



Out of Practice: Foreign Travel as the Productive Disruption of Embodied Knowledge Schemes

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Abstract

This paper explores foreign travel as an affective experience, embodied practice and form of learning. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork on tourism and pilgrimage in the Himalayan region, the phenomenological notions of “home world” and “alien world” are employed to discuss how perceptions of strangeness and everyday practices are shaped by enculturation and socialisation processes. It is shown that travellers bring the habitus and doxa acquired in the home world to foreign situations, where these embodied knowledge schemes and abilities for skilful coping can break down. In a home world, cultural patterns offer actors “trustworthy recipes for interpreting the social world” (Schütz, 1944, pp. 501-502) that allow everyday experience to go largely unnoticed and unquestioned. In alien worlds, however, travellers – as strangers – encounter differences and disturbances that disrupt experience and cause things normally overlooked to become “lit up”. Using Husserlian and Heideggerian notions of “light breaks” and Dewey’s theory of challenge, the author argues that foreign travel generates a form of embodied learning. This occurs first on the level of the pre-reflexive body that is affected and solicited by the new and unfamiliar demands of an alien world. Ultimately, through continuous adjustment of habits and practices in foreign environments, an embodied cosmopolitanism is generated via accumulated travel experience. This calls attention to the role of the lived body in travel experience, as well as the role of place and environment in shaping human practices, perceptions and modes of dwelling.

All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.

Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845)

Introduction

Drawing on ethnographic research on tourism and pilgrimage in the Himalayan region, this paper explores the bodily and affective dimensions of foreign travel experience. I begin by qualifying travel as a boundary crossing in which encultured body subjects depart from their familiar “home world”

environment and arrive in an unfamiliar “alien world”. Estranged from the relative predictability, norms, habits and routines of the home world, such boundary crossings disrupt the embodied knowledge schemes travellers bring into foreign milieus. What ensues is an embodied inter-cultural dialogue taking place first on practical, pre-reflexive and affective levels before cognitive and discursive sense-making occurs. Being

challenged by situations of difference, I argue, largely accounts for the shifts in “perspective” and self-transcendence that travellers reported actively having sought and experienced in Nepal and India. After exploring the experience of arrival, I consider how everyday travel scenarios challenge the practical sense and bodily techniques travellers acquire and bring from a home world. Utilising the phenomenological notion of breakdown, and specifically Husserl’s notion of “light breaks”, I interpret such challenges and disruptions as a form of embodied learning, the accumulation of which expands somatic knowledge and generates an embodied cosmopolitanism. At the same time, and despite globalisation and postmodern critiques of place, travel affirms the existence of a habitus as the product of specific sociocultural environments.

Travel as Interplay between Home and Alien Worlds

A phenomenology which accounts for the practical structures of ordinary experience holds the key to answering questions about extra-ordinary experience, such as finding oneself dis-placed in a foreign environment. The challenges encountered during foreign travel emanate from a traveller being in the social position of a stranger or outsider by virtue of having crossed a threshold separating what Husserl calls the “home world” and the “alien world” (Husserl, 1913/2012). The home world is described by Husserl as a “sphere of ownness” [*Eigenheitssphäre*], a familiar, taken for granted cultural order where things appear as “normal” and without question. As a “geo-historical horizon”, the home world, as Steinbock (1995, p. 222) notes, “is not only the world we experience, but the world *from which* we experience”. Characterized by a certain steadiness and relative predictability, the home world reproduces its stability through the shared and repeated practices, traditions, customs and habits of a community (Schütz, 1944, 1932/1995). An alien world is constituted in relation to a home world, with the two separated by boundaries or “limit zones” that emerge from ordering processes. Such boundaries or borders are not closed, but permeable and constantly in question (Waldenfels, 2006/2011, p. 8), especially in the global age. While increased mobility, cultural flows, interconnectivity and other globalisation processes (Appadurai, 1996, 2010; Bauman, 2000; Castells, 2000; Urry, 2007, 2014) indeed reconfigure boundaries, they do not render the world a vast, undifferentiated non-place.

