TRAVEL AS HOMEMAKING: 
The Building of Mobile Intentional Communities

by

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It can be argued that the journey has the potential to facilitate a re-setting of boundaries as the traveling self, besides moving from one place to another, may embark in an additional journeying practice, having constantly to negotiate between the familiar and the unknown, between a here, a there, and an elsewhere (Minh-ha 1994:9).
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PROLOGUE

This thesis is a product of my interest in movement and social transformation. I was drawn to the practice of travel because of my desire to learn about the world and myself and to do this learning in the service of my commitment to social justice. Travel is a profound metaphor for the work of personal and social change; the journey that takes individuals and groups from one 'place' to another is a movement that can be physical, mental, or spiritual.

This project is an account of a journey I undertook to participate in and observe the phenomenon known as couchsurfing. The people whom I encountered while couchsurfing were engaged in processes of re-finding, expressing, and creating meanings. In my movement, I am self-reflective, processing what I observe and who I am, then reflecting it to others so that we have the opportunity to see multiple perspectives. Couchsurfers, the Rainbow Family, artists, and activists seek to imagine themselves as creative individuals, knowledge-makers, and relationship-builders. As activists, they believe in a world that will never be fully realized because it is constantly being made.

To be able to make choices about where one goes is a privilege, and nothing exemplifies this more than couchsurfing. Using all the means at their disposal, individuals seek to use their power to create new kinds of tourist paths and flows, and with their movement draw sketches of the world as they envision it to be. Alternative travelers have long existed in various forms, but with the current expansion of communication and mobility, it’s even easier for the individual to move. Perhaps one of the most important aspects of this increased mobility is the couchsurfer’s ability to
inspire through making and telling stories and building communities. Couchsurfing is one vehicle through which individuals make a conscious choice to work together towards a common goal. Thus, it is not surprising that the making of intentional community is at the heart of couchsurfing. Whether it is through reaching an online message board or a temporary festival in the woods, interactions create new opportunities for people to imagine alternative ways of living and such visions have the potential to be transformative practices.

There are many consistencies between past and present motivations for travel. Participants in travel (or tourists) use their movement to make real their values. Most of the time, that means maintaining status quo ideology by consuming and perpetuating fantasies of the Other, grounded in rigid binaries such as foreigner/local, outsider/insider, and home/away. Couchsurfers, by contrast, seek, with varying levels of success, to upset the status quo by creating new, fluid social relationships between selves and others, guests and hosts, home and away.

The individuals and groups of people I observed and participated in community building with during the summer of 2009 moved between home and “away” to deliberately create deep social and political bonds. In doing so, they formed and reformed the foundations of the world in which they want to live. They offered collective inspiration to those they encountered through example and model, realizing dreams and possibilities on a daily basis. Such ways of moving are in and of themselves radical acts.
INTRODUCTION

To conduct the research for this project, I traveled in a variety of ways and contexts during the spring and summer of 2009. Although these modes of travel are tied together by a theme of community and friendship-based hospitality, their various forms sometimes seem incongruous.

To gain a clearer understanding of the couchsurfing phenomenon, my research began the same way that the alternative tourists I was studying find a home for their selves. I started my research trip by staying in the homes of new friends who I found through the use of Facebook. This resulted in my being hosted by the friend of a high school acquaintance and a Wesleyan alum. These two individuals, who both identified as artists, welcomed me into their home much as others had hosted them during their own travels. This was an important aspect of their willingness to “return the favor” through “paying it forward”.

Couchsurfing acts a formalized way to practice this kind of reciprocity. I used the website called CouchSurfing International to find places to stay. Founded in 2003, CouchSurfing International is an online networking site that facilitates connections in real life, creating networks based on principles of trust and friendship. Members set up profiles and collect references in order to host or be hosted by strangers. Since its inception, the website has expanded from simply facilitating one-on-one connections to facilitating entire local and global social networks. While traveling, I took advantage of both these aspects, attending gatherings and staying in people’s homes, participating in
their daily life. In her senior thesis on Bolivian party hostels in 2009, Lilly Fink Shapiro commented on this trend in couchsurfing. She writes that,

In contrast to lodging experience grounded in for-profit monetary exchange and an impersonal consumer-marketer relationship, CouchSurfing thrives on trust and envisions travel as a means of producing social relationships. The growing popularity of the CouchSurfing project demonstrates “alternative” travel is still very much alive, and that consumers have agency; travelers are not cogs in the wheel positioned by the tourism industry.

Later in my trip I traveled to a Croatian city called Pula, specifically to meet and live with a person a friend had met through study abroad. In Pula, I learned that my host was a part of the anarcha-feminist scene of Eastern Europe and also traveled substantially through her own friend and acquaintance networks.

During the last part of the trip, I lived in a temporary community of one hundred people called the Rainbow Gathering in Northern Italy. Anyone could attend (as long as they could get there) and no money or resources were required. Participants stayed in tents, ate meals communally, explored the surroundings, and made music. It was entirely funded by volunteer contributions, and organized by participants in the gathering.

All the ways I traveled could be grouped under the heading of backpacking. The prominent characteristics of this form of travel are the length of time in motion (counted in months rather than weeks sometimes extending even longer) and the mode of travel (an insistence on the least expensive). What is often the most emphasized with regard to backpacking is the importance of spontaneity to the
traveler. “Put simply, they embrace serendipity: low levels of advance planning, no fixed timetable, and an openness to change of plan or itinerary (O’Reilly, 2006)”. The degree of planning varies between individuals or even within one individual’s journey, depending on changes in mood, health, or desire. Despite this, spontaneity is a commonly held ideal. The main marker of an “authentic” place and experience for young independent travelers is the apparent absence of the commercial travel industry (Desforges, 1998).

Studies have identified one of the main motivations of backpackers as the desire to construct a new temporary identity through travel, in the sense that they hope to become more courageous, relaxed, and independent (Cohen 2004; Elsrud 2001). This form of seeking has been found to play a central role in the construction of the self (Desforges 1998).

Like the word tourist, backpacking actually includes a range of practices and participants. While I was traveling, I met people aged 15-70, equal numbers of men and women (although this changed depending on the specific context: couchsurfing gathering in a city, in the woods, etc), individuals who varied by levels of planning, the amount of time they planned to spend on the road, or stages in life.

Mostly, the demographics of the group I came into contact with were different than the definition given by Pearce (1990) or Cohen (1972), in that the individuals I encountered were more varied by age and life stages. Participants in couchsurfing or the Rainbow were often older than the general backpacking age bracket, 25-40, with many exceptions on the older side.

Europeans made up the majority of the backpackers, and overwhelmingly, white Europeans. Although I did not ask questions about personal wealth, it seemed from
access to resources and material possessions that people fell into the middle- to upper-middle-class range. I met at least one very wealthy couchsurfer who had been living for years off parental support. This is not uncommon considering the classed connotations of leisure travel, which I will explore later.

Throughout this text, I use different words to describe the individuals I encountered. For example, I will use the word “traveler” rather than “tourist”, because that is how many people identified themselves; but while couchsurfers distinguished themselves from “the tourist” as an ideological category, from an analytic perspective, these “travelers” can be classified as tourists. In other contexts, I will use the word couchsurfer, activist, or Rainbow family. These are the markers that people chose to anchor themselves with and present to the world.

Tourism Studies

In this thesis, I am writing about leisure travel, when individuals or groups move of their own volition to seek pleasure. Travel for enjoyment and status display is an old practice, in which those with wealth display it through conspicuously spending time and
resources visiting places away from home or maintaining multiple dwellings. In Europe and the United States, the ability to travel is used as a marker of status and success. The history of travel specifically addressed in this project originates in Western Europe.

Travel can be used as an escape, a pilgrimage, a rite of passage, an assertion of superiority, or a means of objectification. The search for cultural capital, the narrative of finding oneself, the exploratory freedom of the liminal, the pursuit of authenticity, all have a place in the dominant and conventional travel narrative. People travel for many reasons: for work, play, or worship, to escape conflict or pursue love. Travel is movement from one place to another, and “place” can be near or far (I travel a short distance to school), it can be an imaginary journey (through photographs, I can travel to places I have never been), or it can be psychological (I finally have gotten to a place where I can forgive myself). Travel as a physical movement is also a powerful metaphor for sojourns of all kinds. It is also possible to travel and never “get” anywhere and, in this sense, it is also about the time spent in transit, in between (Elsrud, 2004).

The history of tourism is in many ways a history of the search for the Other. The difference that is sought depends on the subject of the gaze (Urry, 1990). For example, a person going to a “developing” country is looking for the “undeveloped”, the primitive or traditional Other, what modern society has left behind. The vacation tourist is looking for a sense of relaxation that is not available at home. A backpacker is looking for a sense of freedom and independence she cannot find while in the grips of everyday routines. There are many qualities that differentiate experiences of ‘going away’: food, time, landscape, language, currency, unfamiliar people, or rapid movement through space.
From another perspective, tourism also maintains national identities: indicating to the travelers who they are in comparison to those who are the objects of the tourist gaze (Maoz, 2005, 2007). Overall, tourism often maintains and reinforces social and cultural divisions and power inequalities. It continues to advantage some people over others. It works to preserve stereotypes and reductive images of the other rather than to open up new possibilities for identity and identification (Munt, 1994).

At home, tourism also can be used to bolster class status and reinforce class hierarchy. The tourist requires an experience of the authentic to indicate that she has actually gotten away from home. There are multiple images of the traveler or tourist and those are also culturally constructed ideals. For example, my initial images of the independent female backpacker were one such socially constructed fantasy.

The hyper-awareness I had of typical travel narratives made me especially reflective on these fantasies. I felt as though I was playing a part I had already written, while trying to ignore the fact that I already knew the ending; as a privileged, middle class college student I could feel myself yearning for the “authentic” identity of the backpacker. I found the reality of my positionality uncomfortable because it did not fit into my own narrative of what this experience was supposed to be. It
In retrospect, I realize that this is what it means to be part of the phenomenon I was studying.

Research Context and Methodology

I conducted my fieldwork between the spring and summer of 2009. In the spring, I traveled to Istanbul, Turkey and Athens, Ios, Santorini and Rhodes in Greece. During the summer, I began in Copenhagen (where I studied abroad for the semester), and traveled to Berlin, Cologne, and Traben-Trabach in Germany; Vienna, Austria; Budapest, Hungary; Zagreb and Pula in Croatia; Locarno, Switzerland; Marthalen, Switzerland; and back to Copenhagen again. In total, I slept in tents, on strangers’ couches, and in hostels for over two months.

