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Platform placemaking and the digital urban culture of Airbnbification

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Abstract

This paper develops the notion of "platform placemaking", describing how platforms mobilize user data to remake urban spatial imaginaries in their interests. Using Airbnb as a case, the paper studies the digital urban culture of "Airbnbification" – examining how Airbnb's reviews and descriptions become part of reshaping urban place, while contributing to the place alienation of long-term residents. Airbnb feeds a surge in urban tourists on the hunt for "real urban experiences": off-the-beaten-track, everyday and mundane urban life, seen as representing something "real" and "authentic". This paper situates Airbnb in the literature on postmodern consumption, and examines the way hosts and guests on Airbnb stage, perform and construct cosmopolitanism and "authentic" urban place to cater to the values of new urban tourism. The paper introduces an approach to studying digital urban culture through platform data, using computational discourse analysis to examine Airbnb in New York City. By linking narratives in reviews and neighborhood descriptions to census data, we examine how authenticity and cosmopolitanism is staged and marketed. The paper argues that Airbnb serves to promote a value system that devalues the cultural and spatial capital of long-term residents, implying that the new tourists' cosmopolitan longing to belong may thus come at the cost of the locals' own sense of belonging. The platform placemaking of Airbnb thus emphasizes urban place as a consumption experience, while depressing other ways of experiencing the city.

Keywords: Platform placemaking, New York City, Digital urban culture, Airbnbification, Spatial imaginaries, Data colonialism, Authenticity, New urban tourism, Computational discourse analysis

Science highlights

1. Platforms their mobilize users to remake spatial imaginaries.
2. Airbnb is situated in a larger postmodern shift in tourism and consumer culture.
3. This enables a touristic display of cosmopolitan cultural capital, using locals as a source of "authenticity".
4. Short-term rental thereby devalues the spatial and cultural capital of long-term residents.
5. Residents experience this through a feeling of *loss* – of belonging, community and place.

BMC

Policy and practice recommendations

1. Policymakers need consider the emotional and symbolic effects platforms such as Airbnb.
2. Policies ought to address risks for cultural displacement and place alienation.
3. Platform data extraction should be considered appropriation of community resources.

Introduction

We today increasingly experience our lives through interfaces – Google Maps, TripAdvisor, Airbnb, and so on – thus intertwining our daily tasks, routines and social practices with the code and data of digital platforms (Dodge and Kitchin 2005). This intermediation enables these platforms to engage in data commodification, value extraction, and data governance within our every-day life (Langley and Leyshon 2017). In what has been referred to as a novel form of colonialism, these platforms employ the medium of data to transform social relations into market relations, allowing capital to annex new aspects of human life (Couldry and Mejias 2020).

For cities, in particular, the rise of platforms has been transformative. A large share of the data extracted and accumulated by these platforms is location-based (Thatcher 2017; Zook and Graham 2007), thus mediating social practices that blur the distinction between spatial and digital (Kitchin and Dodge 2014). An emerging literature on "platform urbanism" describes a condition "whereby platform-based business models ensure the generation of urban data largely takes place within proprietary data ecosystems" (Barns, 2017, p. n.p). This literature highlights the centrality of the urban in this emerging form of capitalist accumulation, suggesting irreducible, co-generative dynamics between platforms and the city (Barns 2019; van Doorn 2019). Platforms are coming to "alter the conditions through which society, space, and time, and thus spatiality, are produced" (Kitchin and Dodge 2014, p. 13), using data as the new means to remake the city in capital's image (Couldry and Mejias 2020).

This paper uses Airbnb as a case of platform urbanism, and seeks to go from these abstract characterizations of "data colonialism" to their concrete implications in everyday urban life, by examining how platforms' data extraction is coming to remake spatial imaginaries. The paper theorizes and empirically examines what we will refer to as "platform placemaking": a process in which platforms mobilize their users as "discursive investors" (Zukin et al. 2017, p. 459), to shape spatial imaginaries in the interests of the platform. As platforms like Airbnb employ locational user data – in the forms of reviews, images, and descriptions – for commodifying urban place and "annexing human life directly to the economy" (Couldry and Mejias 2020, l. 926), they transform not merely the short-term rental market, but "the very fabric of city life" (van Doorn 2019, p. 2). Airbnb curates a social infrastructure that enables users to participate discursively in the process of making "place", while nudging and directing them to reshape the city in its image (Törnberg and Uitermark 2020). Airbnb thereby expands commodification not only by expanding short-term rentals into residential parts of the city and into the "private" space of the home – but also by employing user data to mobilize placemaking

to package urban communities as products for outsiders' consumption (Bialski 2017; Goyette 2021; O'Regan and Choe 2017; Stabrowski 2017). By examining this, the paper answers Sadowski's (2020) call for research on how platforms produce spaces for extraction and enclosure: if we understand platforms as a contemporary "milieu of accumulation, of growth, of commodities, of money, of capital" (Lefebvre 1991, p. 129), then we should seek to examine how they undertake the production of productive space.

Platform placemaking is an important part of what Peters (2016) refers to as 'Airbnbification': the changing socio-cultural landscape of urban neighborhoods produced by Airbnb. These include the destruction of community coherence, changing character of urban neighborhoods, and transformation of residential communities into tourist spaces – but it centrally also concerns shifting discourses and imaginaries of place (Ferreri and Sanyal 2018; Watkins 2015). As cultural geographers have long argued, language is both reflexive and generative of the social world; they can shape and direct, hurt or empower (McGeachan and Philo 2014, p. 546), as "space, time and social constructions are productive of, and produced by, languages and their usage" (Kanngieser 2012, p. 338). As Medeiros puts it, "language is the chisel with which we shape and sculpt and slice the world around us" (2010, p. 95). As platforms acquire the power to direct this chisel, questions are raised of what type of urban culture will be thus produced.

These changing spatial imaginaries impact long-term residents in concrete ways. While early research on Airbnb focused particularly on its effects on rental markets and the displacement of long-time residents, recent studies have highlighted the emotional and symbolic impacts of Airbnb. These studies point to its contribution to displacement in a broader sense: not merely physical relocation, but changes in the unique character and social identity of place (LeGates and Hartman 1981; Rozena and Lees 2021) – what gentrification scholars call 'cultural', 'indirect' or 'exclusionary' displacement (Hyra 2017; Lees et al. 2008). Recent studies have looked at the emotional effects associated to short-term rentals, and the ways in which Airbnb have alienated residents and contributed to feelings of displacement, alienation, and loss of community and identity (Pinkster 2016; Rozena and Lees 2021; Spangler 2020).

The paper thus seeks to examine how Airbnb is implicated in the discursive and symbolic dimensions of the commodification of place by examining the discourses of its platform placemaking. Like platform studies focuses on the way technical designs of platform infrastructures shape networked cultures, so we suggest the study of how the technical designs of urban platforms shape the increasingly digital cultures of cities. To study this empirically, the paper proposes a critical approach to digital data analysis, which draws on the data produced by these platforms to examine the conditions of its production, analyzed through a combination between critical discourse analysis and digital methods. To theorize how Airbnb is implicated in the discursive and symbolic dimensions of the commodification of place, we draw on the literatures of postmodern tourism and new urban tourism, which have long been interested in the symbolic commodification of place.

