

White collar intimacy

An advertisement beckons in a carriage on the Piccadilly Line coming in from London's Heathrow airport. Lovestruck.com, "where busy people click", is a dating site that "lets you meet single professionals working nearby", whether you are at home, in the office or "on-the-go." "No matter where you work in London" the website reads – "Soho, Chelsea, The West End, Notting Hill, Canary Wharf or The City" – this online community "lets you walk into a bar or venue and see which fellow Lovestruckers are out and about." Its "high-calibre" membership is developing in various locations across the English-speaking world, although the service is "strictly for city singles." At first glance, Lovestruck is just one of a range of platforms premised on the convenience enabled by geo-mapping technology. The advantage of such applications – from Grindr to FourSquare and lately Facebook's Places – is more than just the pleasure of discovering attractive company. Each in their own way makes city space legible, familiar, inhabitable. The taste logic of profile pages establishes the terms of encounter in advance, making the anonymity of the city to navigate. With the utmost discretion, social networking sites and their geomapping counterparts domesticate life's unruly potential, online and off.

What does this list of precincts bring to mind on the long ride to or from the city? Are they home to the officeparks and open-plan lofts typical of travelers riding the tube to Heathrow? Or are they the business hubs attracting visiting professionals to London from elsewhere? No matter the case, these creative enclaves of urban regeneration blossom with untold possibility, while the monolithic towers of corporate precincts contain untold numbers of hearts to be wooed. Lovestruck takes it as read that the demands of work life impact on opportunities for intimacy. Help is at hand for those wanting to avoid the "ignominy" of speed dating and the time-consuming dimensions of start-up relationships. To those familiar with the cues of online identity performance, there is no need for unhelpful and unproductive emotional energy to be wasted in the search for after-work company. Lovestruck promises to make love so much easier and more convenient.

The website also trusts that those who work in the city will be attracted to others of a similar inclination. In this way, Lovestruck shares with other social networking sites the logic of like attracting like. As Pierre Bourdieu explained, in his theory of "elective affinities":

Those whom we find to our taste put into their practices a taste which does not differ from the taste we put into operation in perceiving their practices. Two people can give each other no better proof of the affinity of their tastes than the taste they have for each other (Bourdieu, 1984: 243)

Social networking sites follow this pattern to the extent that they promise to unite “all those who are the product of similar conditions distinguishing them from all others”. The profile page central to online identity performance “distinguishes in an essential way, since taste is the basis of all that one has – people and things – and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others” (Bourdieu, 1984: 56).

Building on Bourdieu’s insight, this chapter explores the intricate relationship between white collar work and intimacy. Noting the metrocentricism naturalized in advertising like *Lovestruck*, I question the notion of busy-ness that corporate capital renders commonsense, and which becomes technology’s unique mission to navigate. The productivity imperative that drives both workplace cultures and their digital assistants has worrying effects when translated to the realm of intimacy and love. And yet, with the rise of workplace-based online cultures, these effects may be proving quite common. The second part of this chapter takes examples from a recent study of information professionals to think about the impact of productivity imperatives as they encroach on home life.¹ This is to consider how intimacy is reconfigured alongside wider shifts in white collar work, and what this perspective offers our understanding of labour politics.

A market of strangers

In his landmark 1951 book, *White Collar*, C Wright Mills described the “prestige market of the big city” as “a market of strangers, a milieu where contacts having relevance to prestige are often transitory and fleeting” (Mills 1973, p. 251). Mills’ influential study is one of a number of precedents that are useful for analyzing the white collar worker, whom I take to be the default user of the most dominant online platforms in the English-speaking West.² Mills’ classic account of US modernity allows us to think historically about the popularity of online networking, its phenomenal rise in recent years. The idea of a “market of strangers” reveals how digital culture offers new outlets for social practices long engaged in by the professional middle class. For young professionals entering the big city today, online cultures supplement the lived experience of physical space, magnifying the “milieu” and the number of opportunities that may manifest. A site like Facebook, for instance, combines the need for a set of contacts to navigate the city with the psychologically reassuring function of a safety blanket: friends and family can be brought along – as “virtual” company – through a succession of projects and positions. Contacts no longer need to be transitory or fleeting when they can be maintained, however tenuously, online. Facebook thus arises as a coping mechanism for middle class social mobility, a comforting reminder that one is never completely alone.³