In that time, I attended three major couchsurfing gatherings (in Vienna, Berlin, and Barcelona), as well as a number of smaller weekly meetings in Istanbul and Budapest. While in Switzerland, I participated in a meeting of over 200 people in an isolated location in the Alps. The occasion was a Rainbow Gathering, an originally American festival established in the 1970s, as an opportunity to decompress and live away from electricity and time.

I documented my observations in notebooks and on my computer, as well as by recording conversations, both casual and more formal. Because of the consistent place of photography in the tourist’s journey (Crenshaw & Urry, 1997), I took over 1,000 photographs to both document events and construct memories. Several of these are included throughout the text. These photographs are not intended as illustrations, but slices of the visual and visceral experience of travel.
Organization and Goals of the Study

The thesis consists of three chapters. In the first chapter, I contextualize traveling practices by focusing on experiences of class status and privilege in tourist narratives and possibilities. Through a discussion of the expectations and insights of my family and friends, I consider how travel is an experience of cultural capital and authenticity. Some of the questions I seek to answer are: Why is this kind of trip a desired experience? What does Europe have to do with the experience? Why is it difficult to break out of exploration narratives? Then I continue to the way that couchsurfing can facilitate an alternative process to that of middle class consumption of places and experiences.

The second chapter is on the themes of trust and accountability. Using my experiences in Istanbul and Rhodes I consider the foundations of friendship and trust in these traveler networks and some of the ways that trust is sustained and reinforced. During my stay in Germany, I attended a couchsurfing gathering that I use to expand the theme of authenticity in couchsurfing, and the intersecting backpacking subculture. My
interaction with my Austrian host is a point of exploration of accountability and responsibility in the host/guest community-oriented interaction.

Knowledge flows and concepts of home are the themes of the third chapter, specifically the way that individuals can use the mobility of their bodies to collect stories and inspiration that they otherwise would not be able to gain. What type of interactions can best facilitate that? The final section is on the traveler’s conceptions of home and the blurry boundary between home and away. How is this form of travel actually about learning how to create a home wherever you are?

Although my research is based specifically on couchsurfers and other unconventional travelers, there are larger implications to the work. Tourism research today suggests that many travelers are looking for alternatives to the standard tradition of consumption of people, places, and things. It is important to explore what successes and challenges hospitality networks of all forms are having, in order to best understand how to move forward.
CHAPTER ONE:  
Journeys through Class in the Tourism Landscape

Tourism constitutes the means by which people, places and pasts are seen and imagined.  
John Urry, The Tourist Gaze

In 1972 my mother, Kathy McKenna, graduated from Newton College of the Sacred Heart with a major in Political Science and a minor in Philosophy. Arthur Frommer’s Europe on Five Dollars a Day was recently published. My great-grandmother gave Kathy $1,000 as a graduation present to travel to Europe, which she thought would be an appropriate and enriching experience. In September, my mother left from New York City on an ocean liner called the Michelangelo and arrived a week later in Aljezeera, Spain. She recalls the experience, “I did not speak Spanish, but I felt that I, you know, was 21 and I could do anything.”

Kathy was not the only one. In the 1960s and 1970s, going to Europe after college was seen as the “thing to do” for young middle- and upper-class individuals. In travel advertising, the tag line was, See the world, discover yourself. Backpackers used the travel experience to escape from the restriction of middle-class life and expectations. The cost of travel to Europe made it unlikely that the participants would be anything other than upper-middle-class kids, while the permissive values associated with aimless travel appealed primarily to white liberals. According to Kathy, “It was people who came from upper-middle-class families…a lot of people from the northeast, you know liberals, liberal parents that let them do stuff like this.”
It was not just the money that made travel especially inviting to the children of the middle class, but also the idea of “finding yourself”. Understood as a mode of self-exploration, travel appeared as a productive way of postponing the transition to adulthood. A trip to Europe was (and continues to be) seen as a way to acquire valuable knowledge about the world as well as the self, and more specifically, what it means to be worldly.

Barbara Ehrenreich (1989) would see such travel as one of the practices constitutive of the professional middle class, which she defines as “all those people whose economic and social status is based on education rather than on ownership of capital and property (12)”. Members of this class must work for a living and perform various forms of “mental work” as managers and professionals, work which requires credentials and self-discipline. A key aspect of this identity is the way that a steady income makes possible material and experiential things like a house, college education, vacations, gym memberships, summer camp, or psychotherapy. All of these experiences combine to form what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) would call cultural capital.
Through my conversations with my mother, I came to understand the continuities and discontinuities between her trip and my own, and between the backpacking style of that time and this one.

By the time I went abroad my junior year of college, I had already been on two trips to Europe during the summer (to Poland and then Italy) in addition to having attended an international themed summer camp in Canada from age six to eleven. I was encouraged to be politically active and cosmopolitan, learning about movements and news all over the world. This gave me a taste for the international and the desire to travel. Meeting people from other places was seen as a way to broaden one’s worldview – something beneficial to my own development as a cultured middle-class subject. My mother and her sisters all talked with me about how much their European trips had to do with their identity as independent women who knew how to “think for themselves”.

After talking with my mother about her experiences, I realized that many of the messages about Europe being a safe and welcoming place must have come from her. During our conversation, she often repeated the idea that Europe was “safe” yet exciting. “I thought because I was a young person I would be taken care of, protected and looked upon kindly.” While it was not that simple for me (probably not for her either), I did have this sense that Europe would be a safe place to explore, that nothing really bad was likely to happen to me.

Our motivations for travel were also similar, she told me, “I think having a sheltered Catholic girl childhood and academic experience made me really want to break out and break through and find my wings and find my feet and find my own voice and use my brain, my well-educated brain to have new experiences and see how different Europe was from America....”
Like Kathy, I wrote in my journal, “My head was full of fantasy feelings and images of what it would mean to be completely on my own and removed from all familiarity, needing to find that familiar in the unfamiliar. I dreamed that travel would be empowering and informative.”

One way to distinguish among various types of travelers is through their motivations for travel. Are they intending on going for leisurely and relaxed vacations? An educational sightseeing tour? A tourist’s motivations for travel are also very connected to how he or she feels about their home. Erik Cohen created a typology in 1979 that still serves in some senses today. He breaks tourism down into five main ‘modes’, from travel being a mere occasion in someone’s life, the “recreational mode”, to travel being an intrinsic aspect, the “existential mode”.

There are many modes of leisure travel, from charter tours to couchsurfing. Accessibility of travel has increased the amount of forms by making it possible to find cheap ground transportation and places to stay. There is a relationship between package
tours, created for the individual who wants everything planned on their behalf, and budget travel, for individuals who save money by planning their trip to match their own means. The more tourists want to “get off the beaten path”, the more places open up to other kinds of travelers. The search for the authentic is often the project of the backpacker. These travelers usually shun the tourist label and think of themselves as somehow separate from ‘those other people’ with loud voices and an air of entitlement.

Both my mother’s motivations for her trip in 1972 and my own in 2009 fit with what studies have shown to be the primary motivating factor for backpackers, to construct new identities for themselves (Cohen 2004; Elsrud 2001). These journeys allow backpackers to form their own interpretations of the world, supposedly uninfluenced by preconceptions held in their home society. By going out “into the world” on our own, both of us hoped to use the experience as an opportunity to develop our unique selves. However, as Maoz (2007) points out with reference to backpackers, “the ‘new’ identity they construct through their journeys is sometimes a reflection of their own society, and, in most cases, this is a western society (126)”.

Despite the emphasis on self-definition, Desforges (1998) and Maoz (2007) show that the experience is still about the cultural learning that the young traveler does. The drive to amass worldly knowledge relates to what Pierre Bourdieu calls “cultural capital”. The class value of acquiring
specific forms of knowledge is evident in the role of travel in middle-class life. Along with the emphasis on self-discovery, fun, and exploration, backpackers (Kathy included) continued, in the pattern of earlier middle-class travelers, to see the trip as an opportunity for self-improvement through cultural learning. She remembers:

I started looking around and saying well you know what, the culture here is thousands of years old; I’m going to go to every church in every town that I am visiting because it’s phenomenal. The artwork and the architecture and also I began to understand what the Middle Ages were like. Everything that I had studied, I could now see it in front of me.

Visits to key cities are seen as enriching, occasions for viewing the Eiffel tower, the bridges in Florence, art in Rome, antiquities in Greece. This way of traveling shared many similarities to an earlier form of touring.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, wealthy young European men would embark on a “Grand Tour” to historically and artistically appropriate sites. The trip could last from several months to several years and was meant to increase (and maintain) the social prestige and standing of its participants. The typical itinerary included significant sites in France and Italy. London, Paris, Rome, Venice, and Florence were, much as they are today, “compulsory destinations (Sorabela 2001, Löfgren, 1999)”.

Advancements in train travel during the Victorian Era opened up travel opportunities to middle-class Europeans by lowering the cost. As a result, tourist destinations increased and the ability to travel through Europe increasingly became a means of attaining or maintaining class status in Europe and North America.

Similar to the difference affordable train travel made, Cohen (1973) argues that it was the introduction of cheaper airfares during the ‘60s and ‘70s, in addition to budget accommodation and ground travel, that had the largest impact on the increase of backpacker tourism. Since that point, “alternative” tourism has become more widespread.
and institutionalized in an interdependent relationship with mainstream travel (Butler, 1992).

Backpackers embraced the ideals of minimal belongings and relaxation as opposed to busily visiting historically and culturally important sites on a planned itinerary. Travelers also rejected their earlier forerunners’ comforts and placed a value on “roughing it”. Hanging out became a laudable activity. Kathy describes her motivations to travel,

What would be your dream fantasy thing to do? It was to go on a trip. To take an ocean liner, my dad had always told me that being on the ocean was fantastic because he was in the Navy, and you just go with this book and your intelligence and a little bit of money and you carry everything on your back and you do whatever you want everyday. You go here, you go there, you eat stuff, you see stuff and you meet people and it’s fantastic. I thought yeah, that’s fantastic, I’m going to do that for three months. A thousand dollars bought me three months.

