

Intimate Tourism

Friendships in a state of mobility -
The case of the online hospitality network.

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Abstract

Online hospitality networks such as Couchsurfing.com are a vastly growing phenomenon, establishing a global web of hundreds of thousands of users who travel to foreign places while residing in the private home or on the “couch” of other members of the network. These hospitality networks are now forming a new category of tourism, which the author terms Intimate Tourism. Here, the tourist is given the rare opportunity of temporarily residing in the private home of a stranger of their choosing. By scanning hundreds of online profiles, the tourist does not travel to visit the physical foreign space, but to visit the stranger residing in that space. In doing so, the tourist moves away from simply gazing and consuming the physical environment to experiencing an exchange of emotional intensity and closeness through meeting a foreign individual in the privacy of their home. Intimate Tourism allows the tourist to leave a specific location with emotional memories of their specific host rather than with the visual or sensual memories of the specific location. Based on a medley of ethnographic interviews with “Couchsurfers” conducted in the summer of 2006, and data extracted from an online survey of over 3000 users, programmed into the website of the hospitality network itself, this research shows how individuals within modernity travel in order to fulfill new motivations – conditions which are products of modernity. Both theoretically and empirically, the author explores first, the changing face of tourism and mobility, secondly, introduces the current approach to creating social ties and the temporary, utilitarian nature of these ties, lastly, the way private and public space, and the context and use of that space factors into creating new ties which are temporary, yet still based on intimacy, meaning, and intensity.

Key Words:

Intimacy, tourism, mobility, reflexivity, modernity, identity, space

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An **Intro**duction

“My antidote to being some kid in a room without really anything, living paycheck-to-paycheck, no access to the world... was to create a website which would help me go and stay on people's couches..., give me access to the world, substantially lower the costs, and I'd be able to gain those important, intense, frequent and diverse experiences.” - Casey Fenton, founder of www.couchsurfing.com

This work is an analysis of a form of tourism, friendship, and intimacy during the highly mobile and virtual times we are living in. This form of tourism you will get to know throughout the course of this book is not new – pilgrims, sages, vagabonds, prophets, and hobos have been knocking on the doors of strangers to seek refuge as long as humanity has existed. Yet what I care to show in this work is the way in which this practice has been institutionalized through the introduction of the internet. I invite you on my journey as I travel, analytically, through a community of travelers known as a hospitality network. The

website Couchsurfing.com is the main actor in this story. I will share my own experiences as well as interviews in order to understand this global web of users who travel to foreign places while residing in the private home or on the “couch” of other members of the network. Unlike other online networking communities, here users present their profiles with the purpose of meeting other users off-line.

Danah¹, a nomadic, uprooted 52 year-old Couchsurfer from California told me that “Couchsurfing is a community. People on the same wavelength, people who maybe have the same political views, the same views of the world, the same views of friendship, the same views of trust, the same views of travel.”²

Before moving on to present the approach of this analysis, it would be worthwhile to explain what hospitality networks like Couchsurfing.com exactly are. The first hospitality network, called Servas Open Doors, was established by Bob Luitweiler in 1949 as a cross national, non-profit, volunteer run organization advocating interracial and international peace. While Servas had only a few hundred members worldwide, the Internet in the 1990s paved way for a number of other hospitality exchange services. Today, some of the services number close to 800,000 members. And before moving on, I must underline that the average user is a young white male who speaks English and lives in a developed nation. While there are many users who do not fit this description, the more different they are, the less likely it is that they will be involved in this community. This is especially true for persons living in the developing world who likely do not have easy access to the fundamental prerequisite for using these services: computers and the Internet. Thus, the sample population found on these websites is not truly “Global” -- hospitality network members are really much less diverse than a geographical representation of worldwide users might suggest.

Hospitality networks are networks which hold their own network culture, consisting of symbolic structures of certain interpersonal expectations. Couchsurfing.com is one of the largest hospitality projects with over 750,000 members globally, and the project, much like other hospitality exchange systems, also functions on a system of reciprocity. For those who have had no previous introduction to hospitality exchange networks – either through practice or by logging onto the website – the system can be broken down into a few key steps.

¹ All names in this work have been changed.

² Interview conducted Saturday, August 06, 2005, 10 am.

Functioning on a members-only basis, as a new user, one must first log into the website and form an online profile of oneself – a calling card of sorts that establishes the “self” to other users in the system. Most users add pictures, hobbies, and links to other friends within the system to their profile. Profiles with text and no photos can be considered less trustworthy, and users are encouraged to post a photo online in order to get better feedback. Dan, one of the founders of the website, explained that the profile questions are structured in such a way that “it brings out the essence of people. And when people's essences are visible, it contributes to the building of trust.” And beyond textual description, one of the main aspects which make Couchsurfing distinct from all other websites of its sort, is its high use of photo images. According to website statistics, 54% of the members have photos,³ and most active members have a number of photos attached to their profile. Unlike on other websites like Friendster, for example, or the Polish Grono.net, the photos attached to the profile must be actual likenesses of the members themselves. And although this does not guarantee that a member will use somebody else's headshot, photos of celebrities, animals, or objects are never used.

Each profile also contains a 'friend list,' which is simply a list of other members that the given person knows. As an example, Andrew in Warsaw, Poland, has 180 friends linked to his profile, and most of them are people he has strictly surfed or hosted with, although also include high school friends, university friends, and family members who joined the system. Every time somebody clicks on Andrew's profile, they can look at all of Andrew's friends, and all their “references” to Andrew as well as the origin of relationship, “friendship strength,” and “trust level.”⁴ By using simple common sense, a user will come to the conclusion that somebody with many friends is, in fact, more likely to be trustworthy. Members who become very involved in the development of the Couchsurfing project, want to help promotion of Couchsurfing, or are simply highly active surfers and hosts, have the potential of becoming a Couchsurfing “Ambassador.” The Ambassador's job comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Sometimes an ambassador can help translate the website into a new language, or send “greetings” to new members. The title of “Ambassador” is given to a surfer by administrator of the website.

Membership to Couchsurfing is free, although donations are encouraged. Once one's

³ Couchsurfing online, April 2007.

⁴ These categories are pre-determined and appear as a form each user must fill out when 'adding' a friend to their profile.

profile has been established, a user can search other “couches” located in the destination he/she is traveling to (ex.: Warsaw). This member then emails the member in Warsaw, requesting to “surf”⁵ their “couch.” The use of the word “surfing” is part of the network culture and refers to visiting the other user. By "surfing" a couch, bed, tent, etc., the individual actor often builds some sort of bond with their hosts. An emotional (either positive, negative, or neutral) link is often formed because the tourist or “surfer” enters the private sphere of the host. Moreover, social ties are maintained both on and off line.

Although I could have delved into the world of hospitality exchange by researching other existing services (HospitalityClub.org, or PlacestoStay.com), I chose Couchsurfing.com due my previous involvement with the website, the ease in which I became an insider within the organization, and because of the website's unique design and structure. Both the friend-link system and the visual aspects of the website were, and continue to be, more conducive to data collection than other websites.

While I do write from a sociological background, I aim to write in a way that is accessible to a wider audience. Reading through this work, you will hopefully gain insight into this type of travel, and the patterns of interaction that are created when using such a hospitality network. In order to create this type of experience for you, the reader, while staying true to my roots in sociology, I decided to focus on the micro-processes of relationship formation by analyzing the individual as he/she forms friendships in our mobile world today. In doing so, I will be able to show how this type of tourism happens, and the type of norms this network holds in order to allow the individual to create the types of instant, intimate connections found within the hospitality exchange.

And perhaps while reading about Intimate Tourism, you’ll start to wonder if this intimacy, closeness, exchange of ideas, is something that happens between all hosts and guests. And the answer to that of course is, “no.” Not everyone who is part of Couchsurfing will experience these types of connections while traveling. Some travelers may use their host’s home as just a free couch – sightseeing the area they are traveled to, coming home to sleep, and exchanging only a few words with the host. But as a researcher, I was interested in defining a type of tourism that had not yet been institutionalized, and had not yet been defined – a tourism I call Intimate Tourism. The set of Couchsurfers who do not want to

⁵ Within this work 'surfing' will be synonymous with 'visiting.'

engage in discussion, do not want to learn and grow from their host, are not part of the phenomenon I wished to define. This book is about how this tourism functions. Why some people cannot function in this system is a much larger task for another time and another sociologist.

Having said that, this work was written two years ago, when I was a different sociologist. Much like the way we cringe at those photographs of us, at the age of 13, when we had really bad hair or wore that incredibly silly sweater vest, there is a lot that I cringe at in this piece of writing. But instead of cringing at the bad hair, here I can see theoretical holes and analytical issues. There is a lot I would change in this work. But these problems will hopefully be quite invisible to you, the reader, and won't take away from the fact that I tried to create an aerial snapshot of a community which in turn helps me define this type of tourism. I hope that two years later, you will still be able to better understand how individuals (predominantly those living in a rich, Northern society), are able to become quickly familiar and connected with complete strangers.

Paula Bialski, December, 2008.

Chapter **1**

Becoming the Intimate Tourist

Oddly enough, my first encounter using an online hospitality network was not intimate, not touristic, not part of the process I term Intimate Tourism in any way. I joined Couchsurfing.com when the network was in its infancy, early in 2004. I was living in a small cozy university town in Ontario's southwest farming district, where the distance between friend and stranger was minimal. Weeks after 'building' my online profile I received a humorous email from an equally humorous Couchsurfer named Scotty who threatened to surf my couch with 128 of his friends. The joke was that Scotty lived in my university town, and was in no need of a couch to sleep on at all. I promptly rejected his silly offer, but we continued to exchange laugh-out-loud emails. Months later, we randomly met each other at a concert. Our encounter was filled with jittery hand-shuffling and I-don't-know-what-to-say awkwardness. Afterwards we kept meeting on campus, and even invited each other to parties.

But our friendship was a distant, perhaps different sort of relationship that I later ended up experiencing with my hosts and guests. Why these two types of relationships were so different took me a while to answer.

In the fall of 2004, I moved to Warsaw to complete my Masters education in Sociology. Having just entered the European Union, Warsaw's tourism traffic was getting heavier than ever, and at the beginning of 2005, I hosted my first Couchsurfer in my downtown two room flat. My connection with my first surfer was something completely different than my encounter with Scotty – very intense, brief, and yet lacking any sort of longevity. My surfer was a vagabond from Seattle without a given home. He decided to visit Poland on a complete whim. This trip, just like his life, lacked purpose and true drive. He was searching, and that searching was obvious through his hunger to speak to me until the late hours of the night. There was nothing romantic about our encounter. Our conversation was more locked in his search for self-discovery and my attraction to the nature of our new form of communication. He would speak, and I would often listen. It was the first time I ever invited a stranger into my home, and the first time I ended up speaking to a stranger until the late hours of the night. We'd talk (or he'd talk, as our exchange entailed) until four in the morning. By the seventh day I was completely exhausted and, not knowing then the exact rules of surfer/host etiquette, had to politely tell him to leave after the seventh day. It was only months later that I realized two or three days was usually the average duration of hosting a guest.

Despite the awkward start, I became intrigued with this type of interaction and quickly after my first guest I welcomed two French travelers from Annecy and Lyon, who were making their way through Warsaw en route to Thailand. After a day, Quentin and Jerome felt like my brothers – they made me apple tart, cleaned my kitchen, and took me out for drinks (come to think of it – they went above and beyond what my brothers would normally do!). My home felt like their home – I enjoyed sharing everything I had with them. My sense of giving seemed endless. After making them a few sandwiches with Polish ham, I sent them off on their train and wondered when I would see them again.

My experience with the aimless wanderer from Seattle, the two French backpackers, as well as all my hosts and guests who followed them, opened my eyes to a new type of relationship – one which was quick, deeply intense and moving, with an undertone of self-discovery. It was a pure exchange, as well. Whether planned or not, both my traveler and I learned and discovered something during our week-long interaction. Sorrow or grief did not

accompany his departure. The only thing I remember is that I had trouble categorizing our friendship – it was a book that didn't exactly fit on the shelf of my past relationships.

The following year brought various other similar relationships, which carried forth varying degrees of intensity, meaning and longevity along with them. Spontaneity was always part of my interaction with my surfers, and the short segmented periods in which I hosted were always treated as episodes removed from the normality of my everyday life. My hosting experiences were heightened life, sometimes odd, extremely heartfelt and emotional.

During the summer of 2005, Casey Fenton, the founder of the website literally came knocking on my Warsaw door. He brought three friends with him, and together, squished between the couch and the floorspace in my living room, they stayed for four days. At that point, I was already deeply enjoying my studies at the University of Warsaw sociology department, and I was constantly attempting to search out offbeat social phenomena to study for a seminar or project. One evening, I engaged myself in a heated discussion about the odd type of connections which were being created over Couchsurfing, which, to me, were unclassifiable. The more I discussed the purpose, benefits, and oddities with my four temporary flat mates, the more I began to realize that what I was engaged in was more than just a cheap way to travel. That evening, Casey lay out all his cards on the table – explaining his motivations to start the system, his passions, and personal convictions. Couchsurfing was more the product of the postmodern mobility and global reality than I thought – filled with ideologies regarding cross-cultural understanding, self-improvement through the eyes of others, and “building deep and meaningful connections.” Individuals were forming post-friendships – friends ‘with instant benefits,’ removed from the time and space they were living in while at the same time reaping benefits of intensity and candid intimacy that is typically shared only among lifelong friends. Moreover, not only was this system de-commercializing tourism, it was creating a new focal point in tourism – the person not the place was now important.

I knew after my evening discussion with Casey and the gang, that I had to delve deeper into this phenomenon. I had both the knowledge, personal experience, and network to be able to carry out research within this field. During the following year, within my courses at the University of Warsaw on Individualism, the Social Psychology of Post-Modern Man, Social Networks and the Internet, and Visual Communication, I wrote various papers which explored various aspects of the Internet-minded, globally-networked, and mobile society

using Couchsurfing.com as a research tool. Here, I mostly delved into my personal experiences as participant observer as well as studying the actual visual culture of the website itself. It wasn't until January 2006, that my research took on other methodological dimensions. Enrolled in a course regarding Social Network Analysis, I asked Casey for a data set regarding the connections between users so that I may better understand the network of trust which exists within Couchsurfing. I received a anonymized network data set of 56,000 users which was embedded with various variables such as age, sex, and location of user, as well as the strength of trust between users (as a trust mechanism, the website system forced users to rate each other on a scale of 1-10, 10 being most trustworthy). This data introduced me to the quite complex world of social network analysis, and a study on trust has become a side-project which I am still undertaking today based on a new, more intricate data set.

I was now deeply engaged in studying this hospitality network from all angles, and Casey viewed me as a sociologist who was somewhat feverishly becoming an expert in the field of this type of tourism. It was now the end of February, and late in the evening I receive a phone call from Casey who wanted to relay his newfound idea. The website's popularity was growing quickly, and frustrated by having to carry the entire programming load on his back alone, he wanted to gather interested members of the Couchsurfing community to restructure the website itself and spread out the responsibilities of maintaining such a site. And so I was invited, to live in Montreal among vagabonds, beatniks, artists, wanderers, computer programmers, writers, and musicians – all of whom shared a common goal of improving the Couchsurfing website. Enthusiastic, I packed my suitcases at the beginning of July and took off from Warsaw to Montreal, ready to interview, research, and fully become immersed in the local context of what I wanted to study – the way an online-community can meet the post-modern individual's intrinsic needs to 'find themselves' through intense interaction with another human. I also wanted to explore the process of friendship-building with this community – I wanted to know if this instant, intense nature of these connections was not just something I myself was experiencing. Was friendship regarded as a commodity? How was it becoming so fluid and very temporary?

The Collective

The Couchsurfing Collective filled the top level of a row-house located in the artsy area of Montreal. It was a hippie commune of modernity in every sense of the word. People were

coming in and out of the house like little ants bringing fresh food and bread, some were washing the dishes, others sat around computers which lined the walls in one of the main rooms. There were so many people coming and going that I couldn't keep track. A veritable sociologist's paradise. It was that environment which created one of the most fruitful habitats for my work, where I was able to explore this community from all possible angles. The "Couchsurfing Collective" became a place where I both gathered and created thoughts and ideas. It was perfect – respondents were coming in and out of the house and I was there to greet them with open arms.

While more of details of my experiences and approach within this house will be discussed in a later section dedicated to methodology, I wanted to state here that, by the end of the summer, I met close to sixty Couchsurfers, and had a deep, quite lengthy discussion with twenty of them. My experiences here, as well as the results from my online survey which I began studying at the end of August (it was then that I had a substantial sample of around 500 users), which led me to conclude that there was a number of factors or forces – products of post-modernity such as an increase in individualism (Kaufmann) and narcissism (Lasch), the search for "the self" (Giddens), a networked society (Castells), the internet, or increased mobility (Urry) – which allowed strangers to meet, in an intimate space, and discuss their intimate thoughts. I then began to realize that it is a culmination of these processes which makes possible this new form of friendship, or connection, or whatever you may call it. It was then, at the end of the summer, that, for lack of a better term, I named this phenomenon "Intimate Tourism."

Now that you know my road in getting to this point, I'll take you further through my writing into this world I call Intimate Tourism. The following chapters will dissect each individual process which make this phenomenon possible, and then come to a conclusion about where this type of tourism fits in the context of our general society and how this process will compare to relationship made in the future.

I chose to create the term Intimate Tourism for lack of a better concept of the reality

which is being created by certain members of our vast, and quite varied global societies. Presumably, now, when reading “Intimate Tourism,” the concept means nothing, or is more of a fusion of two concepts of “intimacy” and “tourism,” which, put together, seem a bit out of place. The goal within this work, is that by the time you are finished reading, you will hopefully understand the term “Intimate Tourism” as a whole, not as two separate words, and in doing so, be able to understand a small section of our current reality.

Thus, before undertaking the arduous task of reading my lengthy ramblings, it would be important to clear up a few misconceptions. Within this work, I will make reference to the “intimate” as a) *relationships* based on mutual trust which are close, candid, and meaningful to one or both parties, and b) *spaces* which are close, familiar to one or both parties, and usually private. I am also implying that tourism itself has taken on a new face. No longer must we view tourism as a concept of the “industry of tourism,” where mass tour groups with cameras dangling from their neck follow prescribed ways of viewing the world. Tourism as a mass commercial mechanism is replaced by a type of mobility which is highly personal, individualized, and lacking the sense of being a branded product. When tourism becomes intimate, the individual is able to enter a sphere where the actual tourism industry has little influence on the events they experience. This, is in my opinion, a riveting concept (hence my fascination in writing about this), and one which will be further developed within this paper.