Using New York City as the empirical case, and drawing on reviews and listings through a "heterodox" computational social science approach (Törnberg and Uitermark 2021), we argue that the cultural logic of Airbnb is quintessential of post-modern tourism – and that literature on the staging of far-away tourism destinations as "exotic"

and "authentic" can be applied to examine the Airbnbification of residential areas at the Western "urban frontier" (Smith 2005). We find that Airbnb's tourism gentrification is founded on the commodification of a sense of belonging, marketing an authenticity founded in processes of othering, thereby serving to devalue the spatial capital of the rooted population (Jansson 2019; Rozena and Lees 2021). We will begin, however, by situating Airbnb in the emerging literature on platform urbanism.

Airbnb and platform urbanism

What distinguishes short-term rental platforms such as Airbnb from regular hotel businesses is that they do not own rental real estate, but instead act brokers between those with space to rent and those looking for short-term lodgings. Airbnb thus leverages the real estate assets of a multitude of companies and individuals, without actually owning any housing stock. Seeking to align themselves with progressive movements for urban change, Airbnb regularly presents their role as enabling "home sharing", which "puts money into the pockets of regular people" (Hickey and Cookney 2016, n.p). More realistically, the platform role affords important business advantages: acting as intermediary between producers and consumers means that Airbnb can collect commissions on market transactions with relatively low fixed and variable costs (Sadowski 2020). The role furthermore provides important competitive advantages to hotels, by shifting responsibility for taxes and regulations onto "hosts" – while simultaneously refusing to share host information, suing governments and tax agencies, and wielding their user community as a lobbying power to fight stringent regulation (Törnberg 2021). In this sense, Airbnb operates as a "regulatory entrepreneur": its innovation and competitive advantage lies in a scheme which grants plausible deniability, while it functions to provide real estate capital a vehicle to bypass, fight and litigate public regulations (Pollman and Barry 2016; van Doorn 2019).

The Airbnb business model has become ubiquitous in recent years, defined by companies which do not provide product or services, but rather own and manage proprietary "multi-sided" markets which connect buyers and sellers (Langley and Leyshon 2017). This platform model has become so dominant in the contemporary economy that scholars have described an emerging "platform capitalism" (Srnicek 2017), "platform society" (van Dijck et al. 2018), "digital capitalism" (Schiller 1999), or "surveillance capitalism" (Foster and McChesney 2014; Zuboff 2019). While neoliberalism sought the annexation of new fields by the market, digital capitalism can be understood as seeking the annexation of the market itself by private companies (Staab 2019). Such proprietary markets generate profits by owners leveraging their intermediary position to function as rentiers of the digital economy (Sadowski 2020), while acquiring significant power to organize and control these markets.

The growth of platforms is however also linked to their capacity to use their intermediary position to extract digital data. Data has grown into the defining commodity of contemporary capitalism, with the literature describing a mode of capitalist accumulation organized around its capturing, processing, and monetization (Couldry and Mejias 2020; Cukier and Mayer-Schoenberger 2013).

The value of data relies on its capacity to capture, analyze, predict and control the social world, thereby enabling the annexation of new aspects of human life into

capitalism – "liquifying" areas previously inaccessible to capital and expand the production resources available to capital (Van Dijck 2014; see also Lohr 2015). Couldry and Mejias (2020) describe this as a "data colonialism", in which human life, rather than natural resources and labor, have become the subject of colonial appropriation. Through data, everyday life is abstracted, quantified, and dispossessed: just as industrial capitalism employed the medium of money to transform all economic relations into market relations, so digital capitalism employs the medium of data to transform social relations into market relations. Data colonialism thus goes beyond neoliberalism by annexing human life directly to the economy and reorganizing it fundamentally in the process. Whereas neoliberalism was at war with the parts of social life that remained outside the market, data colonialism simply appropriates all of life for markets (Couldry and Mejias 2020).

The literature on digital and platform capitalism has recently begun to recognize the centrality of the urban in the platform economy, as platforms and urban space are co-constituted and geospatial dimensions are ubiquitous in data representations. "Platform urbanism" has thus become an important field of research, examining the entanglement between platforms and the city – and the governance of the latter by the former. Through their data extraction, platforms should be understood not only to transform markets or transactions, but as to reconstitute the very "perceptual fabric of space, a fabric that knits socio-spatial practices into something we have come to think of as 'the urban'" (Barns 2019, p. 56). The urban ambitions of platforms such as Airbnb are thus significantly broader than providing short-term rentals; as (van Doorn 2019, p. 2) argues, "Airbnb aims to co-shape the terms of current and future policy debates pertaining not just to home sharing/short-term rental but also to the very fabric of city life".

As digital platforms are coming to redefine urbanity, urban space can no longer be treated as merely spatial: the social practices associated to digital media – checking in, posting stories, taking selfies – blur, if not erase, the line between the spatial and the digital (Gordon and e Silva 2011; Graham and Zook 2013). As data and code become part of the very infrastructure through which spatiality is produced, urban space itself is becoming "hybrid" (De Souza e Silva 2006) or "digiplace" (Zook and Graham 2007). Data extraction and its commodifying capacities are hence coming to seep into the very production of urban space (Törnberg and Uitermark 2022).

However, while these literatures provide the central conditions and outlines of this emerging platform urbanism, as (Leszczynski 2020, p. 190) recently noted, "platforms are not first and foremost ecosystems of value extraction and capital accumulation, but rather of mundane connectivity and interaction". Understanding platform urbanism requires an understanding of platform urbanism as a phenomenon of the urban everyday; urging a move from the abstract to the concrete. While it is becoming clear that digital capitalism is in the process of remaking cities in the image of capital, "as of yet, we are unsure as to what kind of urban culture this may produce" (Kitchin et al. 2017, p. 27).

The literature on platforms like Airbnb does gives important clues. Significant research has explored Airbnb's impact on cities and tourism, focusing in particular impact on rental markets (Barron et al. 2018); (Horn and Merante 2017), racial biases (Edelman et al. 2017; Kakar et al., 2016; Kakar et al. 2018; Leong and Belzer 2016), links to gentrification and displacement (Cox, 2017; Gant, 2016; Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018), as well as

on effects on traditional businesses and labor (Guttentag, 2015; Oskam & Boswijk, 2016; Zervas et al. 2017).

Recent literature has also begun to also emphasize the effects on urban culture, focusing on how the marketing of private homes and everyday local residential life as a consumption experience has implications for the wellbeing of long-term residents. Airbnb drives socio-cultural changes described as an amalgamation between gentri-fication and touristification, captured under the concept of "Airbnbification" (Peters 2016; Rozena and Lees 2021). Airbnbification shifts the focus from physical displace-ment to "indirect displacement", in which the character and social identity of place is shifted, driving residential alienation, disruption and erasure of long-term communities (Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2019; Freytag and Bauder 2018; Spangler 2020). Complaints from residents concern feelings of unease and a sense of loss – loss of belonging or of "feeling at home" in their neighborhood (Colomb and Novy 2016; Pinkster and Boterman 2017; Richardson 2015).

The suggestion of this paper is that Airbnb's data extraction is part of driving the place alienation and indirect displacement associated to Airbnbification, by mobilizing a shift in the spatial imaginaries of urban place. Our focus here is to examine what type of urban culture this shift produces. To theorize this, we turn to viewing Airbnb through the literature on new urban tourism and postmodern consumption – which has long been interested in the symbolic consumption of urban place – to theorize how Airbnb's data colonialism symbolically and culturally shapes the city in capital's image.

