

## **Negotiating 'home' and 'away': the impacts of long-term travel, time and distance on identity, belonging and sense of place.**

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I'd say [travel is]... doing a fine job of helping me find myself again. I was fairly lost before I came here and had lost most of my confidence. Travelling is giving me the chance to test my limits once again whilst seeing some of the nicest landscapes in Europe. (Damien, age 29)

It is well established that travel operates for many people as a transitional moment or experientially significant life-phase (see for example, Noy, 2004; O'Reilly, 2005; Rosh White & White, 2004). As a time and space free from the pressures of everyday life, it is argued that travel allows individuals the opportunity to construct, imagine, maintain and reconstruct their identities with reference to the world around them (Desforges 1998 & 2000; Elsrud, 2001; Riley, 1988). It seems that such reflexivity is especially important for individuals who are faced with significant life-changes or a sense of uncertainty or disillusionment with regards home relationships, roles and responsibilities. In such cases it has been argued that travel not only provides requisite distance between old and new, but that it functions as a contemporary rite of passage, a means of exchanging the known for the unknown, engaging with Otherness, and in the process, developing self (see for example, Sørensen, 2003; Rosh White & White, 2004).

To this end, drawing on the works of Victor Turner (1969; 1982; 1986) I have suggested elsewhere (Matthews, forthcoming) that as a chosen leisure pursuit and purposely sought ritual, travel operates as a liminoid space, and that this liminoidity, with its increased freedom, heightened sociability, socio-cultural inversion, intense but fleeting connections, and notions of alternativism, houses a regenerative and perhaps even socially progressive potential. While this analysis remains fruitful, it is important to note that there are limitations to the rite of passage model as it currently stands, at least in so far as it applies to globalised tourist practices. For the purposes of this paper, most significant is the suggestion that increased traveller reliance on

telecommunications and the Internet has resulted in the need to problematise home and away, place and space, and the idea of an all-encompassing and subsequently life altering limen (Sørensen, 2003; Rosh White & White, 2007).

Situated within a larger research project examining the role of extended international travel in the lives of young Australians, this paper will explore the key themes of home and away, space and place, and identity, demonstrating that time and distance (whether configured emotionally, socially or physically) can influence understandings of self and other, ordinary and extraordinary, strangerhood and belonging. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a variety of international locations and semi-structured in-depth interviews with young Australian backpackers, the paper will also argue for a less linear and more malleable model of liminoidity, which addresses the increased mobility, fluidity and ambiguity encountered under 'liquid' modernity (Bauman, 2000). A model such as this would better represent the heterogeneous nature of the backpacking community and go some ways toward accommodating travellers who exist on the margins: those individuals that by virtue of their relationships or careers are not quite 'home' and not quite 'away', located instead somewhere between the role of transient backpacker and that of (less-mobile) international expat. Before turning to these issues though it is first necessary to discuss some of the incongruities that emerge in the travel space, many of which seem to oscillate around the concept of distance.

### **Distant selves and distant others...**

I think when you are away from your usual home securities you have no choice but to be you - no-one around you has any expectations of how you are going to behave, so you could be anyone or anything you want to be. In that way I think you have no choice but to find out who you truly are! I certainly did and had to take a good look at who I was and make concerted efforts to amend the things I didn't like. And being away from those who have expectations about your behaviour made it easier to make those changes.  
(Michelle, age 29)

As this comment from Michelle indicates, freedom from home is significant to travellers' experiences of transformation and their subsequent travel and life narratives. Such freedom, as realised in the disconnection from those with whom we share our everyday lives, may prove challenging and result in increased vulnerability, but at the same time it also provides a sense of anonymity and creative potential or possibility (this was also recognised by Rosh White & White, 2004 in their study of older Australian travellers). Subsequently, I would argue that in the case of extended travel, distance often operates as impetus for transition or change.

As individuals travel and they are exposed not only to the 'Otherness' that exists outside of them, but also to the other 'true' self that exists within, they are no longer automatically grounded or stabilised by people and places at home, in fact it seems that their reference points are inevitably altered. This idea certainly resonates with Filip (aged 25) who commented that when you travel 'you're not distracted by other things. You're kind of "with yourself" the whole time'. It also coincides with his observation that increased self-orientation provided him with the 'strength' to try new things, to accumulate significant and potentially life-changing experiences whilst undertaking a physical and spiritual 'journey'. Contact with home then is a complex issue, not only for the barriers it presents to engaging with Otherness but also because it may well operate as a reminder of an old and distant self, a self that has been left behind.