It is my belief that this type of interhuman contact, specifically, the level of intimacy between others, is changing when individuals are in a state of mobility, or in the process of “touring.” As Giddens has stated, “changes in intimate aspects of personal life, in other words, are directly tied to the establishment of social connections of very wide scope. I do not mean to deny the existence of many kinds of more intermediate connections – between, for example, localities and state organizations. But the level of time-space distancing introduced by high modernity is so extensive that, for the first time in human history, ‘self’ and ‘society’ are interrelated in global milieu.”⁶

And it is here, in the following chapters, where I’ll present my findings and additional theory in order to explain what motivates a particular individual to tour, why they engage in close intimate contacts with relative strangers, and what mechanisms allow this process to happen today.

⁶ Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Oxford: Polity, p. 32.

Ostensibly, no matter what culture we're talking about, throughout history people accepted wanderers and vagabonds into their home. Yet these visits were usually unexpected and uncalculated by the actual host or guest. Interaction within this type of mechanism is an action both parties *plan* to engage themselves in. This is the essential difference. Plus, websites like Couchsurfing.com or Hospitalityclub.org (another similar website) simply create a very accessible network in which the actor can access others network members in order to engage in this type of exchange over and over again, among hundreds of thousands of people. Moreover, the appeal within Couchsurfing is that it gives the individual something which was previously unavailable – quite exciting, intense connections with complete strangers.

Within this type of tourism, there are key social processes which assist this mechanism to fully function as it does – factors which allow people to become physically and emotionally close, and verbally intimate after a very brief time. In the following chapters, I will explain the needs, motivations and circumstances which make this process possible.

This thesis will unfold as follows: First, I will get technical, and explain my methodology, in order for you to understand the exact research tools I used and the way in which I approached them. Then, I will move on to a rather introductory chapter regarding tourism and mobility, in the current state it is now. Following this chapter will be a section on the theory of intimacy – both intimacy in space and relationships. Some discourse on virtual (internet) mobility and networks will also be discussed here. These two chapters will state a bit of the history of these processes, but mainly focus on the current state of being, the way the processes of intimacy, mobility, and tourism look today. The latter chapter will then explain how online hospitality networks, or Couchsurfing specifically, is a product of these processes, and here I will present my results from both my interviews and my online survey. To conclude, I will explain some limits of my study, and then draw some conclusions as to what this type of mobile connection means for the future.

Methodologies

Within this work, I use various methodological tools – a choice which was partially made by default, after my long period of involvement in hospitality networks, rather than by my own calculation. In the field of sociology, it is the topic itself which should dictate the type of methodological tool a sociologist should use in order to study a topic, and not the other way around. Thus, the more I explored the topic, the more methodological approaches were made

available to me.

To give a general outline, my methodology can be mapped out in various stages which trace back to my first membership in Couchsurfing in February, 2004. As I explained in the introduction, I was first deeply immersed within the website itself, as a host and guest, and after I realized this hospitality network would be worth studying, I took on the role of participant observer. I kept a loose diary of my interactions with Couchsurfers, both officially and non-officially. As participant observer, I did not yet know my purpose which is something perfectly natural within the field of social interactionism.

This section of my qualitative research was conducted using two forms of participant observation determined by Junker (1980). In the first stage, when I became involved as merely a Couchsurfer (host and guest), I employed “total participation” in which “the role and the activities of observation themselves are totally hidden.” Later, when I joined the team of Couchsurfers at the “Couchsurfing Collective” in Montreal, which I briefly mentioned in the introduction, I became the participant observer, which corresponds with the situation in which⁷ the researchers activities are not completely secretive, yet are mainly hidden and do not affect the actual interaction. Author of the observation manual, Henry Peretz, suggests that the participant observation method concerns the studies of social organizations more or less closely. My aim was to first understand specifically *how* such a hospitality network functions, from the moment a user thinks of joining such a project, to the end result, where two users undergo an interaction where one is being hosted in the private home of the other. In this preliminary stage of research, there would be no other methodology adequate in order to gain the answer to such a question.

Yet, the more I learned about the subject, the more I felt that participatory observation in this case was not satisfactory, because my questions began to spider off into various directions – questions which simply being a participant did not answer. Now that I knew *how* the hospitality network functioned, I wanted to know *what* the motivations of these users were, *why* they were making such choices to travel, why their contact between host and guest became so deep so quickly, and *who* was trusting whom?

The Couchsurfing Collective, the volunteer-run Couchsurfing ‘office,’ in Montreal, provided me with the perfect opportunity to explore various research methods (The fact that I

⁷ “the researcher’s activities are not totally dissimulate, but seem hidden or submit on his/her activity of participant.”

felt, and was, accepted as part of the Couchsurfing volunteer team within that office meant that I was able to gain the trust and respect of others within the group). For two months, between July and August, 2006, I became the participatory observer and ethnographer. There were many things that happened around the house which I was not used to, socially, such as conflicting values, breach of physical space, and the extreme level of emotional openness between individuals. But interestingly enough, after I vowed to become part of the “collective,” I slowly began to swallow the ‘weirdness’ and accept the events as though they were all too normal. The social norms which I was used to were thrown out the window in the collective – a deep trait of closed societies where trust is a main linking factor. My morals, my cultured values, my sense of ‘what’s right’ and ‘what’s wrong’ seemed odd in that context. Moreover, the fact that other members of the community were accepting the actions, forced me, myself, to accept the actions as well. It was peer-pressure conformity to new social values. This is when the struggle to preserve my methodological composure came down hard. I attempted to stay composed – part of the group but at all times observing and objective. Yet, in swallowing my social morals, I became entrenched in emotions that I normally, as my day-to-day ‘self,’ don’t experience. Emotions like jealousy seemed to force themselves through my composed ‘self’ like a natural, socio-biological reaction to what was happening. My thoughts turned animalistic in this neo-tribe I was surrounded in. Yet, knowing that these emotions accompanied this level of participant observation, I, in many ways, had to sacrifice my own sense of self for my methodology.

Throughout the summer, I conducted 20 ethnographic interviews with Couchsurfers, and I will use pieces of those interviews within this work as a way to illustrate the process of this type of tourism. Because I was more of an insider, more a part of the Couchsurfing team, rather than an outsider, a sociologist looking in, my interviews resembled more deep discussion rather than strict outlined interviews. My approach was twofold: I first, slowly, became closer with the members of the “house.” Sometimes I recorded the discussions, sometimes I didn’t. My role as sociologist and researcher in that house was clear, but I emphasize in saying that I was viewed more as “their” researcher, who was working for “their” organization (and, quite honestly, I very well was, as the results from this research are open and can, and probably will, be used by the Couchsurfing Project at one stage or another). And when I announced that I was looking for people to interview for my ‘thesis,’ people flocked to me – without a clue about what I was writing about. The interview was a joined-effort on both

parties. My subjects often reminded *me* of our interview time. I soon noted that their eagerness to talk about themselves (some for over 1.5 hours) was a common occurrence and only affirmed my hypothesis that these people were yearning for contact with another human (something I will get to later). I also found that my “house mates” treated our interview like “private Paula time” or the “one-on-one time” they were longing for. Some of my subjects actually told me “wow, I’m so glad we had this time to talk, because I feel like I haven’t had a chance to get to know you.”⁸ (ironically, they were the ones talking and by the end of my stay only two people truly got to know my inner-workings). But in stating that, they upgraded our interview into a “conversation,” or a “deep and meaningful connection” that they were used to having with other members of the house. After that discussion, they felt they “got closer to me,” which really made the interview, in their eyes, more beneficial to them than to me. These people collected narratives, collected “connections” with people like medals – after my interview I wasn’t “that girl who interviewed me” but “Paula who I connected with.” I was part of a consumerism of a different kind, and this again I something I will discuss in a later chapter.

Although the interviews provided me with an array of information and colourful narratives regarding various issues relating to trust, friendship longevity, internet-initiated-intimacy, private/public space and the utility of connections between users, I felt my interviews could be expanded by quantitative methodology, and the easiest for me to create at the time was an online survey. The survey was simply called “Couchsurfing Friendships” and asked questions about user’s views on friendship, travel, and mobility.⁹ The survey was conducted using a program called PHP Surveyor, which is an open source program, that Casey Fenton, the founder of the website, programmed into the server of the Couchsurfing system itself. The survey was made available to users through their individual profiles, by adding an extra tab named “My Survey” onto the profile itself. The user would then click on the tab, which would link him/her to the survey page, explaining the purpose of my survey, which then had an URL link to the actual PHP Surveyor site. The first wave of respondents were those who found the tab themselves, without any communication on behalf of myself stating that the survey was in fact there. The second wave came in after a general email was sent out to all CS users inviting them to take part in the survey. Apart from their answers, the user’s IP

⁸ Anita, July 30th, 2006.

⁹ See „Couchsurfing Friendships” in the glossary.

address and date of taking the survey would be recorded. At the time of publishing this paper, the survey was still active and gathered a little over 3000 respondents. Although the responses from my interview sample can provide skewed results based on the fact that my subjects were selected from a group of highly-involved (only those who are active took the survey), surfers my survey results, along with the supplementary interviews, hopefully help to build a well-rounded image of who these travelers are and the source of their motivations to travel and build connections.

Although one can see that, as a researcher, I was heavily involved in all dimensions of this hospitality network, throughout these years, I have strived to be an unbiased researcher. I hope that my high level of involvement will not be a detriment but rather a substantial benefit to the results of this research.

Chapter 2

Mobility & Motivations to Tour

“The world is big as the power of our soul. Why not take advantage of the ways to travel of our time?” - A 24 French year old male respondent on his motivation to travel.

Michael, an American, is a highly successful 29-year-old working professional. He likes rock climbing, visiting museums, and listening to alternative music. The only thing odd about him is that he doesn't have a home. While he is registered in his family's home in Pittsburgh, he has no place to really call his own. But, much like many business consultants, his job is a high-travel gig. The typical consultant has a home in a particular city, flies to work during the week, and comes home on the weekends. Michael's private consulting firm has a policy called 'alternative travel' which means that, instead of taking the funds to his 'home' base in Pittsburgh, Michael can use the money to pay for a flight to wherever he wants, on the company dollar no less.

“I am actually a homebody, I forced myself to do it, because it is an experience I wanted to go through, its something I wanted to do,” he explained.

And during the weeks he is working, whether it be in Phoenix, San Jose, Seattle, or New York, he lives in a hotel which is provided to him by his consulting firm. “I stay at the Westin or wherever, and then on the weekend I fly and Couchsurf. There is this massive disparity between the two worlds. But I wouldn't do it any other way.”

The way people move, the way we shift space, the way we push and explore the boundaries between “us,” the tourists and “them,” the native citizens, has become a fascinating and quickly changing phenomenon. Web-based travel journals, tourism websites, and adventure communities – all mechanisms of globalization – allow us to see, hear, and directly interact with foreign places before we ever move from the glow of our computer screens. The discourse surrounding tourism today has adopted a more textured, varied, and multidimensional quality. Quite simply, tourism today has been experiencing a great fragmentation. These mechanisms of globalization, mainly the Internet, have provided “alternatives” to tourism, with emphasis on the real, the local. Zygmunt Bauman explains that more than anything else, “globalization” means that our network of dependencies is quickly acquiring a worldwide scope.¹⁰ This “network of dependencies” as Bauman puts it is leeching its way into tourism. Our globalized tourism is not just an in-and-out process where we graze on our well kept beaches or surround ourselves with other transient foreigners in a no-strings-attached getaway. Processes of globalization such as the Internet allow us to freely choose between growing varieties of travel methods. Tourism today often also comes with strings attached because we, the tourists, have realized that making personal bonds with locals and other communities in foreign lands is, in fact, possible. Moreover, tourism has often become a lifestyle, where we no longer separate time into “being at home” and “being on vacation.” Today, individuals can make choices to engage in a life-long 'vacation,' in which being mobile is locked within one's inner “project of the self.”

There is no denying that the intensely-consumerist phase of tourism is still prevalent within upper-class societies of our capitalist parts of the world. But those who have the opportunity to travel are able to *choose* contact with “the local,” or choose to become an endless vagabond. The idea of *choice* is key.

¹⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, Community: Seeking safety in an insecure world. (Cambridge: Polity. 2001), p. 97.

Tourism: Past and Present

So, is what Michael doing classified as tourism? In the traditional sense, no. Originally, tourism began as a form of exploration, colonization, and then simply an upper-class privilege, where individuals abandoned their home in order to experience another setting. The original version of tourism had one single purpose – to experience, first-hand, a new place. The new “experience” was an all-sensory experience – involving new sights, sounds, smells, and tastes. These sensory experiences were locked up in, as we shall discuss further, material “touchables” such as a hotel room, a local dish, or a busy street. Photography itself became a way in which these “touchables” could be documented and brought back home as a souvenir. Post-tourism can be called the first fragmentation. Mike Featherstone, John Urry and other sociologists researching the discipline of the “new tourism” placed an emphasis on the mechanisms of globalization – where an individual, now middle-to-upper-class -- travels in order to experience the real, the local. Where classical tourism was about going to one area and seeing *things*, Featherstone explains that post-tourists “seek a whole range of experiences and direct encounters with locals.”¹¹ In order to explain this phenomenon, theorists heavily borrowed Erving Goffman’s metaphor of stage/curtain or private versus public space, where the tourist yearned to not only experience the public sphere of drinking the coffee from a café, but also longed to observe the private sphere of how that coffee was harvested and served.

Post-tourism and the emphasis of the local has now formed a new hybrid of tourism, and yet another fragmentation within the tourism process. This new hybrid is inextricably complex where the travel experiences are not strictly limited to sensory “touchables” (such as the hotel room I mentioned in the previous paragraph), but provide various emotions linked to the closeness achieved with another human being. Where post-tourism was the tourism linked to experiencing processes and private-sphere events (such as the daily life of a villager in the Swiss alps), the tourism prevalent the hospitality network is one in which the tourist-scape – the tourism icons, figures, landmarks – become secondary images within the tourism experience. Here, the tourist gaze is no longer really a 'gaze' but an emotional interaction, a tourism feeling. No longer are tourists just looking and experiencing with just their five senses, but they are feeling and experiencing more on an existential, psychological, perhaps

¹¹ Mike Featherstone, *Undoing Culture*, (London: Sage, 1996), p. 120.

even spiritual level which only the intense, intimate experience of human-to-human emotion can evoke. An easy way to explain this is to use an example of the tourist photograph. In the first two stages of tourism, the tourist could capture his/her experience through a picture (“This is the food we ate at the restaurant in Geneva,” or “This is me at the villager’s cabin in the Alps”). Yet the hospitality networker's experience cannot be captured on film. This chapter will be devoted to the dissection of the nature of tourism, past and present, and will attempt to fit the current state of tourism as it relates to the discourse surrounding the hospitality network. This section will be divided into three parts. Firstly, I shall discuss tourism as a whole, the way tourism has changed, different socio-psychological approaches to looking at tourism, and the way this new process fits into this discourse. After, I will discuss the exact process of the hospitality exchange. Lastly, I will discuss how tourism has moved from being an industry to a lifestyle, and how the hospitality exchange exists due to this change in personal motivations.

Motivations and Mobilities

I will start to explain tourism with a question: “When we pack our bags and decide to travel, why are we leaving exactly?” The essence of the answer here is motivation. And as Parrinello has stated, these motivations act as a trigger that set off all the events involved in travel.¹² There is a lack of agreed common theory regarding motivations to travel,¹³ but for the sake of condensing this topic, making the state of tourism today easier to understand, I will place the tourist into two extreme categories: one who tours as a form of recreation, and the other who travels as a way of life, where mobility is ingrained within one's identity and “life mission.” To further clarify, recreational tourists have a grounded sense of home, and life-tourists lack any sense of home whatsoever. While we shall discuss the ideas of self-identity in a later chapter, for the sake of explaining how motivation impacts tourism, past and present, let us take these two simple categories into consideration as we turn to a few theories regarding psychological motivations, as well as examples from my personal interviews with Couchsurfers.

¹² Parrinello, G.R. 1993. "Motiation and anticipation in post-industrial tourism." *Annals of Tourism Research* 20:233-249.

¹³ Holden, Andrew. 2005. *Tourism Studies and the Social Sciences*. New York: Routledge, p. 63.

The Recreational Mode	Emphasis is placed on enjoyment and recreation. This type of tourist is not searching for authenticity, instead emphasizing entertainment. He/she thrives on what Boorstin [1961] referred to as 'pseudo-events.' This type of tourism may be little more than a form of escapism from the pressures of daily life.
The Experiential Mode	A search for meaning away from one's home society although the intention is to return to it. This meaning is to be found through having new experiences. This type of tourist still has their spiritual centre or sense of belonging at home.
The Diversionary Mode	The tourist lacks focus or meaning, they are alienated from their environment both at home and in a foreign destination.
The Experimental Mode	This type of tourist no longer has their spiritual centre in their own society. They are therefore searching for an alternative one. They may engage in others' 'authentic' life but refuse to fully commit themselves to it.
The Existential Mode	This type of traveller is fully committed to an 'elective' spiritual centre away from his own culture. Living away from this centre, for example having to return home, is akin to living 'in exile.'

Figure 1.1 Cohen's typology of tourist experiences (1979) found in Holden, A. (2005)

Cohen's typology (see figure 1.1.) classifies the tourist experience based on five 'modes.' Here, we can apply my two simple categorizations, where the individual's motivations to travel becomes increasingly part of one's life-mission the lower down on the chart one goes (note that while this chart indicates a shift from one extreme to the other, the chart's order does not signify any sort of preference on my behalf over one mode or another other). Thus, the fully-committed life-traveller would not identify home with a specific place, and, if I may add to Cohen's typology, would also find touring as an unquestionable necessity in their life mission. The recreational tourist, hence, has no sense of urgency to become mobile, and exploring questions of identity, life purpose, or meaning through tourism are overridden with a resounding motivation to experience a sense of recreation, or pleasure.

While Cohen also does not imply any sense of progression from one type of tourist to another, the life-tourist sees tourism as a holistic experience, where one's new experiences are linked with discovery of the world in which one is living through a full, lifelong dedication, where touring is part of "making a difference" in the world. In reality, tourists can not be simplified down to two categories, Cohen's typology is quite meaningful because it also takes into account those who, much like the life-traveler, also treat travel as a way to experience

something, whether that be through inter-human dialogue or actual sensory interactions with a new environment. Yet, in this intermediate case, the tourist does not abandon their sense of home, and mobility becomes more of a learning process than a way of life.

Within my online research survey, a respondent was asked to give his/her primary motivation to travel. This question was inspired by Crompton's "push factors for tourism" which was based on seven socio-psychological variables he identified within his empirical work as important in motivating people to travel.¹⁴ In my set of statistics, out of 8 different possible responses¹⁵, only 14% answered "Seeing Interesting Sights of the World," whereas 56% of respondents chose "Personal growth/personal development (learning about yourself and the world around you)" as their primary motivation to travel. Even among seemingly similar groups of the hospitality network members, there is a fragmentation in the motivations to travel.