Airbnb and new urban tourism

The literature on urban tourism of the 80 s and 90 s studied a modernist tourism with clear boundaries between tourism and everyday urban life. In this form of tourism, par-ticular cities and places became tourist destinations – "tourist cities" (Judd and Fain-stein 1999) like Las Vegas or Venice, within which tourism was further concentrated to particular areas – "tourist bubbles" (Judd and Fainstein 1999) or "enclavic tourist spaces" (Edensor 2008) – enclosed and regulated urban areas within which tourist activities were focused and its effects on the urban fabric most easily observed (Selby 2004). Tour-ism was thus seen as isolated from urban everyday life, producing commodified hyper-real "non-places" within these bubbles, focused around events and iconic architecture, but with limited connection to the rest of urban life (Novy 2010). The effects of tourism were positioned within the larger homogenizing and standardizing impact of globali-zation. This was epitomized in Sorkin's (1992) notion that global consumerism would replace local particularities with theme park versions of themselves: a "Disneyfication" which would imply a simultaneous decontextualization and homogenization, as this was required for the successful packaging and marketing of places as universally consumable products (Zukin 1993).

The postmodern shift in consumption constituted a consumer rejection of this form of tourism – critical of what was seen as an inauthentic and unethical form of con-sumption. This transformation was part of a shifting role of consumers, who could no longer be content with the homogeneous mass-consumerism of the previous era (Gart-man 2004), but now was to take on the project of constructing a lifestyle, that is, to dis-play their consumer individuality through an assemblage of goods, clothes, practices,

experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions (Featherstone 1987; Giddens 1991). Consumer goods became like words in a language, which postmodern consumers use to tell stories about themselves, to be read and classified in terms of taste and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1993). Urban place was increasingly brought into this symbolic marketplace, where it was given a value as a cultural commodity, thus becoming like any other post-industrial consumer product (Zukin 1989, 2009).

With this shift, the boundary between tourism and everyday urban life – once clear and well-defined – has become increasingly blurred. This commodification of urban place is changing how we visit and relate to the city, expressed in cities around the world seeing a surge in a type of tourism that emphasizes "real urban experiences": leaving the beaten-track tourist attractions for the everyday and mundane activities of urban life (Sequera and Nofre 2018). These places and activities are seen as markers of the *real* and *authentic* (Maitland 2010), which are central values in what has been called "new urban tourism" (Frisch et al. 2019; Novy 2010). These tourists seek the consumption of local amenities in diverse and ethnic neighborhoods – what Maitland (2007) refers to as "new tourism areas". This transition is thus part of a broader shift towards longing for authenticity in current consumer culture (Gilmore & Pine, 2007), constituting a reaction against passive consumerism and commodification, which is interlinking with contemporary cities increasingly turning toward tourism as a means of economic development (Gotham 2005, 2018).

New urban tourism is part of a broader shift of capitalism in which symbolic capital has grown ever more important as a basis for monopoly rents (Harvey 2012). The value of products in other words increasingly draws on their discursive dimensions, in which the capacity to tell stories within which "authenticity, originality, uniqueness, and special un-replicable qualities looms large", serving to "ground their claims to the uniqueness that yields monopoly rent" (Harvey 2012, p. 104). As capital seek the monopoly rents that derive from depicting commodities as incomparable, the "branding" of cities becomes big business, having significant drawing power upon the flows of both tourists and capital.

This shift importantly concerns the power of collective symbolic capital – a power within the hegemonic classificatory struggle over taste, which sets the logic of the cultural realm, and the rate of conversion into economic capital (Bourdieu 2011; Featherstone 1987). While Bourdieu did not include place in his forms of capital, later authors have expanded on his work to include a role for place (Centner 2008; Pred 1984; Veenstra 2007). Centner's (2008) notion of "spatial capital" captures the way in which urban place is related to these symbolic struggles, using Lefebvre (1991) to expand on Bourdieu (1986), by adding the ability of different groups to access, appropriate and define urban places and neighborhoods as a distinct form of capital. In this way, the symbolic conflicts over place concern the ability of locals and visitors right to feel a sense of belonging, speaking to the notion of the "right to the city" (Harvey 2012). What is marketed is not only a visit to a neighborhood – but a construction and staging of what the neighborhood *is*. As the concept of "cultural displacement" (Abramson et al. 2006; Hyra 2015) highlights, this can lead to reduced attachment to place, as the cultural understanding of the neighborhood changes so profoundly that residents no longer recognize or identify with their home (Maly 2011; Zukin 2009).

Airbnb's product is quintessential of new urban tourism. This can be seen in its marketing of the idea to "live like a local", and claims of providing an alternative to impersonal and mass-produced travel (Roelofsen and Minca 2018). Airbnb presents themselves as an alternative to mass-produced and impersonal travel experiences, by offering the experience of sleeping, living, and feeling "belonging" in the spaces where "real life" supposedly takes place. According to an Airbnb-conducted poll (cited in Sans and Quaglieri 2016), 96% of Airbnb guests want to live "like a local" during their stay. As Sans and Quaglieri (2016) argue, Airbnb appears as a field for the "cosmopolitan consuming class" (Fainstein et al. 2003, Judd 2003). By blurring the distinction between residential and tourist areas, Airbnb claims to offer integration in local neighborhoods and access to every-day life. This is in part enabled by the platform's capacity to leverage legal grey zones and its policy entrepreneurship to by-pass zoning regulations and thus expand the hospitability industry into residential areas (Gurran and Phibbs 2017).

Focusing on the Airbnb as a platform marketing new urban tourism suggests that Airbnb should be understood not merely as a proprietary market for short-term rentals, but simultaneously as a site for the production and "staging" of urban place as a post-modern consumer product. Airbnb's product is not merely released "'latent space' within existing buildings" (Barns 2019, p. 81) but a cultural product of community, belonging, and authenticity. Correspondingly, Airbnb is not merely the owner of a proprietary market, but of a user "community" that carry out the staging and production of this cultural product. Airbnb mobilizes its users to become "discursive investors" (Bronsvoort and Uitermark 2020; Zukin et al. 2017) and to carry out the discursive work necessary to package place as an attractive postmodern product. The focus on data extraction thus shifts the attention to Airbnb as an interface for the symbolic marketplace of the city, driving changes in the cultural lives of cities by bringing new aspects of urban life into market relations.

In what we will refer to as "platform placemaking", Airbnb thus stages and frames urban place as desirable postmodern consumer products. This concept draws on the notion of "placemaking", which designates the social, political, and material processes by which people experience places, emphasizing that places are constructed through social negotiation and contestation (Pierce et al. 2011). Residents, organizations, and social movements seek to frame places (Martin 2003) in ways that assert a particular neighborhood identity, emphasizing certain characteristics of residents and the landscape in ways that capture their experiences or support their interests. The capacity to define, describe, or characterize a place and its community constitutes an important form of power, as place identity holds a central role in supporting and driving activities and political agendas (Martin 2003). Geographers have in particular examined mass-media's power to define and shaping such place identities, based on their hegemony to shape discourses of place (e.g., Beauregard 2013; Brown-Saracino and Rumpf 2011; Martin 2000). The here proposed notion of platform placemaking goes beyond this form of power by pointing to the novel form of control over placemaking processes embodied by digital platforms (Törnberg and Uitermark 2020). Just as Airbnb provides a market for its rental property, it mobilizes and curates a community for discursive production: reviews, listing descriptions and photographs, which are curated to form an 'interactive lifestyle magazine' through which users can window-shop for urban place that fits their particular

lifestyle assemblage. By controlling the social infrastructure, Airbnb can steer the discourse through subtle nudging and technical designs. For 'guests', Airbnb frames reviewing as an interpersonal message to the host, as well as a contribution to the community good. As economic investors, 'hosts' become also *discursive* investors, driven to support the imaginaries of Airbnbification. The discursive power is far from evenly distributed among hosts – just as the Airbnb market is highly dominated by a small number of professional hosts, so is the discursive production of place dominated by these influential users, who claim the lion share of the visibility.