Facebook has become the iconic application amongst a middle class, office-dwelling user or aspirant because it illustrates – indeed encourages – the seamless combination of professional and personal identity. Work life, school and fun all converge in the shift to intimate work,

where “contact” always equals “friend”. Amassing these relationships in a unique biographical configuration, Facebook’s rise to prominence is notable for the way that it confirms and displays the significance of work-related accomplishment in the lives of white collar professionals.⁴ The platform is one of several digital avenues (another being Twitter) that provides new insight on how work influences individual status and esteem. It also demonstrates work’s capacity to generate intimate relationships and pleasures. Through “status updates”, “posted items”, “pokes” and “gifts” – the latter often specific to one’s profession⁵ – Facebook users showcase their interests and obsessions to a cast of sympathetic onlookers. If Grossberg described the mainstream appeal of rock music as “a way of making it through the day” (1997, p. 115), for desk-bound employees in information jobs, Facebook provides a similarly reliable solace.

This especially the case when long hours work cultures prevent other kinds of intimate connection. Facebook and other social networking sites offer a reliable locus for affection for the growing number of workers for whom traditional forms of community seem lacking. Comment sections, wall space, email and instant messaging are just some of the ways they incite convivial discourse between familiar friends. Add-on applications allow gestures and mementos to accrue over time, acting as tangible evidence of friends’ ongoing presence – not to mention the potential for further “hook-ups” in future. It is this potential, and the constant and reassuring guarantee of presence, that is Facebook’s permanent consolation. Like Lovestruck, it creates a mobilising belief in intimacy’s imminence.

Another of Mills’ observations of the white collar worker is his suggestion that for many, “such traits as courtesy, helpfulness, and kindness, once intimate, are now part of the impersonal means of livelihood” (1973, p. xvii). In Mills’ reading, “self-alienation” is a key feature of the emerging professional class: “When white-collar people get jobs, they sell not only their time and energy but their personalities as well” (*ibid*). These words more than echo some of the concerns raised with the widespread uptake of social networking sites. The public displays of affection online friendships reward and sanction have been taken to mark a significant departure from more organic, discreet or authentic friendships of an earlier time, with popular media routinely worrying about the wisdom of airing intimate thoughts in corporate-owned online spaces (Morris 2009). In the scholarly literature, it is the cumulative effects of the incitement to “broadcast yourself” that are of concern (Driscoll & Gregg 2008). Drawing on the ideas of Erving Goffman (1973), these studies fear that “front region behavior” will have a detrimental impact on especially young people’s capacity to switch off, relax, and appreciate the pursuit of friendship in properly intimate – which is to say private – settings.⁶ Such studies typically fail to note Goffman’s own acknowledgement that those further up the class hierarchy have always spent more time in the “front region”. It is in fact a direct reflection of their higher status:

the higher one's place in the status pyramid, the smaller the number of persons with whom one can be familiar, the less time one spends backstage, and the more likely it is that one will be required to be polite as well as decorous (Goffman 1973, p. 133).

Following this argument, Goffman's theories regarding the presentation of self in everyday dealings build momentum for reading social networking sites as one of the key ways that class power is reconfiguring to fit a new economic formation.

The public friendships that social networking sites make possible aren't limited to the online era. For decades, the mobility involved in the pursuit of middle class security and patronage has brought adjacent requirements in the domain of friendship. In his take on life inside The Organization, William H. Whyte (1963) speaks of the "outward personality" required of couples moving between company towns in the long march up the workplace hierarchy. His "organization man" of the 1950s was a diligent employee whose shifting residential location was an inevitable feature of career elevation. The mutual bond captured in the title of Whyte's book is less an indictment of mindless corporate ambition than it is a synopsis of the kind of loyalty expected between employer and worker at this point in Fordist modernity. Whyte's writing speaks of a time when one could believe that a "social ethic" could be pursued through affiliation with an outstanding firm. The worker could depend on a return on his investment in the company so long as the latter maintained a convincing vocational narrative and enviable position within the community. The "web of friendship" Whyte uses to describe the social networks of dormitory suburbs in the mid-century US is a precedent for the coercive friendships of digital culture today. Whyte saw few alternatives to participation in the "outgoing life" of the neighbourhood for couples seeking a sense of belonging in unfamiliar locations.⁷ His analysis highlights the enduring problem for professionals seeking to recapture a lost sense of community when work leads them away from home, and the limited avenues for intimacy available to busy professionals.