Nick was born and raised in Kentucky, where he spent his first 18 years. He then lived in New Orleans for 5 years, has been through almost every state at least two times, and says that spending a month at a time driving around the United States getting to know his fellow citizens "gives him a conception of where [he] stands and where our society stands." His response already denotes that travel, for Nick, is in some way exploratory or educational. Nick then decided after the last US election that he was going to go back to school, and make a difference – do something "more important than pushing the last legal drug." Again, traveling rather than stagnancy is also a process necessary in order for him to make a change in the world. During our interview, he revealed that tourism for him is not an escape, but an immersion in a certain culture, and he likes traveling alone for the spontaneity that it provides, for it is only then that he is "open to any shift in schedule." Already within his response we can identify three explicit motivations to travel. Furthermore, travel for him is not only a sensory but also an emotional exploration, stating that when traveling, "I want to

¹⁴ See Crompton, J. 1979. "Why people go on a pleasure vacation." *Annals of Tourism Research* 6:408-424, where he identified the following 7 motivating "push factors" to tour: Escape from the mundane, exploration and evaluation of self, relaxation, prestige, regression to childhood, bonding with family and friends, and social interaction. Here tourism is distinguished as a change in relationship between the tourist which relates to tourism as an external occurrence, or one which views tourism as a reflexive project. Despite the fact that Crompton does not distinguish tourism into these categories, his push factors are useful nonetheless.

¹⁵ Eight possible answers being: Seeing interesting sights of the world 14.19%, Personal growth/personal development (learning about yourself and the world around you) 56.21%, Meeting and building relationships with people from around the world 17.78%, To relax 1.56%, To escape daily responsibilities 1.12%, To see family 0.41%, For business 0.61%, Other 7.21%.

see but I also want to feel. And getting out into the world, the rest of the 6 continents, I try and take the same kind of vibe. I want to see what people are doing. What they eat for dinner. What's on the table and how do they put it there. What do they talk about when they're sitting around, having a chat or walking down the street. I guess I'd like to know what people are thinking. Does that make sense?"

For Nick this all makes perfect sense. For others, it might not at all. There is no denying that a new quality of tourist has been emerging based on new motivations, which directly makes the process of Internet hospitality networks possible, and as I noted during my empirical research, is directly linked to self identity and the individual's view of life and what this said individual wants out of life. Moreover, the individuals often shift their position or 'mode' of travel, and much like Nick, they aren't limited to one space on the tourist mode trajectory which I have presented here. The group I am focusing on within this chapter is found in the latter half of Cohen's scale, specifically those travelers who adopt a travel-as-discovery or a traveler-as-self-identity ethos. The pleasure-seeking tourists (those in the recreation mode) are outcomes of a post-industrial era, it is the latter group of travelers which caused the fragmentation into post-modern tourism characterized by individuals who are using mobility as a means to an exploratory, soul-searching, end, which will (hopefully for them) allow them to find and fulfill their 'life purpose'.

Yet before we return to these typologies, it would be worthwhile to explain the hospitality exchange network in order to situate this process as well as the actors within this process, into the general realm of post-tourism.

The workings of a hospitality exchange network

"Well, so there you are. You're going to be here for a couple of days... ok well, so I guess you'll sleep here, I have a mattress for you. What are you doing tonight? Tomorrow?... Hey you know what, I'm going to a party tomorrow night? And I have another one this weekend, and I have this show I'm going to go to. And there are a few people who want to meet you..."
--Adam, a 40-something hairstylist from Seattle, when explaining what he told his first Couchsurfer, who ended up staying for a period of 10 days.

Before we move on to map out the various stages and processes of tourism, it would be worthwhile to flat-out describe what the process of the hospitality network actually looks like. Even if we have not experienced the types of travel, tours, and trips available to us, mainstream tourism is so much part of pop culture, that anyone immersed in any pop imagery

would have at least a vague, if not a completely clear, idea of what happens on a cruise ship, what a five-star hotel looks like, what airplane food tastes like, or what a city tour entails. Quoted above, Adam explained in his interview that “for both of us, it was our first time. So we didn't really know [what to do].” Not only do the majority of individuals not know what the process of Couchsurfing looks like, as a new host, many would probably share Adam's sentiments and have no idea what to do once a stranger showed up at one's door.

Most often, this type of tourism is highly individualized, meaning the type of experience the guest receives is dependent on the individual host's plans for the guest. This often depends on the amount of time and motivation the host has to actually provide the surfer with a worthwhile experience. Notice that this is quite unpredictable and also differs drastically from the other form of tourism, where the tourism environment, the stage on which the individual toured was quite stable – prescribed from the top-down by the institution of tourism itself. The hospitality network tourist can not open a brochure or click on a website in order to 'preview' the experience. With the host-surfer interaction, the tourism experience does not depend on the tourism industry or institution of tourism, but on the individual hosting the tourist. This is the key difference. While this can provide the thrill of a sort of guerilla, grassroots tourism, the experience is often so individualized, that the host can be a traveller themselves, and does not have to feel any connection or sense of home to the place they are living in. Thus, what they end up showing the host may not be authentically 'local' or part of the set countries tourism agenda, something that Urry called “tourism reflexivity” - the set of disciplines, procedures and criteria that enable each place to monitor, evaluate and develop its 'tourism potential' within the emerging patters of global tourism.¹⁶

Mary, an American citizen from New Jersey born to a Ukrainian mother, was living in Krakow for over a year at the time of our interview. While hosting guests through Couchsurfing.com, she was a foreigner hosting other foreigners. Mary told me that she often felt that her “surfers” missed out on the local aspect, and on the more authentic insight into what the city offers and what the Polish culture is about. On the other hand, this situation embodies the global nature of the times which gave birth to the Couchsurfing project in the first place – meaning the global, the cross-cultural, the multi-leveled, with people constantly shifting their space, their home. But Mary, too, rejected the idea that Couchsurfing substitutes

¹⁶ <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/sociology/papers/urry-globalising-the-tourist-gaze.pdf>

one's home in a foreign area. She explained that a guest's role when traveling can often be one that is awkward, but preferable to many because it reinforces (almost as a microcosm) the guest role of the traveler in the culture she/he is visiting.

"... [hosting] reminds me of the delusion in participating in tourist structures, such as paying for a bed, in which we are trying to falsely negate our displacement. When we are a (complaisant) guest, the inherent discomfort serves as a foil to heighten our understanding of the host's comfort, sense of home and belonging, and I think this makes us feel closer to the culture - not through direct experience, but through intensive, direct observation."

It is important to note here that Mary is reasserting the idea of "I, the tourist" and "you, the local," while at the same time breaking down the wall between the two. The visitor here is constantly alert, somewhat on-edge, attempting to move between new spaces and attempting to understand how these "spaces" become "places" for this local person. Couchsurfing does not provide the sense of home for the traveler, yet it merges the local and the traveler into a completely new sphere – making them interact in a way that previously was not possible.

Some hosts are highly involved with their guests, and others simply provide a bed to sleep on. In some cases, the host leaves a key with a neighbour (although this happens quite rarely), and gives the 'surfer' directions via email, phone, or text message. In the first group, the tourist actually experiences an intense experience in both the traditional tourism sense and the post-tourism sense. So, in Krakow for example, a highly-intensive experience would be one in which two individuals meet in a public space or the 'surfer' comes to the host's home. After a brief stage of introduction, the highly involved host would already have their day/evening planned (depending on when the surfer arrived). Daytime activities often include sightseeing – both to pop tourist landmarks and "personalized" spaces (such as the host's favourite rooftop building with a view of the city, an edgy farmer's market where the host buys her free-range eggs, etc.).

One can see how these personalized spaces now become tourist attractions simply due to the individual choice of the host. Evening activities could often be a house party or a birthday dinner, a trendy night club, or a concert or theatre performance – any place off-the-tourist-path, often exclusively frequented by individuals from that given locality. Whether the 'surfer' is being led around by a true 'local' or by a 'local-tourist' (like Mary), they still feel they are experiencing something they could not have experienced otherwise just through the sheer interaction with the host, who constitutes for them, a greater expert than them on the space

they are temporarily visiting. And as Nick stated earlier, that this type of tourism takes him from experiencing just an all-sensory journey, into what people are thinking about, hundreds of my survey and personal respondents stated that this type of tourism maximizes their learning process. A 27-year-old Belgian stated that he travels to “learn new things, other ways of living, other ways of thinking...,” and another 32-year-old American female said that “traveling is a humbling experience and something that makes you realise what the world is really like and that sitting in one little part of it is limiting in itself...” Thus, the tourism which Featherstone was talking about, where the individual yearns to experience 'the local,' is now replaced with simply experiencing something which is displaced from the tourist's own sense of home.

Getting back to the actual process of the exchange, the daytime or evening activities are also dependent on the host's lifestyle, and it also is frequent that the two individuals stay in the vicinity of their hosts home, immersed in dialogue. In the case of the uninvolved host, the guest would have to 'fend for themselves,' occasionally asking the host for directions, maps, or sightseeing tips. When the host is uninvolved, the surfer's tourist experience is similar to a guest at a bed and breakfast, and can hardly be classified as being part of this new form of tourism. This second group is less frequent. I will again pull from my survey results to show that when asked about how many hours one spends interacting with a surfer/host per day, 17% of respondents stated between 0-1 hours. 19% responded between 1-3 hours, and the largest group of 26% responded between 3-6 hours. 16% responded that they spend over 6 hours with their host/guest. Although 19% of the 2893 did not respond to this question, one can still see that one in five hosts would be considered uninvolved Couchsurfers. The rest, fall into this realm of involved Couchsurfers.

If we return to my own categories of the recreational and the life-tourist, one can see how those who are life-tourists themselves would become more involved with their own guest than those who view tourism as a recreation. For life-tourists, tourism becomes a certain language, a form of understanding where more contact with tourist/movement/mobility dialogue means an increase in the fluency in the set language. Thus, a life-tourist feels compelled to spend time with their host because in doing so, they become immersed in a common language. Ulla from Finland state that communication is “easier with Couchsufers because there is some common element, some kind of spirit which combines you, that's not seen around the people I'm usually around in my place.” This 'common spirit' means a large

number of similarities, including their likeness to interweave mobility into their life mission.

Life-Tourists

Mobility was a way of life for the Bedouins, the Irish travelers, the Roma gypsies, the pilgrims. I can continue to give numerous examples of travelers throughout history who would consider physical stagnancy as a hindrance to their life's mission. Yet the difference today is that the ability to migrate has become much more accessible to the larger public, and that this vagrancy is significantly more individual than group-based. This is directly linked to the general idea of mobility as an essential way of developing one's identity. When Urry stated, there is a growth of "tourism reflexivity,"¹⁷ I would go further and argue that that this growth in reflexivity also translates itself into an increase in the self-reflexivity of the very narrative of mobility. No longer is the individual simply thinking of themselves in the context of their locality, but the idea of touring, of traveling, of moving, becomes a set goal, one which develops along with the project of 'the self.' As the individual today creates their reality, so necessary in the self-project, the setting or place in which that future is planned is also becomes part of this project. One can easily question: "In five years, will I be in Bangkok or Madrid? In Sydney or Reykjavik?" This is a question which is new to the age we are living in. No longer is tourism just locked in a vacation setting. Tourism has trickled into the lifestyles the postmodern individual chooses to lead. Thus, our sense of self is now an actor within local, national, and international contexts. This is the state of tourism today. Michael, therefore, is not just taking a vacation – his homelessness is his lifestyle.

On one hand, this "choice" to change one's setting and to become mobile can be linked to a search for some sort of intense experience which is not available in one's own locality, an all-sensory intensification which the newness of another setting can provide. In some ways, this can be linked with postmodern hedonism. Campbell (1995) argues, that while traditional, pre-modern hedonism was concerned primarily with opulence, luxury, abundance, and revelry, contemporary hedonism is also achieved via 'new', exciting experience, which may involve danger, grief, hardship and fear. Many commentaries on the nature of human existence at the end of the twentieth century remark on the ceaseless search for new and exciting experience, the lack of satisfaction, that appears to be part of this existence; 'Images of consumers as explorers, restless and impatient, driven by insatiable curiosity, constantly

¹⁷ <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/sociology/papers/urry-globalising-the-tourist-gaze.pdf>,

looking for difference, underscore the ideas of numerous prominent cultural theorists'¹⁸

Quite simply, the individual's eyes, as well as their concept of the world becomes wider. Instead of identifying one's immediate environment, or even the nation as "my world," mass media, new technology, and the internet, causes the individual to take ownership of the global environment, for better or for worse. Urry calls these "the global cosmopolitans" who develop a stance and an ideology of openness towards certain 'other' cultures, peoples and environments.¹⁹ This sort of mental mobility can either become a new choice in the world of consumerism, or can provide a sort of connection with every space the tourist travels through, and this connection changes this idea of "what I am seeing is something different," into a holistic approach of "what I am seeing is something mine." Thus, one can say that tourism today can be both experimental and existential, changing the idea of 'the home' as a certain base within one's locality. I will refer to MacCannell, as he related to the topic of "the other," when stating 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."²⁰

Life-travelers share ideas much like the following 29-year-old female respondent from Austria, who stated that, "I can change the world only if I am able to change myself. Traveling helps me to gain insights about myself and reminds me life is not about fitting into a system, life is about knowing who I am." A 23-year-old Croatian female stated that "by traveling to new places you find yourself in an environment that is new for you, situations that you are not used to and all that makes you see who you really are, you see yourself from a different point of view. You meet that new world and also by getting to know yourself better, you have a chance to improve." I return to the idea of motivation here. These two respondent's motivations are less about pleasure (recreational tourism, which, practiced in excess, can be linked to hedonism), and more about self-discovery. This, for them, is the tourist attraction.

¹⁸ Gabrial, Yiannis, and Lang, Tim. 1995. *The Unmanageable Consumer - Consumption and its Fragmentation*. London: Sage. p. 161.

¹⁹ Urry, John. 2000. *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century*. London: Routledge, p. 173.

²⁰ MacCannell, p. 77.

New and Old Tourist Attractions

“Public behaviour and these other visible public parts of society [...refuse, monuments, museums, parks...] are tourist attractions.²¹ The “sightseeing sacralization” which MacCannell describes, in which the tourist sights and souvenirs become an attraction of a specific place, is the core of the traditional tourism experience. “Modern international sightseeing possesses its own moral structure, a collective sense that certain sights must be seen.”²² But the ritual of seeing a sight, the collective conventionalized belief that one object or space must be experienced visually is central to the traditional idea of tourism, yet completely secondary to this sort of post-tourism which is experienced through the hospitality exchange network. Here, the tourist's motivation to travel is most definitely not a sightseeing experience in the traditional sense of the word.

Nick, who we met earlier in this chapter, would fit into this type of traveler, stating that “traveling is absolutely (about personal growth), I mean you know that wherever you go, whatever you do, there is going to be something that you hopefully learn. If you go through a day without finding out anything new about yourself or the world around you then you might as well stay in bed. And travel for me is all that packed into 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. For as long as you're out, if you're not figuring something out about yourself or where you fit into the cosmos, then I don't know why people do it.”

Up to this point, I have hopefully explained that the fragmentation in tourism means that the “sightseeing” is no longer a central act of the tourism experience. Yet, we might as well pause here to ask, has the idea of “sightseeing” simply taken on another meaning? Is the sightseeing of historical artifacts and urban structures being replaced with the “sightseeing” of the person? Or is that simply stretching the sociological terminology too far? I would argue that stretching the “sightseeing” concept to the experience that the individual has when being hosted by a Couchsurfer denotes a shift in the experience of gazing onto an object, to a human-to-human experience locked in emotion, something that an intimate interpersonal relationship provides. We can find commonalities between the act of sightseeing and the familiarization with another person. Both involve a certain degree of discovery, self-reflexivity, learning, metaphysical experience, and/or emotionality. And as we will later observe in the chapter regarding intimacy and friendship, the process of meeting new people,

²¹ MacCannell, p. 39)

²² MacCannell, p. 42.

new “hosts” and “surfers,” can also be a sort of process of collecting souvenirs.

We can not go as far as to say that these interpersonal experiences completely lose their 'personal' quality to them. We must remember that in the hospitality exchange, one travels or hosts real people. The communication is a two-way affair, a two-way insight, a sort of dance between two parties. The difference between traditional tourism and post-tourism is like the difference between being an actor in a movie and being the person the movie is based on. In the first case, we go through various movements which are part of sightseeing sacralization which is locked in the collective consciousness of the given society. This is a sort of staged authenticity, where we engage in sights which are part of the tourism act. In the other instance, the experience is our own, highly individualized, with the potential to be as intensely intimate as we are motivated to make it. As MacCannell stated that “public behavior... and other 'visible' parts of society are tourist attractions,” one can see how the privacy of one's home is not a truly “visible” part of society, and that the interaction which takes place within the realm of the private space is also not “public behavior.” Moreover, this genuine authenticity of the private sphere interactions which take place become authentic because they provide us with a sense of discovering universal “truths” and “non-truths” which are made available to us through authentic discourse with another human being. We will return to this point both in the chapter regarding private/public space as well as intimacy. But as MacCannell states, within pre-modern societies, “the maintenance of this distinction [truth versus nontruth] is essential to the functioning of society that is based on interpersonal relationships.²³ Yet in modern settings, he believes, real life relations are being liberated from their traditional constraints as the integrity of society is no longer dependent on such constraints.

One can see how this new form of tourism begs for a re-examination. Moreover, the state of tourism, as MacCannell presented, is still a “state” or “process” of tourism, whereas today, with the growing potential for the self-sustaining individual to become mobile, the idea of touring is becoming less of a process and more of a state of mind. Hopefully, this chapter provided a worthwhile investigation of the current state of tourism so that we may now explore in what way this form of tourism is placing the essence of value on pre-modern types of inter-human relationships, based on true, interpersonal authenticity.

²³ MacCannell 91.

Chapter 3

Friendship: Reflexivity and Utility

“Couchsurfing wants to expand relationships in a more free way” - Michael, 27-year-old American Couchsurfer.

Anita is standing out in gigantic Montreal summer rainstorm. The pouring water breaks the July heat. Feeling the air becoming electric she joins her friends and starts jumping into the puddles, completely soaked in the rain and the cloud's intension, watching the electrical storm surround them. Anita defines herself as a “pretty intense person,” and while speaking to her about how she values friendship, she started to recall the summer storm.

