed but it is nevertheless clearly there. Another way of expressing it is by way of talking about the locals or non-expats, in this case Dutch employees, in contrasting terms. Locals are often seen not to possess these characteristics or fit in in this kind of high-performance environment.

“You are pretty much chained to your desk, you work insane hours and there is this work-hard, play-hard mentality. And to be perfectly honest – and I’m not being anti-Dutch here – but I don’t think the average Dutch person would want to be part of that. So from that point of view the recruitment probably sways away from the Dutch crowd.”

However, the bias against locals or non-expats is about more than just how hard they are willing to work or how driven and ambitious they are. It is about international experience, expertise and skills. Here is how another interviewee, who has just recently been recruited to a position in the European Headquarters of an American MNC, describe how the new managing director for Europe is working on changing what was previously a small and local office that was as she described it “*incredibly Dutch*”:

“Our MD hates that because he comes from Nike. So what he wants to do is... yeah his role is to bring in more international talent to start making the company more international. He wants to get rid of a lot of the local mentality. In his opinion it’s people who have been hired to do a job rather than people that have skills and expertise. Oh yeah they can do the role, but they don’t have pan-European experience, they haven’t worked in an international company. He wants people who have been working in the industry with international exposure doing multiple roles in the same sort of field.”

Here it is again quite clear that the interviewee is talking about herself and those she identifies with, namely other international talent. She has been brought in precisely as part of this move away from an ‘incredibly Dutch’ work force who have been hired to do the job, but is not seen to have what it takes. International experience is a key feature along with specialized

skills and expertise. As we saw earlier, this means that being a local, in this case Dutch, does not in itself disqualify you from being part of this community.

‘I feel the person who lives in different places’

What transnationals share is a significant detachment from both the national context where they happen to live as well as their national origin. One interviewee describe his own identity like this:

“I always denounce my nationality, or I’m European. If someone asks where I’m from, I say [name of the street in Amsterdam where he lives]. I’m not interested in the conversation. [...] I guess it’s because I don’t really identify with English people. But I’m also not Dutch at all. Absolutely not. I just don’t feel English either [...].”

He is neither English where he comes from, nor Dutch where he lives, nor anything else – at the most European. Essentially he is non-national and as ‘placesless’ as the organization where he works. The non-aspect is only part of the story however. Rather than a non-identity it is to some extent a new form of identity. One interviewee describe it as a new nationality called globalism:

“If I go home to France, the only people I can relate to are people who have also lived in other places, who have been abroad. There is this new nationality, which is globalism, you know. [...] I have a French passport, but I don’t feel French. I have lived in Holland for 15 years, but I don’t feel Dutch either. I feel the person who lives in different places – that’s who I am.”

Being a transnational implies a sacrifice of the kind of belonging to a place that the vast majority of people around the world still have. This is however mostly viewed in positive terms and functions as a repertoire for identity construction.

“I do identity myself as more of a global person rather than Australian. Because I don’t identify with the Australian sort of insular mindset anymore, I guess.”

As we see it here, the national is seen as an insular mindset as opposed to that which characterizes a ‘global person’. Here is how the same interviewee explains this further:

“I mean here [Amsterdam] is sort of home and second home being Australia and if I moved to say Singapore, that could be another home as well. I think not having that completely solidified base and not really fitting into either could be a massive... I will never be accepted as Dutch even if I lived here for the rest of my life. And if I go back to Australia I will never fit in there anymore either. So that is a big down side. But you can't go back. You almost get bored just thinking about the small-mindedness. People are very happy with their lives but you just want to rip open their blinds and say: 'see it's all out there, why don't you come out and enjoy it too'.”

Clearly being a transnational does imply a sacrifice of a particular type of belonging, but at the same time there are no regrets. On the contrary. Once home has become potentially anywhere ‘you can't go back’ as it's expressed. In fact, what the international life has given in return for the sacrifice is so cherished that it creates a strong inclination to want to share it with those that have not yet experienced it.