While the opportunity to travel was partially framed as a commodified opportunity to have new experiences, it was also about the skills youth could learn through the trip. Kathy points out, “It was a journey more of self-discovery more than it was a journey of ‘let me see what the world is like and where else do I want to go.’ No, it was more a going inside journey for me because I didn’t know who I was. No idea. No clue.”
Today’s backpacking travel combines the quest for self-knowledge with the opportunity to “stoke up on cultural capital (Munt, 1994)”. After a trip to or through Europe, these travelers were expected to have acquired “good taste” and should be able to identify what quality is in food, education, and culture.

I really disassociated myself from other Americans that were traveling in Europe, especially adult Americans that were tourists. I definitely wasn’t one of them. I didn’t want to have anything to do with them. They were the ugly Americans and I would tread lightly around the margins of having personal relationships with people. Not to be confused with those other people that are just from a ton of money and just want to flash it around and want everyone to know that they’re Americans and they’re not Europeans and it’s ok that they don’t speak the language because the other person is supposed to speak English and because “we’re there spending a lot of money in their country so they should like it”. You know, I didn’t want to be a part of that.

Unlike the separation Kathy articulates in this quote, I did not try to distance myself in the same way from other tourists. By realizing my nearness to these practices of touring, I hoped to make a difference with my daily practices: staying with locals, thinking about places in terms of what they shared with my experience instead of consuming their difference.
Reflections

My intentions and motivations for travel were not always this clear. After my sophomore year, I decided to go to Europe for the summer. When I told my father that I quit my well-paying and resume-building job to couchsurf around Europe for three months, his response was not positive. I remember him pointing out that a girl from my working- to middle-class background needed to have certain experiences in order to "get ahead". Ultimately, he thought that the summer I now intended to have would do me more harm than good.

According to Ehrenriech, what distinguishes the professional middle class is that “[I]ts only ‘capital’ is knowledge and skill…In this class no one escapes the requirements of self-discipline and self-directed labor; they are visited, in each generation, upon the young as they were upon the parents.” This is what my father was trying to insist on with me: a work ethic, a sense of duty, only because this discipline is what would keep me in my class position. “[I]n the middle class there is another anxiety: a fear of inner weakness, of growing soft, of failing to strive, of losing the discipline and will. Even the affluence that is so often the goal of all this striving becomes a treat, for it holds the possibility of hedonism and self-indulgence.” (15). In the case of my father and stepmother the ascetic impulse is especially strong as they did not grow up belonging to this class; to my father, I suspect, it seemed that I lacked the very virtues that had enabled him to rise.

In the end, I did not go away that summer; I found a job and a fellowship to add to my resume and bank account. However, my father remained frustrated by my apparent unwillingness to accept and participate in the life of work. He always said
that he didn't want me to run away from something, but to run towards something else.

Kathy’s reaction was that now was not the right time for this kind of behavior. If I wanted to go to Europe to travel and see the sights, she would give me the money after I graduated, as her grandmother had done for her. After college would be the right time, the correct moment to enter into a liminal period of soul seeking. Now was time for school and home, time for family, and still being a child. My research trip emerged from this experience of navigating familial expectations of class and travel.

The next summer I made it to Europe, but a lot had changed, including my reasons for going. Europe no longer represented an escape. Encouraged by my family to make my desires acceptable, I had turned them into an ethnographic exploration of the impulse to run away. Initially, the pull toward Europe, for me, was about adventurous ease; I imagined the continent as a space for comfortable exploration. This fantasy reflected common notions of European backpacking that I inherited from my mother and found reiterated in books and popular media. Friends of the family or their older siblings shared journeys with me through photo albums. It was not until later that it struck me that the adventurous locale of their tales was almost always somewhere in Western Europe. The narrative that these friends and family members told upon return was about self-discovery and gaining independence. During their time “away” they were able to discover their “true selves”, unfettered by the conventions of everyday home life.

My first mission of couchsurfing was “Get out of Dodge!” placed prominently at the top of my profile page. This statement clearly demonstrated my desire to get away. My motivations fell somewhere between a self-fashioning escape into the liminal space
of travel and an idea of relaxation and celebration. Even though I rejected the values of pure leisure tourism that seemed to only consume the environment by creating the most fun and manageable experience possible, I was searching for a vacation of my own.

Couchsurfing promised serendipity because a surfer would not always know what was coming next. Travel aspirations such as mine, an affinity for the relational rather than an objectified culture, are not entirely in line with common middle-class expectations about tourism. Although the emphasis on having “authentic” connections with locals (MacCannell, 1976) does line up with the backpacking interest in amassing a sub-cultural capital of “experience” (Thornton, 1996), the practices of couchsurfers with a focus on the connection between individuals, rather than on the site, takes this interest to a new level. Instead of being worldly in the sense of having seen many places, couchsurfers become worldly through their connections with people. Rather than being interested in seeing the Eiffel Tower, the point is to spend time with someone who lived near it. This quality or intention is part of what distinguishes couchsurfing from earlier forms of travel.

Between one summer and the next, I had time to reflect on my initial motivations to travel. I found that I was driven by a desire to escape from what I viewed as an unduly demanding lifestyle to a fantasy of freedom. That desire was fed by stories of relaxation and self-discovery told in movies like *Vicky-Christina Barcelona*, or popular books like *Eat, Pray, Love*. Another pivotal book that I read in high school was called *Off the Map* about two young women who travel around Europe on their own.

My motivation the next summer was very different. The spring semester I spent studying in Copenhagen eliminated any immediate need to escape. I found myself hungry for home rather than itching for flight. Instead, because of my research subject, I
found myself on the road and searching for some sense of familiarity and comfort. In some ways, this is what drew me toward others who were also seeking a home in motion.

*Couchsurfing Foundations*

Our activities on the Internet are so often making us more and more removed from our activities in the real world, but we think of it as like a replacement instead of a supplement. With couchsurfing, it is an Internet social media type network and whatnot but it’s rooted in real world experience, in face to face, that’s the whole point, that ultimately you’re going to be having these face-to-face experiences and support network. It’s real man, real people, real talk, don’tcha think?

This comment by fellow couchsurfer, Michele, shows how in this practice, a primary motivation is the relationships built through travel. Friendship becomes the main tourist attraction. The network presents itself as being about people making connections in real life, which is an interesting blend of online and offline technologies. In some ways, the focus on building relationships links couchsurfing to dating websites, where people also try to make online connections. The difference is that dating websites emphasize one-on-one connections rather than community as a whole.
CouchSurfing International is a travel network based on non-commodified tourist/visit experiences. Three computer programmers founded it in 2003. Since then, they write on their About page, “members have been using our system to come together for cultural exchange, friendship, and learning experiences.” Today, the website connects travelers in over 230 countries and has over one-million members. Participants create profiles on the site, which they use to offer free hospitality to guests or to find a host whose couch they can “surf”. The system is based on trust, on assurances that members will do no physical or emotional harm to others, that they are respectful individuals, who as hosts will not exploit the vulnerability of guests, and who as guests are not looking to take advantage of free accommodation and will not exploit the generosity of their hosts. Access to the website is free and anyone can create a profile. It is, in effect, an article of faith that those who do so are likeminded and will abide by the organization’s principles.

On the website, the founders write about the mission:

   Our mission as an organization is to create inspiring experiences: cross-cultural encounters that are fun, engaging, and illuminating. These experiences take many forms. CouchSurfing's initial focus was on hosting and "surfing" (staying with a local as a guest in their home). Alongside these core experiences, we now also facilitate a growing array of activities and events.

   (http://www.couchsurfing.org/about.html/faq, March 23, 2010)

The “activities and events” touched on in this mission statement have become a very important part of the website for many members. Cities with very active couchsurfing communities often hold multiple events a week, from general meetings for local couchsurfers to meet one another, to international gatherings attended by hundreds of surfers/hosts from around the world. The fundamental vision of couchsurfing is articulated as follows:

   At CouchSurfing, we envision a world where everyone can explore and make meaningful connections with the people and places they encounter. We believe
that relationships we build across continents and cultures can create a global community that values diversity and seeks understanding in times of disagreement.  
(http://www.couchsurfing.org/about.html/vision#, March 23, 2010)

Using the website, members browse profiles, join groups, write on message boards, and, most importantly, make or respond to couchsurfing requests.

CouchSurfing members share hospitality with one another. These exchanges are a uniquely rich form of cultural interaction. Hosts have the opportunity to meet people from all over the world without leaving home. "Surfers”, or travelers, are able to participate in the local life of the places they visit. We also give more people the chance to become travelers, because "surfing" lowers the financial cost of exploration.  
(http://www.couchsurfing.org/about.html, March 23, 2010)

There are a variety of networks that are related in structure and intention to couchsurfing, whether they are more of less formalized. Religious organizations or transnational communities of artists created some. Servas Open Doors is a hospitality network closely related to CouchSurfing in its purpose. It was established in 1949 and has now been incorporated into the UN. Offering hospitality and specifically a home stay to foreign travelers is a well-established ideal in popular imagination and practice. An example of this is Study Abroad for college students, often accompanied by a home stay.

After the development of the Internet, some established hospitality networks experienced dramatic increases in membership, and new organizations were founded. Couchsurfing is a network defined by the emphasis on mutual exchange and reciprocity. The description that follows is based on how a new user would approach the website.

Although there are many parts of the website that are open to all (such as searching for members and reading some of the message boards), to actually use it, one must become a member. This is done by setting up a profile, including pictures, interests,
and links to other friends’ profiles. Some degree of care is important in this process because profiles that are left largely blank are seen as untrustworthy. According to one of the developers of the website and project, the questions users are asked to answer for their profile are designed to “bring out the essence of people. And when people’s essences are visible, it contributes to the building of trust (quoted in Bialski, 2007).”

To couchsurf means to use the website couchsurfing.com to find or offer free hospitality. Members of the community/website set up a profile that includes what city or town they live in, in addition to more personal introductory information. Participants in the practice of couchsurfing span multiple modes of travel. Some use the network to travel on the weekends or for holidays, with shorter and relatively well-planned itineraries, while some use it to travel on a long-term basis, typically with a more fluid itinerary. They are, however, unified by many of the traits that they share with backpackers, such as a sense of solidarity with other non-commercial or “alternative” travelers; an interest in freedom gained through travel; a belief in common humanity, as well as an interest in cultural difference and a desire to get to know people with certain broadly shared orientations who live in different social-cultural milieus; the belief that travel can lead to self-knowledge and transformation; and a hunger for more travel experiences (O’Reilly, 1999).

