

Identity in Temporary Spaces:

Reflections inspired by the North Atlantic Islands Residency 2024

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Introduction:

For fear of idleness, we do not want to remain the same and therefore we seek change. Our strive for growth, or fear of stagnancy, means we often find a way to rationalise our choices for moving so quickly, and therefore we do not see the invisible shifts we create for ourselves through spontaneous human connection. Shifts in our perceptions, our dependencies, and within our identities.

Who chooses to listen and who chooses to look? What becomes background noise for some, yet continuously alters another's perception? How has my presence impacted other people and how have they impacted me? By asking ourselves these kinds of questions, we entice the process of reflection. To reflect on what surrounds us and what does not.

Setting the Scene

I had folded myself into the corner of my 6ft something box bunk, surrendering to what would be a particularly extended bout of seasickness, brought on by the surging waves on all sides of me. Perhaps as a consequence of my inability to sit still I had found myself aboard a century or so old, magnificent wooden vessel, that effortlessly engaged in a somewhat constant form of high-pitched creaking in a ludicrously timely manner; with my howling stomach Excelsior would rhythmically sway, matching my weakening mood.

My primary reasoning for partaking in the residency was to observe the ebb and flow of identity within the space that this temporary crew created throughout the journey. Achieving this became frustratingly difficult as I found myself anchored behind a curtain for practically the entirety of the crossing. And back.

Addedly, to be systematically floating in such a vast body of open water, yet to have absolutely no control over how I expressed my own identity into the space, made me deeply

aware of how limited my *physical* space was, instead of how incredibly boundless my surroundings really were. Yet, I was hyperaware of the vastness encircling me, especially the miles that lay ahead, whilst I roughly calculated how many hours more, I would have to endure. To cope, I envisioned myself taking a bird's eye view of our vessel, a miniscule reassurance that I would only be glued to the confines of my bunk for a fragmented moment of the Atlantic's' time capsule, a moment so trivial to the exhaustive landscape, that surely, I could cope for a few hours longer.

Using the broad and complex concepts of space, place and time, intertwined with descriptions and anecdotes of our journey aboard the Excelsior, this essay will tell *our* story, through a conceptual discussion of reflective realisations. The story of artists, sailors and creators who came together to generate this distinctive space, by webbing our individuality together through the essence of our every movement.

Place Identity

A recent study looks to answer the question as to why sailors often choose to leave their profession prematurely. The author discusses the physiological impact the “fear of the unknown” can have when living and working on open waters (Günc, 2023, p.20). The journey from start to finish, is an unpredictable existence. Not just getting from A to B, which includes a variant of potential changes from weather to mechanical issues, but the journey of your own self. When you're constantly moving, it is difficult to keep checking in with yourself, with such a physically and mentally demanding profession. By the time you get a chance to do this, you are in a new place, with countless elements to get accustomed to. Often, the inability to attach one's own identity to a physical space is daunting and overwhelming as it lacks a sense of secureness.

Callum, a resident on board, once spoke of how you feel “gobbled up” by the landscape in the Faroe Islands. As a collective crew, we became absorbed into the terrain, a provisional element of the topography, suspended in a space between sea and land. The progression of a sailor's identity is uniquely determined by the ocean. How it chooses to flow, turn, twist, rise and retreat. Leaning into the unknown is a primitive instinct. As humans, we either choose to run towards it or stay well away.

Place- Identity is a concept coined by psychologist Harold M. Proshansky to introduce the idea of our “environmental past” (Proshansky et al., 2014, p.59), whereby a series of spaces, a collection unique to everyone, alters our socio-cultural and psychological framework due to the resources within these spaces. Our encounters within these spaces, both negative and positive, will encourage our perception and responses hereafter. Recognising the possibility to achieve stability within a space dictates our reactions to its’ stimuli. When we intertwine identity with space and place, we access the ability to decipher human exchanges on a profound level and so here we see that our ability to feel regulated within a new space is a direct reflection of our experiences in previous places.

So, I ask you this; how long can someone really be a stranger when you rely on each other so instantly? During one of our reflection sessions, Mark ponders on the various features of life on board. The highs and lows, a sprinkle of discomfort at times, but ultimately the journey was heavily saturated in laughter and humour. Perhaps we got lucky, but to exist in a such a tightly squeezed space, with virtually no bickering or clashing, is an impressive feat. This may have been due to our common purpose, to create and to explore our individual disciplines within the collective unit. I have no doubt, that most of us probably had our moments of frustration or tiredness, but as crew member Harry once described it, we are essentially a short-term family, coexisting in a rhythm with each other.

Movement causes changes. Ropes can fray from pulling to and fro, mugs can tip over at the jolt of a wave; in the same way your patience can wear thin, or your body becomes tired from the unpredictability of such a journey. Yet, we were all aware of the responsibility we had to exist cooperatively and so this inevitably involved altering our habits and perceptions.