This 28-year-old actress based out of New York wants an intense friendship. As intense as the summer storm. She doesn't “do causal” very well. She can, but she'd rather have intensity. She values intense relationships. “What is a life without passion?” she asks me rhetorically. “What is a friendship if it's not passionate?” And when Anita does not find that passionate, intense connection with someone, she shrugs it off and says “that's OK.” She will

just find that intensity with someone else. The sense that Anita has choice within her connections, the fact that she can sift through her undesirable relationships and choose those which are valuable is something new, and contrary to the classic notion of friendship which shall be discussed in this chapter. Linked with our idea of mobility discussed in the previous chapter, the individual today is not restricted to their locality within their internal friend-discourse. If we look around us, living in the Western environment, we will notice that there is an incredible sense of choice - whether it is the products we consumer or where we live and travel. While individuals populate their mind with both close and distant ties, we have already established that today, those ties can be made globally. This is drastically different than a classic society, where mobility was limited. Although we discussed mobility in a previous chapter, it would be worth noting here that the limits in one's mobility greatly affect the way one views friendship. Living in a small community, one would have no choice but to stay in that small environment one is surrounded in, and befriend those who are in one's immediate vicinity. Thinking only locally, Anita, who values intensity within friendship, would have to resort to searching for this intensity among her limited community members, or abandon this desire for intensity altogether. Modernity, it might be said, breaks down the protective framework of the small community and of tradition,²⁴ and the individual is then able to step out of these narrow borders and into a world of his/her choosing. But the problem which arises here is not the fact that both close and distant friendship is available to us, but that the individual decides to create those global friends. The questions regarding our motivation to seek friends elsewhere is what this chapter will to explain.

Johan, a 27-year-old Dutch Couchsurfer, stated: "I look back on my friends, I've been in Holland and I think I got into more meaningful relationships with Couchsurfers than people whom I've known for years...I just see them being so static, as they are, they didn't get out. Even though we spent all these years together as friends, drinking together, or whatever, they still stay static, they're still in the same place, [mentally] too."²⁵ Ulla, a 26-year-old Finnish Couchsurfer explained that "all the Finnish culture and the Helsinki culture is just so closed down somehow. It's tough to break into circles and meet people for the first time.... There are people who do not understand this side of me... Couchsurfers all have the same needs to see." Both Johan and Ulla stated something quite characteristic for this type of

²⁴ Giddens, p.33

²⁵ Johan, Interview

global-friendship making: a) that global relationships (here, Couchsurfers) are in fact more meaningful than local relationships, which results from the fact that b) leaving one's immediate locality allows the individual to engage in a friendship dyad based on similar needs and goals.

As Kaufman puts it, today, our social ties don't define who the individual is. It is the individual himself who defines who his social ties will consist of.²⁶ Just as Anita picks those individuals with whom she will experience that thunderstorm, the individual of modernity can also pick an incredible amount of contacts in order to build a dense, stable network of people – giving the individual assurance and freedom from the anxiety of being alone and left behind in a world which is based on “who we know” less than “what we know.” It would be worthwhile to state that the age we are living in now offers an incredible time-space trajectory within personal relationships. Not only are the forces of modernity causing a shift from a small amount of contacts based in a concrete local spatiality to a large amount of contacts which are spaced out across the globe, these contacts are often fluid, often momentary (Beck, Gergen, et. al.). A recent article eloquently summarizes Wellman's concept of “networked individualism,” which will greatly aid as a base to the empirical analysis here. Boase and Wellman argue, that since the industrial revolution, the rise of mass transit and telecommunications systems have allowed a shift in the nature of social relationships, especially in urban areas where these kinds of systems tend to be more readily accessible.

Wellman argues that this shift, which he calls “networked individualism,” has at least three important characteristics: 1) Relationships are both local and long distance. 2) Personal networks are sparsely knit but include densely knit groups. 3) Relationships are more easily formed and abandoned.²⁷ Here, I shall not focus on the characteristics of the individual's personal network, but rather treat the first and last points as theoretical jumping-off points to frame my argument. As I stated, Both Ulla and Johan engage in local and long distance relationships, and both these relationships are formed and abandoned. Yet, my interviews suggested an active pursuit of distant contacts out of the dissatisfaction with one's local friendships. Although Wellman and others have linked networked individualism to the rise of technologies and other forces of modernity, my attempt at analysis takes on an individualized

²⁶ Kaufman, p. 232.

²⁷ Boase, Jeffrey, Wellman, Barry. December, 2004. "Personal Relationships: On and Off the Internet." (accessed May, 2007).

model. My question stems from the socio-psychological motivation to create new contacts. Where is this motivation stemming from and how do these new movements change friendship? This chapter will take into account the ideas regarding mobility mentioned within the previous chapter, and take on a theoretical and empirical approach to questions regarding new social ties and the search for intimacy. Within this chapter, I will both describe what mobile friendship and intimacy looks like within the context of the hospitality network, as well as answer how these motivations came into existence, taking a psychological look into the state of personal identity today. The first section discusses the individual's state of identity, the idea of reflexivity, and need for personal growth in shaping "the self." Later, I will discuss the history of friendship, and how friendship today acts as a tool for not only pleasure and love, but for engaging in the process of reflexivity and "personal growth" which in turn impacts the individual's identity.

Constructing the Self: Reflexivity and Narrative

Currently, there is a range of "identity politics" and ample discourse regarding the "social construction of identity" circulating the social sciences,²⁸ and the reflexivity regarding one's own identity that is happening currently in the state of modernity begs for further investigation and explanation. Identity discourse both focuses on the actions of individuals in establishing their own identity, and the inner discourse leading up to or following an action (less action, more inner interaction) which also helps establish a 'sense of self.' The act of clustering into an specific collective in order to establish and maintain an individual identity is something which can be observed within the Couchsurfing network. The individual, by initially engaging him/herself in the network, is already making a certain statement about one's identity. Harrison White was perhaps the first to theoretically define a network, calling it a 'network of meaning,' composed of stories and identities.²⁹ While the question of the individual's identity, as it is shaped by their actual participation in various networks can be explored further in White's analysis (1992), identity-building will be examined here under the

²⁸ Somers, Margaret. 1994. "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach." *Theory and Society* 23: p. 605.

²⁹ White, Harrison. 1992. *Identity and Control: A Structural Theory of Social Action*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. p. 65.

theme of self-reflexivity and relationship-building. Thus, I will presume here that identity is built more on discourse (both dyadic and internal) rather than on actions. General theoretical analysis regarding identity formation can be grouped into two camps which are sometimes treated separately, yet often fused into a joined analysis: one, being discourse on an entirely individual level – while sociological forces induce self-reflexivity, identity formation is a highly individualized process. And the second type of discourse being a group identity in which narrative of the self is formulated based on collective narratives and the belonging to an established social group or class. Both stages of reflexivity will be evaluated here using appropriate empirical examples. Let's start with Simon, a 25-year-old social entrepreneur from Michigan, who stated in an interview: “I definitely know now that I think more about myself, and improving myself than some do. That's a personal goal, that's something that I've set out to do, each day in my life and figure out how I can be somewhat better. A lot of people are just content with being... as of right now I'm thinking about myself a ton... figuring a lot of things about myself through traveling.”

Here, Simon shows that not only is he being self-reflective, but that he discerns that he is a rare individual in the backdrop of the society he is living in. Moreover, being part of the traveler's culture is something which will help him achieve the state of inner advancement he is seeking. His goal is self-improvement, and his statement exemplifies the fact that individual's identity today is a reflexive project – this reflexivity is what makes the individual think in terms of “individualized” categories – meaning his/her motivations, goals, and roles as they relate to their immediate environment. Traditional societies, as Ulrich Beck phrases it, were societies where the “I” did not play such an important role. Yet our inner discussion today is a product of our time, what Giddens calls the reflexivity of modernity; explaining that the construction of the self is a reflexive project.³⁰ Worth underlining is the fact that mobility alone does not guarantee personal growth. Ashley, a 21-year-old Canadian, explained in her interview that “everyone says it's the experiences that make you. But I think just as important are that the reflections on the experiences that really make you.”

This search for 'personal growth,' is characteristic of the time we are living in, and can fall into what Anthony Giddens terms a state of 'reflexivity'³¹ in which the individual is constantly entering into a self-dialogue over their identity, embarking on a process of self-

³⁰ Giddens, p. 124.

³¹ Anthony Giddens, p. 124.

definition, a 'project of the self' and constant re-adjustment. All my collected research shows that Couchsurfing individuals have an intrinsic need for 'personal growth' or 'personal development' – meaning the improvement of one's entire being, sense of self, and/or outlook on the world. Within my survey, 42.51% of respondents believe that personal growth is something 'extremely important' to them, while 35.71% said that it is 'very important.' This also ties in to what I mentioned in the previous chapter regarding mobility – 56% of respondents chose "Personal growth/personal development (learning about yourself and the world around you)" as their primary motivation to travel out of 8 different possible responses. But, most interestingly enough, 17.69% of respondents (the second-highest respondent group) chose "meeting and building relationships with people from around the world." Thus, we can discern that the "personal growth" project is much more important than making new friendships with individuals from across the globe. It is the quest for personal growth which fuels connections between people and not the other way around. Moreover, those who responded to the latter question, had the opportunity to enter their motivations to "meeting and build relationships" in an open-ended survey question. As a result, 572 responses had a common theme of learning or growing as a motivating factor to initiating these new friendships. Terms like "insight" (55 times), "growth" (26 times), "learning" or some form of the word (160 times), and "understanding" (89 times) were most frequently used. A further list of detailed quotes which illustrate user motivations towards 'personal growth' can be found at the end of this chapter, but delving further into my qualitative interviews shows that friendship can serve as a vehicle in personal progress and self-reflexivity. Thus, today we are witnessing a phenomenon where not only are we retreating inwards into a reflexive discussion, but this private sphere (our thoughts, feelings, emotions, the goings-on in our personal lives) has entered the public sphere through dialogue and self-narrative.

We have now reached the second side of identity-formation, in which the individual moves the ontological self-dialogue outwards in two ways: engaging in discourse with another person, and placing oneself in the backdrop of one's immediate population, community, or class, in an "I-versus-them" comparative. Just as my respondents stated that friendship aids in learning or growth, Gergen's argument is that the original "self" is now overpowered by the population of others. This process begins when the child is put into a populated environment, where learning the qualities of others is connected in an immediate way with the earliest

explorations of the object-world and self-identity.³² Moreover, talking about the details of our therapy session or our sexual exploits to relative strangers (as so happens via the Couchsurfing exchange) has lost its sense of taboo, because these narratives are part of the collective identity. Somers classifies this as a narrative of identity formation. She suggests that we should infuse the study of identity formation with a “relational and historical approach” by “emphasizing the embeddedness of identity in overlapping networks of relations that shift over time and space.”³³ The process of identity formation is entrenched in our self-narrative, and the case of the Couchsurfer is no different. Establishing the “self” while Couchsurfing is done in two ways: for one, we present a live profile of ourselves presenting our interests, our skills, and our likes and dislikes to the other while hosting or being hosted. This profile resembles our online Couchsurfing profile (for example: “I speak 4 languages and I love the Beatles). Note that this profile can change at the user's discretion, thus enabling the online identity to change as frequently as the offline identity does. The second way of establishing the self is by telling stories. Kenneth Gergen addresses his analysis of self-narration: “...saying that we use stories to make ourselves comprehensible does not go far enough. Not only do we tell our lives as stories; there is also a significant sense in which our relationships with each other are lived-out in narrative form.”³⁴

One respondent, Adam, discussed his trip to a Genevan host who had a “desperate need to talk about himself.” Each Couchsurfer I encountered through interviews or observation showed elements of “establishing the self,” in which he/she spent time explaining who he/she was to the other person. In Adam's case, his host was willing to stay up all night to talk about his life, and was “less interested” in what Adam had to say. Almost the entire relational experience Adam had was constructed through Frank's (his Genevan host's) self-narration. He told stories of his years as a TV reporter, his travel experiences, his tales of love. Each piece in this narrative was used to “paint a picture” of Frank as a whole person. One can presume that creating such a narrative was as helpful for Adam (to understand Frank as a person) as it was to Frank (to assert who he is and what exactly he accomplished in life). The more monologue and dialogue we have concerning ourselves help us to assert ourselves, helps to verify who we are as individuals. This narrative and presentation of our profile is part of our reflexive

³² Gergen, 1997, p. 51.

³³ Somers, p. 606.

³⁴ Gergen, Kenneth. 1997. *Realities and Relationships*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p. 210.

project, and is now instantly available through contact with another human in one's network.

Not only is the individual identity being bombarded with various other people across space and time, we are being attacked with a slew of information and knowledge. Late or reflexive modernity may revolve around the motivations of “self,” yet the “self's” motivations are knowledge based, and based on “expert systems.” The problem is that while knowledge often leads to greater reflexivity, it only sometimes may lead to a real sense of truth. There is a need for exchanging information, and this information is collective information, not information of an individual's own creation. But why this need for information? One answer may be that the reflexive individual does not hold answers to deep, ontological ‘spiritual’ questions and therefore, forces of culture and socialization promise to ‘ease’ our anxieties of not possessing these answers. Our ‘unknown’ becomes filled up with vast amounts of information – often linked to pop culture and consumerism. One can also look at Anita, Simon, Johan, Ulla, or any other of my respondents who expressed that they wanted to ‘learn’ from one another, as individuals who are dependent on dialogue as well as experiences with others in order to form a concrete identity of themselves. Theoretically, one can also approach the case of identity building as the decline of the true self-dialogue. As Kaufman states, the ‘democratic individual’ of today does not search for truth, he/she chooses truth from global stimuli.³⁵ The reflexivity that Giddens writes about has the potential to no longer be based on the “true self dialogue,” but on outside forces. Yet, Giddens warns that that reflexivity of the self broadens the opportunity and potential catastrophe in equal measure.³⁶ We can move through life keeping a balance between the true “self” and the stimuli which affect us. Or we can become the “I” which creates its identity through events experiences through mass media.³⁷

Up to this point, we established, through empirical and theoretical examples, that an individual today is inclined to be in a state of reflexivity and that relationships with others allow the individual to pursue that reflexivity which then leads of identity formation. The following section will explore the utility of relationship-building today.

Friendship History

³⁵ Kaufmann, p. 230.

³⁶ Giddens, p. 34.

³⁷ Thompson, p. 227.

As we slowly begin to unravel the individual's motivations to engage in a relationship, “personal growth” becomes an underlying theme. But, before we move on to the current state of friendship, it would be worthwhile to rewind back in history in order to paint a picture of the pre-modern idea of friendship. Possibly the father of friendship-discourse, Aristotle, divided the notion of friendship into three categories: the first category based on utility, the second on pleasure, and the third based on civic virtue or trust. Now as Aristotle suggests, the first two types of friendship are instable because they rely on a shared activity like work or leisure which, in themselves, can be fleeting³⁸. Yet the third type of friendship, full of moral virtue, devotion, and harmony, holds a level of lifetime longevity. This third type of 'civic friendship' suggests that through a friend, one would be able to go beyond one 'self,' become a better person, and thus, help improve society.' We can even go beyond that and state that a civic friendship is one which transforms the person into something which he/she wasn't before. And although Aristotle obviously did not spout out post-modern terms such as personal growth, one can say that a civic friendship is one where the actual relationship enforces inner dynamism and reflexivity. If we wish to put Aristotle's idea of civic friendship under the modern microscope, we can shift to Anthony Giddens' concept of the “pure” relationship of modernity, which can be either platonic or romantic. Giddens explains that in contrast to close personal ties in traditional contexts, the pure relationship is not anchored in external conditions of social or economic life. Here, the pure relationship is, comparable to Aristotle's 'civic relationship', free-floating³⁹, existing beyond such fleeting activities.

Relationships demand self-examination which is inherent in the pure relationship and very necessary in the reflective project of the 'self.' But as we shall soon see, the intimate tourist creates friendships which are extremely temporary yet, at the same time, equally as virtuous, honest, and built on mutual trust as Aristotle's esteemed 'civic friendship.' Giddens argues that commitment is important in the 'pure' relationship – my respondents would reject this claim. Commitment is locked in a long drawn-out period of time. Post-modern friendship is not anchored on commitment but on the moment of intensity, or intimate exchange which fosters reflexivity.

³⁸ Chambers, Deborah. 2006. *New Social Ties: contemporary connections in a fragmented society*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan. p. 15.

³⁹ Giddens, Anthony. 1991., p. 89.

Bensman and Lilienfeld have stressed the growing concern to achieve intimacy in modern societies, stating that 'the demand for intimacy persists to the point where it is virtually compulsive.' They explain this situation in terms of the alienating effects of the development of large, impersonal organizations in the modern world. Much of social life becomes run along impersonal lines... A flight into intimacy is an attempt to secure a meaningful life in familiar environments that have not been incorporated into these larger systems. ⁴⁰ Thus, we can imagine that intimacy was a key element of friendship throughout history, it existed from Aristotle's civic friendship to the 'pure' relationship. Yet, what has now changed is that the uniqueness of this intimacy, this intensity between two individuals, is declining. Our mobility and modern technologies enable us to become intimate with others at a larger scale – that is, if we so choose. What makes us want to choose becoming close and intimate with many is this search for personal growth and self-reflexivity that I had previously mentioned. Why not stay with one or two friends and revel in their intimacies? The answer lies not only in the decline of personal communities, as Bensman and Lilienfeld suggest. Intimacy and deep, personal exchange between two individuals can be just that – an exchange – one which benefits both parties in the most positive way. These exchanges thus enable sought-after experiences of intensity, like in Anita's case, but, moreover, the new friendships allow the individual to maximize the amount of 'personal growth' they may achieve in their lifetime – a factor which is increasingly becoming a priority in the postmodern environment and something which shall be further discussed.

Friends: the new utility

"I like new people," explains Anita. "What can I learn from them? What can they learn from me? I really feel that I need all that stimuli, I need the new people, new people are interesting... if I feel that it's not working in my group at the time, I ask like 'OK, which one of these people are really the prime people.'" Here, Anita expressed two key elements of the new form of friendship which will help us understand the the underlying argument in the rest of this chapter: meeting new people teaches her something, and, moreover, if she feels she can not learn from these new people, she shows no remorse in 'moving on' and finding someone who will, in fact, meet her needs. While this approach may seem harsh, cold, and incredibly

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Joseph Bensman and Robert Lilienfeld, *Between Public and private* (New York: Free Press, 1979), p. 94.

utilitarian, it is not uncommon and I hope the following analysis will shine light on this reality as more of a positive progress in world of friendship. While intimacy is something that binds friendships, my research shows that it is the search for personal progress and self-reflexivity which fuels that search for intimacy, and the abandonment of local ties, in the first place. Moreover, the quantity of experiences directly affects the amount of personal growth.