Thus rather than mourning the loss of stability and belonging to a place, the interviewees talk in a positive sense about being addicted to ‘placelessness’ – or in their terms addicted to change, mobility, new experiences, new challenges, new people, new places.

“You know there is not really any borders, lets say, anymore for me – everything is more fluid. [...] I don't feel English, I just feel like Katherine (synonym). You become a lot more nomadic. I feel more like home is where you are happy, rather than home is back in the UK. I wouldn't consider going back. But I also don't plan to stay.”

This particular interviewee has indeed left Amsterdam since the time of the interview and is now living and working in New York. The sense of fluidness and nomadic mentality is characteristic of many of the interviewees. There is a distinct transience to the community and the friendships within it, because people are always leaving, going to other places. But it does not seem to bother them and close friendships remain regardless. Essentially it's not a *local* community. It's a global and ‘placeless’ community, but it does nevertheless seem to be able to provide its members with some sense of belonging. The friendships for instance are described as close:

“Our friends are from all over the world, I mean we have a solid group of probably 25 close people that we are in contact with on a regular basis, you know from Russia, Spain, France, Germany, South Africa, America – just from all over. And seeing how all these likeminded individuals interact together and get along so well because we all have that sort of same mindset to see the world and live the same type of lifestyle. Travel and learn and great flexibility. [...] I’m probably closer to the friends I have made over here in a shorter amount of time because I think there is a similar thirst for knowledge, there is a wanting to know more about the world, be it from food or experiences or geography or politics or whatever.”

There is, as we see it here, a sense of sharing something that goes beyond merely being a ‘placeless’ non-national person who lives in different places. It is about being flexible as we also saw earlier and constantly wanting to learn more and experience more. Some of the interviewees talked explicitly about distinct values characterizing international people and again in a way that implies a very particular kind of elitism:

“I value international friendships much more. [...] I like the ‘lightness of being’, lets put it that way, of international people. They are not so attached to things. They are more into travelling and to know other people and to know other cultures. There is not so much materialism involved. Their values are different. People who have lived in different countries develop other common values that are different from those who have always lived just in one place where they were born”

What these common values are more precisely is difficult to decipher, but it is partly about what the experience of living in different places does to you and difference or diversity as a value in and of itself. When asking for more description in the interview situation, it typically became quite clear that the transnationals themselves do not really know how to describe what these shared values are. What can be said is that it has to do with openness, flexibility, thirst for knowing about the world, addictiveness to mobility, change and experiencing new things, detachment and ‘lightness of being’ or fluidness. All aspects of what is used to construct this particular type of elite, non-national identity.

For some, mobility itself is more a mental state of mind rather than actual, constant and never-ending physical mobility. Quite a few of the interviewees have lived in Amsterdam for a significant number of years, bought apartments or houses and settled with a partner and

eventually also children. As some transnationals ‘come of age’ so to speak, it becomes clear that they are not in effect homeless non-persons forever floating freely around the globe with no sense of place or localized belonging. Many of them are regionally confined and create roots in and identify with the city where they live and work. Metropolitan headquarter hubs provide career opportunities that cannot be found anywhere else and some of them do build their international careers by mainly moving across organizational boundaries as they progress working for different MNCs located in a specific city.

This however does not seem to influence the way they identify and relate to the context within which they live. Even those who have settled to some extent in Amsterdam still identify themselves as ‘expats’ and live quite separately from the locals, in this case the Dutch. They rarely speak Dutch, their partners and friends are typically other transnationals and their kids attend international nurseries and schools. In metropolitan places like Amsterdam they can put down some form of roots while maintaining international and non-national working and private lives. They are in other words creating new ways of being local while identifying as nomadic, ‘placeless’ and non-national.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper we have seen how a non-national identity emerges amongst a highly diverse and international group of managers and professionals brought together on neutral ground in corporate non-places. This is based on some degree of transcending, converging and synthesizing differences and becoming neutralized, generic, professionalized and devoid of nationalized identities on the one hand while at the same time characterized by a diverse and international knowledge base where differences can be used as a resource and curiosum. National and cultural differences are transcended as a non-national organizational culture, community and identity develops, while remaining important externally in dealing with different markets and other part of the global organization.