Airbnb thereby partly resolves the fundamental contradiction that "the marketing itself tends to destroy the unique qualities [that] provide a basis for monopoly rent" (Harvey 2012, p. 104): hosts are engaged to tell a story of a place, of which they, their home, their belonging, their 'local life', and their community is part of the product – cast as authentic, original, unique, and un-replicable, in Harvey's (2012) terms. While social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter extract user data for advertising revenue, Airbnb leverage user data to stage and commodify urban place. The intersection of latent real estate and user reviews is thus a concrete embodiment of the intersection between financialization and datafication at which Airbnb operates.

We now turn to the question of how to empirically examine what type of spatial imaginaries this produces, through the examination of user data.

Methodology

The study is carried out on data gathered from InsideAirbnb (Cox 2015), on October 2, 2017, covering the period January 2015 to September 2017. InsideAirbnb is a non-commercial database which uses web scrapers to regularly collect data on listings and reviews from Airbnb.com. The data source thus provides useful basis for studying Airbnb, and has been used by a large number of research studies (e.g., Gutiérrez et al. 2017; Kakar et al. 2016). InsideAirbnb provides access to listings, their geographic location, information on hosts, associated reviews, price per night, and much more. The data used here concern the database of the listings in New York City, as well as the database of the guest reviews associated to these listings, linked through a unique listing identification number. As this is publicly available data, no personal information is stored or described, and users agree to making this data public, no ethical issues are identified in relation to this analysis. To protect user privacy, user quotes within this paper will not be attributed.

The InsideAirbnb data is furthermore combined with the 2016 American Community Survey (ACS) demographic, economic and housing estimates data on high-resolution census-area level (referred to as Neighborhood Tabulation Areas or NTA.) This allows linking words and discourses in the textual data with survey data, showing how different neighborhood properties are described and marketed in the data. Listings were linked to NTAs using their location coordinates to allow for comparison between census and Airbnb data. A limitation should here be noted. Airbnb adds noise to the geolocation data in the form of a spatial offset by up to 150 m in a random radial direction, in part to prevent governments from identifying the identity of the host. This means that listings located close to the boundary between two NTAs risk being misclassified (the probability of which depends on their distance to the boundary – 50% chance if they are

exactly on the boundary, 25% chance if they are 75 m from the boundary, and so on), thus effectively blurring the NTA boundary lines. Such blurring ends up capturing the fact that houses located on the boundaries between two neighborhoods will be shaped by both neighborhoods: the characteristics of both neighborhoods will be reflected in the descriptions and reviews here studied. As the scrambling is random and independent, it furthermore does not systematically bias the analysis, but it does mean that some listings will be misclassified as part of a neighboring NTA, constituting a limitation to be considered.

The academic study of the type of platform data used in this article has grown exponentially in recent years, spawning new disciplines such as Computational Social Science and Urban Science which view such data as "traces" of social behavior, capable of throwing light on patterns of social life (Lazer et al. 2020). These disciplines have however been subject of significant social scientific critique, targeting their tendency to approach social science as a form of data analytics (Marres 2017), while ignoring "the metaphysical aspects of human life (concerned with meanings, beliefs, experiences)" (Kitchin 2014, p. 8). In contrast to this, we here adopt what Törnberg and Uitermark (2021) refer to as a "heterodox" approach to urban platform data, viewing digital data not as representations of the world, but as extracted commodities whose critical examination can be informative of the processes that produce them. By examining Airbnb data through a critical pluralist methodology, we thus here seek to leverage medium-specific and surface-level observations for the critical examination of the cultural logic of platform urbanism.

This has three epistemic implications: first, in relation to platform data, it emphasizes conflicts, power and meaning-making processes, viewing platform data not as "raw traces" (Conte et al. 2012), but as performative and meaning-laden (Marres 2017; Törnberg and Uitermark 2021). The paper therefore employs digital data in a way that "emphasizes context, clarity and critique over the automatic identification of large-scale pattern" (Törnberg and Törnberg 2018). Second, in relation to the city, the approach builds on scholars such as Walter Benjamin and Henri Lefebvre's views on the relationship between the city and its representation in media, in seeing platform mediatization not as separate from the urban experience, but rather the two as inextricably intertwined (Couldry and Hepp 2018; Kang 2014; Thrift and Amin 2002). In other words, what takes place on digital urban platforms should be understood as part and parcel of contemporary urban life (Törnberg and Uitermark 2022). Finally, it suggests the methodological use of a computational text analysis to support interpretation in retroductive dialogue with a theoretical exploration in combination with automated text analytic methods (Byrne 2002; Nelson 2020).

This content analysis was carried out through the epistemic lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), employing computational methods to enable analysis of the large-scale corpus, in line with the approach developed in Törnberg and Törnberg (2015, 2016). CDA is a sprawling research program (Wodak and Meyer 2009) studying "the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (Van Dijk 2001, p. 352). This comes from the perspective that cultural and discursive aspects cannot be completely separated from the economic or political dimensions; as JanMohamed (1985) puts it, there is a "profound symbiotic relationship between the discursive and the material practices of imperialism"

(p.64). In the context of this study, discourse analysis allows us to see the larger power structures within which Airbnb engages in the production of urban space.

This analysis approach was supported by using custom-developed methods built in Python and PostgreSQL. These computational methods were used to provide an overview and to navigate the material, drawing on random samples of listings and review from high- and low-income neighborhoods for qualitative analysis. The quantitative and computational methods were applied with the aim of supporting rather than supplanting interpretation, by focusing on capturing patterns as well as identifying samples for close-reading. Characteristic patterns of high- and low-income neighborhoods were identified using computational methods, drawing from these patterns further sample of posts for the qualitative analysis (Nelson 2020). In the following analysis, the findings from this discourse analysis are discussed together with illustrative quotes. Two custom-made computational text analysis methods were applied in order to identify typical terms associated to poor neighborhoods. First, words were sorted by their association to poverty by taking the average ACS-defined neighborhood poverty rate of the neighborhood over each use of the term. The resulting list sorts all words by their association to neighborhood poverty – from high to low. Second, the most overrepresented words, in terms of Log-Likelihood, of the tertile of NTAs with the highest level of poverty was compared to the rest of the material. This results in a list of words that are most typical for the poorest neighborhoods.