It stands to reason that while home may provide contrasting value or operate as a symbolic reminder of how far one has come (physically, socially and personally), it may also be a source of conflict, especially when 'distant others' at home fail to recognise the significance of the journey being undertaken by the traveller. Take for example the following comments from Julia (aged 22):

Lots of my close friends from home, like their emails are like 'oh, when are you coming home, we miss you, I miss you'... It's not like 'wow, what you're doing sounds incredible, it's inspiring!'... I think that they look at what they're doing and look at how old they are and ... I don't know; I think that they just think that they can't do it [travel]... And they look at me and at what I'm doing and that I've made that possible and they don't understand how I've made that

possible and how I can just go and not have to come home and not need that, y'know?

The people I've met along the way are really, really supportive of what I'm doing. Like I'll write a group email of what I've been doing or what country I've just been in and I'll get, mostly from the people that I've ah met along the way... or even just while I've been settled, like in California and in Canada, they'll be like 'wow, you're amazing'. Like, they'll be like, 'your emails are so inspiring, I want to go away'... And it's great!

Here there is a stark contrast between Julia's friends at home who focus on their own feelings about her absence, are centred on her return and who seemingly don't understand her desire for travel – or by implication her travelled self - and those friends she has met overseas who appear to understand the real significance of the events and places relayed in her emails. In this way, friendships encountered whilst away provide the sort of response that she values and sees as missing from her contacts with home. In a similar fashion, Christina (aged 26) also recognised the growing differences between her friends at home and herself:

I'm still in contact with all my friends [in Australia]... They think what I'm doing is a bit of a laugh [though]... That I'm just stuffing around and having fun, which is not really true all the time... and they're always very interested to get my emails and I'm very interested to find out what's going on in their lives but they're at very different points right now and ah, I did find it quite strange when I went home that everyone was very keen for you to slot back into their life but they didn't really want to know what you had been doing for the last year.

Because I find that so many of my friends who haven't travelled, even the ones who have, are so alien from my experiences in the way they've done things that they don't understand why I've done things... I don't think it would be hard to go back [to Australia] and make friends... But I think those friends would change compared to the ones I had when I went away.

Interestingly, what is present in both interviewees' observations is an implicit desire for validation, a need for their family and friends at home to understand their life choices and the lifestyle that they are living overseas. In many cases, what this actually equates to is the traveller's need for family and friends to recognise and appreciate the person that has emerged through the experience of travel. Importantly, what Christina also hints at is that those relationships that can accommodate a traveller's newly discovered sense-of-self are more likely to endure than those that cannot. In short, it seems that if travel is conceived as having significant ramifications for one's identity, as well as for one's future life plans, that it will also have potential impacts on the future of one's relationships at home and abroad. In this sense, physical distance may eventually take on social and emotional dimensions; a point that is not lost on Claudia (aged 19):

Since I've been over here like the people I email are people in Europe. I still don't email home very often... I mean I miss very few people. Like miss, miss, like actually touched me miss. Like there are a few. Like my sister, my best-friend, and I do miss my ex-boyfriend... because we were so long together and yeah, my mum and my dad... Everyone else like, like they've lost my story. If I tell them things it's as if I'm just, I feel it's like I'm bragging... Like y'know 'Oh I've been here, I've done this', 'ooh look what I'm doing next weekend', 'oh I'm going to go to Spain and last week I was in Paris'. It's a head spin... And they don't know the people I'm hanging out with. Y'know, it's only like my sister and say my best friend: they know where I'm at. They'll be like 'So, how was your day' and I'm like 'Ooh, well', y'know?... And other people it's like, 'So are you having a good time?' and I'm like 'Yes, I'm having a good time'. Y'know it's like silly sort of questions.

It appears then that distance and differing experiential measures can prove to be an obstruction to relationships with friends and family in Australia, while strengthening those between travellers who share common experience and perhaps even feelings of community. However, while travellers are bound together by their shared values and circumstances, there is also an inherent danger to some of the hegemonic discourses that backpackers draw on in constructing and understanding their experiences. For as travel becomes normative there is the possibility that significant moments may be

bypassed or overlooked, that they will become routine, ordinary or everyday. The following observation from Shannon (aged 27) indicates, for instance, that there is perhaps an experiential saturation point that travellers may reach in their journeys:

I think long-term travelling is good and I appreciate that I've had this chance to do it for a year... But in the future I don't think I'd do it for a year though... the reason I say [that], I've met many other travellers as well [who agree] – [is] I almost become numb like to new experiences, new countries... You're not really taking it all in, or you're comparing it to the last country you were at... I was expecting to be blown away by India... I mean ... maybe if you go to the north it's very different. More in your face. But here... in Goa it's not too different to [the] beaches in Thailand. It's... a bit more hippyish but [pretty similar].