Mobility

“Physiological adaptation” is an absolute necessity with life upon a moving vessel, and this process will take place as a subconscious or to some extent a conscious measure (Shevchenko et al., 2020, p.540). In my case, my ability and motivation to regulate this adaptation came with difficulty as I was faced with the uncertainty of my situation. You cannot control how others view you, yet in most cases you can dictate how you present yourself. My isolation was not preventative, yet I still felt a sense of guilt and urgency to get better, so I could become a part of the collective in a way that actually reflected my identity within this

unchartered spatial arrangement. Carlstein (2019, pg. 4-7) discusses the “dimension of time” in relation to its attributes as a resource and as a locational asset. “All activity and interaction is a resource demanding process,” the geographer states, and when I read this, the first word that comes to mind is *progress*. During a discussion I had with fellow resident Samm, we reflected on the assumptions we have in our minds, about how things will or should go. I had come into this space with a pre-emptive idea of how I would use my time, how I would progress in this scenario and how this makeshift community would develop. However, the trajectory of how I expected this journey to unfold was drastically altered. As I lay ill in my bunk I found myself *chasing time*, so that I could live up to my own expectations, and so it is here that I begin to think about the process of pace in all of this.

Pace

“To sense this world of waters known to the creatures of the sea we must shed our human perceptions of length and breadth and time and place, and enter vicariously into a universe of all-pervading water.” (Carson, 1937, as seen in Gee, 2019, p.23)

Our pace and personal rhythm on board the Excelsior was expectedly altered and so we adapted to this. Limited space depicts constraints and the need for “trade-offs” (Miller, 2005, p.17). In our case, passing cutlery, plates, sauces, or rather anything that involved stepping in to the kitchenette, became a sort of ‘bucket brigade’ action. Mealtime required each person’s *full* attention and actions carried out during these periods, including filling up cups at the sink (if you chose to sit in this section of the benches, this is a consequence), pulling down said cups from their respective places, passing out knives, forks, etc. If you were lucky enough to be sitting at the end of the row, whilst you indeed had the opportunity to freely move your outer arm about without the risk of elbowing your bench mate, you would be frequenting the fridge for the duration of the meal, for any condiments that had been forgotten about.

Cereals which were strategically placed in an easily accessible location, devised with the anticipation of early morning rises in mind, were also stored inside the benches and so if more was needed to be obtained during mealtimes, everyone sitting on this row would be required to reposition themselves to allow for access. This was the choreography of our journey. On one occasion, whilst reflecting on the previous night’s dinner, Ellie mentions the comedic chaos of the situation. Chatting, laughter, and music join the scene of the particularly

hectic meal preparation of locally supplied mussels. At this point, having reached Shetland, we were nearing the end of the residency and so the initial facade of reservedness and politeness, one often performs when meeting new people, was no longer a sought-after priority. Our rhythms were in alignment, a jumping and lively tune.

Living Alongside Rhythm

Pace is a pillar stone of communal living. The likes of Follett (1919, p.576) describe community as a “creative process” of “integration,” and a century or so on this statement still stands. Community, especially when approached with a temporary motive, is almost entirely experimental. You can make predictions, based on similar scenarios, but with so many varying factors, you really cannot foresee the outcome until you are living through it.

Interestingly, Carlstein (2019, p.9) points out how out of tune most of the human population is with the natural environment, instead relying on city-centric rhythms and therefore becoming desensitized to the natural forces. Take for instance, the weather forecast. For the average person who lives in a Eurocentric city, a thunderstorm although inconvenient, will not really alter too much about our day. We will still go to work, still cook ourselves dinner, still probably get a night’s sleep. Travelling by boat places you in the centre of a temperamental cyclic rhythm that you physically and mentally cannot ignore and as Samm once pointed out water not only teaches us to be patient but also humble. Vives (2020, p.170-173) describes this amalgamation of ‘crew, the vessel and the environment’ as a “meshwork of relationships” that creates a thickening plot of layered personalities, shared habits, and storylines. By collectively living in motion, we are ‘kinetically’ adapting to every aspect of the journey, be it the weather, the physical movement of the vessel, our fellow crew members and ourselves. This kinetic energy, or lack of in my daily life, is something I become acutely aware of once I had finished the voyage.

At a superficial level, I do not have a *need* to live harmoniously in my regular life, where essentials are easily accessible. Yet life on the Excelsior meant we had to be mindful of so many hidden elements. Meals must be planned in advance to account for weather conditions, because no one wants to be standing over a stove on a particularly rocky evening, clothes had to be easily accessible to avoid having to rummage for an extra layer. How we walk so that we can balance ourselves or how we position ourselves to sleep in unison with the constant

tilting. The vessel becomes an “extension of our bodies,” and thinking of it in this way, it gives reason for why some of the crew members often walked barefoot on deck, the grip offering assistance to ones “postural sway,” and perhaps even the added connection to the processes of feeling grounded in your space (Vives, 2020, p.114-116).