As Simon stated, “You are improving yourself to a certain extent. Had you not had that conversation with that person or created that experience you probably would not have jumped into that theory and put it into your life... so you are increasing the variety and diversity of experiences and therefore you're getting all these different perspectives and from that you're kind of boiling them down into your own perspective, your own way of looking at life.” This sense of “gaining different perspectives” in order to place the other's thoughts into your own self-project is a concept which goes back to my discussion regarding the value in narratives and stories which emerge within dialogue. This discourse between dyads allows for identity-formation, as we had previously outline, as well as mutual learning.

Now that we have established that this is important, we can go further in defining *who* finds this important. In no way do I care to suggest that this new mobile friendship is a universal shift in friendship-building. Today, certain individuals include, within their life trajectory, a sense of Utopian idealism and conquer-the-world ideology which transfers itself through to the seemingly utilitarian approach to the friendships they make.

Self-Progress and Utopia

Simon, much like many of my respondents, also has a save-the-world attitude, which Giddens terms positive utopianism,⁴¹ and this drive for positive utopian ideas also forces the individual to search out other contacts who share a similar outlook. My ethnographic interviews and participatory observation conducted over the span of two years⁴² found that there is a relative homogeneity in the Couchsurfer's personal philosophy and approach to life, sharing this Giddensian utopianism, which I came to recognize through my empirical research. In an online survey,⁴³ 90% of all users are “open to new relationships,” 71 % said

⁴¹ Giddens, 1992.

⁴² Research included hosting and “surfing” with members of the network, as well as living among a group of 10-20 Couchsurfers for two months in Montreal, July-August, 2006.

⁴³ Couchsurfing Friendships, survey designed by Paula Bialski using SPS Surveyor, August 2004. Based on 2659 responses. See methodology section for further details.

they “can become friends with certain people instantly.” Moreover, 66% responded “yes” to the statement “I don’t mind sharing my inner thoughts with people I find interesting” (29% answered “sometimes”). While these are strictly percentages, they help show the open, outgoing personality type of Couchsurfers themselves – a personality which values a multitude of friendships and intense, outgoing dialogue. It was through my direct interviews and my participatory observation in fact, that I began to get a sense that this type of tourist is first of all, reflexive, and secondly, views life as a utopian project in which he/she is the designer. Simon explained: “I am constantly trying to find some sort of meaning, some sort of direction in life, a reason to be. And I don't take that job very lightly. I want to be effective, I want to change the world.” Nanami, another 27-year-old female Couchsurfer from Okinawa explained that her motivations to travel are “Meeting people...and those people help you expand your paradigm, and I don’t think this journey will end, because the paradigm is like the universe, when you try to get to the end of it it keeps expanding...we are heading towards a greater goal which is to spread awareness and experiences and create greater connections between people.” Nanami, as well as Simon, both have a sense that more contacts and more information can offer positive benefits in the grand scheme of the evolution of an individual or personal “paradigm.” Most of my respondents – Giddens' model of 'the utopian idealists,' believe that more than ever, the individual has the opportunity to love more people, to learn more, to see and experience new things – hopefully generating some sense of evolution and benefit.

But this inner sense to save the world is understood greatly through dialogue with another person. A 28-year-old female from New Zealand wrote that “from meeting with others we will ultimately learn more about the world and ourselves, and we can help make the world a better place, while the world helps make us better people.” Others were more specific, like this 43-year-old American male, who stated that “...Due to my experiences as an AFS (American Field Service) Exchange student when I was 17, I learned the value of promoting peace between different people by getting to know them and their cultures and sharing mine with them. If more and more people did this, it would help promote better understanding in the world and maybe reduce some of the conflicts we see raging around the world. Couchsurfing is another way of promoting that same philosophy.” Often, peace-building and cross-cultural understanding is another motive to create new friendships. Simon explained that his immediate goal is figuring out “what [he] wants to do, what [his] talent is, and how

that can lend itself best on this earth.” Simon was also explicit in stating that he feels influenced by outer forces, and thus, relationships can and must be utilized in order to exchange such experiences, further promoting the utopian project. But it is my observation that the intimate tourist can also place too much emphasis on the 'reflexive' and not enough on the 'self' in the process of 'self-reflexivity,' transforming the whole procedure of friendship-building into a therapeutic mess of consumerist proportions. This is an example of how the mobile form of friendship building can have no limits, and here the tourist begins to consume the 'other' without sitting aside to focus on 'the self.'⁴⁴

Conversation: Getting Closer Faster

The previous sections aimed to sketch out an outline of the changing definition of friendship today as it relates to the inner motivations of an individual. In a bit of a roundabout way, we established that the individual is in a state of reflexivity, questioning their actions and those around them. This questioning is a process which falls under the general self-project of lifelong 'personal growth,' -- a commitment which is part of a Utopian ideal to better society (or even, the world) through bettering oneself. In order to achieve personal growth, the individual therefore embarks on a quest of emotional intensity and verbal intimacy by engaging in conversations with a multitude of like-minded individuals beyond one's local boundaries. There is a maximization of these intimate contacts, where a relationship of mutual learning is attempted with as many people as possible. The fact that the post-modern individual seeks to maximize his/her contacts directly means that intimacy does not always have to be accompanied by long lasting commitment. This next section will explore the idea of a conversation, how it leads to intimacy, and how the individual gains from that sense of intimacy. This process is defined in this work as a dyadic process of familiarization which is established through conversation, and will hopefully act as a worthwhile conclusion to this chapter.

The fact that Couchsurfers actually like talking to people is something that should not be overlooked. As Michael stated, “One of my favorite things is to have a conversation with someone new. Especially a protracted one that comes on a personal level, that explores things that I might not have thought about. Whenever it reaches to you. That's one of the things that

⁴⁴ For additional responses regarding 'personal growth,' as it relates to inter-human connection, see Appendix.

I love the most. That's one of the reasons I like this service so much.... I love talking to people forever and ever.” The best narrative example of this process can be given from my participatory observations during my stay at the “Couchsurfing Collective” – which was, as was explained earlier, a gathering house in Montreal where Couchsurfers lived for 3 months during the summer of 2006. Here, Couchsurfers often reminded *me* of our interview time. It was soon noted that their eagerness to talk about themselves (some for over 1.5 hours) was a common occurrence and only affirmed my hypothesis mentioned above of the need for “self-purging.” But more specifically, I also found that my “house mates” treated our interview like “private time” or “one-on-one time” they were longing for. Some of my subjects actually told me, “I’m so glad we had this time to talk, because I feel like I haven’t had a chance to get to know you” (ironically, they were the ones talking). But in stating that, they upgraded our interview into a “conversation,” or a “deep and meaningful connection” they were used to having with other members of the Collective house and their past Couchsurfing hosts/guests. After that discussion, they felt they “got closer to me,” which really made the interview, in their eyes, more beneficial to them than to me. After my interview I was not “the interviewer” but “the person who I connected with.” But why did they feel this sense of “closeness”? As my observations led me to believe, intimacy is shared when both individuals engage in a trusting dialogue, such as the discussions I experienced at the Collective. Derek Layder perhaps best described the actual elements which are important for intimacy:

“Intimacy has to be created through the efforts and 'negotiated' agreements of those involved. To be intimate, people have to 'open up' emotionally and be vulnerable to each other, and this requires trust. However, trust is only possible when it is accompanied by sincerity; only then do we feel safe enough to confide in each other. Trust of this kind may be formed in but a few hours of meeting someone for the first time, or it may require months (or longer) to develop. However long it takes, a willingness to trust each other 'emerges' out of the communication between those involved. They have to persuade each other by conversation, argument, behaviour, expressed feelings, and attitudes that they are indeed trustworthy. In other words, intimacy has to be earned and achieved through interpersonal contact over time... Trust and vulnerability, then, are preludes to intimacy.⁴⁵

Yet what is worth adding here is that while intimacy is gained through a certain time trajectory, the actual length of time is not important in an exchange within a mobile relationship. Although our discussion lasted a very short time (on average, around 50 minutes

⁴⁵ Layder, Derek. 2004., [online]. *Emotion in Social Life: The Lost Heart of Society*: SAGE Publications.

each), the amount of self-purging, emotion, and mutual trust which went into that conversation locked the two of us into an intimate relationship. Moreover, that relationship extended itself in time. As I can discern from my interviews and observation, these moments of verbal intimacy, however brief, are accompanied by a collective conscious memory of that given event by one or both parties, cementing that moment, and that relationship, in time. Ostensibly, that moment is locked within the collective memory because it was based on either one, or both party's moment of truthfulness. Colloquially called "opening oneself up," - anyone who has done it (presumably, most of us at one point or another) knows that this process in fact entails a high amount of risk. Usually, one opens oneself up to another at a time when he/she feels the other party to be trustworthy, or when he/she wants to gain the other person's trust. This process is almost magical, quite personal, and extremely special, which deems it also memorable. Perhaps calling all my respondents my actual friends may be stretching the truth, I would consider some of them my friends, many of them would consider me a friend, and I remember all discussions as moments of verbal intimacy. My two months at the Collective, which I personally viewed as a research zone and some kind of simulation of an adult-summer camp, was full of heart-to-hearts and "opening oneself up," to other members of the Collective. And the more emotional and intensive the exchange, the stronger that moment is now embedded within my memory. Linking this notion back to the relationships based on moments of verbal intimacies, the hospitality networker does not view the time of a relationship as factor of the depth of the relationship, yet knows that it is in fact what one does with that time spent together that matters.

The Dyadic Process of Familiarization

A Couchsurfer stays with a host usually between two days and a week.⁴⁶ And thus, having only a limited amount of time, the traveler as well as the host will maximize this time. The regular process of "getting to know" one another is quite different and extremely condensed compared to our standard friendship process. Luhmann discussed the process of familiarization stating that there are certain factors which imprint the other individual in our mind. This will be mapped out by both showing how the process of familiarization works and how it differs in the context of the hospitality networker, where both time and norms usually

⁴⁶

Based on "Friendship dyad Data Set." received from Couchsurfing.com. January, 2007.

found within friendship shift due to various factors which shall be discussed. Karen, a 27-year-old Australian's first Couchsurfing visit was to a paramedic in his late 30s who lived in Dublin. Karen told me she was "extremely nervous" before meeting him, but the first night she stayed at his house, they had a conversation until two in the morning. When asked what they talked about, she explained: "For him it was the death of his wife, how he felt about his wife. Being diagnosed with polycystic kidneys. Kids... relationships with his siblings. Travel stories. What his disappointments in life were. What he likes about life. What he liked about northern Ireland. Some really interesting stories he'd seen because he'd been an ambulance driver during the troubles. Really interesting stories about um.. shootings and things like that. He was totally open to any question I'd ask him." And Karen said that she "had the same with just about every Couchsurfer." This level of candidness and process of familiarization will be discussed in this section.

Friendship in the Couchsurfing context usually can be broken down into three stages. The following stages will outline a shift in both the process of familiarization, and the standard idea of of friendship. This outline is placed under the Couchsurfing context, yet should be read as an occurrence not strictly embedded in this process alone. From the outset, these stages are not too different from the traditional way of creating friendship, yet we must notice that the time in which this all happens is shorter, giving this friendship a completely different quality to it. Upon explaining these stages, a subsequent section will explain the reason for this shift in familiarization which will be linked to agency and motivation of the individual.

First, the *Introduction stage*, where the surfer and host meet in a public place or simply at the front door of the host's home, embrace and/or shake hands. Here, the surfer enters the private space of the host's home, the host shows the surfer their bed/floor space/mattress/etc., gives him/her a tour of the house, and then they sit down to dinner or leave the house altogether and start 'touring.' This is where the initial verbal exchange is initiated, as the individuals take turns giving a sort of self-monologue describing their biographical sketch. This stage can contain a true level of verbal intimacy if one or both individuals feel like delving deeper into a biographical discussion, although it usually takes the individuals to the second stage of the friendship building to get more into this kind of level of intimacy. After initial small-talk, the first common biographical question observed is centered

around place, such as “what brings you to Warsaw?” Or the guest can ask “how long have you been living here?” Discussing physical place within this introductory dialogue is so common for various reasons. Mainly, discussing space is a safe subject for both the asking and receiving party. Safe, because it is a common element for both parties. Notice that at this stage, both parties have very little in common, other than perhaps their age range or gender. The one common element during this stage of introduction is the space. Both the host and guest are, presumably, situated in the same apartment, in the same city. Yet, while the guest is a traveler in motion, just passing through the given location, and the host is a permanent resident, they can find enough difference in their commonality to start a potentially smooth and insightful discussion, and one which can be interesting for both parties. This initial process of familiarization thus involves low risk, and is engaged upon due to the fact that it is based on a common subject among the two strangers.

The second stage, the *The Insight stage*, is the time in which one or both parties provide some insight into their own life, the lives of others around them, their personal history, their experiences, their problems, or their failures. The one common theme in this stage is the presence of insight, which in turn raises the level of intensity of a conversation, thus raising the intimacy of the exchange. The insight stage can, but does not have to, include an exhibition of emotions, but it always includes a sense of trust between one or both parties. Eye contact and close, personal, spacial proximity (which will be discussed more in the chapter on Intimacy Space) is present. This process can last anywhere between an hour and several days, depending on how long the individual surfer stays with the host. It is worth noting, that it is the Insight stage which produces the close personal connection which individuals such as Anita (who craved intensity), Simon (who craved personal growth), longed for. It is within the Insight stage that they learn, and their realities become intensified. Michael, the life-traveler who we met earlier, stated that on the “number of occasions” in which his hosts told him their life story, he could tell that doing so was “exceptionally personal to them,” and that they're “very involved in it.” This discussion, to Michael is for him, “part of what makes this whole experience seem so special. These things which come across as very emotional and very personal to the other person, just get given out as these gifts to the stranger that came by.”

The third stage, termed here the *Embedding Stage* in where the surfer has to leave to his/her next destination and both parties are faced with the decision of whether or not to

keep, or embed, this new friend into his/her span of friends. This decision is based on the intensity of exchange during the Insight stage, and the amount of intimacy and insight experienced by both parties. Michael described many of his conversations as “special” or as a “gift.” And it is my argument that the bigger the “gift” is, meaning the more the host/guest opened up to the other, the more likely the person will be embedded within their memory. This process of embedding is not at all physical – it is not about scribbling a name down in an address book, or adding an email address to one's email account. The process of embedding a friend is a decision which is completely new, and is a contract with oneself which states “Yes, I will keep in contact with this person on a regular basis.” According to my online survey, Couchsurfers keep in touch with 50% of their hosts/surfers. While I admit that “keeping in touch” and “regular basis” are fairly unspecified concepts, this can give a general outline as to how often one chooses to embed or not embed a new contact.

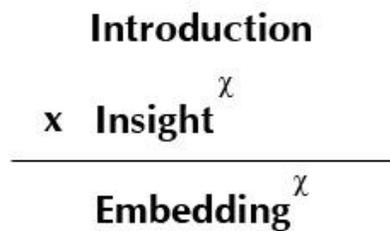


FIGURE A

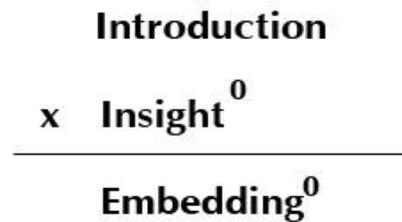


FIGURE B

The previous two diagrams are an attempt to simply map out the significance of the insight stage on the embedding stage within a dyadic process of familiarization. Within this process, the introduction stage must occur in some shape or form but does not have any value for the embedding stage. It is the insight stage which gives all value for the embedding stage. Thus, the embedding stage is only as great as the value of the insight – when there is no insight (Figure B) the receiver has no value to embed. Moreover, the greater the insight, the greater the embedding value.

The following section begs for an analysis of the issue of longevity towards that

intimacy, and just how, in fact, longevity has become secondary. Here, we will break this down into two factors which relate to the changing view of the duration of a relationship. Firstly, this section will show the way in which the hospitality exchange structure limits the time spent between surfer/host, therefore intensifying the exchange. Additionally, it will attempt to show how a lack of commitment can be more valuable in this process of exchange, as it provides the 'growth' that the individual so strongly seeks out.

Insight Stage: Meeting and Learning?

The fact that length of time spent with an individual is one of the defining factors of friendship is something which is slowly changing. Friendship today is not reliant on the duration of contact between two people, but on the level of intimacy achieved. Moreover, as a mobile, Intimate Tourist, one can achieve a level of intimacy during a very short period of time. In order to draw some conclusions, we can see that, contrary to the traditional view of friendship, meeting somebody new is less about pleasure and more about learning and personal development. Certain individuals focused on learning and 'personal growth,' and as was analyzed in the previous chapter, mobility allows the individual to fulfill their drive for personal growth, making learning and self-improvement a motivation to travel. But this chapter dealt with the fact that not only do individuals travel to achieve "growth," this growth, and identity-building is achieved through intimate dialogue with another individual. In the same survey question analyzed in the previous chapter,⁴⁷ those who responded that their main motivation to travel was to "meet people," then were directed to a follow-up question asking "what do you gain when meeting somebody new." Interestingly enough, the majority of the 624 responses linked meeting somebody with some sort of personal growth or sense of learning. While a mere 26 of these responses included the word "fun" in them, only two out of the 26 just stated "having fun" as their answer. The large majority included words like "learn" or "insight." Thus, meeting somebody new is for this group something very much interlinked with learning or discovery.

This insight stage is where we really experience the shift from the classical view of friendship to this new, rapid process of friendship-building. While traditional close friendship is based on various degrees of candid dialogue which span the duration of the friendship

⁴⁷ Question: "What is your primary motivation to travel?"

trajectory, the level of trust and intimate dialogue within the hospitality exchange is intensified. The insight stage is sped up because of the lack of common “trivial” subjects to discuss. Points of reference usually found in traditional friend conversations would include dialogue which is ingrained within local events, common friends, politics, and gossip. In a hospitality exchange dyad, conversation is emotional because it is these emotions which become the language that the two have in common. Common human emotions which can be relayed through narratives, such as memories of pain, love, fear, or loss, are all common subjects among individuals, independent of their culture of origin. Ashley explained that “one of the most intimate things that you can do with someone is tell somebody a story. So if you want to be closer with people, if you want to grow from them, get a story.” Here, Ashley is linking intimacy with a story, and something definable as *insight*. Another reason for this rapidity of intimacy is the fact that the relationship is not locked in a strict location, and therefore, is fleeting. Ulla, my Finnish respondent, stated that “Of course the process has to be quicker because they’re only staying for a while so it’s more intense, deeper than it would be when meeting random strangers on the street... But with Couchsurfers it would be more intense... it’s just because you only know that they’re going to be gone soon. When I talk to people I do not wish to discuss the superficial things like ‘what went on in the football game’ or ‘which model has the biggest boobs,’ so with Couchsurfer there’s an excuse to avoid all that stuff because they’re only there for a short time. So you get closer faster.”