New York City is Airbnb's third largest market, representing more than US$650 million in host revenue per year (Wachsmuth and Weisler 2018). At the time of the collection of the database, Airbnb in New York had 44,317 listings, owned by 37,108 hosts, which had had received a total of 801,784 reviews by 703,685 reviewers. The distribution of Airbnb listings compared to traditional hotels in different cities have been subject to some debate (see e.g. Alizadeh et al. 2018; Gurran and Phibbs 2017; Gutiérrez et al. 2017; Quattrone et al. 2016). For New York City, Airbnb's supply of listings is focused on areas outside the most central parts of the city, in particular Brooklyn, while traditional hotels are strongly centered on Manhattan – with "83 percent of New York City's hotel rooms" (New York City Department of City Planning 2017, p. 21). "Super-gentrified" (Lees 2003) Williamsburg dominates (3,073 listings, 69,782 reviews), followed by Bedford-Stuyvesant (2,592 listings, 67,606 reviews) and Bushwick (1,704 listings, 34,122 reviews) – both in the process of rapid gentrification. The locations of Airbnb's listings in New York may in part be explained by the city's zoning regulations, which do not allow traditional hotels in residentially zoned areas.

Results and analysis

Being an experienced traveler

To examine the cultural value system that characterizes the way Airbnb discursively produces space, we begin by examining what guests emphasize about their experiences in their reviews, as this speaks to what they see as being culturally valued by the community. A central theme for the reviews is narratives that describe the reviewer meeting a difference, being exposed to the risk of feeling unsafe or of not fitting in, but ultimately being able to overcome this challenge. The notion of an "experienced traveler" is taken

to imply the ability to navigate difference, and being able to "fit in" to various contexts, competently interacting with local people.

This can be related to Giddens's (1991, p. 190) notion of a "cosmopolitan person": a person who draws strength from being at home in a variety of contexts. The cosmopolitan person is able to negotiate the fragmentation of identities associated to the consumerist society, which implies the ability to make use of diversity to create a distinctive self-identity. As rigid and fixed identities have been replaced by a fluid multiplicity of signs, this requires weaving together elements from different settings into an integrated narrative (Beck et al. 1994). Cosmopolitanism thus implies, and enables, "an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other" (Hannerz 1990, p. 239): being faced by differences, without being overcome by it. Cosmopolitanism is thus both a competence, needed to "make one's way within other cultures and countries" (Szerszynski and Urry 2006, p. 114), while at the same time being a form of "cultural capital", used by the middle classes to distance themselves from those who lack this good taste, through the consumption of difference (Hage 2012). Signs of a cosmopolitan value system are ubiquitous in reviews on Airbnb:

> *"Bed Stuy got quite a reputation. ...There are not many tourists in the area so will stand out as a newcomer as soon as you step out of the subway or the Über [sic]. That said we did not have any trouble during the week we stayed here. People were in general helpful and greeted us with a warm smiles on the streets. I will recommend this area for experienced travelers who are comfortable with getting around in big cities and curious on seeing other parts of New York." (Guest review).*

As exemplified in this review, reviewers commonly describe stories in which they interact with locals and friendly neighbors, which emphasize and demonstrate their ability to meet difference. Such "interaction" – which may often be more aptly described as *gazing* (Urry and Larsen 2011) – is seen as a way of breaking out of the tourist bubble: it is framed as moving beyond touristic relationships and into something *real* and *authentic*. Not all meetings with difference, however, are positive, as certain events are difficult to bring into the narrative frame of successfully overcoming of a challenge. These instead results in feelings of unease or fear with "a different kind of difference", one that is not alluringly exotic but perceived as hostile (Snee, 2013). This is the foundation for the ambiguous relationship to difference that is at the heart of post-tourist consumption.

It appears the cosmopolitan values distilled in the marketing slogan "belonging anywhere" can be found also in the community discourses on Airbnb. Reviews reveal the value of being cosmopolitan, defined by the ability to face and overcome difference, which implies that that they see themselves as speaking to a community of users that value cosmopolitan cultural capital.

Staging cosmopolitan place through the other

As places are used to acquire cosmopolitan cultural capital through touristic narratives of exploration, they become symbols, seen as "containing" experiences that can be incorporated into one's identity (Desforges 2000). Places are not simply "out there", waiting to be consumed – they need to be constructed through story-telling that bring into being a particular sort of place and its people. The symbolic work carried out by guests and

hosts on Airbnb is therefore to stage place as cosmopolitan. Since cosmopolitanism is related to the overcoming of difference, its display is dependent on having a difference to overcome (Edensor 2000). Difference thus becomes something desirable, and therefore, it needs to be found, constructed, or a mix between the two – it is, as Elsrud (2001) argues, central to the value and meaning of urban place. Difference creates an authenticity that is the foundational value of modern tourism, similar to the "concern for the sacred in primitive society" (MacCannell 1973, p. 590). The staging of authenticity is dependent on the staging of a difference to overcome, but it is a particular type of difference: a difference that has been packaged and sanitized for cosmopolitan symbolic consumption.

This staging and framing of place is carried out by both guests and hosts. While guests and hosts differ significantly in terms of interests and subject positions, their framings of neighborhoods are often strikingly similar, as both are discursively invested in describing the neighborhood as an attractive consumption experience (Bronsvoort and Uitermark 2020). Hosts often describe neighborhoods as embodying an authenticity or realness inherent in diversity, requiring cosmopolitan capacities for its appreciation:

"Our neighborhood is culturally and socio-economically diverse. This means that you'll see folks from many, many backgrounds. This is not a neighborhood that's full of hipster-Brooklyn college age kids (though they are welcome to stay here), and we don't have bourgeois coffee shops or fancy vegan shops either. If that's what you're looking for please stay somewhere else. Instead, if you're willing to stay in a place where the real folks live, this is exactly the space for you" (Host neighborhood description).

For guests, the challenge and perceived risk of meeting difference enables drawing a boundary between oneself and other tourists – separating the "traveler" from the mere "tourist" (MacCannell 1973). Tourists are seen as diluting the "authenticity" of the local experience – much in line with Brown-Saracino's (2010) characterization of how gentrifiers construct distinctions and draw symbolic boundaries between one another.

> *"The neighboorhood is industrial but rapidly gentrifying. We kinda liked it: not pretty, but lots of new (hipster) bars, restaurants and vintage/thrift shops. Very well located from the L line subway. A really different side of NY compared to most touristic areas." (Guest review).*

As Elsrud (2001) argues, in this form of tourism, places thus acquire their symbolic value through images of otherness – boundaries of difference that can be cast as providing a perceived risk and adventure to a travel narrative. Just as tourist use pre-established notions of places in order to understand places by comparing them with what they know (Urry 2002), Rapport (1995) argued pre-established stereotypes help tourists to "make sense" of their contact with the other: positioning both the tourist and the person that the tourist encounters (Featherstone 2007).

This formula for staging cosmopolitanism through otherness has come to produce a type of tourism that finds authenticity in urban deprivation (Mowforth et al. 2007). This can been seen in the growth of phenomena described by concepts such as "slum tourism", "dark tourism", "disaster tourism", or "poverty tourism" (Dürr and Jaffe 2012; Frenzel et al. 2012, 2015; Frisch 2012; Lennon and Foley 2002; Sharpley 2005), involving the casting of poverty, deprivation and violence as sources of commodifiable difference, by

packaging them as tourism products. Deprivation thus becomes a source of something "real", to be used in the staging of authenticity. This constructs an image of a "cosmopolitan place", which may be economically poor – but is "real", and rich in terms of "community" and "diversity".

> "The neighborhood is transitional, but all the neighbors were very nice, we loved how on a warm evening everyone was sitting on their stoops, kids playing, a real neighborhood!" (Guest review).