An important part of every profile is the friend list and reference section. A profile contains links to friends a user has offline, in addition to people s/he has met through traveling. Users are encouraged to “friend” people only if they have interacted with them in real life; this makes the network safer by only including people who one
trusts based on direct encounters\(^1\). The purpose of this part of the profile is to allow the viewer to gauge the level of trustworthiness of the individual – more friends probably means that the person is more trustworthy. When people add a friend to their list, they also are required to indicate on a qualitative scale the “friendship strength” and “trust level”.

In order to use the website for hosting or surfing, a new member fills out the section of the profile about their accommodations. They can indicate if they are available to host; options include: Definitely, maybe, meet for coffee or a drink\(^2\), no, or traveling; and they are to state what they expect to receive or are willing to provide in terms of hospitality. For example, users are encouraged to describe what a surfer can expect when they arrive at the home, whether they will be sharing a room with the host, whether it is okay to use the kitchen or the bathroom, how long the host is comfortable with having a guest.

Surfers can include what they think makes them a good guest; such as the kinds of things that they like to do with hosts or while they travel. This online sharing acts as a general introduction between the creator of a profile and the person reading through it. Surfers sometimes add something into their profile about what they can offer their host, such as Jason who writes, “I’m really good at making ‘Indian style’ lentils and may be able to make a face that will entertain a child under the age of 6, possibly 7 depending on their disposition (http://www.couchsurfing.org/people/jbigman/)”.

To make a specific couchsurfing request, one user sends a message to another, stating when they would like to arrive. In writing a request, users are encouraged to

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\(^1\) This is in direct contrast to the norm on other social networking sites like Myspace that encourage friendship not to be realized in real life.

\(^2\) The coffee-and-a-drink option means that an individual does not have to be able to travel or host to participate in the network.
indicate that they have read the host’s profile and want to stay with them because of what they have in common or could learn from one another. For example, couchsurfers offer to teach everything from lessons in music, cooking, and languages to busking and hitchhiking. Using the website exclusively for the purpose of free accommodation is viewed with disapproval by many in the couchsurfing community. The ultimate purpose as stated on the website is to promote friendships and understanding.

Importantly, the website is not only used for individual couchsurfing. There is a significant part dedicated to building community on- and offline. Through membership in various groups and posts on the message boards, individuals create connections with others. It can also be used to share resources. There is an increasing use of the website to create consistent social gatherings for the members of CouchSurfing International located in specific cities. It is used as a way to bring together people, even when they are not traveling, based on their shared interest in traveling and building an international community.

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3 One example of this is when a couchsurfer needed a memory card read to download her pictures so she made a post on a message board. As a result, someone with a computer to help her met her at a gathering.
CHAPTER TWO:
The Creation of Couchsurfing Community

Every couchsurfing experience is unique, precisely because it depends on the particular participants. A host might have the surfer’s whole visit planned out, or a surfer might arrive and have the host tell them that they are leaving the city for the week and will leave their key\(^4\). The surfer’s personality and inclinations also play a part in shaping the interaction, she may be talkative or shy, and she may have the whole visit planned out already or be open to suggestions. The profile acts as a possible preview for the encounter, but ultimately, there are no guarantees. This is one major difference between couchsurfing and other modes of tourism: with its dependence on personal relations, the couchsurfing experience is in some ways more unpredictable and unstable. With other forms of tourism, especially regarding accommodation, the traveler has some sense of what to expect from a hotel or a hostel. In couchsurfing, an individual can find herself encountering any number of kinds of hosts or living situations. This is true even though couchsurfing members do expect a few commonalities with their fellow participants. In a way, there is an assumption of self-selection.

The phenomenon of couchsurfing blurs the line between host and guest. Many hosts are foreigners in their own “home” cities or locales. I stayed with multiple people who had been living in the “host country” for less than a year. As a consequence, we often explored new places together, my visit acting as an opportunity for the hosts to visit places that might be as foreign to them as to the guest. As people interested in the

\(^4\) This happened to a friend of mine in Venice, an apartment in the center of the city!
international, couchsurfers tend to be on the move, not only as surfers, but also for work, school, or a change of scene. The propensity for movement is reflected in the lifestyle choices of the host themselves.

The couchsurfing moment itself is varied. A host might pick up a surfer at the airport, train station, subway stop, or give them their address and have them ring the doorbell. Once introductions are made and the surfer has a chance to put her bag down, the host can take off, or can list a number of activities that the two can do together, or ask what the surfer wants to do. It depends on the amount of time and interest that the host has to offer. Sometimes hosts are too busy to do more than have a quick conversation with their guest, but other times they are willing to be a personal friend and tour guide through local life. Often the most important experiences are when the surfer gets to participate in the host’s “everyday life”, gaining access to experiences that she would not have otherwise been able to participate in, such as dinner parties, personal tours around a city, or a night out with the locals.

In this sense, the tourist attraction for the surfer has changed from something “authentic/exotic/local” to something that is at once different and mundane, a chance to participate in someone else’s everyday life. How this experience will play out depends on many things, including the people that an individual chooses to surf with or host: whether or not it is someone that she would be likely to meet and befriend in her own life, or whether she normally would not get a chance to interact with them anywhere else.

The possibility of extending one’s social world extends into the broader practice of the couchsurfing network. It is not only about one-on-one travel experiences. The website now facilitates a range of social interactions, from weekly meet-ups to clubs to
huge gatherings. These social opportunities all connect people who might not otherwise have known each other, but are united by their common interest in travel and meeting new people in a transgressive context. There is a bond of trust that transforms strangers into friends. In this sense, couchsurfing is about extending one’s social network, but also developing and putting into practice theories of social change.

Participants speak of their couchsurfing experience in a common vocabulary of desires: to move, to leave, to introduce people to a place, to dream of a world where everyone wants to participate in forging transnational relations. Some of the basics of couchsurfing include an emphasis on sharing, of culture, experiences, time, food, accommodation, and through these means, some degree of monetary exchange.

For many couchsurfers, what is at stake is a moral economy based on cooperation and sharing, an alternative to the dominant system that encourages competition and accumulation.

Couchsurfers often told me they were interested in alternatives, which has a lot to do with their decision to travel in a non-mainstream way. This choice also has many similarities to the reason for backpacker travel, attempting to free oneself from the values imprinted on one by the host society. In this way, couchsurfing represents an alternative to commodified tourist experiences of the other. It brings in a personal

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5 One couchsurfer told me her dream was to be able to walk up anyone’s door and ask for a place to stay.
element of integrating and celebrating differences, rather than using them to reify an exclusive sense of self.

This attempt at reshaping social bonds is present from the basic idea that travelers are encouraged and generally want to become friends with their hosts, at least temporarily, and there is an ideal of forging lasting relationships. Surfers talk about how intense these short experiences can be and look forward to future encounters. In this way, the relationship becomes part of the traveler’s sense of self and personal connections, rather than something they perceive to be ‘other’ and outside themselves.

Sociologist Dean MacCannell writes in the seminal text *The Tourist* (1976, 77) that,

we like to think of nature and other societies as being outside of historical time and beyond the boundaries of our own cultural experience. In this way, we can draw upon them as endless resources for social change and development. But this exteriority of nature and otherness is mainly fictional as modernity expands and draws every group, class, nation and nature itself into a single framework of relations.

Although, I do not agree with MacCannell’s last assertion that modernity is drawing every group into a single framework, I do believe that there is a globalized culture reaching more places and attempting to draw everything under its umbrella. However, this very process enables people interested in social change to use heightened connectivity as an opportunity to unite geographically separate groups in an effort to create an opposition to flows of global capital. Couchsurfing exemplifies such a counter-tendency and in the next site-specific sections I will describe some of these practices.
Rhodes, Greece

Because of its location and size, the island of Rhodes has historically been important as a religious and military center, dominated by many different groups of people. The old city is beautiful, and the walls of the city are still standing. A group similar to the Knights Templar built many of the structures, which still act today as one of the main tourist draws.

I arrived in Rhodes with my travel companions, Nicole and Nora, sometime in the afternoon. Nicole was an acquaintance from Wesleyan and Nora was her American friend from a study abroad program at Oxford. At the port where our ferry docked, the owner of Rodos Youth Hostel picked us up. We drove in the van up from the sea to the old city to a parking lot outside the walls, and from there, we walked through the winding streets to the hostel. The owner checked us in and showed us our room, three beds and a bathroom, and the kitchen.

What I remember most about this arrival, though, is the man who introduced himself to us the minute we walked through the gate, “Hi! My named is Black Jack, no, Jack Black, you know… The Angel of Death. You’ll put your stuff down and then I will take you to the store. I know where to go. I have to go feed my dogs. I will be right back.”
First and foremost, Jack was a character. About 5’10”, tanned white, crooked teeth, sinewy frame, athletic, active, energetic. He had a completely shaved head and wore a baseball hat and light pants and sneakers. Jack had been living in the hostel for the past few months and was intending on staying another four years. Born in Poland, he moved on in his late teens. He served in the French Legion in Eritrea and the Congo for eight years, and then moved to Spain for another twenty. Now he was living on Rhodes, in Greece, because there was a job he needed to save money to retire in Uruguay with his nine donkeys. Jack hated Greece and almost all Greeks. He spent a long time telling us about how they were corrupt and never finished anything they started, in addition to being rude and uncaring.

Stories like Jack’s were echoed in many of the people that I met during my research – they had experiences living in many places, settling in for short or long periods of time and developing some sense of home, belonging and authority before moving on again.

Despite only living in Rhodes for a few months, Jack was our main host. In the earlier tourism research, and even in some today, the line between hosts and guests is stark (Bialski, 2007). Host means local, at home, unmoving. Guest means foreign, away, mobile. Often times what happens in couchsurfing or ‘intimate tourism’ is a blurring of this line between host and guest.

In recalling my encounter with Jack, I sought to understand why I felt comfortable with him and what made his story interesting to me. I was inclined to trust him unlike my fellow travelers. Ultimately, I believe that I didn’t want to imagine that Jack had possible ulterior motives that could endanger me. This shows the way that I thought about and judged risk in this situation.
In order to better understand Jack’s actions and words and to feel more comfortable, I tried to imagine his motivations. Because I knew that he felt most at home in Spain, I thought having a hospitable nature might be something important to him. However, what I think is more likely from my experiences with other hosts, is that he had positive prior experiences of hosting or being a guest in the past. This ability to imagine beneficial host/guest interactions is an important prerequisite for participating in these networks. I imagined that he took pleasure, as I did, in showing people places that he found interesting or cooking them a meal that he thought they’d enjoy.