What we're starting to see here is a new friendship-making pattern, one in which contacts have a use or purpose. This utilitarian approach to friendship is quite openly expressed in my survey responses, where each new contact is, in fact, a means to an end (see Appendix). While this may seem cold or harsh, the utility takes on an existential, if not slightly spiritual approach, one in which friendship often is expressed in personal need to gain something beyond a practical exchange. Here, exchange is saturated in personal emotions, where personal insights and narratives become the goods being exchanged, and the “gain” is more in the form of learning and existential awakening than in the form of status or monetary wealth. Moreover, some of my respondents even went beyond the basic idea of knowledge or insight exchange, into an idea that new friendships can, in fact, save the world.

Chapter **4** **Personal Space: Interaction, Meaning, and Control**

This chapter will deal with two aspects of the hospitality mechanism which has inevitably been an underlying question during the entirety of our discourse: how space affects our levels of intimacy. From the outset, this thesis challenged the idea of instant intimacy and what factors are making it happen. The previous chapters on mobility and friendship have presented two dependent variables for instant-intimacy – the state of being mobile, and new friendship motivations which are based on the individual's needs for 'personal growth,' learning, and intensity of experience. Yet, within this discourse, something still is missing. When searching for the reason for the intensification of verbal intimacy within the hospitality exchange, one must take into account the fact that it is *spacial intimacy* (specifically, one's private home, perhaps the most intimate of all spaces) which is the currency being exchanged in this network.

This chapter reaches for answers regarding the main question of the meaning of space within our urban environment and how it influences our levels of intimacy – why do we regard “the private” as intimate and de-sacralize “the public.” In answering this question, this

section will first explore the idea of space – both as an ontological and cultural construct. This chapter will also explore theoretical ideas of space-as-actor, using some ideas of Actor Network Theory (ANT)⁴⁸ and Harrison C. White, which will help reveal yet another factor in answering why instant-intimacy is being created.

Individuals are not only creating intimate ties based on factors discussed within the two previous chapters: the fact that contacts are made outside of one's own locality (lacking any points of reference, working on a 'mobile' sense of time), and are based on choice and common motivations (personal growth, intensity, meaningfulness). Space, and physical proximity within that space are also factors which lead to intimacy, in this context and beyond. The hospitality exchange network offers a quite out-of-the-ordinary opportunity of entering the private space of a complete stranger. This extreme situation provides an excellent ground to analyze the way space and proximity influence the individual. This physical closeness, while at the same time complete lack of emotional or intimate closeness, will have psychological repercussions on the individuals involved. Let us start with the idea of space, simply because a living room, a bedroom, a home, is entrenched in meaning and its meaning has psychological implications which go beyond the implications of physical closeness; which is another issue in itself.

Michael, one of my respondents, told me that “part of this [instant sense of intimacy] has to do with the environment fostered by staying with someone.” For him, this process is kind of an “equalization process” that people go through. “You have this intimate relationship where you’re sharing a physical space with someone that’s very personal to you and so to equalize this physical intimacy you develop this emotional intimacy and that kind of makes people more comfortable. Because as soon as they get really close and really personal with someone they don’t seem to feel that strange about how physically intimate the relationship is.”

Throughout my empirical observations, I have also noticed Michael’s theory in action. As strangers become physically close, or are confined to a set area, the physical closeness is off-balance with the emotional closeness or intimacy level one has with that stranger, and it becomes simply natural to try and ‘catch up’ with the physical intimacy and start talking about

⁴⁸ For the past ten years, ANT theorists like Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law, began to revise the idea of ANT in order to fit processes of mobility. Despite the fact that ANT as it once was “is dead” (see Latour's speech, Lancaster 1997), I will continue to use the term ANT as a general discourse regarding space and the actors within it.

oneself in order to avoid the feeling of awkwardness. While Michal could be partially right, the host and guest are not always that physically close. The space shared can be a large apartment, a family home, or a studio space. Any of these private spaces may provide more distance than a regular hostel, where dozens of people live in the same room. So why is intimacy happening? In order to answer that question, we must approach the problem by first analyzing the meaning of space itself and the behaviors attached to given spaces. Stating that proximity alone is causing emotional closeness is simply doing half of the theoretical work.

To begin, let's focus on space within our post-modern environment, how we move through that space, and how that space can foster both physical and emotional closeness. In order to explore the way space changes our relationship potential, we must first accept the fact that inter-human relationships are influenced by the time spent within public and private space.⁴⁹ Mike Featherstone writes a great deal about space and its effect on the human psyche. In *Undoing Culture*, he mentions that people make "space" into a "place" through inter-personal bonds.⁵⁰ Our context of *who we are* is greatly influenced by *where we are* and who we are interacting with at the time. It goes without saying that the space we inhabit has the ability to influence individuals on a great scale, and helps produce various levels of emotion. For example, urban life has been linked to emotional fluctuations such as increased anxiety or fear among the individual. Deborah Lupton states that the perceptions of place and space that individuals gather from their senses – the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and feel of the environment – have a potentially powerful role in the production of emotion.⁵¹

The two underlying theoretical think-points critical in this chapter are that: a) an individual constructs certain views of their social world, and in doing so construct their world itself,⁵² and here, we accept that the *meaning* of certain space is something socially constructed; b) a space, once entrenched with meaning, is a certain actor which plays a certain role for other actors (people) and has power over other spaces. Developing these two theoretical points will place the empirical evidence (survey data, large network data, and interview responses) regarding the host-guest exchange in a clear context.

⁴⁹ Here, the space of urban life can be defined as the general atmosphere of individuals living together in a one set physical environment.

⁵⁰ Mike Featherstone, p. 115.

⁵¹ Deborah Lupton, p. 152.

⁵² Pierre Bourdieu p. 727

Spaces of Meaning

So, let us embark on an analysis of space itself. Take the example of an ordinary common space quite familiar for anyone who has ever lived in a city. Let's start with a park, one with trees, park benches, flowers, perhaps a pond. Essentially speaking, a park is just made up of objects – either natural or man made. But an individual gives a park meaning and purpose, qualifying this space. We can go further along with how Harrison C. White understands space, as something of an actor, stating first that our social space “must be mixed up with meanings.”⁵³ For White, space is a type of controlled identity – a social construction which in itself has meaning, and individuals give it meaning in order to have some sort of control of a situation.

This should be taken into consideration within this discourse, acknowledging that, when defining private spaces as “intimate spaces,” these spaces only become intimate because they are entrenched in some sort of socially-constructed meaning. To specify, take into consideration an example of a park bench. A park bench is an intimate space – despite being quite public – because, not only does it allow two individuals to focus on face-to-face interaction, it is also entrenched in intimate narrative, something what White would call an identity. That bench is not just a wooden construct, it is, in our society, based on a collective history, on pop culture iconography, a place for lovers, for old friends, a place where homeless people sleep. A bench almost becomes human as it is soaked in meaning.

This example of the bench helps one see now how an interaction on that bench can shift from being simply an interaction, to an interaction on an object of meaning, which in turn, brings meaning to a conversation. This triad of meaning is partially what ANT theorists, as well as White (who is not directly linked to ANT discourse) define as a system of interaction. White calls this a “network of meaning,” and LaTour, perhaps the father of ANT, stated in his revision of ANT that it is not a theory of the social, but a theory of a space in which the social has become a certain type of circulation.⁵⁴ John Law, another creator of ANT, stated that entities take their form and acquire their attributes as a result of their relations with other entities. Here, space is looked at in terms of having it's own agency rather than being a setting for agency and action to take place.

⁵³ White, Harrison. 1992. *Identity and Control: A Structural Theory of Social Action*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. p. 338.

⁵⁴ LaTour, p. 3

ANT would state that it is the bench itself which causes an interaction to be intimate; thus, if the interaction did not take place on this bench, the dialogue would have been less intimate. Others would state that individuals choose to sit on the park bench (rather than on a street bench) in order to create an intimate setting, and it is the individual's agency and purpose which overrides that of setting. Thus, if an individual hoped to break up with their partner (involving intimate dialogue), they could just as well do it on a train station bench. But in accepting both ANT and White's argument here, we understand that the park bench just has its own socially-constructed meaning (it's romantic, intimate, etc.), and hence, appropriate for such a break-up. It is not the intention of this chapter to qualify one argument over another. Rather, the purpose here is to extract this outlook of actor networks in order to analyze the individual's experience through the hospitality exchange, the home-guest-host network, in which the house or home is one of the key triadic elements which effects action.

Space in historical context

The human geographer Yi-Fun Tuan calls the emotional relationship with places or landscapes *topophilia*, or 'the affective bond between people and place or setting.'⁵⁵ Space and place are central features of the experience of 'being-in-the-world' as an embodied subject, for embodiment is always experienced through spatial dimension. Possibly the best theoretical investigation regarding the emotional meaning of a home was presented by Deborah Lupton, who stated that "in contemporary western societies, the concept of 'the home' has particular resonances for the 'authentic' emotional self.⁵⁶ The perceptions of place and space that individuals gather from their senses – the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and feel of the environment – have a potentially powerful role in the production of emotion. So just as people are able to shape aspects of their physical environment, so does the environment shape subjectivity.⁵⁷

Turning to the idea of our socially-constructed meaning of space, a good example can be taken from what Richard Sennett once explained in a radio interview: that Christians took over cities whose form was really not of their own invention, but they re-imagined what these forms of Roman public life could be like in ways that stayed with us today, meaning that the

⁵⁵ Tuan, Yi-Fu. 1974. *Topophilia: a study of environmental perception, attitudes, and values*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, p. 4.

⁵⁶ Lupton, p. 156.

⁵⁷ Lupton, p. 152.

inner part of the city, its recesses, its interiors become more important than their exteriors. Thus, historically, meaning or importance is placed on the exteriors rather than interiors, and this is something culturally ingrained in our western society. "The surfaces of cities literally have a substantiality and a value in ways that are very different to the ways that cities in India, for instance, developed where the outside is a continuum with the inside. Where there's value in the streets. For us that's always been a struggle. The street is a space for domination, struggle, but not a space in which people find themselves. Real value is something hidden inside a building. That the real meanings of things are unsealable in everyday life."⁵⁸

While Sennett historically shows the way society values space, he doesn't explain here exactly why this 'real value' is hidden inside a building or what exactly these 'real values' are made of. Lupton states that the progressive divide following industrialization between what has been represented as the aggressive, impersonal world of paid labour or the 'public' sphere, and the 'private' domain of the family and intimate relationships, the home has become portrayed as a place of security, control over one's environment, warmth, comfort, creativity, and freedom.⁵⁹ Delving into Goffman, or simple empirical observation of our everyday life, one can see that there is also strong contrasting symbolism between the home-as-emotionally-authentic and the outside-as-act-of-authenticity. Sennett comments that modern public life is a matter of formal obligation that seems non-authentic to us, while private life is the realm in which we attempt to behave in an authentic manner, to be 'true' to ourselves.⁶⁰ Moreover, Lupton suggests that family relationships and the site of the home are commonly represented as providing comfort and security for family members, allowing them a safe place to retreat from the dangers of the outside world. Consequently, the home is entrenched socio-historically in emotional meaning of authenticity, privacy, and intimacy.

Our relationship to space

Entering a home of a Couchsurfer as a guest, I often felt as if I was entering the person, where a space became almost human. Sara, my 30-something host in Leipzig, lived with her 7-year-old son on the top floor of a characteristic pre-war apartment row-house. The apartment

⁵⁸ Sennett, Richard. January 25, 2007. "Flesh and Stone: The Sociology of Richard Sennett." Pp. 57:00:00, edited by CBC Radio Canada Ideas Podcast. Canada: CBC Radio Canada.

⁵⁹ Lupton, Deborah. 1998. *The Emotional Self*. London: Sage., p. 152.

⁶⁰ Sennett, Richard. 2003. *The Fall of Public Man*. New York: Penguin, p. 7.

had two quite large cluttered rooms, with an even-more-cluttered kitchen. Objects, photographs, toys, or children's paintings were hung or strewn everywhere. It was a truly lived-in apartment: atmospheric and completely personalized to fit the characters of both Sara and her son. In our discussion, she stated that “my private sphere has all sorts of emotions attached to it. And when I share that space with someone, it just feels more natural to be emotional and honest, and have an honest discussion. Outside, we have small talk. And small talk is not me, it's not about me. It's about nothing. But these discussions are anonymous because the surroundings, too, are anonymous.”

Given the circumstances, neither I nor Sara had a lot of time to spend with one another. But the time we did spend together, which, for my three-day stay, amounted to about one hour, was in fact deeply candid. Just as ANT suggests, this apartment was now a space of meaning, an actor which allowed me to behave in a certain way, and having a close, intimate discussion with a relative stranger made me in no way feel awkward because I was already intimately acquainted with an actor (her apartment) who she was intimately acquainted with, quite similarly to a triadic system of trust, where I would feel closer to a friend-of-a-friend than with a complete stranger. In Sara's case, the apartment was that friend-of-a-friend whom I had already met.

In our moments together, Sara discussed her current romantic relationship, which was with a man she hosted through the Couchsurfing service (the first and only person she hosted prior to myself). She stated that their initial connection did not strictly stem from their level of compatibility, but from the opportunity to spend so much time together in her intimate space, which, she says, revealed so much about her as a person. “He got to see everything about me in just a few days, he lived here and we spent hours talking... but it was the atmosphere in which we were talking which made us so close. He saw all my things, he could look at them, touch them. Seeing him in this environment really created that love between us.” She also stated that if they had met elsewhere, despite being so compatible, she did not see the connection between them as being as strong as their meeting at her home.

While this may not ring true for all cases on Couchsurfing, it states something about the idea of spatial value attachment and the way it can reproduce certain meaning. It is quite common for those individuals who place high value on their private space to have similar experiences as Sara – in valuing one's home, that home becomes a type of actor which creates a setting for certain valuable exchanges to take place (such as a conversation between

strangers). The familiarization process which was discussed in the previous chapter, once placed in a space of meaning, eases the way for the insight stage to take place. Moreover, I left that space with just as strong of an image of Sara, as I did of the actual physical rooms and all the colorful clutter within it. Space, as an actor, thus plays a role within our “network of meaning.”

Spaces of Control

While in Sara's case, space acted as a positive catalyst, it can often work the other way around, and the hospitality exchange system is no exception. One of the most common questions non-hospitality networkers ask me is “Is this safe? I mean, strangers coming into your private home?” We established that the private sphere is a sacred sphere, and worth adding is that this sacred sphere is owned by the person inhabiting that sphere. The very idea of “private property” denotes that the owner has control of this property and can allow or forbid certain things to happen within that private property. Here, we return to White's theory of control. Once one loses control of actors (things, spaces) we normally have control of, unease, and a lack of physical and ontological safety can engulf the individual. Oliver, a young Canadian traveler in his early 20s, described a situation to me where his host, a Turkish woman, agreed to host him in Istanbul. Having mixed up Oliver's online profile with a profile of a Turkish user, Oliver said “she thought I was Turkish, and thought I was lying to her about being from Canada. And I showed her my passport, and I don't sound very Turkish. But in the end she kicked me out at 11pm at night in a dangerous neighborhood in Istanbul...” Despite being a bit confused, Oliver stated that he doesn't “think she was a bad person but she just couldn't handle this idea of having a stranger in her house. For her it was just a really big thing.”

While this is an extreme case, it shows a situation in which introducing strangers, the unfamiliar, into one's private space can cause unease to those who normally have a lot of control over that space. A stranger like Oliver can represent a loss of control for an individual-in-control like the Turkish host, because she could not control or predict his actions due to lack of information about him, personal history, or sense of familiarity. If this host had a lot of personal history or information, Oliver would be rendered predictable, and therefore a person who would be safe and controllable in this private space.

As an individual takes ownership over private space, they also, as discussed in our

previous section, attach value to their private space – an ownership which can not be created in a public sphere such as the park. While the park bench has a certain identity, the individual can not control that space, and thus can not feel a personal unease when a third party encroaches upon that space. What also can be noted from the hospitality exchange system is that when individuals have control over certain spaces, they also feel that they have the right to place certain *expectations* on how the actors can, in fact *act* in that given space. A common expectation of a host would be for the guest to be active – which often means both physically active (eager to tour, often independently), as well as mentally active (inquisitive and open for dialogue).

In many cases, when asking respondents to relay a “bad” couchsurfing experience, common statements arose such as, “I never had really bad experiences really. Just one time my Couchsurfers just slept all day,” or “they used my apartment like a hotel,” is also a common response. In stating that their guests “slept all day,” or used their apartment “as a hotel,” of course implies that as a guest they *should have* been exploring the city or interacting with the host more as the home's resident or new-found-friend and less as a bellboy. The emotion of disappointment follows a breach of pre-established expectations, which in this case, is for the actor to behave in a certain way in this area of control. Here, the host has certain pre-established expectations of how his/her space will be used, and is disappointed when that space is wrongfully exploited.

The idea of “invading space” is also worth analyzing. In stating that an individual invaded a space, we accept that they crossed an area we normally have control over. This can explain the negative situations which happen via Couchsuring or any hospitality exchange system. Where two individuals experience a negative situation in a home (a controlled space), they may have a completely different experience in a public space which is not controlled by one of the parties involved.

Time in Meaningful Space

Establishing that intimacy between friends is usually created through a one-on-one connection between two people, face to face, eye to eye, or arguably, keyboard to keyboard, two people become connected when they devote a certain amount of time to one another. Friendship or inter-human connection is strengthened through time spent within something Giddens or Simmel would simply call privacy, we can go further by stating that this space can,

not only, be private, but it has to hold some sort of meaning for both parties involved. Giddens stated that privacy makes possible the “psychic satisfactions” that the achievement of intimacy has to offer.⁶¹ This space – the park bench, or Sara's home, is something I term as “meaningful space,” a setting which is conducive to intimate conversation or connection due to its immersion in socially-constructed meaning. This section aims to show that the more time spent within a space of meaning with one person (much like in the case of Sara and her partner), the more intimate the friendship has the potential to be. In order to do so, results from the online survey, as well as some results from a study on trust networks which was based on a large data set extracted from the Couchsurfing database, will be used. One survey question asked users to give an estimate of the number of hours spent with their host/surfer per day. Out of nearly 3000 respondents, 7% of Couchsurfers spend more than 8 hours interacting with each other per day. 10% of all users mentioned spending between 6 and 8 hours with their host/surfer, while 28% said they spent between 3 and 6 hours and 20% said they spent between 1 and 3 hours per day. Of those users who answered that they spend 6 to 8 hours a day interacting with their surfer/host, 27% say that they often become emotionally close with their surfer. Moreover, of those who spend more than 8 hours with their surfer/host 34% of them stated that they often become emotionally close with their host..⁶² So according to this data, there is a connection between the time spent with a surfer/host per day and the level of emotional closeness achieved with a surfer/host.