In fact it is Whyte, as much as Mills, whose resources help to unpack the further dimensions of white collar intimacy prevalent in the digital workplace today. He distinguishes between the "well-rounded man" of the organization, who is successful, but not *too* successful (1963, p. 125), and "the executive", endearingly termed the "not-well-rounded man". As new technologies make the possibility of chronic connection to work an effortless proposition, it is precisely this distinction that may well be eroding, at least in the stories I will focus upon shortly. In Whyte's account, the well-rounded worker followed the principle: "be loyal to the company and the company will be loyal to you", and he had particular insights to share:

On the matter of overwork they are particularly stern. They want to work hard, but not too hard; the good, equable life is paramount and they see no conflict between enjoying it and getting ahead. The usual top executive, they believe, works much too hard, and

there are few subjects upon which they will discourse more emphatically than the folly of elders who have a single-minded devotion to work.

For “the wise young man” of the organization, the main philosophy was “to enjoy himself – plenty of time with the kids, some good hobbies”. He was “obtrusive in no particular, excessive in no zeal. He will be the man in the middle” (1963, p.127).

The executive, by contrast, is described in part three of the book, “The Neuroses of Organization Man”:

Common to these men is an average work week that runs between fifty and sixty hours. Typically, it would break down something like this: each weekday the executive will put in about 9 1/2 hours in the office. Four out of five weekdays he will work nights. One night he will be booked for business entertaining, another night he will probably spend at the office or in a protracted conference somewhere else.

On two of the other nights he goes home. But it’s no sanctuary he retreats to; it’s a branch office. While only a few go so far as to have a room equipped with dictating machines, calculators, and other appurtenances of their real life, most executives make a regular practice of doing the bulk of their business reading at home and some find it the best time to do their most serious business phone work (‘I do a lot of spot-checking by phone from home,’ one executive explained. ‘I have more time then, and besides most people have their guard down when you phone them at home.’)

When it comes to technology use in the home, Whyte notes: “In one company, the top executives have set up a pool of Dictaphones to service executives who want to take them home, the better to do more night and week-end work. In almost all companies the five-day week is pure fiction.”

These details illustrate how technology has long facilitated particular work styles and preferences, and that these often spill in to home space. But Whyte’s description is of further interest for the way that it captures the motivation of employees at this level:

In talking about why he works, the executive does not speak first of service, or of pressures from the organization; very rarely does he mention his family as a reason. He speaks of himself – and the demon within him. He works because his ego demands it.

For these personalities, work is dominant. And even though wives, doctors and friends may warn against working to such lengths, the executive maintained: “They just didn’t understand” (1963, p. 139). The unique satisfaction to be gained from white collar work is an irresistible compulsion.

Performance anxiety

Turning to consider some of the workers I've interviewed in recent years, similar rhetoric can be heard in the effort to describe what drives them to work. Here I will focus on two employees, neither of whom were executives in their organization, and both of whom were women (a noticeable development in white collar work since Mills and Whyte were writing). Jenny, a part-time project officer for a library, was one of many employees in the study who checked her work email at home in spite of her paid hours. She explained that it was her personal preference "to deal with something once" by answering email straight away, even on her days off. It was a way for her to demonstrate her commitment to the team and the job: "how I see myself as a professional. I want people to know I am looking after things." It was also an inclination that generated self-censure when her email monitoring got out of hand at times. When she worked on weekends, for instance:

I'm feeling pretty guilty, usually. I'm thinking, 'Oh look, I shouldn't do this; it shouldn't take this long. I said I was going to do 10 minutes. Just contain it.' But I then think, No, but it's just easier to get it done on the spot and I can do it in there, and then I don't have to come back to it.

Jenny had strategies to stop herself from the temptation of work and the excitement to be found online. She kept her home connection limited to a desktop computer, because "I think if I could search the Internet everywhere, I would." Jenny admitted: "I do sometimes say right, this weekend I'm not doing any work," especially because she knew that her partner "would probably prefer I was online less." But she also believed that he didn't "truly understand or relate to the idea and notion of the work I do online at home" since "he can't take his work home like I can."

Jenny realized – even though it "will make him sound not very good" – that her partner didn't tend to notice her working habits "when the football season is on."