While time for reflection is certainly a significant factor here, so too is gaining outside perspective. As Natalie (aged 22) remarked:

My friends, mostly, like especially my friends who are from university who have like gotten [through] the same four years [of medicine] as me, mostly are ... envious ... when you tell people what you're doing they're like, 'wow, that sounds really amazing!' Like, I don't know it's really, I find it really good to hear because sometimes... you just get used to what you're doing... and you just become accustomed to it. And then you start telling people about your trip or whatever and they're like 'wow, that's really cool, that's really amazing, you're so lucky!' and you think 'yeah, like I really am, it's really cool!'

Here then rather than operating as a distraction or burden, feedback from friends and family members at home is recognised as adding a new dimension to one's understanding and appreciation of the travelled moment. In this situation, distance actually provides the traveller with a heightened sense of perspective and encourages them to view increasingly everyday (yet unique) occurrences as special. Where interactions with fellow travellers reinforce one's activities and experiences as normative, home provides an often much needed contrast and a reminder not to take things for granted. As Emily (aged 21) observed:

You get homesick and then you'll write an email or something home to say y'know you miss everybody and then you'll just get an email back saying 'Well today I went to work, today I went to Uni' and you realise actually that life is going on and nothing really exciting is happening at home so you might as well be in London enjoying yourself.

As one would expect, contact with home tends to vary according to the strength of travellers' desires for freedom and connection, their bonds with people at home and bonds with other travellers. In fact, what seems to be the case with many backpackers is that as the ties with home relax, there is a corresponding tightening of ties overseas. This movement seemingly corresponds with one's progression into and through liminoid space. For example, Claudia depicts her gradual distancing from home as follows:

At the start, especially on Busabout I'd be like 'Tomorrow I'm going to France' y'know?... Or I'd ring home and be like 'Hello, I made it to France, merci beaucoup'. Y'know like, it was so ridiculous... And then after a while it'd be like I'd give them a call after a week and I'd be like 'Oh yeah, I just went to Amsterdam, Prague and now I'm in Berlin' and they'd be like 'Oh yeah'. And then like the spaces would get bigger and stuff like that.

By easing herself into the liminoid space of travel in this way, it seems that Claudia undertook a delayed or extended crossing of the threshold, which was gradually completed as home becomes less occupying and the present more fantastically real. Interestingly, there is at the same time, especially for those living abroad, a corresponding switch between perceptions of everyday and extraordinary sights and experiences. This was hinted at earlier when Natalie spoke of how friends at home were a constant reminder not to take things for granted overseas and is perhaps best depicted in the following statement from Phil (aged 23), describing how his life in London became less liminal and life at home in Australia more dreamlike:

I don't know, when we write emails back home and we're travelling it's like 'Oh, we're just looking at the Coliseum today'... and people write back 'I'm so jealous' and it's like 'well, why?' It's just... [if] you live in Sydney, y'know it's

like 'I walked past the Opera House today, went for a picnic in the Botanical Gardens and ... took a ferry ride across the harbour. That seems just as special to me now as... going past Big Ben everyday.

Such interchangeability between ordinary and extraordinary is similarly acknowledged in Danielle's (aged 26) claim that her friends 'have been overseas for so long that they're going home for holidays!' Indeed, there is a well-founded perception among many travellers that the longer you spend overseas the more likely it is that you will establish a life in that country, that you will make increasingly permanent connections with people and place. Seemingly, this situation involves not only forgoing some level of freedom then, but also reconceptualising one's place in the world and one's understandings of extraordinary and ordinary. Based on this I would suggest that while contact with home may well prove an interruption to immersion in the liminoid space, in other instances it can also enhance one's experiences and highlight the 'Otherness' that they are engaged in. To this end, contact with home does not necessitate an end to liminoidity, but perhaps a more reflexive engagement with self and other, ordinary and extraordinary, home and away. Just as sparks of familiarity may see you moving outside of the liminoid space, sparks of unfamiliarity will see you moving back in, especially as belonging is not always an immediate or whole process.