> "There are singles, children, families, and elderly of all ethnic backgrounds who live in the community, which is vibrant and welcoming." (Host neighborhood description).

In the narratives told in Airbnb reviews and neighborhood descriptions, a particular cosmopolitan status is thus associated to poor and disenfranchised neighborhoods, as the locus of the authentic and real. To explore this relationship, we combined the ACS data with host neighborhood descriptions, to identify what words are most strongly associated to low and high-poverty neighborhoods. The results are shown in Table 1. This table reveals the tension between the longing for, and the fear of the "other": poor areas are described both through a narrative of risk and danger – *intimidating, danger, gritty, dodgy, unsafe, sketchy, edgy* – but also to life, authenticity, and vibrancy – *artists, culture, diversity, creative, authentic*. The *gritty* and *edgy* carries cultural value, given the

Table 1 This table lists the words used in the listing neighborhood description sorted by the words' "poverty", defined as the average share of the households living in poverty in the neighborhood, according to the ACS definition, in which the word is used over all word occurrences. Left half of this table shows the "richest" words, and the right half shows the "poorest" words. Place and person names were removed, and only words occurring more than 100 times are included. These are split between content appearing in hosts' neighborhood descriptions, and in guest reviews. "Nr" shows the number of occurrences. "Pov" shows the average rate of households living below the poverty line in the neighborhoods where the word is used

"Richest" words						"Poorest" words					
Description	Pov	Nr	*Reviews*	Pov	Nr	*Descriptions*	Pov	Nr	*Reviews*	Pov	Nr
luxury	9.6	535	*theatres*	6.7	373	*barrio*	26.1	103	*murals*	23.5	102
theaters	9.7	129	*theaters*	7.1	716	*murals*	24.3	178	*gentrification*	23.5	217
designer	10.1	173	*doormen*	7.7	740	*generations*	22.8	109	*graffiti*	23.5	244
promenade	10.1	168	*promenade*	8.2	417	*changing*	22.1	184	*latino*	23.3	268
comedy	10.1	396	*museums*	10.0	2,301	*gentrifying*	22.1	101	*jewish*	23.2	157
metropolitan	10.8	119	*centrally*	11.2	4,026	*police*	22.0	210	*spanish*	23.1	909
finest	11.2	226	*district*	11.2	3,921	*artist*	21.8	205	*hispanic*	22.9	178
desirable	11.2	279	*gay*	11.2	108	*soul*	21.6	251	*gentrified*	22.0	386
greek	11.4	206	*nespresso*	11.3	323	*gentrification*	21.6	144	*intimidating*	22.0	283
cobble	11.4	165	*landmarks*	11.4	390	*bodegas*	21.6	342	*dominican*	21.9	217
stone	11.5	182	*memorial*	11.5	671	*colorful*	21.6	104	*habitants*	21.7	147
sightseeing	11.6	106	*unbeatable*	12.1	1,269	*gentrified*	21.0	133	*danger*	21.5	189
safest	11.6	281	*shopping*	12.2	10,014	*caribbean*	21.0	508	*dodgy*	21.4	151
tourist	11.7	415	*attractions*	12.2	5,939	*social*	20.8	164	*african*	21.4	152
choice	11.7	119	*fingertips*	12.3	218	*gallery*	20.8	213	*unsafe*	21.4	1,845
european	11.7	130	*wholefoods*	12.3	294	*black*	20.8	180	*sketchy*	21.1	871

right packaging, as it can be taken to reveal the cosmopolitan capacities of the traveler (Zukin 2009).

In this packaging, cosmopolitan place become represented through familiar signs of urban poverty that circulate globally through popular culture. As Urry (2002) argues, tourists use signs acquired from travel discourses to navigate and read the landscape, comparing what they see with pre-established notions of places in order to draw pleasure from being somewhere out of the ordinary. Thus, certain symbols function as aesthetic markers of urban poverty, and thus often indirectly of authenticity. As tourism mobilizes places by drawing them into systems of dissemination and representation, these become global imaginaries (Dürr and Jaffe 2012). Race is inextricably linked to this symbolic system, being entangled in a territorial ideology within which *blackness* has come to mean "authentic urbanity", and "authentic urbanity" to mean *poverty*, *danger* and *excitement* (Hyra 2017; Short 1999). As Table 1 shows, poverty is intimately linked to both danger and a sense of community, excitement, and authenticity. The expressions and aesthetics of poverty are made recognizable as symbols of cosmopolitan authenticity and realness.

This conception of the *other* as humble, simple, basic, and authentic can be linked to historic tropes of European expansion and colonization. It can be traced to ideas of the "natural" native, "traditional life"; and the simple "happy native" (O'Reilly 2006), and in particular the Romanticist notion of the "noble savage", embodying the indigene, outsider, wild human; one who has not been "corrupted" by civilization, and can therefore represent humanity's innate goodness. This contains both a romanticized notion of that which was lost through the civilizing process, while at the same time being part of a civilized/uncivilized narrative central to the defense of colonial atrocities (Elias 1978). This points to an inherent paradox, identified by Wang (2000, p. 138), in that there is both nostalgia for a simpler and more authentic way of life but also confidence that home nations are "superior" and more "civilized" – the other is *authentic*, *colorful,* and *vibrant*, but also *unkempt*, *intimidating,* and *dangerous*.

Otherness as an aesthetic

Cosmopolitanism over time goes from being a rejection of the inauthenticity of homogeneous mass-consumption, to itself becoming reduced to a mass-produced aesthetic. Digital platforms like Airbnb are mobilizing this homogenization, driving a convergence on a particular type of harmonized cosmopolitan taste. The real and authentic becomes replaced by the symbolism of the "real" and "authentic", itself becoming represented through familiar signs that circulate globally through popular culture. Tourists use signs acquired from travel discourses to navigate and read the landscape, comparing what they see with pre-established notions of places, and so certain symbols come to function as aesthetic markers of cosmopolitanism, and of authenticity (Urry 2002). Cosmopolitan place thereby becomes defined by a certain aesthetics, associated to certain symbols that are seen as a capturing a "cosmopolitan flair". Cosmopolitanism becomes represented by a number of stand-in symbols, integrated into a symbolic economy and part of a consumer lifestyle (Szerszynski and Urry 2006; Zukin 1996).

As Airbnb's "post-tourists" (Feifer et al. 1985) escape the perceived artificiality and placelessness of urban center tourist bubbles, they wander "off-the-beaten-track" on the search for "alternative public spaces" (Richards 2011), "creative urban areas" (Pappalepore 2010) or "ethnic precincts" (Collins 2007) characterized by this harmonized symbolic system.

> *"I wanted to experience what real New York locals live like, so we got this place with Hollis. She was very nice and accommodating! Really cool lady for sure. The place is a historic brownstone built in the 1800s. Really cool! The neighborhood is gritty and still authentic Brooklyn. You have to adjust if you aren't used to the city life. Very vibrant and a melting pot." (Guest review).*

> *"This area is well-suited for travelers who want the authentic New York experience. Perfect for any palette- Jamaican bakeries, hipster coffee shops, asian restaurants, 24/7 bodegas, bars, and organic grocery stores" (Host neighborhood description).*

The aesthetics of these "cosmopolitan places" is often associated to that of former working-class and post-industrial inner-city neighborhoods, often ethnically mixed and characterized by small retail (in New York in particular represented by the "bodega"), and whose residents tend to be poor, non-white, and immigrants (Judd 2003). This urban imaginary is associated to a "gritty", "rough" or "edgy" flair, helping to speak to a sense of risk that is central to the narrative of the new tourist as an adventurous explorer of the urban frontier (Zukin 2009).