Another possible motivation for Jack and other hosts is loneliness. On the last night of my visit we had dinner together and he told me that he was isolated on Rhodes, all his friends were dead or married and far away. I imagined that if I were living in a hostel far away from my home, I too would want company. I would especially be interested in people younger than me, over whom I could assert some degree of authority.

During many of our encounters, Jack exerted great influence. He was often very assertive and at times almost aggressive. In this respect, I often felt that I had to work to assert my agency with Jack. He made both Nicole and Nora really uncomfortable. Part of the reason for their discomfort was being more accustomed to traveling in hotels or hostels. Situations like this one with Jack were of particular interest to me partially because of the risk and opportunity to cross the class divide into less sanitized social interactions. Beyond the class implications, being open to a range of host personalities is a crucial part of couchsurfing or other hospitality networks. With online networks, the profile can act as a way to screen, but in daily traveling life to receive the benefits of being hosted, it is sometimes necessary to move out of one’s range of comfort.
On the other hand, my two female companions and I had reason for caution. There were lots of reasons not to trust Jack. When I asked him why he was being so kind, he told me, “I'm not nice, I'm bad.” Or, “You can't take a picture of me because I am a criminal.” In addition, he once told us he smuggled silver. As three women, we were more vulnerable to harm, especially from shady men like Jack. Perhaps part of my interest had to do with playing with the risk to prove something to others, or myself but Nicole and Nora may have not felt such desires.

In the time that we were there, he took us shopping, to a bakery at night, and, after Nicole and Nora went back to Athens, he took me on a tour through the new city, old city, acropolis, and shore. The experience that I had that day was better than anything else my whole time in Greece.

One of the reasons that the hospitality network works is because both guests and hosts already have an expectation of how power and decision-making in interactions will play out. In a way, these interactions might not end up being balanced (a host will ask for more participation in their activities than the guest wants, or the guest will be more demanding of hospitality) but if that is previewed on the profile first, than at least there is some degree of consent. One person, Michel, that I stayed with in Berlin had an extensive part of his profile about his expectations and opinions. He says that this is to avoid future problems.

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6 - No special rules, just common sense...
- Please don't use me as a hotel; consider my schedule, if you want "absolute freedom" then better find a hostel
- Please feel free to ask questions if you feel unsure about something
- I like to share my food with you, but please ask me before using my stuff (food, phone etc.) and consider sharing the cost
- Please show some interested in your host (=me), don't talk in your mother tongue ALL the time and keep it clean (eg hair in the shower and sink).
- Let me know when you plan to stay out late at night (tell me, or mobile message, or paper on the floor). I don't mind my guests coming back late, but I want to know about it, otherwise I will really worry about
Even though my interactions with Jack were not always smooth, what I got out of it were the sights that he shared with me and his kindness and hospitality. Certainly, as in any gift transaction, there was some degree of asymmetry in this situation: he had the power to show us around, which probably wouldn’t have been something that he could do with any Greeks, and buying/cooking us food put him into a provider role. He may have also felt like he was taking care of us. I even found myself wondering whether taking me out was one of his largest expenses.

Istanbul, Turkey

After going in the wrong direction for awhile on the city tram, I was running a bit late, but I finally met up with my hosts, Kjelti and Albrect in front of a University building in Taksim Square, one of the central areas in Istanbul, Turkey. It was easy to something happened to you. Please keep a certain priority on that.
- COMMUNICATE! If there is a problem, talk about it and don't eat it up inside. Many things come from misunderstandings and keep in mind people do mistakes without noticing, so give them a chance to correct them.
Also keep in mind cultural differences, although don't use them as an excuse for yourself. (http://www.couchsurfing.org/profile.html?id=6AO0DF, accessed April 10, 2010)
pick them out; they looked expectant and resembled their profile pictures. With my big backpack, I’m sure they easily recognized me as well. We exchanged greetings in the March evening, and they asked me if I wanted to go to their favorite falafel place. After dinner and conversation, we went to a couchsurfing meet up at a salsa club, and then a ferry trip to the Asia side and their flat.

Neither Kjelti nor Albrect were from Turkey. They met in Canada when Albrect, originally from Germany, was participating in a high school exchange program at Kjelti’s school. After high school they decided to attend a cultural studies program at the University of Sweden – Malmo, and from there they participated in an exchange program in Istanbul. Their transnationalism is typical of a wider trend in couchsurfing in general.

As regular participants in couchsurfing, both hosting and surfing in a variety of locations, they talked about the differences between couchsurfing in Western Europe or North America and in Turkey. Specifically, they said, the anti-consumerist tendency in the former places does not carry over to the couchsurfing scene in Istanbul. They explained this by noting that couchsurfers often represent the alternative elements in a society, and in Istanbul what is ‘alternative’ is to participate in the young professional scene. This did not mean, they added, that anti-consumerist people did not exist in Istanbul or Turkey. Rather participating in couchsurfing requires both Internet access and use of the English language, and many people, or young people in particular, might not have those resources because of their status outside the mainstream.

Toward end of the evening, we went to a couchsurfing meeting at a club near the center of the city. The “meeting” turned out to be a salsa party where Kjelti and Albrect greeted the people whom they knew, and I was introduced to some other couchsurfing
hosts and travelers. Both Kjelti and Albrecht said they usually did not enjoy these events because it was difficult to make real connections with people in the party atmosphere. I too felt overwhelmed, but that might have been my reaction to the first day in this new city and all the traveling.

The next day I explored the city with my “Turkish” hosts. It was easy to see how the line between our roles as host or guest became blurred. In the morning we looked on the Internet for different Sunday markets and found one with mainly organic produce some distance from their apartment. We decided that we would visit this market and then make our way to the Spice Bazaar, a tourist destination that I wanted to see. These two markets were located in different parts of the city and neither my hosts nor I knew how to get from one to the other by foot. We decided go on this adventure together, both allowing us to see the city and them to practice their Turkish. What resulted was a four-hour hike through the city and some of its neighborhoods, exploring places new to

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7 Later I had better experiences at couchsurfing weekly meetings. In Budapest, I met a future host at one such event and a former tour guide that loved sharing his knowledge of the city.
all of us. So often, the directions Albrect or Kjelti asked for contradicted the previous ones, or when one of them went into a store to ask for guidance, the voices argued and we followed the loudest one.

I learned that industry in the city is divided into sections, one part for lighting, one for metal parts. The most memorable was the street lined with mannequin shops, every kind imaginable standing naked in windows from sumo wrestlers to silver sci-fi creatures. That street was closest to the university where some of their classes were held. Then we walked over the bridge and through the park. Sitting under the trees were a group of women wearing black burkas, Kjelti told me that was very unusual to see in the city and we wondered what their business of the day was.

Often couchsurfers and hosts talk about discovering their cities through a guest, either seeing old sights again through different eyes or going to entirely new locations. One summer in high school, I stayed with a family in Torun, Poland. I remember my host sister telling me, she had no idea the history surrounding her until I came and she wanted to show me all that there was to offer.

Another example occurred in Cologne, Germany, when my host took me up the big tower so that I could see the city. It was his 100th time, but he thought it was an important part to share (I also think he liked running up and down all the stairs).

_Traben-Trabach, Germany_

On a rainy day, a group of couchsurfers and locals took a tractor ride down the mountain to the town for entertainment. It took us forever to leave the campground. We kept on waiting for people, but it wasn't clear or important who exactly those people were.
I have a video that I made from the moment before we actually got on the tractor. A Dutch woman is playing the melodica and another guy is playing an accordion. Frank is meeting Anne for the first time, they shake hands and exchange names, Frank pulls her a little closer, she and I assume this is to hear her repeat the name again, but instead he kisses her on the cheek. She laughs. We're covered in plastic bags, plastic neon ponchos, or rain jackets. We have a destination, but there's a sense that we could stand there forever.

Once we get into town, we mill around deciding where to go. It doesn't matter to me because, my journal reminded me, I wasn't feeling well and had a headache. What I recall is slowly walking through the gray narrow street of this intentionally picturesque wine valley town, listening to the accordion and the sounds of my companions' laughs. Eventually I end up taking a walk with Frank to the peak of this mountain where an old fort remains, while the rest stayed to share the small bar with some old local men, drinking beers. Even though I had only met these people a few days before, I felt relaxed and safe with them. I knew that I would be treated respectfully and entertained.

Frank tells me about the plant species as we walk along. He is an ecologist whose job in the Netherlands is to count endangered species and write reports on their health. I also ask him about his hitchhiking and couchsurfing experiences. Because he likes to travel and travels only by hitchhiking, he's up to 987
rides and thousands of kilometers with strangers.

When we return to the bar, it’s filled with the sounds of the accordion. The bartender is smiling and seems amused, while earlier he looked quite skeptical. Heading to a pizza place, the music continues and I feel like a part of some parade or circus. Strangers in colorful costumes and with musical accompaniment stroll down small town streets. Those we passed mostly offered grins. That night, under Christopher's direction, we snuck into the town pool, barely making it out by morning when they opened it up to the public.

What brought me to this location was called the Mont Royal Summer Camp. This was the third year of its existence, hosted by Christopher and Flo, childhood, and current best friends. Their bond remained solid despite the fact that Flo still more commonly went by the name FlohFish and identified as a lifelong couchsurfer and drunk, while Christopher had now joined in the running of his family winery and was married and starting a family.

From what I could gather, their motivations were to host a fun reunion in their hometown, showing a different side of German life that travelers, including couchsurfers, would usually not get to see, especially together. The main elements of the camp were
drinking, cooking, and standing by the fire, with side educational (on the history of the town) and non-educational excursions. The countryside was beautiful, so many, including myself, took walks. There was a tour through the town with an official tour guide (translated by the not so professional and drunk Flo) that explained the interesting gargoyles and underground wine cellar tunnels.

My first ride was from someone that I met at the camp, a middle-aged Bavarian man who seemed to be a bit of an eccentric recluse. He shared with me his thoughts on how the world economy is going to crash, the importance of German punk and hip-hop, and how to travel across national borders unofficially for fun (his favorite was the US-Mexican border). He dropped me at a petrol station on the highway toward Vienna. I made the decision based on the fact that other people I met and admired hitchhiked on a regular basis and recommended it as a new kind of learning experience. They said it was a way to talk to people that you wouldn’t otherwise meet, hear their stories or share yours; a friend of mine had also used hitchhiking as an opportunity to practice his French. Many of those friends used it to maintain their very low cost lifestyles and combined it with dumpster diving and couchsurfing to meet all their basic needs (food, clothing, shelter, mobility). In retrospect, I realized how dangerous this choice was and how swayed I was by the romantic tales I heard from fellow travelers.