Because he'll watch some of the footy, he just doesn't notice that I've disappeared for an hour and a half, but when the football season finishes, he's more like, "What are you doing? What are you doing there?" I'll say, "I'm going just to check my emails for 10 minutes" and I'll come out in an hour, and he'll say, "Why are you doing that? You don't need to do that."

Nonetheless, Jenny thought having access to mobile technologies had improved her relationship at home because she spent more time with her partner.

I sit on the lounge. Don actually made the comment last night, 'You seem to still work as much but at least you sit out here now.' I thought, I don't know why you think that's any

better – because he’s watching a movie and I’m doing work – but he seems to think it’s nicer.

In this situation Jenny refers to a time she was clearing her inbox on her laptop on a Sunday night while Don was watching a movie.

I was trying to just do it all via arrows and enter instead of using the touch pad because I thought the touch pad was louder. He kept keeping increasing the volume of the television and I thought I’ll try and be a bit quieter. I was thinking that I know that I don’t have to be doing this work now here. I could watch this movie with him. But I was not interested in the movie and I feel better about a Monday morning if I have done something productive on a Sunday night.

The fact that Jenny didn’t even work on Mondays is a further complicating factor in this example. Efforts to consider her partner by quietly going about her email filing are matched by a punishing interior dialogue about why she feels the need to be working. What is it about Jenny’s personality that makes her unable to enjoy a trashy movie with her partner on a Sunday night? Something prevents her from being able to view this time and space as free for unproductive activities. Like Whyte’s executives, Jenny thinks her partner doesn’t understand what it’s like to have a job that requires her to work outside paid hours. But it is her own motivation that leads her to carry out these job-related tasks.

On Mondays and Tuesdays, when Jenny was looking after her son, it was normal for her to “log onto work and just leave the email open, and the laptop on just there, and just walk past and check things and deal with things on the fly.” A number of Jenny’s colleagues, including her boss Georgia, would email her on days off so that she would be kept aware of developments in the office. It was also so that she had time to think things over before getting to work on Wednesdays. As Jenny explained: “If I didn’t look at my email before I got in on a Wednesday I think at least the first two hours would just be wasted on catching up.” Whether at home or work, Jenny is intent on making productive use of her time.

In a diary entry for the project, Jenny made an interesting observation about her email habits:

Have noticed my partner does get annoyed when I log on at night to check my email. I try to limit it but I sometimes find myself quickly checking my email

- before he gets home
- when he goes to the shop
- when he is downstairs gardening etc.

I check my email constantly because I think to try and stay organised, 'on top of things'. I do not want any surprises.

The final sentence suggests that Jenny's behaviour is not solely a personal choice, but that it is also a response she has formed to an unpredictable workload, and the coercive email preferences maintained by colleagues. Her relationship to the technology and her work reads as a series of opportunities to be seized in moments free from surveillance – like a clandestine affair that she needs to hide from her partner. Contact with work here manifests as a highly intimate relationship, with all the symbols of adultery.

Donna worked as a project co-ordinator for the same library, in charge of capital assets. Her job involved negotiating between management, outside consultants and building contractors hired to work on library infrastructure. In our first meeting, Donna's schedule was especially busy, as the library continued to deal with issues following a major renovation and relaunch. She told us she had "the highest mobile phone bill" of any worker in the organization. During this period she was working at home up to three nights a week, and she would do this "all over the place":

So if I've got documents I need to refer to I'll perhaps sit at the dining room table. If I'm just responding to emails and organising diary entries and appointments and things I often sit on the couch and do it while I'm watching TV or talking to my daughter or whatever. Sometimes I'll sit in bed when I should be sleeping but I can't so I sort of do a bit of work.

Donna was trying to limit the amount of work she did at home, "but if it's going to make my life easier the next day at work it's worth it." This statement neatly captures why so many in the study claimed to pursue extra home-based work. But it also effaces the worker's involvement in other relationships, beyond the requirements of the workday, that could be affected by such individually-oriented decisions. We can get a glimpse of the intensity of Donna's workday as she describes the difficulty of adjusting to her arrival back home. "I spend maybe an hour trying to get in my head now I'm home. My work's still very on my mind." By contrast, she claimed that the days she spent working from home were less of a transition: "It's a little bit softer." Some things helped to ease the adjustment from work to home: "I have a glass of wine and sit on the couch and I just stare at a wall. I put the TV on but I actually don't watch it." One of the drawbacks of online technology that Donna reported was that her daughter Chloe was spending a lot of time on the computer. Donna thought Chloe seemed depressed and withdrawn and had taken her to see a counselor to get some help. The counselor actually diagnosed an internet addiction, estimating that "90% of the kids she sees have internet addiction." In light of the range of comments from study participants who diagnosed *themselves* as addicted to email and other online platforms, this was an interesting side note.