Aboard the *Excelsior*, we learned to rely on our own senses, to withdraw from any scepticism we had in our abilities, so that we could find the optimum level of synchronisation within our environment and our community, both on a physical and psychological level.

Trust within the Liminal

Frustratingly, I could not bring myself to paper the thoughts that circled my mind over those days of seasickness. This reason entirely relates to my inability to sit up to drink water, let alone successfully put pen to paper. I am deeply grateful for the strangers who become family on the journey, who patiently took care of me whilst I was ill, taking on the role of worrying. This kind of vulnerability between humans is not regularly exchanged in everyday life, let alone in such a short window of time. Not once throughout the journey did I feel alone in my situation due to their attentiveness and patience. Seeing the look of worry on Marks face or hearing the concern in the voices of everyone as they habitually checked in on me gave me a sense of comfort that is difficult to describe.

One of my most prominent memories is of Jessie the dancer, floating towards my bunk as if she were an angel, to help me take off the layers of woollen socks I had on, in presumptuous anticipation of standing on deck for my watch. To be completely honest, it took me quite some time to begin writing my reflections after the residency had ended. This was not because I did not want to, but for about three months after the journey, each time I began looking over my journal to make some logical sense of what I had noted down during the voyage, I would feel nauseous. An 1881 account of seasickness by a Dr. George Miller Beard, describes how the illness “harasses the patient” sometimes even after they have reached land and nearly 150 years later this statement still holds truth (as seen in Blackham, 1939, p.295). Philosopher Ariston of Chios, who was producing works in the 3rd century BC, observed the different reactions between a novice and experienced sailor on board various vessels when it came to seasickness (as seen in Huppert et al., 2017, p.9). It is something that has been a collective experience for centuries. I find strange comfort in knowing this.

Another vivid memory from the voyage were a set of hands peeking through the curtain every so often to grant me with little gifts; some lavender oil, peppermint oil and a little pink crystal set down by Anna, the owner of these hands. When we eventually docked, Anna encouraged me to take a nap in a quieter part of the boat. Although my first instinct was to object, as I had just spent nearly two days asleep and was desperate to explore my surroundings, I humoured the idea, and it ended up being the best step forward for me to regain my strength. As women, we mother each other through our perspective journeys and we anchor ourselves to each other when we most need it.

Understanding the Liminal

We tell our stories by sharing ourselves with others and everyone on board seemed intrigued by the process of allowing their crewmates to influence them. This emphasises how impressionable our identities are to change, the willingness to experiment with alternating perspectives, all to act as motivation for our personal creativity. Sharing not only a physical area, but an intangible and indefinable headspace. Trust cannot be created without a certain vulnerability and this state of being is often accelerated within periods of liminal experiences where we find ourselves “suspended,” pending an unknown “reality” (Stenner, 2021, p.2).

Beech (2011, p.287) describes liminality, as “a state of in-between-ness.” They discuss this in relation to the process of reconstructing ones’ own identity. This type of dynamic has often been seen to impose a ‘before’ and ‘after’ version of ones’ identity, with changes characterised by the event or interestingly a state of ‘fluidity’ between versions of the self in different spaces. The author queries the dynamic of social structures that encourage these characteristics, pondering on the idea that a dialogue may manifest between ones’ “inner-self-identity” and the “outer social identity” as a subconscious encouragement towards alterations (Watson, 2009, as seen in Beech, 2011, p.288). The outward identity is also partial to influence from the company a person holds. Hence, this so-called in-between stage that we are describing, occurs when the identity does not fully change, but instead enters a dynamical shift. Perhaps it manifests as an uncertainty with one’s own self or better yet an assurance of the mind that was not present prior to a situational change. The boundaries we are exposed to within a new space, directly impact the boundaries we set for ourselves as our identity enters

a state of short-term transition. The question is, however, what part of this temporary phase will take a permanent state within oneself?

Conclusion

When we enter a temporary dialogue, we begin an experimental phase which involves an examination of our own boundaries. We may find ourselves swaying back and forth, choosing how much we will attach ourselves to a new situation, pledging an innovative disturbance towards the idea we have of ourselves from that point onwards. The intensity of non-permanency forces oneself to ask questions that as humans, we are often afraid to unravel such depth within ourselves. It nitpicks at any flaws we think we may have and questions our ability to protect ourselves when such an unpredictable atmosphere stirs around us.

Throughout the residency, the group took time to reflect on the trip at regular intervals. We would gather ourselves, along with our notebooks, and congregate at a set location to discuss the happenings of the journey. In this way, we were regularly asking ourselves what we were learning and what were our takeaways from the time spent on board. In one sense, it comes as no surprise that a collection of creative people was proactively categorising our experiences, after all, it is a deep -routed element of one's personalised innovative process as a creator. Personally, it almost feels as though I cannot productively create if I do not pensively anchor down a set of contemplations arising from sections of my life experiences. To conclude, it seems that nothing can feel more human than instantly connecting with complete strangers through a hyper awareness of limited time.

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