Vienna, Austria

If you search for couchsurfing hosts in Vienna, Flora’s page is listed somewhere in the high hundreds. A friend, Anna, from home who couchsurfed in Germany and Austria for two months told me about Flora when she returned from her trip. She described a flat full to the high ceilings with books and art and plants, cats and a
wonderful host who would share the secret spots of the city. I would not have known about Flora if it weren’t for this friend connection. The subject line of my first message to Flora was actually, “Hey from a friend of Anna of ‘Anna and Elena that are friends of Chelsea’”, a long connection.

Flora has lived in Austria all her life and in the same apartment in Vienna for eight years. Although she likes to travel, she is comfortable being a homebody and traveling through the experiences of guests or friends. There was a comfort in that space, I felt like I could rest after the movement and excitement of my time in Germany. Get my head on straight and avoid other poor decisions like hitch hiking alone.

The week that I spent with Flora was sometimes bumpy. I didn’t know yet the difference between being a friend crashing on the couch and being a guest in a stranger’s home. I did not communicate as much as I should have about when I was arriving back at her flat at night or when we could meet up. In retrospect, I see that I acted irresponsibly and somewhat disrespectfully. I felt that what we had in common was supposed to make connecting easy, but it didn’t. The assumptions that I made about her habits being like mine were not true.

The times that worked out really well were when we went to Kalideskop together, a volunteer-run collective space. The weekend that I arrived they were having a
culture jamming event series, including films, concerts, visiting artists, and direct action planning (and events). This was the kind of sharing that I was most interested in. “If I had been born in this city, what would I be doing?” is a question that I often ask myself. I think it is helpful in getting a handle on what a person with my values would be feeling passionate about in this context.

The uncertainty of a travel experience is especially acute when working through formal or informal hospitality networks. Hosts want to know when you are arriving and be informed of any change in your plans, both to avoid disrupting their own schedules and because they may be making special preparations to receive the guest. A friend whom I made through couchsurfing in Copenhagen expressed to me her frustration when people would cancel their requests at the last minute, after she had cleaned her apartment and prepared a place for them to sleep. This accountability is one example of how hospitality networks operate as a community different from hostels or hotels. There is a personal relationship in the making between host and guest at the onset of the connection, the hallmark of a gift transaction that needs to be respected.
CHAPTER THREE:
Finding a Home in Motion

Looking back on the two months I spent backpacking, I am engaged in an interpretive struggle. While one part of me acknowledged that the trip was just an extension of my everyday experience, but another argues that there was something extraordinary about those moments. As I have previously stated, I have found it helpful to use travel as a metaphor for the internal journey. It isn’t that people don’t develop personally while they are “at home”, but usually the “away” period is temporally bounded and therefore easier to bracket as a story of “this is how I changed.”

The events that I recount in this chapter come from the middle of my trip; at that time, I sensed a change from my earlier experiments with what O’Reilly names as the main attribute of backpacker travel. This included an orientation toward the task of travel, little to no advanced planning, no timetable (with the exception of my flight home), and an openness to change in plan.

My ideal of travel was that I would leave things up to chance and the universe, learn to let go and live with the consequences. In my imagination, this technique would work because friends who had traveled before me seemed to have used it, as did the characters I read about in books like Off the Map. The truth is that I didn’t question any of these sources too closely. If I had, I might have learned that the image people project of their travel is usually positive and relatively carefree, with the exception of some humorously recounted horror stories. In
addition, each individual must figure out for herself with what she is comfortable. Although I did know that before I began the research, it wasn’t until I visited Croatia that I felt in the swing of things.

_Zagreb, Croatia_

Before I left for my two-month trip, I remembered that a college acquaintance, Jane, had made some friends while studying abroad in Croatia. I contacted her and she put me in touch with them. I ended up staying with Tatjana, in her home city, Pula. Jane forwarded Tatjana’s email to me and I communicated when I was planning to go to visit her. Originally, I was also going to take a trip to Serbia, where Jane had some other friends, but that proved too out of my way. While I was in Budapest, my stop before entering Croatia, I emailed Tatjana and asked her where she wanted me to meet her. She told me that she wasn’t available to meet me in the capital, Zagreb, but if I wanted someone to show me around, she’d ask a friend.
When I got to Zagreb it was evening and I made my way to a hostel\(^8\). In the morning, I called Tatjana’s friend Kaja, and we met near the main train station. She and her boyfriend Eugene offered me an “alternative” tour of the city. Despite the rain, I had an amazing time listening to them talk about the history of their country, the language, politics, and literature. Eugene studied political science and Kaja studied sociology, both at the university in Zagreb. They both were very involved in the political struggles of the city.

A current and pressing issue was proposed tuition instatement in the national university system. They described the opposition being mounted by students all over the country. There were walkouts and protests far beyond what anyone had expected. They also told me about the drawbacks to the movement: it wasn’t centrally coordinated, so students from outside the city didn’t have a clear idea of what they were protesting, and in most places the walkouts ended before any demands were met. Still it was a huge achievement and inspiring to learn about.

This experience fit the ideal I had imagined before I started traveling: going to a city and learning about current events from the perspectives of the activists involved. We also stopped by an Internet café/info shop where Kaja used to work. They were hosting a conference on culture jamming. There were a few American intellectuals and students crammed into a relatively tiny space; it was interesting to have these two worlds of American academia and Croatian politics overlapping in this unexpected way. We went online to look up my afternoon bus to Pula and continued on.

\(^8\) After a month of couchsurfing, I felt like I needed my “own” space that is one I actually purchased. As I have discussed, there are a variety of accommodation options for tourists. Couchsurfing is one of these, but does not always meet the needs to a traveler to have privacy. Although I strongly advocate use of the network, it became apparent to me through my trip that sometimes, a person needs her own space.
As we were walking Kaja and I talked about what jobs were available to sociology students in Zagreb and what she did and did not want to do. Something I found intriguing was how she described working for one women’s organization that described itself as feminist, but in her view was not because of their lack of structural critique. This, to me, was an example of how getting a more subjective local perspective diversifies the kind of information one is exposed to as a traveler. I would never have gotten such an analysis of contemporary Croatian life and politics from a book or television program.

Kaja conducted this entire tour despite having been bitten by a bee in the morning and walking around with a swollen hand. During our goodbye, she told me that when Tatjana asked her to show me around, she wasn’t sure whether she would enjoy the experience of guiding a stranger around town, but it had turned out to be fun. She was interested to hear about my project and my life, and I really liked learning about her.

Arriving late to the bus to Tatjana’s city, followed my general tendency to neglect planning in life and especially in travel. Other travelers told stories about running to planes, losing phone numbers, and getting stranded. Originally, it seemed to me that learning how to manage without plans was part of the character building aspect of travel. In retrospect, the stress of having things
“up in the air” was most likely just a claim to prestige through enduring personally induced hardship.

In my travels, as in my life in general, I tried to create a balance between not knowing things and being okay with that, and being more informed about and thus prepared for new situations. Balancing spontaneity with foresight and planning may be an example of a skill people try to learn through travel: what to plan and what to leave to chance. This balance goes back to the freedom trope of backpacking travel, not wanting to be constrained by deadlines or limitations. However, striking a balance is a skill.

I ran up to the bus driver with my backpack, calling in English for him to wait. He asked me if I spoke Italian or Spanish, because everyone there speaks Italian, but I didn’t, and he just shook his head and put my pack under the bus. He walked down the aisle collecting tickets, but skipped me. I assumed it was because I still needed to purchase mine. While I was traveling, I made so many assumptions. It was the only way to feel like I had any understanding. I could tell that he was making jokes, but I didn’t understand any of them and sometimes I felt like they were about me, but I wasn’t sure. I felt like that a lot when interacting with public servants in foreign countries. I felt like they were joking with me, or that I myself was a joke that I didn’t get.

One of the functions that hospitality networks play is to make travelers feel less out of place and less like foreigners. For example, whenever I was staying with a host and we went out together, he or she made me feel welcome and like I “fit in”, or as if I were a visitor from out of town rather than from abroad. When I was alone, as on this bus ride, I often felt confused, overwhelmed and out of place.
While some travelers like these opportunities to test their confidence or mettle, others, like me, find them a source of anxiety.

As a traveler, I almost always felt like an outsider or interloper, especially when I was staying in cities and trying to find my way around without the help of a host. When I was staying with a host, I could and did play the role of the friend from out of town. While it might be true that I was also from another country on another continent, I had the validation of a local. One of the functions that couchsurfing plays, beyond friendship and cultural exchange, is to offer travelers the pleasures of feeling like an insider; it also soothes the nerves of those who might otherwise feel so anxious.

Asking people for help is a big part of traveling. Even if I were a person who planned ahead, it is impossible to know what a city is going to be like or how to get around even with a map. Asking for help is really interesting because I often did it with the assumption that people would provide what I needed out of the “goodness of their hearts,” but I also knew that this was an exercise in privilege: I’m the one who can leave my home and travel to another place where I do not speak the language, thus putting myself in this situation of confusion, while many of the people I expect to help me have no such mobility. Entitlement in traveling is another common trait associated with asking for help. How much did I expect people to assist me and why? It is another balance question because learning that the world is there for you when you need it is a good lesson, but what are the costs? How much of my ability to request help is about how I look and most tourists look? When I was in Bulgaria, we learned about recent studies on prejudice
that documented the extreme racism in the country toward black people. If I were
dark skinned and needed help in a Bulgarian city, would I have gotten it?

It is not always one sided. Many people I talked to on the street spoke
English, meaning that they were already open to English speakers like me and
maybe to Americans. I often answered questions about what I was doing traveling
and tried to carry on a conversation, but I still left feeling uncomfortable. It is
possible that they were too used to having English speakers around. This bus
driver was not one of those people.

While on this particular journey, my dilemma was needing to find a phone to
contact Tatjana and tell her when I planned to arrive. Usually, while traveling,
when I asked people if they knew where I could find a phone, they would offer

their. This was not the case for this bus ride. Eventually, I talked to a girl working
at one of the bus stations along the way and she hesitantly lent me her cell phone
to make the call. In this case, I felt like I was taking advantage of someone. The girl
was really hesitant and probably had good reasons to be that way. If I had thought
it all out, I could have gone to the ATM, taken out more money, bought a phone
card with more minutes on it than I needed, and used the pay phone. What I was
thinking was that it would be cheaper to just borrow someone’s phone for a
minute and that mostly people don’t mind; in this situation, however, people did mind, but I hadn’t given myself enough time to do the more respectful plan.