The second time we met Donna, a period when her workload had noticeably slowed, it became apparent that her daughter's depression may have had other causes. Having taken some time off for a holiday, and facing a less hectic workload, Donna was reflecting on the amount she had sacrificed to stay on top of her job:

I think my daughter could have done with me a little bit more at home during sort of Year 11 and 12. But now it's almost too late, she's finished Year 12, and she's working herself and doing similar hours that I'm doing.

She continued:

I think she could have really done with a lot more support at that time... because I've only got a small family as well. But my partner who works a lot of night shift and he does a lot of hours every week and usually has 12 to 14 hour days and sometimes seven days a week. So it's not like he'll notice because he's not there either.

When she was busier, Donna admitted: "I was never home for her after school or anything. It's like I had other pressures on my mind when I probably could have had hers on my mind a little bit more. She had sort of personal issues at the time as well, that I could have concentrated a little bit more on." It was here that Donna explained how three of her daughter's friends committed suicide during the last six months of Year 12, a factor that she hadn't mentioned previously.

Donna rationalized her earlier workload and her willingness to work long hours due to the bond she'd made with a colleague:

the other person I worked with was very passionate and a workaholic with you know, no partner, no children... a single person, a career minded person and she was fantastic. We just drove through everything. I don't work with her any more. We're still very close and we still talk a lot... I sort of love and respect her to death.

Indeed, in spite of her stated intentions, Donna also admitted that she would "probably end up doing the same thing" if she had the chance to work with the same colleague again.

These contradictions indicate the conflict experienced by workers like Donna when professional relationships generate their own kind of intimacy. "You're enjoying what you're doing and you're running on adrenaline", she mentioned. The job gave her a regular feeling of importance and achievement that was hard to attain at home, especially with her partner quite absent. Describing her new role, Donna's tone had the character of mourning that accompanies the end of a significant relationship: "There was a while, there was a period of a couple of weeks there where I just wondered what I was doing, the phone wasn't ringing there and I wasn't coming in

as much.” A hint of emotion seemed evident in her acknowledgment that: “Even though I have someone to report to in this new building project, no one really cares where I am.” For Donna, like a number of study participants, work was a source of fulfillment that rivaled family life. It took priority in daily concerns to the point where other relationships could sometimes be neglected. Looking back, Donna was thankful that her daughter had found a job and a boyfriend and seemed “well adjusted” overall. But her story illustrates the stakes involved when work schedules threaten other forms of intimacy.

To sum up some of the themes in these workers’ stories, online technologies are a factor in making their jobs feel at times invasive, compelling, consuming, readily available, a solace, anxiety provoking and addictive. Many of these qualities can also be taken as the terrain of passion, love and intimacy, and it is these analogies that warrant further exploration as the basis for an affective labour politics. Barbara Ehrenreich claims it is “the cultural ubiquity of the professional middle class” that “may seem to make it an easy subject for a writer... Their lifestyles, habits, tastes, and attitudes are everywhere, and inescapably before us.” It is for this reason that scholars must attempt to produce critical analysis of such practices: “Nameless, and camouflaged by a culture in which it both stars and writes the scripts,” the middle class “holds the privilege of defining the mainstream. But rarely is it seen to be “one class among others, and as a class with its own peculiar assumptions and anxieties” (Ehrenreich 1990, p. 6).

Mills saw the particular anxieties of the white collar worker stemming from his having “no firm roots, no sure loyalties to sustain his life and give it a center” (1973, p. xvi). With the certainties of previous centuries forever lost, the white collar worker finds “no new sanctions or justifications for the new routines we live, and must live.” This made him uniquely vulnerable “to the manufactured loyalties and distractions that are contrived and urgently pressed” upon him by popular culture.