> *"In summary, great spot, brilliant people, and a very genuine 'Bohemian Brooklyn' experience…there's not many of these left any more!!" (Guest review).*

The irony of the hunt for difference, is thus that that in the end, everything looks the same, converging on a form of "Airbnb aesthetic": faux-artisanal symbols of minimalism, with reclaimed wood and industrial lightning, with a sprinkling of specific cultural symbols of a place, signifying the local type of difference (Chayka 2016). This aesthetics describes the cultural lens through which urban place is consumed.

Figure 1 shows a word cloud of the words most statistically overrepresented in the neighborhood descriptions for the third of neighborhoods in New York with highest level of poverty, capturing this imaginary of the cosmopolitan flair. As can be seen, the aesthetic of this form of urban tourism is similar to that of gentrification – both emphasizing the same creative and gritty aesthetics – and are thus associated to the "creative class" (Florida 2005) or a "neo-bohemia" (Lloyd 2002). The new urban tourism imaginary thus can be related to what Neil Smith (2005) referred to as the "urban pioneer" mentality: part of lifestyle trends that draw young suburbanites to move to the inner city in search of urban "grit" and "authenticity" (Lloyd 2010; Zukin 2011).

> *"I would recommend this as a destination for anyone looking to experienced [sic] New York as a New Yorker" (Guest review).*

The search for authentic urban experiences among urban tourists has thus meant that the boundaries between tourists and residents are becoming less clear-cut: as

Fig. 1 This word cloud contains the words statistically most overrepresented in the neighborhood descriptions for areas in the tertile of NTAs with highest fraction of poverty, compared to the rest of the material. That is, these words are significantly more prevalent when describing a neighborhood with a high level of poverty. The size of the words is proportional to their Log-Likelihood overrepresentation. Place names were filtered out. As the cloud illustrates, poor neighborhoods tend to be represented as cultural experiences, emphasizing *raw*, *hip*, *cool*, *colorful*, *vibrant*, *authentic*, *historic* urban life, and the local *community*. There is also a clear prevalence of the symbols of gentrification: *art*, *galleries*, *music*, *bodegas*, including explicit mentioning of the term *gentrification*. The use of the word *unkempt* is in particular interesting, discursively linking the racialized idea of "untidy hair" with the notion of a "gritty" neighborhood

tourists are no longer focused on sightseeing of designated tourist attractions, the effects of tourism on urban neighborhoods are difficult to distinguish from other urban change (Hamnett and Whitelegg 2007; Zukin 2009). This entanglement is the focus of the concept of "tourism gentrification", developed by Gotham (2005) in a study of New Orleans' *Vieux Carre* and since the subject of significant research interest (Gotham 2018). This notion suggests that tourism plays an increasingly important role in urban gentrification processes, as areas are reshaped to become spaces of entertainment and consumption, focused on the production of local differences that appeal to visitors' tastes for the exotic and unique (Coleman and Crang 2002; Urry 2002). While Gotham (2005) focuses on state-led gentrification, emphasizing the role of large-scale investment, these transformations can also develop from below, with almost no strategic state planning involved, as shown in Füller and Michel's (2014) study of *Kreuzberg*.

  In the discourse around cosmopolitan places in reviews and descriptions on Airbnb, however, gentrification also leaks into becoming one of the tourist attractions: "gentrification" itself is an important keyword in the marketing and touristic consumption of neighborhoods. Gentrification is a central part of the urban imaginary, seen as something inherent and characteristic of cosmopolitan places. Such places are understood to undergo rapid change: this is part of its brand and urban imaginary, and so to

experience cosmopolitan place, one needs to experience – and indeed partake in – its gentrification process. Rather than Gotham's (2005) *tourism gentrification*, this points to a *gentrification tourism*, as the notion of gentrification becomes part of the symbols in the symbolic economy used in the marketing of place.

> *"Brooklyn is filled with ups and downs like many parts of New York City. Back in the 80 s & 90 s it was considered rough area but over the past years, it has been going through a slow gentrification. Crown Heights is a great mix of different cultures; it's mainly Caribbean & Jewish families but you will find people from all different races living here including a sprinkling of hipsters." (Host neighborhood description).*

This process illustrates Giddens' (1984, p. 20) notion of a "double hermeneutic", as the social scientific notions surrounding gentrification enter constitutively into the world they describe. This is well illustrated by a wordy review for a listing in Bushwick:

> *"The neighborhood is rapidly gentrifying. This is a fraught subject for many, but the contrasts are too stark not be fascinating—abandoned lots and homes not maintained in 50 years adjacent to brand new architect-designed web startup buildings, with bicycle (fixed gear, of course) shops and cafes in the middle ground—rehabbing dingy spaces but keeping the rougher edges in place. No artisanal pickle or mayonnaise shops yet—I suppose that's just a matter of time.*
>
> *The street has rundown houses, metal working shops, and auto repair places mixed in obviously newly fixed up homes, tons of high-end new construction, and young people in skinny jeans. There are public housing projects right across Bushwick avenue and the lower income minority people whose families have lived in Bushwick since the 1960s are still here, in their neighborhood. For how long? Who knows. For an amateur student of class relations, urban studies, and a host of other fields, this neighborhood is fascinating." (Guest review).*

Airbnb users hunt for cosmopolitan cultural capital implies the formation of an aesthetic and symbolic conception of urban place, which is the foundation for the symbolic marketplace to which Airbnb provides an interface. The Airbnb users share an aesthetic view of urban place, conceiving of space through the lens of the same type of criteria that we use while shopping for consumer products (Ley 2003; Zukin 2008). The places that are seen as valuable through this cosmopolitan consumer lens are "authentic" – but it is the aesthetics, imagery and symbols of authenticity that is sought. This begs for places that are in the sweet spot between "dodgy" and "authentic"; places that contain a difference to overcome, but whose difference have been packaged and sanitized for cosmopolitan symbolic consumption. As the search for authenticity, founded as reaction against the alienation of consumerist society, is itself commodified and brought into the symbolic exchange, in a reflexive move that is quintessential of the cultural commodification of consumerist society, we have returned to the mass-produced aesthetics of distinction with which we began (Baudrillard 2016; MacCannell 1973).

Discussion

In order to extract profits from short-term rentals, Airbnb needs to produce urban space for extraction and enclosure (Sadowski 2020). To do so, Airbnb mobilizes and nudges its users to produce locational text data which discursively frame urban place as a valuable consumption experience – a process that we have referred to as "platform placemaking." This production of space is a concrete expression of "data colonialism" (Couldry Mejias 2020), in that Airbnb employs the medium of user data to transform social relations into market relations, in ways that transforms the very fabric of city life. We have here sought to examine the type of urban space that this produces. In studying how users frame places in their reviews and listings, we found that cosmopolitan post-tourism values hold a central role – cherishing the ability to "fit in" in various contexts, or "belong anywhere". This is highlighted as a source of cultural capital, earned through displays of capacity to overcome encounters with difference. This in turn, in line with Edenson (2000), means that the symbolic value and meaning of place becomes determined by the presence or absence of *difference*.