Even though I felt anxious, I was not thinking about how much worse the situation could have been. Later Tatjana told me a story about two backpackers from another country she knew or had heard about who got off the bus at a rest stop, but didn’t get back to it right on time. The bus started driving away with their packs on it, and they ran behind it until the bus stopped. The driver didn’t want to let them back on, but agreed to get their stuff out for them, and then he drove away. So the travelers were stranded at a rest stop, far away from everything while the bus that they had paid to be on drove off without them. People are not always nice to foreigners. I wonder what would have happened to me in that situation.

When I tell Tatjana how difficult is was for me to find a phone she is appalled. For her, it was an issue of the people in her country not being hospitable enough. I wish now I had asked her more about it. Is it because she travels too? Is it because she believes in mutual aid and people stepping out of their comfort zones to help one another? On the other hand, is it something less radical: that people should just offer the help that they would like to receive?
The Border

My next destination was a remote valley in the Alps on the Swiss/Italian border. I was going to join a friend, Jeremie, who I met two weeks prior and had known for only a few hours. The plan was to convene in the mountains on the Swiss/Italian border at an event called a Rainbow Gathering and I had no idea what it would be like. I could not shake the fear that I would get there and there would be no people.

The bus ride out of Croatia was unbelievable, so much land slightly rolling until it dropped off into rocky cliffs. The most incredible part was how fast I was going through all these places. One of the most important parts of being in transit is the way that distance and land get distorted and made unimportant. When I can get between two distant points so quickly, it almost erases all the difference. On a bus, I see the landscape go by in a slow blur, not meeting people or talking about these places. It’s like they don’t exist, or exist only for me to pass them by.

In these moments, I remember feeling a sense of calm. Calm is a best-case scenario in transit, feeling the soothing rhythm that comes from making one
connection after another, observing in between, watching people, eating an ice
cream, sipping a soda. It happened late at night and early in the morning, at bus
stations, gas stations, and rest stops, a sense of peace and place in the in-between.

I get off somewhere in Switzerland, change money, and buy a ticket to
Locarno (the next stop on my journey). Once I get to that town I can't find my
bus. I have been traveling for more than 10 hours. As I get closer to my
destination, I grow more nervous. Sometimes there is not enough time to prepare
myself for these giant leaps over distances, into different topographies,
geographies, climates, languages, monies. Guidebooks suggest that the nearness of
all the countries is one of the positive aspects about traveling in Europe, but I
often couldn’t get a good look at all this difference because everything was going
too fast. When speed traveling, all the superficial things start to look the same.
Different coin, same hostel.

I find the bus stop and there is a person there who looks like she is going in
the same direction that I am. I can tell because of her hiking books, colorful
clothes, scarf over her head, and guitar on her back. I introduce myself. Her name
is Vera and she is from Bern. She apologizes for her English because it is not very
good, “do I speak Spanish?” We talk more (in English) about where we are from.
She has been to many Rainbows before. I want to know what they are like in detail,
but she just tells me that they are wonderful. I believe her because she is friendly
and close to my age. We sit near each other on the bus, which lurches and sways
up the mountain and looks like it is going to go straight into walls. I am happy to
meet someone else going to the same destination. When “on the road” it is mostly
impossible to tell if a person you have just met will become important. In this case,
Vera was one of the people that I spent the most time with and with whom I became close. We had a lot in common (students, age, beliefs, tastes) and got along really well. This is one of the allures of travel, that you never know who'll be waiting at the bus stop.

The bus driver nods to every other driver and person in every town along the way. The curves are so sharp and the roads are so narrow that he aims the bus into the side of the mountain and turns at just the right time. I keep trying to capture this moment with my camera, but it’s always too blurry. You can’t capture the exhilaration anyway.

I think about how my parents don’t really know where I am right now and if a bus accident in Switzerland even made it on to the news, they wouldn’t even know to be concerned. The towns are picturesque, meaning that if I were a capable photographer I could take pictures of them and put them on postcards.

This is another type of freedom, to be completely “by myself” with no one knowing exactly where I am or how to contact me. At the time I thought that was important; it’s a really individualistic urge; disconnecting from all familiar communities, but in a sense, searching for a new one. All travelers are different. I was almost always looking to form connections with people and wanting to stick around for a while, but others are loners, interacting on their own level.

Our stop was at the very end of the line. We started the hike down into the valley. I can’t remember, but I bet I was thinking about how amazing it is to wake up in the morning in Croatia and arrive that late afternoon in the Alps. All on my own.
We sang along the path downhill. Vera hummed under her breath, and I tried to learn some songs but didn't have enough concentration. Walking into the woods, I felt like I was walking to a fairy tale. Its odd how there aren’t words to describe these experiences other than to retreat into the realm of fantasy or art.

There’s a book that I read in high school that really influenced a lot of my dreams and expectations about travel. *Off the Map* is a supposedly true story of two girls who backpack around Europe over the summer and have adventures. The descriptions were so enticing (also true of a journal a friend wrote and read to me after her own travels). Sometimes it seems so necessary to be more poetic with words.

In the valley, we walked along the bank of a river and crossed it once. I didn’t mind all the walking so much; I was just excited to get there. The trail kept going on and on, but Vera told me that the little piles of stones next to the path were signs that we were going the right way. At the end of the paved road (which signified the border with Italy) we found the welcome camp set up to offer a break for people on their way.
A Rainbow sign said, “welcome home”, and a group of people sitting under a tent invited us to tea, but we went on. We kept on going until we started to see a few tents. Then up into the main meadow where folks were sitting in a giant circle. A friend of hers embraced Vera, and I set down my pack to take a look around. I saw Jeremie, my friend perched on a rock and he had also just arrived! I got some food and settled in.

Marthalen, Switzerland

After the rush of departing, the time at the train platform was a second of breath. At rest finally, for a moment in the momentum of leaving. I stood ready to leave with my newly made family. I couldn’t tell whether I was going toward home or away from it. That was what traveling had come to be about for me, finding a home inside letting go. Not a disorientation, but locating myself in the understanding that life is motion, and it is up to me to believe that the ground beneath my feet is steady.

This group had come together over three weeks at the Rainbow Gathering. When that gathering ended, we continued on to the home of Marsilio, a Swiss student of urban studies in his late twenties, and Angela, also in her late twenties and a graphic designer. All the members of our group were around my age: Katrina, from Poland with a year of solo travel under her belt; Stefan, an Australian, taking a year off to travel; Jeremie, from Canada, traveling indefinitely; Mary Lauren, a student from Wesleyan; and me. Jeremie, Stefan, and Katrina had all been traveling between three months and a year already, Mary Lauren for a few weeks, and I for three months.

Marsilio and Angela’s house was in a small town north of Zurich called Marthalen. Three of the four people they shared the house with were not home when
we arrived, but the house was well equipped for guests, with many mattresses and a big kitchen table. Both hosts expressed excitement and eagerness over our presence there. We arrived at midnight, ate, and went to bed. In the morning most of the group set off on a bike ride to explore the surrounding area, find Internet, and buy groceries. When we returned we made a trip to the dairy farm to pick up fresh milk and take an informal tour. The next day we swam in a pond, and Mary Lauren and I packed up to go to Copenhagen.

Although our time in Marthalen may seem mundane, that is only because describing the impact these moments had on me is a difficult task. The experience of having someone open their home to five travelers with very little notice and the joint efforts of hosts and guests to create a temporary home are what this thesis is all about. While traveling, I often wondered how it was possible to stay on the road for such long periods without losing a sense of ground. One way is to create temporary homes and families in new, often unexpected places.

Standing on the train platform, I marveled at how this home and family came together, since creating a home is always something that has been a struggle for me. I went on this trip was to discover what makes a home and specifically, what does the individual contribute to this goal. This journey took me into people’s actual homes in various cities through Couchsurfing and social connections, as well as three weeks at the Rainbow Gathering. The moment on the train platform was a microcosm of these experiences. Unable to arrive at any grand epiphanies or insights while waiting for the train, I turned to hug and hold the others.

Katrina had become my sister-in-awe. We were struck by the times we found ourselves in fairy-tale situations, walking into forests dappled in light, finding shacks with
hot springs inside, and guided by farmers willing to take us through their fields. We allowed each other to entertain and explore the possibility that life could actually be this magical. Red cotton strapless summer dress, her polska shoulders baked brown. Scarf wrapped holding her hair back so I can see my reflection in her eyes. She taught me that life is a balance between fear and courage, love and apathy; that trusting one’s self takes practice and small steps. I felt grounded and it wasn’t just my 20-pound backpack, it was the belief that I was standing with a home and a family that belonged to me.

Marsilio pronounces Angela’s name like angle-a, and I try that too, but names aren’t that important here, in the space of goodbye. What I know about her is that she’s searching for something too, understands the impossibility and the process of finding oneself and the need for movement even in standing still. On our bike ride the day before, we talked about her travels in Asia and New Zealand. I had wanted follow up, but there’s never enough time for everything. I found peace in the story of her journey, the struggles to love family, find family, and be family. That spoke to me. (After all, what I was I doing in this small town in Switzerland so far from home?) She gets a little teary and so do I, I can’t believe we met just two days ago. The only way to describe it is, that we were living inside each other all along.
Marsilio is without a doubt a character from a fairy tale, C.S. Lewis’ hospitable, lanky faun providing blankets, food, and love for a ragged band of travelers. It’s odd, but he seems such a fantastic figure that I’m not sad to leave him, feeling that we could all follow the breadcrumbs back here when we’re 70 and find him still at home, unchanged.

Marsilio and Angela are travelers too. While I was at his house, Marsilio was packing for a trip to Iceland to go camping with a friend. Angela was originally from somewhere in Germany, ended up in Switzerland, and still isn’t sure where she wants to settle.

Not thinking of these details, I dance with the pack on my back, like it’s a prop symbolizing this journey. Paired with my hiking boots, leggings and tank top, I am a train platform pixie. I can’t explain why I twirl and shift the weight from hip to hip, feeling my knees and ankles flex. I can’t explain why the heaviness of this journey seems so light in this moment, like the love has made the burden of leaving weightless. That’s it right there, the goal of my movement, how to make the heaviness of letting go weightless.