He is not aware of having any history, his past being as brief as it is unheroic; he has lived through no golden age he can recall in time of trouble. Perhaps because he does not know where he is going, he is in a frantic hurry; perhaps because he does not know what frightens him, he is paralysed with fear (*ibid.*).⁸

Set against the unrelenting busy-ness that defines Donna and Jenny’s experience of work, Mills’ words find ongoing resonance. Matched with the insistent address of digital communications technologies, white collar affects now stretch to include the anxiety of anticipating the next batch of email, indeed the sheer number of messages waiting to be audited.

Describing the impact of the BlackBerry in 2006 – just before the iPhone changed mobile computing for keeps – Research in Motion’s John Balsillie explained his bestselling devices as “latency eliminators.” According to this logic, Balsillie argued, “successful companies have

hearts... and intrinsic force that makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts. BlackBerries... allow those hearts to beat faster” (in Connors 2006). The language of love may help to explain the market triumph of Balsillie’s product, but the stories above enable us to identify some the real life “latencies” smart-phones and laptops help to eliminate. They include time spent with children, partners, and a host of non-work friends. In other examples from the same study, the affective fabrics of digital cultures proved strong enough to prevent workers leaving the house, and the solace of a restful night’s sleep.

Classic definitions of love see the beloved as “the only important thing” in life, compared to which “everything else seems trivial” (Armstrong 2003, p. 3). Armstrong’s “philosophy of intimacy” notes the combination of longing and rapture that accompanies “the romantic vision”, leading to “the sense that one is in touch with the source of all value” (*ibid*). A significant number of participants in my study spoke about work using language very similar to these tenets. The desire to be alone with work, to the exclusion of all other distractions, was certainly couched in the language of productivity and efficiency in many cases. But the time spent engaged in work-related tasks regularly rivaled or came at the expense of other experiences. There was often little time for the very domestic or leisure pursuits we might consider to be the rationale for needing to be productive in the first place.

Moving is living

This chapter began with an image from a train, and it is to technologies of travel and movement that I want to return. This is partly because of the intense relationship – built through so many advertising campaigns – linking new media devices to the notion of freedom (Gregg 2007b). Whether it is office workers tethered to their email inbox, or mobile applications like Lovestruck, the routes of travel and freedom delivered by digital communication technologies seem far from spectacular. Rather, they appear to reify the lifestyle choices of a distinct white collar demographic, one that need not cast its horizons further than the demands of the working day. As images of creative work and social networking applications dominate the spaces and airwaves of public media, the ubiquity of their middle class address performs a kind of symbolic violence. Such images exclude the many citizens without the means of accessing these heavily sanctioned pleasures and for whom the prospect of rewarding work is “a bad joke” (Gorz 1994, p. 46). Gorz reminds us of the substantial numbers of people “on the margins of our so-called work-based civilization,” who appear destined to stay “on the fringes of its scale of values, its ethic of productivity and merit” (1994, p. 46-7). The metaphors of space and place that characterize Gorz’s reading awaken sensitivity to the dominant position urban professionals inhabit in the technological and political imaginary. His words are necessary caution that the loyalties that develop between employers and employees have few solid

bases, and here I conclude with one final example of white collar intimacy and its possible futures.

Jason Reitman's recent film, *Up in The Air*, is a potent reminder of the risks involved in identifying too closely with work-based forms of recognition. In this hyperbolic rendering of fly-in, fly-out protocols, Ryan Bingham (George Clooney) is a professional job terminator who epitomizes the affordances of the mobile lifestyle. In contrast to the companionship of friends and family, Bingham is most at home when he is in transit. It is the "systemized friendly touches" of strangers that keep his world "in orbit." Bingham is the flipside of Whyte's Organization Man. His sense of identity is wrapped up in loyalty cards, and the notion of loyalty plays out in the film in multiple ways. Billboards for frequent flyer programs adorn the background of poignant airport scenes, and the film opens with an extreme close-up of a hostile worker Bingham has just sacked. Given the movie's release in the wake of the US fiscal crisis, it is hardly incidental that an African-American man addresses the camera directly: "This is what I get for 30 years of service to my company?"