### **The intersubjectivity of 'home' and belonging**

Indeed, the dual existence experienced by those travellers working and living abroad, who have connections in multiple countries and a life 'set up' elsewhere, makes the issue of home and nationality, the issue of identity and belonging a complex one. For instance, on the idea of returning to Australia, Alison commented as follows:

Going back and settling into my actual hometown I think is difficult... Especially after going home and finding out how much everything changes and everyone moves on and it makes it difficult because I didn't actually live in my hometown before coming overseas either, I'd moved away for a couple of years... and then come overseas. So to go back, if I went back to Newcastle, where I'm from; I don't know, I don't know how I'd fit in there. I mean I love

the place and I love my family there but it doesn't really feel like home. A lot of people complain about itchy feet when they get home and wanting to see other places and I'm sure I'll always have the travel bug and be wanting to see other parts of the world. And I don't think I'll stop travelling but at the same time I'm such an incredible nesting person, in some ways I cannot wait to get home as well, to set up and have houses and things like that.

This same sense of conflict was evident when I discussed similar matters with Niome, who spoke on the one hand of occasional bouts of homesickness, of 'always hav[ing]... a sense of longing to go home', and on the other of how neither herself nor her partner were ready to go back to Australia yet, remarking that 'you get there and you just want to go again... I think it's just because it's so far *away*' [emphasis mine]. What is evident in this statement then is a collapsing of home and away or at the very least a blurring of the boundaries that exist between the two. In a sense as attachments to place change, there become for some travellers fewer 'aways' and simply more 'homes' or at the very least 'potential homes' or 'home-like' spaces. This intersubjectivity is recognised by Naomi Rosh White and Peter White in their study of long-term travellers in New Zealand. They contend that (2007: 91):

Just as the nomad has no stable point of reference from which to perceive or measure movement, in the postmodern world, home can arguably be understood to be "located" primarily in relationships between self and others, rather than being a geographic site.

In this regard Niome's elaborations on choosing a place to settle with her partner are illuminating:

Y'know I love it in Australia, it's the best country in the world as far as I am concerned... And [it] has the perfect lifestyle [and]... I know I was only home for four weeks in January, I mean it was great to be home, it's the biggest rush in the world... But umm, I mean after a week and after I'd seen all my friends – like they were working and I'd come back – I felt really lost... It was actually really depressing. And I knew that would happen but, I love Brisbane as well, but I just can't see myself settling down there. But I want to be able, I want to

see myself settling in Australia right, and I have to, but I don't feel that way... I just know in my brain that that's what I should want... We always sort of wanted to settle in Canada. We both love to snowboard, we're mad on it. We'd snowboard everyday if we could, and that was sort of a compromise. But I just, Australia is a great country... it's just beautiful and I have to [settle there but], I just worry if I go back that will be the end of it [travel]... And I don't want that to be the end of it. [The idea that 'that's the last time I get to travel']... is really scary... It's, I guess one of the reasons I don't go home often.

Such comments reveal that notions of home, of nationality, of belonging – whether it is to a particular country, place or community – are for many travellers' issues tinged with ambivalence. So too are notions of extraordinariness and normality, and each of these things makes it difficult for some travellers to define themselves fully. As revealed in the following comments, this is especially so for those who, by virtue of their jobs or relationships, have lived abroad for a length of time and now reside in a space somewhere between that of a backpacker and that of an expatriate Australian:

If I don't travel I will not feel like a traveller. (Damien)

[My] current trip is kinda difficult to regard as a single journey, as I feel like I live here now. I'll return to Australia to live at some stage but [am] not sure when. (David)

Although I've been away from home for 18 months, I'm not travelling for 18 months. So it is quite different compared to somebody who has been travelling non-stop for 6 months through different countries... I think in the same way that I could be working in Australia in my profession, I'm doing that here... I'm not constantly sort of like, 'Oh, I'm in a different culture!' or learning something different each day in that sense... [and] I think in some ways that I might be getting so used to it over here that I might not be recognising... differences as much anymore... like this feels like the norm... and I just live here now and in some ways, it may sound boring, but this is my life now, I live in England. (Alison)

Based on these comments it seems likely that extended periods of travel are not simply linear journeys from home to abroad and back again. Rather they involve the traversing of multiple zones, crossing fantastic and dreamlike spaces alongside those that are more everyday and ordinary. They may involve periods of familiarity and comfort, of discomfort, extraordinariness, and disbelief, and sometimes travel is, in fact, a combination of all of these things simultaneously. As a liminoid space, it is not singularly liminoid, and as a rite of passage it is not necessarily a 'one time only' offer. Take for example, the following comments from interviewees who, when asked what their most challenging experiences had been, discussed the movement from various stages of belonging and familiarity into new, unknown spaces:

Probably saying goodbye to people and spending the first night somewhere new... that's always [the most challenging time], it's still really hard, the first night... You always feel like you know exactly what's going on in the place that you've just left... What everyone's up to and stuff and it makes you feel really alone... But just always for one night. (Nicole)

... everything's quite challenging [travelling] I think... whenever you go to a new country, there's those first couple of days, getting used to the currency... trying to buy train tickets or something – it takes at least a week to sort of get in the groove... That initial week for each new country is always a big challenge, I find. (Shannon)

Of course, sometimes it is these challenges that have the most influence on individuals. To this end, Mel relates that settling into a new environment, making the unknown known and adjusting to different states of liminoidity had a large impact on her:

Probably in Edinburgh... just sort of y'know, really getting into the life there and forming friends there and getting a whole little community going, I suppose [that was one experience that had a big impact on me]... Because that's something that I didn't think would happen... But then... we sort of got, y'know, a whole circle of friends and a life there and all the rest of it. And jobs, and that was really difficult to leave... a lot harder than I thought it would be.

Interestingly, when I asked Mel whether leaving Edinburgh was as difficult as leaving Australia, she responded as follows:

Yeah, it almost was. Yeah [sounds surprised]... Because in leaving home there's excitement, whereas Edinburgh, I don't know you just sort of... it's hard because you are away from home so the friendships you form are a lot stronger and all the rest of it... But it was really, really sad saying goodbye. Also because you know you're never really going to go back. Like you know you're going to go back home but you're never really going to go back to Edinburgh.

It can be seen then that the liminoidity experienced in travel is more fluid and transmutable than what is commonly theorised, and individuals may move in and out of this space any number of times over the course of their extended travels. In fact from Mel's comments it seems that liminoidity may in fact operate on an accumulative basis. Seemingly, the duration of these movements between states of belonging and disbelonging, ordinary and extraordinary, vary on a case-by-case basis and are likely influenced by travellers' previous experiences. Additionally, it seems likely that the brevity of those sparks of unfamiliarity (or familiarity) mentioned earlier, the radius of their influence depends on the level of commonality experienced between home and the place abroad, how accustomed one has become to their surrounds, and how strong the 'ties that bind' them there, are.

### **Zig-zagging through the liminoid space...**

While there is still a lot of work to be done, this paper has attempted to demonstrate empirically that distance is not necessarily experienced objectively. Therefore, 'home', 'away' and 'different' are often characterised as intersubjective places without a fixed endpoint. More specifically, through ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with young Australian backpackers, I have identified a number of situations that challenge current understandings of travel as a contemporary rite of passage.

Namely (following Sørensen, 2003; Rosh White & White, 2007) I have suggested that as pre-existing social connections are upheld alongside those newly formed in the travel arena, the idea of rupture or of breach, the total parting of ways traditionally encountered in rite of passage, is markedly weakened and liminoidity (as we know it) inevitably altered. Conversely though, I have also suggested that as travel becomes increasingly institutionalised (for further discussion of this process see, for example, O'Reilly, 2005) it seems that for some, the probability of meeting individuals from similar socio-cultural backgrounds and with similar experiences increases, while conversely the possibility of immersing oneself in the unknown 'other' and engaging with the extraordinary decreases. Without a point of contrast (such as that provided by home) this can lead to a greater sense of routinisation and may also affect the quality or character of liminoid space.

Finally, under globalisation, where 'relationships across long distances are increasingly common, comfortable, and relatively easy to achieve and maintain' (O'Reilly, 2005: 1009) it is also likely that the 'home' of departure and the 'home' of return will not necessarily remain one and the same. The possibility of individuals' having multiple homes and by correlation, multiple sites of return or reintegration alter the rite of passage undertaken. It is no longer a singularly linear process but one that may be prolonged, left incomplete or concluded in a locality different to the place of departure. Nevertheless, it has significant impact on individuals' identities.

With these points in mind then, I have argued in this paper that liminoidity – a central component in rite of passage theory - needs to be reconceptualised if it is to account for the varied experiences of contemporary travellers, particularly those who are 'away' for long periods of time and who maintain contact with friends and family in Australia. To this end I have suggested that liminoid space is not necessarily a one-way passage between home and away, self and other, ordinary and extraordinary but that one may dip in and out of liminoidity – zig-zag through if you like – and that such movement may in fact add to the quality of the travel experience and result in more cosmopolitan or worldly outlooks.

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