The best part was how blissful I felt, and the way my friends looked while watching, happy with my happiness. There were other people waiting for
the same train, and I imagined them wondering who we were and what kind of scene was unfolding: friends bidding each other a temporary farewell? Siblings saying goodbye? Could they imagine that we only met days ago?

I was first introduced to Jeremie at a Couchsurfing picnic in Vienna. This was the European summer gathering and also a celebration of Couchsurfing’s 10th Anniversary. He and I ended up in a group going to dinner, and on the way, he told me about the Rainbow. All I can really remember him saying was: communal food, singing, hippies, and woods, and I wanted in. He told me the dates, I agreed to meet him there, and we continued on our way. At dinner that night, we got into a conversation with a woman named Anick-Marie who was a part of a collective in Berlin called Project Volunteering. This Project emerged out of some couchsurfers’ desire to form a more permanent home. Jeremie and I were to meet the next day to discuss our plans, but Jeremie was ill and I needed to move on. We exchanged a few emails, but did not confirm our plans, and when I arrived in a valley in the middle of the Alps two weeks later, I was very happy to see that Jeremie had showed up as well.

It was easy to relate to him as another student from North America with an interest in alternative forms of education such as travel, self-education, and meditation. We also related because of our experience as being the one always reaching for more possibilities of community and home. When the train pulls away, I can feel the connections with these people stretching until I can’t see anyone waving, only the reflection of my face in the window.

I can tell you why I leave, but I can’t tell you why I stay. Despite the connections I feel, leaving is the least complicated response - appreciating the days of invigoration or relaxation and moving on to a different experience. I know how to get on a bus, a plane,
or a train. I know how to pack, to make transfers, to walk out the door. What I don’t know is how to stay, unpack, hang decorations on the walls, and curtains over the windows. My understanding of home is as a temporary place.

There’s something personally difficult about settling, something that I am still trying to unpack, but it was reassuring to see similar patterns in the friends I made. Much of my movement had to do with three-month break allowed to me by my school schedule. I wanted to understand how people could integrate strangers into their conceptions of home and what makes individuals choose to enter a stranger’s life.

Some travelers are looking for roots. Trying to find a home in him or herself, or at least a definition of what home means, so that they'll know what they are looking for when they find it. Some people also want confirmation that the place they have left behind is actually home for them, that nothing feels quite like it. Alternatively, they want to experience other ways of being at home that they can apply elsewhere, wherever they may eventually settle.

Katrina became unhappy with the limits of staying in one place with the same people. A greater range of experiences could teach her more about the world and, through the world, about herself. Her goals are to stay in one place as long as she is learning, but also to push herself to keep moving and not get too comfortable. After one year of travel on her own, she is looking forward to another one or two years, expanding her itinerary from Europe to Africa. Since she has been on the road for a while, she has built a network of friends and contacts to share dreams and plans of travel. While we were in Switzerland, she told me that three of her friends have talked to her about going to Northern Africa.
After I returned to the States, I received an email from her about what she had done since we parted. It read,

I was on ukrainian rainbow which was beautiful. I also spent good time on body painting festival in Austria. I passed Prague during the way to gathering and I met there nice rainbow guy. I was on extreme sports festival and I tried free jumping, I have visited my polish friends and now I am in Croatia. Tomorrow or a day after tomorrow me and my friends we are going to south of Italy, we want to hitch hike a boat in direction of africa.

This is her way of searching for meaning in life, moving from experience to experience, trying to unify them all through her poetry.

Jeremie started traveling with his family. His first solo trip was in Costa Rica for a month. Two summers ago, he took a trip to Europe for a few months and fell in love with it. Always interested in more exciting and efficient ways to learn, he found that traveling was the best. His search for home takes the form of learning through experience what makes a good home. Right now, he is living in the Project Volunteering (also known as Permanent Hospitality) house that we first heard about in Berlin. They write:

Here we're all very excited about traveling. Hospitality experiences have been among the best moments of our lives. To meet new people, to learn about other cultures and ways of thinking is very rewarding. Permanent Hospitality tries to take all these life changing experiences to a new level. As travelers we want to give more, as hosts we want to preserve and share with others what we receive. This project is meant to find ways to make possible greater things from small bricks.
(http://berlin.projectvolunteering.net/how)

Taking hospitality to a “new level” means creating homes where the roles of guests and hosts overlap. The expectation of mutual responsibility is another feature that distinguishes this group of people. I have heard of other collectives that often host guests, but I have not experienced any other community that places this much emphasis on sustained guest/host interaction. The residents are interested in undoing the
“privatization/privacy” of the home in capitalist society and reimagining homes as open, inclusive, and expansive versus bounded, differentiated/differentiating “nuclear” units.

In my conversations with Jeremie since he has begun living there, the most important thing is how much he is learning. There are major miscommunications and hard feelings, but through the process of working them out, he is gaining experience in negotiating the difficulties of domestic living and moving toward something that works better. At Project Volunteering, they have been discussing creating a network with other similar projects, focusing mostly on Europe and North America. This fits into Jeremie’s inclination to spread information about the things that enrich and excite him.

Traditional tourism research defines leisure travel as a movement away from home and back again. While this may be true for the ordinary, mainstream leisure traveler, the pattern is more complicated for most of the people I met. Even those who lived in more permanent domestic arrangements view home as a place that is always changing because of the changing residents.

A friend whom I met through couchsurfing writes on her profile page: “Home without people roaming around is just not homey enough for me (http://www.couchsurfing.org/people/nonesee/)”. She regards hosting as part of her personality, but also a part of her Indonesian culture. In a conversation, she told me that
Couchsurfing is just one manifestation of this phenomenon that was present before the network started and will continue after the formal network dissolves.

This culture of hospitality is highlighted at the Rainbow as well. Most things used in public were regarded as communal, including food, musical instruments, cups, blankets, etc. Descended from 1960s happenings, which also borrowed certain features from communes, this event constructed all participants as “Family”, with no division into hosts and guests.

On the trail leading up to the gathering, signs reading “Welcome Home” are posted, and anyone on the path will verbalize the same greeting.

Despite their different inflections of home, the idea behind the Rainbow and Couchsurfing is similar: everyone is on a journey, and therefore everyone is attempting to make a home wherever they pause along their route.

However, traveling is not always a positive experience. What I came to realize is that a proclivity for impermanence can also be used as an escape from confronting problems. Shrin, a person I met at the Rainbow, told me about a community in Israel that many old travelers settle in during their later years. He talked about the difficulty that they have making a life for themselves in one place after always being able to be on
the move. These travelers have a hard time finding stable work, forming long term friendships and relationships, and creating interesting lives for themselves. This is one of the motives for the creation of Project Volunteering. The founders wanted a place to settle and do the difficult work of building community before they were forced to by age or health.

It can also be quite distressing to move around in this way. The morning after standing on the platform in Marthalen, Switzerland, I was in Copenhagen, Denmark. Then the next afternoon I was in JFK Airport in New York City, meeting my mother and my sister on the concrete strip outside the arrivals door.

What does this kind of speed travel mean for the individual? Moving quickly was something that I tried to avoid on my own trip. While Rick Steves, travel writer, suggests that spending as little as a morning in one place can be fruitful, I tried to spend at least four or five days in each place I visited. Speeding through countries on high-speed trains was what disoriented me, not the leaving of one place, but the time in between leaving and arriving. I found transitions such as the one from Switzerland to Denmark to America difficult. Where and what is home?

In the United States, I returned to my family of origin, shared history, and support. In Copenhagen, I returned to the same bed I had slept in for five months that spring, to the family that I had cooked with, gone on trips with, and shared my time with. I was also leaving this family in Marthalen that I shared my heart and my dreams with. Upon reflection, it seems like I am exaggerating, but the feelings of home are still there, partly an illusion created by the rhetoric of travel, and a glimpse into new ideas of what family and home can mean.
CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have explored the ways that couchsurfers and other unconventional tourists have created and expanded definitions of what it means to be home. By challenging the binaries of home/away and guest/host, travelers have the opportunity to transgress the boundaries of self and other in ways that promote social transformation. The approach of couchsurfers toward social interactions with an appreciation of similarities and embrace of differences can be used as a model for other exchanges with strangers.

Using the particulars of my class background and travel experience, I explored the continuities between the modern travel mode of couchsurfing and earlier practices of middle-class tourism. Through this analysis, I deepened our understanding of the way these patterns have developed. I questioned how the desire to find what is “authentic” has led to a new emphasis on having “authentic” relationships by using an online hospitality network. I further analyzed the ways in which couchsurfing remains connected to the search for the other and in what ways it is a departure.

The couchsurfing community comprises many parts, from sometime-hosts or surfers, to full-time city Ambassadors and organizers. Using four of my surfing experiences, I examined the ways that risk, trust, and accountability play into the host/guest relationship. These interactions are complex, with all participants having diverse motivations. The openness necessary to have a positive experience is one of the key aspects to this practice.
My experiences toward the end of my trip provide the foundation for a presentation of the way that knowledge is sometimes site-specific and best communicated in the course of being present in the place discussed. Through my travel to this unfamiliar location and discussing the similarities between that place and the one from which I came, I was able to build community with my hosts.

To take this one step farther, the Rainbow Family is based on the sharing of knowledge, resources, and care. The individuals that I encountered in this context and the experiences we had offered an opportunity for understanding our possibly idealistic beliefs in the context of praxis. The practices of these community members speak to many of their beliefs: intentionality, in the context of choosing this mode of travel; spontaneity, through the inherent unplanned quality of travel; joy, in the friendships formed; and trust of one another despite unfamiliarity.

There is much I left untouched in this project. While traveling and attending Couchsurfing gatherings, I learned about the internal challenges and politics of the organization. I wonder whether members’ fears that the network is growing too large to be a community are true and I am interested in how questions of leadership are answered in a community such as this one. The phenomenon of the Rainbow Family is also deeply fascinating to me. It would be a highly illuminating study to question the mechanisms by which family is created in this context and who welcomed and excluded.

Throughout this process, I have fought the sense of my own insignificance as just one person or tourist in a sea of actors. At the same time, I knew through my own experience that the little choices each individual makes have enormous impact. Finally, I realized that being important and small is what it means to be human. This is why thinking critically about the way we act in physical flows of individuals, as travelers or
otherwise, or in mental and financial flows of knowledge and capital, is crucial to our understanding of how the world is created, because it is always a collaborative process.
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