Bingham's motivational talks on the professional speaker circuit urge tired middle managers to empty their symbolic backpacks: "Make no mistake, Bingham warns, "moving is living. Your relationships are the heaviest components of your life." Unlike the neighbourhood rituals of Whyte's suburban dwellers, however, there is no longer any pretense that community can or should be manufactured alongside career ambitions. Speaking of digital cultures, this film's plot is driven by a technical innovation. Upon joining Bingham's firm, a young female business graduate suggests that job terminations would be more efficiently performed via webcam. Her superiors warmly welcome the business plan, even though the scheme would put an end to Bingham's pleasantly rootless existence as a citizen of the air. While he maintains an ambivalent relationship to the organization (in a way Whyte would have applauded) Bingham does however make one pivotal mistake. Like the other white collar workers in the film – many of whom were laid off workers in real life⁹ – his presumption is that loyalty will have its rewards. When he finally reaches his coveted points total, marking his exceptional status amongst flyers, Bingham is congratulated by the aircraft captain, who reiterates: "We really appreciate your loyalty." But by this stage in the narrative Bingham is preoccupied by other thoughts – namely, the woman he has loved and lost. Hotel sex in a succession of flyover states has become a poor substitute to the normative forms of intimacy depicted in the film: a home with a wife and family in the suburbs. Bingham finds himself in a similar position to the thousands of workers he has counseled during his career, that is, wondering if his energies may have been better exercised elsewhere.

In the closing moments of *Up in the Air*, Clooney's narration reconciles his character's role as a specter, transcending the conventional relationships of this world. He urges the audience to see

the wing tip of his plane as just another star in the night sky, looking down on us omnisciently from on high. This haunting image has an ethereal quality, suggesting a kind of death. It sounds like a story we might tell a child when someone passes away. It is a poetic depiction of a sensibility I felt often during my study visiting the workplaces of parents like Jenny and Donna. Family photos populated the cubicles and desks that housed these workers and their technologies. Holiday snaps on laptop screensavers were a poignant addition to the very devices preventing workers from being physically present with their kids. These affective tokens were a further representation of the remote nature of intimate relationships for white collar workers, the blurred lines between virtual and actual presence. For me, they confirmed that the register of intimacy is one of the better ways to explain how workplaces exploit the pact between emotional and temporal investment in labour. If loyalty is the term we have used to describe this form of commitment until now, we must surely wonder if it remains the most effective language to express the psychological limits now needed to fight the demands of online work cultures. Stepping outside the routes of travel dictated by digital technologies and their seductive platforms is only the first move needed to put work back in its rightful place.

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¹ The book-length account of this study, which interviewed 26 workers over a 3 year period, is published as *Work's Intimacy* (Gregg 2011).

² My choice to focus on mainstream platforms such as Facebook, and workplace experiences of using digital technology such as checking email, are deliberately intended to continue cultural studies' interest in the everyday and the ordinary (e.g. Hartley 2009, Highmore 2010, Stewart 2007, Turner 2009). This is also intended to foreground the significance of middle class office cultures in the take-up of new technologies (Streeter 2005, Liu 2004). The Anglo-American frame of much internet studies debate is contextualized by Goggin & McLelland (2009). Hjorth (2009) is an extensive account of mobile media use in the Asia-Pacific, and the centrality of gender in mobile cultures of leisure and labour.

³ This is not to say that the platform isn't used in other ways, but the premise of the site, and its accompanying design, assumes that one will *always* have more friends to meet. See Miller (2011) for more on Facebook's cultural assumptions.

⁴ In the 2011 update to Facebook's site layout, work came third in the list of distinguishing characteristics on a profile page, after relationship status (1st) and birth (2nd). According to this logic, having a relationship is more important than being alive.

⁵ For instance, "Shite Gifts for Academics" has enduring appeal in university circles.

⁶ I discuss this in more detail in Gregg (2007a).

⁷ "Web of Friendship" and "This Outgoing Life" are the titles of Chapter 26 and 27 of the book. These textured renderings of neighbourhood sociability bear comparison with the writing of Richard Hoggart, particularly his *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), which documents similar aspects in working-class districts of England in a similar period.

⁸ Concern for the pernicious attractions of mass entertainments are another point of connection between Mills' and Hoggart's projects.

⁹ The song that accompanies the closing credits, and shares the film's title, is written and performed by another unemployed countryman, Kevin Renick. Renick handed a cassette version of the track to Reitman following an early test screening and Q&A. In another twist on the temporality of technology platforms, Reitman needed to borrow a friend's car to hear the song for the first time and decide that he wanted it in the movie (Tapley 2009).