While these results may have a certain response bias which can occur during this type of statistical survey, the results extracted from a study on trust networks⁶³ is based on network data which avoids respondent bias. Here, the dependent variable stems from a question each user was to answer about their couchsurfing “friend” regarding how much do they trust the other person. As stated earlier, every user has to answer this question when adding a new friend link, - this question is part of the general Couchsurfing friend link system – making it unbiased data.

The user has a choice of six text-based answers which range from “I don't know this person well enough to decide” to “I would trust this person with my life” (other answers are “I

⁶¹ Giddens, p. 157.

⁶² Data collected from own survey, created August 10th, 2006, collected on November 24th, 2006.

⁶³ Bialski, P. Batorski, D. 2007. "Trust Networks: analyzing the structure and function of trust." from *INSNA SUNBELT Social Network Analysis Conference*. Corfu.

don't trust this person,” “I trust this person somewhat,” “I generally trust this person,” and “I highly trust this person.”) And although trust means something different than friendship, this data also showed a strong correlation between level of acquaintanceship and trust strength which leads us to deduce that the more someone trusts another, the more they trust one another. Here, we can see that the level of trust is dependent on the origin of the relationship. There is a drastic difference between the level of trust of the offline versus the online relationships, making space of familiarization quite an important factor (see chart 4.1).

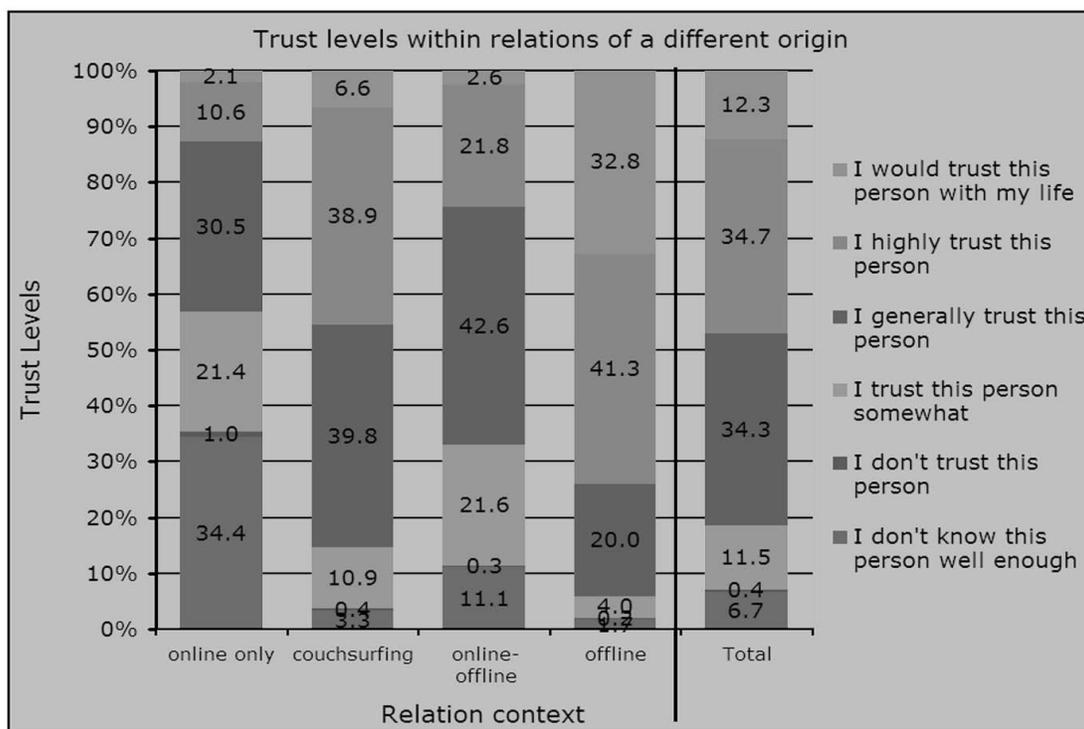


Chart 4.1

Those who hosted or surfed, meaning those who spent a certain period of time with one another within a meaningful space, are also more inclined to trust one another at a deeper level than those who had not hosted or surfed. This is particularly worth noting if we want to analyse the context of a relationship as it relates to familiarization. Additionally, the online-offline dyads are worth comparing to the Couchsurfing dyads. Both are initiated contacts online, and both then met face-to-face offline – yet one group met within a meaningful space (Couchsurfers) while the others met at a meeting, Couchsurfing event, or other type of

meeting in a public sphere (online-offline). If we notice the strength of trust within the online-offline dyads, these results show a correlation between couchsurfing and trust strength, where Couchsurfers are more likely to give a high level of trust, while dyads from the online-offline group are more likely to generally trust one another.

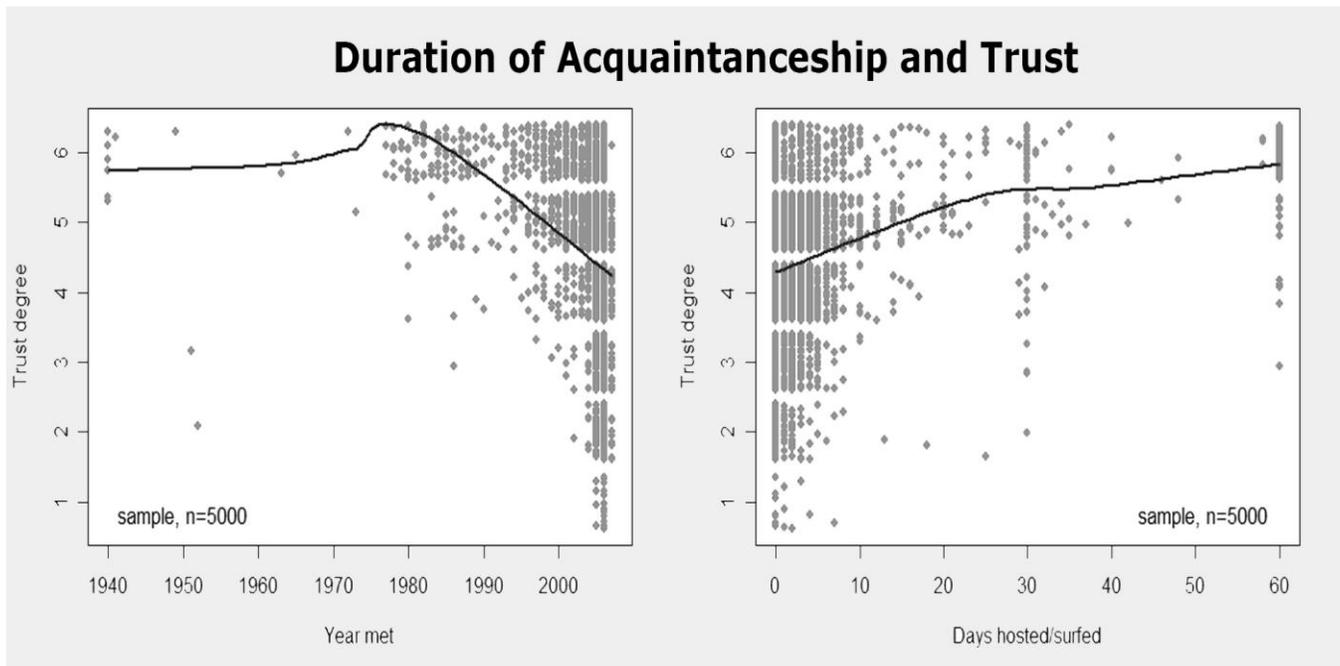


Chart 4.2

These results from the group of hosts/surfers can predictably be more of a steady, even result for our analysis of space, mainly because we know the context in which the two met, meaning, the private, intimate space of the host's home. Another significant example can be found within the “Duration of Acquaintanceship and Time” chart. The left graph shows that the longer a person knows the other, the stronger the degree of trust will be between them. This is quite obvious and can be generally empirically observed within any personal relationship. Yet what is interesting is that the more time spent hosting or visiting the stronger the degree of trust is likely to be. This second mechanism involves levels of risk, the interaction is confined to a close space, and often involves a level of (verbal) intimacy. All of this is conducive to high levels of trust.

What should not be overlooked is the idea of trust and space. Trust can relate to an idea of control and ownership which was discussed in a previous paragraph. Here, trust develops at a high level, not contingent on a long period of time (the Couchsurfer usually stays for an

average of only two days). The trustor (the host) has already allowed the guest into their controlled space which is a large risk, bringing uncertainty and loss of control. Yet as the guest “proves” they are a good person, honouring the hosts ownership and control of a space, trust between the two becomes quite strong, and this strength grows exponentially over time. Moreover, trust within this private space is reciprocated. The upper-hand, or the power, lies with the person who has control of a space, so in this case the owner of the apartment or home. Consequently, just as the host trusts the guest to act in a certain way within their controlled space, the guest trusts the host not to harm him/her in any way within the controlled space.

Simon, the entrepreneur from San Francisco explained trust as a gift, stating that the more he risks in trusting the other person, the bigger the 'gift' is, and the more thankful the trusting party will be in receiving this gift. Thus, they in turn, generate a large 'gift' of trust back to their trustor, or host, as a form of appreciation. Here, the “gift” is the actual home, or use of this “controlled space.”

The relationship between time spent within these meaningful spaces, or controlled spaces, and the levels of intimacy was the food-for-thought in this chapter. This data highlighted that the level of trust is wholly contingent on the amount of time spent between two individuals within an intimate setting. Moreover, the longer one spends within this personal space, the more likely the individual is to trust the other individual. The purpose in presenting this data was to show that strong relationships are built over a short period of time through the hospitality exchange mechanism, and that space plays a role in this level of trust, as stronger relationships are those which were created in the meaningful, intimate space of one's home.

It is easy to get lost in this narrative of the couchsurfing stories and ideology and completely forget that we're observing strangers talking to strangers. Thus, these individuals hope for certain things in meeting somebody new, and their goals are strengthened within the setting of one's home. But, as White stated, “spaces” of social action must be specified to provide the foundation and core of effective models. Just as this chapter suggested, spaces have certain meaning, and this meaning gives the space itself an identity. The individual places more value on a private space than a public space in part because they take ownership of this private space, and also because of certain socio-historical identities which were proscribed to these spaces. Additionally, ownership of a space means that this space is then

controlled by the owner themselves and that trust or mistrust can be fostered if the guest does not adhere to the host's system of control.

The hospitality exchange system allows both the individual and the sociologist to understand relationships of trust and the way space is being used to reach certain goals and experiences. These experiences within private space are thus changing the tourist memory, and upon returning home, many of my respondents remember their host and the details of the host's home, rather than the actual place they traveled to, placing the public tourist space as something secondary.

Chapter 5

Introducing the Intimate Tourist Some Conclusions

After two years of my empirical journey into the world of hospitality networks, there are many issues surrounding the hospitality exchange mechanism which were not touched upon in this thesis. This was a monograph about Intimate Tourism – the chapters (mobility, friendship, space) you just read were written as part of my MA dissertation. I had no idea when starting to write it that it would take to where I am right now. Themes of strangers, trust, gift economies, hospitality, homophily, reputation systems, networks, and many others spilled over from this thesis and inspired me to continue on this research at the Department of Sociology at the University of Lancaster in England. Now doing my doctorate, I feel that theoretically I just skimmed the surface of this issue.

There are many ways I could have approached this topic, and for various reasons decided not to. For one, I could have analyzed this network as just a subculture of the general

internet culture – analyzed usership, accessibility, and computer-mediated-communication (usually just shortened to CMC). The website of Couchsurfing could have been analyzed as any web community – its ideology, its foundation, its administrative structure, and user participation. From the beginning, I noted that there are two sides of Couchsurfing – as a utility, and an online community. This community had an ideology and slogan (“more than just a couch,” and “saving the world, one couch at a time”) and a quite loosely organized yet still hierarchical organizational structure with the founders and their immediate friends, whether intending to or not, sitting at the top of that structure.

What many Couchsurfers don't know today is that the website experienced a severe crash in June, 2004, losing the majority of its data. This happened in late-June, a few weeks after the first “Collective” members gathered in Montreal to work on the website in 2006. Probably out of panic and frustration, Casey decided to close the website down permanently – but to no avail. The day after the announcement, upon receiving over 2000 protest emails from the Couchsurfing “community,” the administrators and volunteers in Montreal dedicated five intense days of non-stop shift work in order to recover the website. There is no doubt that this community is a virtual community. And what I mean by ‘virtual’ here is not just online, but a community which exists in the minds of the users involved. From the outset of my empirical research, I noted, and then established that the most interesting elements of this system of exchange outstretch the borders of research which focuses only on computer-mediated interaction. While communication here is initiated online, the crux of the exchange happens offline – from the outset I realized that the Internet here is just a meeting agent, a third party. Here, the Internet plays the role of the friend, or sister, or aunt who gives you the number of their ex-roommate's cousin in Rome, so that you may stay with them while you travel.

Factoring this into account, the internet does not just play out its role as a sphere, as a world, as a “virtual realm.” The average user treats Couchsurfing.com less as an actual space, and more as a tool, a search engine. Therefore, studying Couchsurfing.com as an online community, or using it to observe CMC would limit my study. I accept that the internet allows these interactions to take place, and there are various design elements (probably interesting to those in social computing) which help provide a virtual space that is conducive to virtual meetings between strangers. But studying this process by focusing solely on the internet would leave out very important details of the meeting, the offline encounter. Focusing on

these details helped me understand that these encounters challenge what we know about strangerhood, trust, and exchange, and of course tourism. Interaction in these encounters must constantly be re-negotiated and re-defined to fit norms which are not common within our everyday friendship and acquaintanceships.

Secondly, I could have challenged the idea of trust more precisely. The hospitality network lends itself nicely in studying the way trust does and does not work, and due to its global nature, one could also use a collection of qualitative and quantitative data in order to understand how different cultures approach trust. I felt that this concept could not be overlooked, and it is now a central issue I am exploring in my doctoral thesis, and elsewhere in a side project I undertook with a colleague. But at the time I wrote my these chapters you just read, all I really understood was that individuals must trust one another in order to gain a certain experience – and it was that *experience* which interested me, and not the emergence of trust itself. In order to experience another person's home, in order to engage in meaningful discussion, in order to experience intensity – all perceived as benefits of the hospitality exchange – individuals had no other choice *but* to be trusting. These motivations to want to experience these situations were more pertinent to me at the time than the factor of trust itself.

I also realize that I left little room for true critique in this work. Mainly, I did not include the excluded in this monograph. If we think of the very phrase “couch,” a concoction of the rich, northern societies, we realize that this phenomenon can be quite limiting and exclusionary. There is little mention here of the digital, as well as linguistic divide that the very nature of this system creates. Statistically, Couchsurfing belongs to a western society – society and a class of consumers, who above all – belong to a society of *choice*. When Anita, a respondent, stated that “I am a people whore, I like meeting people. And I love having the intense conversations,” as a researcher I understood that for some, the intense interactions here are the objects of desire to be consumed. Couchsurfers are consumers, or mainly a generation which embraced the idea of consumption as a way of satisfying their needs. Whether their needs are to gain some sort of experience, a form of escapism, to consume other environments, or for ‘personal growth’ – they are constantly searching, and search for ways that can guarantee that their needs are met. If we wish to take this perspective, we can quickly see how the Couchsurfing mechanism is a way of fulfilling the traveler’s immediate needs, whatever they may be.

Having said that, I still have some findings on Intimate Tourism which have become embedded in my work today. When I noticed in my online survey that 56% of Couchsurfers stated that their primary motivation to travel is personal growth, I came to conclusion that this system is a way in which their need for personal growth is met. Just as a consumer walks down the aisle in a supermarket, the hospitality exchange mechanism enables the user to walk down the global isle of surfers in order to find the best friend, the best location to stay in, the most exciting Parisian, etc. Choice is essential within this type of consumerism as is impermanence. Consumer life favours lightness and speed⁶⁴ and is not about accumulating goods, but about using them and disposing of them after use. Yet the 'lightness' is not present in the CS exchange, as we have already noticed that friendships are deep, adventurous, and intense, often life-changing to some degree. The individuals seek weight, depth, and intensity, and if these factors are not met, then contacts are disposed of.

In his book *Community*, Bauman classified this mobile class of individuals as the succession of the successful – escapees who are keen to join company with other escapees just like them.⁶⁵ These individuals live by an 'I need more space' slogan, where the flight from the 'messiness of real intimacy,' is more akin to a herd-like stampede than to an individually conceived and undertaken journey of self-exploration. This is not the case of the hospitality network traveller, or who I will call, the Intimate Tourist. What I attempted to explain within this work is that new class of tourists, the Intimate Tourists, do not travel in order to avoid the “messiness of real intimacy,” nor is this type of travel homogeneous. It is entirely individualized as dyads of users are matched based on both user's choices. And upon engaging in this tourism exchange, the Intimate Tourist yearns to experience (non-sexual) intimacy, intensity, closeness in dialogue and emotion.

Somehow within the explanations of relationships within modernity, theorists began to link lightness with impermanence, depth with long-term commitment. This is where current theory misses the mark. Why is the intimacy achieved through the hospitality exchange not 'real intimacy'? Since when did time become a necessary factor in true intimacy? The Intimate Tourist had to re-establish their concept of relationships and their traditional roles within their past, more traditional, locally-based relationships, in order to engage in intense

⁶⁴ Bauman, Zygmunt. 2003. *Liquid Love*. Cambridge: Polity Press. p. 49.

⁶⁵ Bauman, Zygmunt. 2001. *Community*. Cambridge: Polity. p. 52.

experiences, and this re-negotiation of relationships meant that for the Intimate Tourist, depth or closeness in a relationship does not have to be accompanied by a time trajectory.

As time does not become a factor within a relationship, yet intimacy is still present, one can not help but ask: who are these people? Are they friends? Not in the traditional sense, no. Acquaintances? The exchange of intimacy is too embedded with personal meaning to call them simply an acquaintance. While the definition of these post-friends is hard to grasp at, what is evident is that these new ties have a consumer-like quality to them – they are disposable. For Bauman, the “sole attraction of the self-chosen exile is the absence of commitments, and particularly long-term commitments of the kind that cramp freedom of movement in a community with its 'messy intimacy.' With commitments replaced by fleeting encounters, the 'until further notice' or 'one-night' (or one day) stands, one can delete from calculation the effects which one's action might have on the lives of others.”⁶⁶ When intimacy is not achieved within that key process of familiarization - the insight stage – individuals feel no remorse in refusing future contact. This lack of remorse comes from the lack of experiences (insight) both parties provided each other. If the experience is to-ones-liking, or goes beyond expectations, then the memory of the host or guest remains for a long time.