These organizational environments are both shaping and being shaped by an elite ‘tribe’ of transnational professionals who are carving out new ways of being global and local at the same time and in so doing are engaging in new ways of b/ordering space (van Houtum et al., 2005). Moore’s (2004) study of transnationals in London and Frankfurt for instance similarly illustrated how these professionals construct complex and continually changing ways of interweaving the global and the local depending on situation, needs and personal strategies. As Kennedy (2005) argues, globalizing conditions involves new forms of re-colonization of place. As we have seen in this paper global transnationals, both people and

organizations, need each other and each other's accessibility in the same locations. Although much can be, and is being, done virtually, both humans and organizations are material beings and entities in need of physical locations. Urban, international, cosmopolitan hubs in different parts of the world can provide the physical and social spaces needed in order to make organizational, cultural and personal 'placelessness', non-nationality and globalism possible.

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Appendix 1

Table – overview of interviewees

Title of interviewee	Current and previous MNC employment	Country of origin of interviewee	International experience (years)	Locations (outside home country)
Director E-commerce, Corporate Markets	Elsevier Accenture Cisco Systems WebEx	Australia	8	Amsterdam, NL
Commercial Marketing manager	Hewlett-Packard MindJet Cisco Systems Oracle	Netherlands	8	London, GB Sydney, AU Genève, CH Dublin, IE
Manager Investor Relations	TNT Express KPMG	France	12	Amsterdam, NL Luxembourg, LU
Product Life-cycle Manager, Europe	Keds Nike Converse	Great Britain	6	Amsterdam, NL
Manager Credit and Collections, EMEA	NetApp Holding ADM	Italy	14	Amsterdam, NL London, GB
Senior manager, Client Services Europe	Cisco Systems WebEx	America	7	Amsterdam, NL
Supervisor CIG Central Operations, Europe	Canon Volkswagen	Mexico	4	Amsterdam, NL Rotterdam, NL
Executive assistant to VP	Danone Canon EF	Portugal	7	Amsterdam, NL London, GB

				Geneve, SE
Internal Auditor	Constellium Staples Kerry Group KPMG	France	12	Amsterdam, NL Co. Kerry, IE Luxembourg, LU
Senior Manager Social Media Consumer Care	Phillips Canon Forrester Research	France	13	Amsterdam, NL
Global Account Manager	Cisco Systems BP	Azerbaijan	4	Amsterdam, NL
Global Business Development Manager	Cisco Systems	Canada	16	Amsterdam, NL
Relationship Marketing Manager, Central & Eastern Europe	Microsoft	Canada	4	Amsterdam, NL
Territory & partner account manager, South & sub-Saharan Africa	Juniper Networks Cisco Systems Computer Associates	Germany	7	Amsterdam, NL London, GB
Demand planning team leader, Europe	Canon Epson	Denmark	10	Amsterdam, NL London, GB
Web collaboration manager, Commercial sales	Cisco Systems WebEx	Great Britain	10	Amsterdam, NL Rotterdam, NL
Technical account manager	Cisco Systems WebEx Iggesund Paperboard	Germany	9	Amsterdam, NL
Senior manager, EMEAR sales	Cisco Systems WebEx	America	8	Amsterdam, NL

operations				
Commercial Sales Manager, Nordic region	Cisco Systems	America	5	Amsterdam, NL
Senior Marketing Intelligence consultant	EXACT Software Canon	France	23	Amsterdam, NL
Project Manager	Canon Air Products	Finland	8	Amsterdam, NL