Airbnb hosts and guests thus stage places by highlighting *authenticity*, *cosmopolitanism*, and *difference*, shaping an imaginary of urban place as attractive consumer goods for a global cosmopolitan class. Airbnb thereby gives access to a postmodern tourism marketplace, in which place is staged and consumed as symbols, used as part of lifestyles aimed at acquiring cosmopolitan cultural capital.

But as the successful packaging and marketing of places as universally consumable product require decontextualization and homogenization (Sorkin 1992), the values of difference and authenticity over time becomes represented by a number of stand-in symbols, as they become integrated into a symbolic economy and part of a consumer lifestyle (Szerszynski and Urry 2006; Zukin 1996). Cosmopolitanism goes from being a rejection of consumer society in favor for the "real" and "authentic", to itself becoming represented through familiar signs that circulate globally through popular culture. Cosmopolitan place thereby becomes defined by a certain aesthetics, associated to certain symbols that are seen as a capturing a "cosmopolitan flair".

The search for authenticity, founded as reaction against the alienation of consumerist society, is thus itself commodified and brought into the symbolic exchange, in a reflexive move that is quintessential of the cultural commodification of consumerist society. This signifies a return to a homogenized symbolic system of distinction (Baudrillard 2016; MacCannell 1973). The result of the aestheticization of authenticity is thus a packaged, universalized, decontextualized set symbols associated to an imaginary of cosmopolitan authenticity. This signifies a return to Sorkin's (1992) "Disneyfication" – but now of a form that is geared to the staging of authenticity, based on the symbolisms of an imagined, stereotyped, racialized, exoticized other – linked to authenticity through colonial tropes of the "uncivilized noble savage".

In the end, while Airbnb is positioned as part of a reaction against the inauthenticity and commodification of consumer culture, and a search for alternative, pro-poor, community-based, ethical, and responsible forms of tourism, this new cultural system itself becomes transformed into a cultural hegemony geared at the production of class difference. The rejection of a symbolic system creating distinction through consumption thus merely led to the production of a new symbolic system of exclusion – one in which

cosmopolitanism is the foundation for distinction, and "authenticity" determines the value of its cultural commodities (Currid-Halkett 2017). The emancipatory and egalitarian ideals of these "cosmopolitan travelers" thus translate into ways of consuming the city that turn into a means of symbolic expulsion *vis-a-vis* the more rooted population (Jansson 2019), as the symbolic system that ostensibly values inclusion transforms into a new means of exclusion (Zukin 2008). As platforms enable capital to reshape the digital culture of cities through data colonialism, they allow commodification to seep deeper into the fabric of urban space – remaking it in ways that shift spatial capital from long-term residents to short-term visitors.

Conclusion

Airbnb is part of an emerging platform capitalism, in which digital interfaces come to mediate our daily life and interactions. As the city becomes mediated, urban space becomes partly digital and datafied – and thereby possible to bring into market relations. Platform urbanism thus signifies a regime in which data has become the means through which cities are remade in the image of capital. This paper has contributed to a move from abstract notions of platform urbanism toward a more concrete understanding of how data extraction transforms everyday urban culture, presenting a methodology for studying placemaking through digital data. We have focused on the case of Airbnb in New York City.

The paper introduced the concept "platform placemaking" to capture the way urban platforms mobilize users as discursive investors, designing and curating social infrastructure in order to shaping imaginaries of urban place in their interests. Using an interpretive computational approach, combining interpretation with digital methods, the paper has examined the cultural values contained within Airbnb's platform placemaking. The paper situated this placemaking in the literature on postmodern tourist consumption: Airbnb's product is not merely a place to stay the night; what Airbnb sells is rather described by values such as "community" and "authenticity", and a "sense of belonging." Users are thus mobilized for the discursive construction of the city as a site for symbolic consumption.

Airbnb's cultural production is firmly situated within postmodern tourism. Postmodern tourism sprung from a revolt against the "Disneyfication" of mass-tourism – the notion that global consumerism brought a simultaneous decontextualization and homogenization, replacing local particularities with theme park versions of themselves; creating mass-produced and homogeneous inauthentic places (Sorkin 1992). This brought a reaction against the inauthenticity and commodification of consumer culture, and a search for alternative, pro-poor, community-based, ethical, and responsible forms of tourism. It is these consumer preferences that Airbnb market to and provide tourism products for: casting itself as more ethical alternative to mainstream hotels, emphasizing community and belonging, while marketing short-term lodgings in residential neighborhoods. Airbnb provides an interface to the symbolic marketplace – an online web shop which packages urban place as postmodern consumer products. This is part of a postmodern value system in which conspicuous consumption paradoxically takes the form of alternative, aware, conscious consumption, aimed at a display of anti-consumerist values (Currid-Halkett 2017).

The placemaking of Airbnb thus plays into new tourism's hunt for authenticity, by staging an "authentic" urban experience. The staging of authenticity in turn depends on finding or creating a difference which the cosmopolitan traveler can overcome; casting poverty and violence as sources of commodifiable difference.

This cultural logic is illustrated in a gentrifying Brooklyn neighborhood seeing the recent opening of a bar that branded their venue by drilling their walls with fake bullet-holes and marketing their $10 craft beers in brown-paper bags, in a plain reference to the neighborhoods' history of violence, homelessness, and substance abuse (Helmore 2017). This epitomizes both the symbolical and aestheticized view of "authentic place" inherent in the cosmopolitan sensibilities promoted by Airbnb, and is simultaneously suggestive of the experience at the sharp end of authenticity: as their neighborhoods are marketed, residents watch historic traumas become the vacant diversions for selfie-stick wielding tourists. If this is a celebration of difference, it is one to which those celebrated are not invited.

While Disneyfication was characterized by a sterilizing removal of any reference to the negative, the drive for staging of cosmopolitan authenticity instead creates a Disney World of past horrors, in which poverty and suffering are commodified for the extraction of symbolic authenticity (Dürr and Jaffe 2012; Sharpley 2005). For tourists, the marketing of symbols of disenfranchisement and poverty enable a display of cosmopolitan capacities and as a contrast serving to emphasize precisely their privilege and affluence. For long-term residents, they instead contribute to devaluing of their spatial and cultural capital. The consumption-oriented placemaking of Airbnb depresses other ways of experiencing the city, other ways of belonging. As Zukin (2008) puts it, "the more connected we are to its social life, especially if we grew up there, the less likely we are to call a neighborhood authentic." The very notion of "authentic" implies a symbolic representation that allows us to think of a neighborhood's value in apparently objective terms, rather than as a lived experience, which in turn requires a privileged distance from material necessity (Bourdieu 1979).

While Airbnbification is part of a value system purportedly based on a rejection of consumerism, founded on cosmopolitan ideals of inclusion, these have themselves become the foundation of new forms of exclusion. Resistance to commodification has thus itself become commodified. The emancipatory and egalitarian ideals of "cosmopolitan travelers" thus translate into ways of consuming the city that turn into a means of symbolic exclusion of the rooted population.

These findings illustrate that as platforms come to mediate our urban experiences, they promote consumption as the only way of relating to the city. Mediation and data extraction enable capital to seep into ever-new aspects of human life, reducing our experience and reading of the world to market relations. Briefly put, in the platform city, we are all tourists.

Availability of data and materials

Declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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