But it is hard not to observe or experience this and not compare the “worthwhile” Couchsurfers which were embedded in our memory as our favourite objects, perhaps that great T-shirt we received when we were 10, and then traveled across the world in it, got our first job in it, went on our first date with it. Here, Bauman would state that Intimate Tourist's 'self-chosen' exile and fleeting encounters are based on the fear of commitment yet still insatiable desire to consume. For Bauman, desire and fear are the push-factors. While accepting the notion that a mass consumer society can heighten the individual's inclination to make more choices (choice of relations included), one must reject the notion that the individual consumes and disposes of their relationships. As previously stated, my research suggests quite the contrary – that the key ingredient in individual agency is not fear of 'messy intimacy,' but the *need* for true intimacy. And this intimacy is not desired for just the very experience, but the 'growth' which it brings, the learning which only a deep meaningful conversation with a person can bring.

Thus, these chance-encounters are not at all disposable, rather permanently impact the

inner psyche of the individual. While superficially, it may seem that in fact these individuals are disposable – any notion of further let's-keep-in-touch contact can be easily be abandoned because of the (often times) expansive geographical distances. Yet the memories shared between two individuals, and the impact they had on each other is something quite permanent, as my research revealed. These new relations, their discourse and personal narratives or insight influences the individual, initiates a process of learning, thus embedding the new relation in the mind. Neither the duration of this encounter nor the commitment play any role. The Intimate Tourist believes that this encounter in itself can trigger an inner process of learning within the mind of the individual which extends over any tangible duration of time. Bauman believes one does not have to calculate the impact one has on another in these types of random encounters. Yet the contrary can be argued – that it is the need to impact and be impacted which motivates individuals to engage in these chance encounters.

Expanding the Network

Another theme which got overlooked within this research is the way the Intimate Tourist thinks and functions within a network society – impacting both his/her way of approaching new contacts, as well as the way other individuals shape our opinion. Individuals of modernity are exponentially increasing their personal networks at this very moment. Kenneth Gergen quite fittingly describes this phenomenon within our society as “over-populating the self,” within our daily life – a symptom of today’s social process – in which we, as individuals, have so many identities flying at us that we are often left in a state of confusion over who we are, where we are, and how we are supposed to react. Gergen blames this on the increase in information in general, the influence of mass media technology (television, Internet) and the “characters” who make up the content of these media (like celebrities).

The development of the “I,” or “the self,” has been greatly influenced by the systems of mass media.⁶⁷ On a daily basis, whether we’re sitting in front of a television, surfing the internet, or even walking through a crowded urban environment – we are faced with a multitude of characters – the business man, the Elvis impersonator, the ‘girl next door’ etc. The list can go on endlessly. And thus, we are presented with a sort of buffet of possible

characters which we can adopt and make our own. As Gergen puts it, there are a various number of “possible selves” which we can adopt, and these “selves” are simply private surrogates of characters we meet in life or in the media.⁶⁸ Here, as we “overpopulate the self,” our real ‘self’ become easily lost within the masses, causing the potential for an identity crisis.

Yet has that role of “I” really changed so much? All forces of modernity: the nation-state, consumer society, and everything about our cultural backdrop forces us to be one in a group of others. As individuals on a path of self-reflexivity, we are faced with daily inner dialogue – yet this dialogue doesn’t ask “what am I feeling right now”? Our self dialogue constantly forces us into a push-and-pull roll playing game in order to fit ourselves into some sort of category within the world around us. Our inner dialogue is therefore turned outwards, instead of inwards. Not only is our private self influenced by outer forces, once our private self becomes influenced, its outcome is made public.

Although modernity provides a multitude of stimuli which can hinder and confuse the individual, when being an Intimate Tourist, one can, in fact, use the internet, or become mobile, in order to meet those people who meet one's needs of deep, meaningful relationships. Much like Kaufmann stated, here, the individual can take charge of the forces of modernity and choose intimacy, choose meaningful dialogue, thus, maximizing one's friendships. Thus, not only do we have different possibilities of who we can be, we also have a greater choice over who we can enter a relationship with. Moreover, the accessibility of our network-at-large, via phone, text message, email, which then result in quickly planned and executed face-to-face meetings, allows the individual to rely on other's opinions in the creation of the 'self' rather than on one's own. The reliance on the other to learn, and to have a worthwhile experience may be a result of the way individuals today think – on a networked scale.

The essence of Intimate Tourism

All these additional points for analysis – trust, internet culture, the networked society, and consumption - were greatly overlooked in order to get down to the description of these encounters. I aimed to understand the way interaction is negotiated within the hospitality exchange in order to allow a new quality of friendship-building to emerge today. Individuals

⁶⁸ Gergen, Kenneth. 1991. *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*. New York: Basic Books, p. 17.

are experiencing a new quality of social relationships which were previously not as accessible and were not experienced to such a scale. Intimate Tourism is a system of exchange in which the individual tours and experiences intimacy, in space and relationships, rather than just in the tourism-dominated environment. This process is most prominently observed, yet not restricted to, online hospitality exchange networks. Within this mechanism, relative strangers are placed into situations where they can become both verbally intimate (through conversation) and spatially intimate (through the lack of physical distance between each other). Through this network, the individual experiences a kind of relationship without physical or geographical borders – a post-friendship where the personal needs of the individual such as “personal growth,” direct dialog, and human closeness, is met instantly, without taking into account any time-space continuum traditionally ingrained in the institution of friendship. Common approaches to privacy, both physical privacy and privacy of thought, is breached.

This work brought together various theories regarding mobility, friendship, the individual's identity, and one's relationship to physical space, in order to come up with a succinct view of the current state of mobile friendship and intimacy which is occurring within our societies. It was my presumption that in studying mobility, we must also analyse both *who* we interact with and *how* we interact with them. By bringing to light that our world is no longer a world of tribal families and those who are familiar, analysing the hospitality exchange network hoped to give an example of how strangers become intimates more readily now than they did when preferences were restricted to tribal and village neighbours.⁶⁹

An increase in the ability to be mobile, and mobile as a choice, also widens other available choices in activities and sensory experiences, which also encompasses the act of friendship. Specifically, when we have the choice to be mobile, we can also choose who we meet when in a state of mobility, and in what space we decide to meet them. Space also monumentally affects the types of interactions we experience. Online hospitality networks are slowly institutionalizing, or defining this type of friendships (post-friendships?), moving them from just a chance bus-station or plane trip encounter between random individuals, where intense contacts were a result of this randomness, to an online-offline mechanism in which

⁶⁹ Solomon, R., Flores, F. 2003. *Building Trust: In Business, Politics, Relationships, and Life*. Cambridge: Oxford University Press. p. 41.

individuals can actively pursue this friendship option based on their personal motivations.

Thus, within Intimate Tourism, friendship is becoming more intense, more quickly, for the following reasons:

- 1) *individual motivations which seek out intimate connections*
- 2) *engaging in heightened level of trust (the trustor and the trustee already engaged in a high risk exchange)*
- 3) *time spent in close, personal, spatial proximity which heightens the level of trust between individuals*
- 4) *the lack of commonality of commonplace, impersonal dialogue, usual among strangers, forcing either one or both parties to engage in intimate dialogue*

All the above points to one key word: choice. The Intimate Tourist is, above all, part of a society of choice, and it is that what he/she does with that choice which can be diversely analysed. Both the individual's needs (personal growth, intimacy, intensity) as well as interactions (within space, and meaning of interaction itself) were analysed, taking choice as the main agent of action here. In the contemporary era, travel and tourism are typically represented as experience which involves removing the consumer from one emotional site to another⁷⁰ whereas the hospitality exchange mechanism actually allows the individual to pursue their needs -- mainly personal growth or personal development. This is their selling point, the institutionalization of this process which previously existed, yet strictly on a sporadic basis. When an individual engages in Intimate Tourism and decides to become that *type* of tourist, they are choosing to engage in an intense experience, which involves risk and intense interaction.

Although not explicitly stating it, Couchsurfing sells cultural exchange, 'deep and meaningful connections' – which in turn lead to personal growth. It should also be noted that theorists such as Lupton make connections between the tourism landscape and emotion – the individual links an array of emotions to physical objects and urban/rural spaces while traveling. Yet seldom do we analyse the emotional and interaction experience of meeting the local – not just a meeting, but when it develops into a real, intimate, relationship. This

⁷⁰

Lupton p. 161.

experience of interaction is summarized as the memory of experience attached to a meaningful space and a fully developed process of familiarization between the two individuals involved.

Michael, one of my respondents, commented on the memory of experience, when he asked me rhetorically: “Which was better: visiting St. Paul in the Vatican? Or learning how to make pasta from an Italian family? Hmm... let me think about this for a little while. Some people would be like well jeez, well that one, visiting the Vatican city had to be more impressive. Well sure, but you know what? You can't pay for that kind of experience to learn how to make pasta with an Italian family. And to wake up and have breakfast with them and see how they live and what they eat. When I think of Italy I now think of them and how they live their life and how that reflects on Italian culture. I don't think of the architecture. It was beautiful and amazing and I'd love to see it again but that is not what comes to mind when I think of Italy.”

My interviews and two years of empirical research suggest that the visual space upon leaving the tourism place is filled with images and emotions of the host, and not of the traditional tourism landscape. Intimate Tourism is, thus, a shift in meaning and motivation within mobility and friendship. As Michael stated, “it was an experience that I wanted to go through. The whole set of experiences [through the hospitality network] is something that I built on my life experiences I had before it. And now I'm going at life in a totally different way.”

Appendix

Extracts collected from “Couchsurfing Friendship” survey, May, 2007, in response to why they want to meet other people.

American male, 23: “I deeper understanding of the world and a chance to meet someone with stories and experiences to share. Expanding the human consciousness is so important and in my opinion the relationships and meetings are the soul purpose of traveling. The destination won't be the the memory or new connection that lasts a lifetime. The destination is just a place. A memory/connection is something that will enrich your life and expand your understanding of the world.”

Indian male, 30: “Its not gaining or losing...its all about sharing life with someone who has got your wavelength. A guy comes to a land where everyone is a stranger and you lend a helping hand to him. Thats Hospitality, you might get that for money in a hotel but you wil not get the real warmth and affection. Thats what is fascinating about the work of CS, bridging minds of equal wavelength....for a traveler.”

American female, 21: “I hope to learn about their perspective of the world, while time and again acknowledging so many of the universal human truths that exist between all peoples. I also hope to share the love of Jesus Simont to my new friend if they are open to hearing the Good News.”

American female, 40: “I hope to re-gain some faith in humanity. Knowing that there are so many kind, caring, genuinely good, people in the world makes me want to be a more kind, caring and genuinley good, person in return. Meeting new people provides me with an opportunity to make a positive impact on how people view all things foreign to them.”

Canadian female, 19: “by meeting people, living with them, see how they live and live unexpected situations, I hope I can learn about myself, others and the world...”

French male, 28: “[Couchsurfing] provides me with the ability to see the same things with different eyes. I mean not only to know that other views, cultures, philosophies exist, but to experience them and try to make them mine. then, to share mine and have people understand them. An odd example may be: what made me athee (atheist) and what made religious guys religious. How can I assimilate their faith and broaden my understanding of the world and human beings with judaism, buddhism, islam or animism? how can I get to be inspired or touched by sacred art, music, writings ? how can those new ideas shine in my everyday life and spread to the ones I love and to the ones I meet ?...”

American female, 36: “[Meeting other people] ties right into personal growth. Getting to know others is also a way to get to know yourself better. It helps people gain new perspectives, and maybe see their own little universe in a different light.”

American female, 32: “I hope to gain knowledge from my worldwide connections. Different

perspectives on important issues have helped be to be a more tolerant and wise person.”

Canadian female, 35: “Learn about his own philosophy, about him, about his country and for personal growth and more and more!”

Italian male, 22: “Personal growth, knowledge of different cultures and maybe find someone to share emotions with.”

Portuguese male, 35: “To learn and grow as a person.”

American female, 19: “I think that meeting someone new and building relationships leads to personal growth and learning about the world around you.”

Australian female, 22: “Personal growth / development, which I believe comes from meeting and interacting with people of different cultures and beliefs. (Maybe this is cheating and really checking two tabs in one.. but I believe it)

American female, 27: “I hope to sometimes be able to see the world from their perspective. To see what I can change in my life so it would be more fulfilling. Also, some people do inspire me.”

Australian female, 37: “personal growth, social and political awareness, sharing knowledge and lifestyles, a sense of connection, hopefully contribute to others' lives and maybe address some differences of privilege between countries.”

Brazilian Male, 17: “I hope to learn about the good experiences this person had, and to have a personal growth with it.”

French Male, 32: “Personal growth, develop, share ideas, discover other points of view and the corresponding reasons.”

Canadian female, 17: “I like to see the world from another's point of view, which I believe will help in personal growth. It's also an excuse to travel there again to visit those people that you meet.”

Couchsurfing Survey

Travel and Friendship: making friends through CouchSurfing

*[Online survey using phpSurveyor, programmed into Couchsurfing.com in August, 2006.
Data collection lasted 8 months]*

Age:

Gender : M F

Nationality:

Occupation:

Couchsurfing username (optional):

PART A

Please check all that apply:

Yes

No

Sometimes

I am open to new relationships

I can become friends with certain
people instantly

I can instantly tell if someone is an interesting person

I don't mind sharing my inner thoughts and feelings with people I find interesting

PART B

1. Approximately how many times have you:

a) surfed (in total) _____ ?

b) hosted (in total) _____ ?

2. Looking back at your past CouchSurfing experiences, how often have you encountered a sense of deeper connection with a surfer/host?

a) Never

b) Seldom

c) Sometimes

d) Often

e) Always

3. Approximately how many of your host/surfers do you keep in touch with on a regular basis (give %)? _____

4. Have you had any couchsurfers you have NOT kept in touch with?

Yes

No

**** If answered "no" why not?

- a) I don't have time
 - b) I don't think that making long term friendships is the purpose of Couchsurfing
 - c) The other person is not interested in keeping in touch
 - d) I haven't found anyone through Couchsurfing worth keeping in touch with
 - e) Other
-

5. Approximately how many of your previous host/surfers would you plan to *meet* up with in the future (give %)? _____

6. What is the average number of hours you spend daily interacting with your CS host/guest?

0-1

1-3

3-6

6-8

more than 8

7. In your past CouchSurfing experiences, have you ever become emotionally close with your host/surfer? (you've shared your thoughts, dreams, insights, problems?)

Yes

No

***** If yes, how often do you and your host/surfer become emotionally close (you share your thoughts, dreams, insights, problems)?

1 never

2 rarely

3 sometimes

4 often

5 always

9. In general, do you have any empty, superficial relationships/friendships in your life right now?

Yes

No

PART C

Note: The definition of personal growth or development in this context is metaphysical, spiritual, and/or intellectual development.

8) In general, how important is “personal growth” to you?

- Not important
- Somewhat important
- Important
- Very important
- Extremely important

9) What is your primary motivation to travel?

- a) Seeing interesting sights of the world
- b) Personal growth/personal development (learning about yourself and the world around you)
- c) Meeting and building relationships with people from around the world
- d) To relax
- e) To escape daily responsibilities
- f) To see family
- g) For business
- h) Other _____

***** If answered c) move to this question:
What do you hope to gain from a new friendship?

10) Do you learn more from your CouchSurfing hosts/guests than from the friends at home?

- a) I generally don't learn from my friends
- b) I learn more from my friends at home
- c) I sometimes learn more from my Couchsurfing hosts/guests, but more from those at home
- d) I learn both from my Couchsurfing hosts/guests, and my friends from home equally
- e) I definitely learn more from my CouchSurfing hosts/guests

11. What do you learn from your Couchsurfing hosts/guests?

- a) Information about local life and culture (language, food, dress, etc.)
 - b) How to perform a certain task (ex. cook, do yoga, speak in another language)
 - c) Their personal philosophy or religion
 - d) Their past life experiences
 - e) Their life goals/passions
 - f) Travel tips
 - g) All of the above
 - h) Other
-

- i) I generally don't learn from my Couchsurfing hosts/guests.

12. Please specify *three* words which would best describe your relationships made over Couchsurfing?

Glossary of terms

Dyadic process of familiarization

A process of becoming familiar with, or “getting to know,” another individual. This process is characterized by three stages: the introduction stage, the insight stage, the embedding stage. While in this work, this process is described using the example of the hospitality network, the author understands this as a general process which affects all new acquaintanceships.

Introduction stage, where the surfer and host meet in a public place or simply at the front door of the host's home, embrace and/or shake hands. Here, the surfer enters the private space of the host's home, the host shows the surfer their bed/floor space/mattress/etc., gives him/her a tour of the house, and then they sit down to dinner or leave the house altogether and start 'touring.' This is where the initial verbal exchange is initiated, as the individuals take turns giving a sort of self-monologue describing their biographical sketch.

Insight stage, is the time in which one or both parties provide some insight into their own life, the lives of others around them, their personal history, their experiences, their problems, or their failures. The one common theme in this stage is the presence of insight, which in turn raises the level of intensity of a conversation, thus raising the intimacy of the exchange. The insight stage can but does not have to include an exhibition of emotions, but it always includes a sense of trust between one or both parties.

Embedding Stage, where an individual, in this case the surfer has to leave to his/her next destination and both parties are faced with the decision of whether or not to keep, or embed, this new friend into his/her span of friends. This decision is based on the intensity of exchange during the Insight stage, and the amount of intimacy and insight experienced by both parties.

Hospitality Exchange Network

Usually appear in the form of, yet are not restricted to, websites which establish a global web of hundreds of thousands of users who travel to foreign places while residing in the private home or on the “couch” of other members of the network.

Intimate Tourism

A a system of exchange in which the individual tours and experiences intimacy, in space and relationships, rather than just in the tourism-dominated environment. This process is most prominently observed, yet not restricted to, online hospitality exchange networks. Within this mechanism, individuals are placed into situations where they can be both verbally intimate (through conversation) and spatially intimate (through the lack of physical distance between each other). Through this network, the individual experiences a kind of relationship without physical or geographical borders – a post-friendship where the personal needs of the individual such as “personal growth,” direct dialog, and human closeness, is met instantly, without taking into account any time-

space continuum traditionally ingrained in the institution of friendship. Common approaches to privacy, both physical privacy and privacy of thought, is breached.

Life-tourist

An individual who sees tourism as a holistic experience, where one's new experiences are linked with discovery of the world in which one is living through a full, lifelong dedication, where touring is part of "making a difference" in the world.

Personal growth

The process of improving one's entire being, sense of self, and/or outlook on the world.

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Interviews

Conducted between July and August, 2007 at the Couchsurfing Collective, Montreal, with the exception of Sara and Maria.

Casey Fenton

Dayna

Anita

Nanami

Ulla

Sara

Johan

Nick

Michael

Karen

Simon

Adam

Oliver

Maria

Ashley

Other interviews not used in this work

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