Rather than being taken as static structures or objective categories, the phenomenological notion of home and alien worlds serves a heuristic function for making sense of relations between the familiar and the unfamiliar. As Simmel (1997) has demonstrated, strangeness can be conceptualized spatially, on a

spectrum of distance and proximity, similar to the way that hermeneutics approaches interpretation from a “polarity of familiarity and strangeness” (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 262). While such perceptions may be subjective or socially constructed, the sense of familiarity is always formed in relation to specific places. Encountering alien worlds not only exposes travellers to the new or Other, but, as a recursive “worldmaking” or world disclosing process, the transformative potential of travel also lies in its ability to reorder perceptions and understandings of the home world. It is important, however, to locate this potential in the pre-reflexive yet cultured body, which is called to respond to an alien world that first announces itself in the form of pathos and affect.

Being-in-the-(Alien)-World as Pathic and Affective Event

In many ways, the meaning of journeys such as those to the Himalayan region is in the movement and visceral experience itself. The body, after all, is not only an ontological starting point (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2013), but an unavoidable medium for making sense of lived experience that ultimately outruns and overwhelms linguistic expression (Serres, 2003). Affect is an umbrella term that covers all kinds of overlapping bodily and emotional phenomena such as sensations, desires, passions, feelings and moods (Blackman & Venn, 2010; Clough & Halley, 2007; Wetherell, 2012). Recent interest in affect in the social sciences and humanities has been resuscitated from Spinoza by way of Deleuze and is also part of the shift towards embodiment more generally (Clough & Halley, 2007; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Latimer & Miele, 2013). In opposition to Cartesian mind-body, subject-object dualisms, Spinoza explored affect as an ideal-type of relation, a pre-conscious, proto-social moment in which the multitude of potential interactions crystallize into the actuality of a specific interaction or response (Shields, Park, & Davidson, 2011, pp. 3-4).

As a lived ability or potential to act, affectivity is what activates an embodied subject. To be affected is to be acted upon, touched or moved; it is something which happens to or befalls us that we do not initiate (Waldenfels, 2006/2011, pp. 46-47). Being affected thus depends on neither our knowing nor our willing – that is, on consciousness – but points back to a situated body. Yet this is not the body of a discrete individual, but an intermingled body that is never alone, always being involved with other people, things and circumstances, and which thus co-exists beyond itself in a more than human environment (Haraway, 2008; Pyyhtinen & Tamminen, 2011; Serres, 1985/2008; Sloterdijk, 1998/2011). As Lingis (2000, p. 29) notes: “Our movements are not spontaneous initiatives launched against masses of

inertia; we move in an environment of air currents, rustling trees, and animate bodies". This is why, for Heidegger, experience and notions of selfhood cannot be taken separately or independently from the way the world affects and solicits us (Käufer, 2012, p. 468). The affective experience of arriving in a foreign country is one that brings to life the notion of "being there" (*dasein*) as "being-with" (*mitsein*).

Arriving as Departing

Although it is problematic to determine when a journey actually begins and ends if we consider the overlapping of virtual, imaginary and corporeal mobilities (Howard, 2012), for the sake of convenience we shall say that a journey formally begins with departure from home. The sense of a journey beginning is especially heightened when one sets out for a place to which one has never been before and that is culturally and geographically distant from the home world. This was the case with the travellers I encountered in Nepal and India, who were largely from western countries and middle-class backgrounds. The expectation and perception of difference and strangeness was in fact a major attraction to the Himalayan region and Asia more generally, and is part of a long tradition of Western enchantment with an East represented as exotic, sensual and mystical (Bishop, 1989; Oujian, 1996; Said, 1978). Bearing in mind that contemporary journeys to the East are thoroughly underwritten by orientalist discourses and colonial imaginaries, and that tourist mobilities reveal a very uneven distribution of economic and symbolic power, the author now asks the reader to imagine him- or herself as a traveller from the developed world who is just arriving in Nepal's capital, Kathmandu.

Your own heightened sense of crossing a threshold and entering an alien world comes on a spring morning with the captain announcing in a foreign accent the aeroplane's descent into Kathmandu. Clouds give way to the Himalayas towering above hazy valleys. Densely clustered brick buildings and trafficked roads appear as civilization comes into focus. You see cars, motorbikes and people scurrying about like ants before, finally, the aeroplane touches down with a violent thud. An atmosphere of anxiety and excitement fills the cabin as seatbelts unclick and passengers begin shifting restlessly in their seats. Reaching for their belongings, their eyes dart about the cabin and towards the small windows as they prepare to step out into the worlds which await them. As the aeroplane approaches the terminal, you notice some foreign passengers becoming quiet and inward, focusing their gaze on the seat back in front of them. They appear to be gathering their thoughts, taking stock of the situation at hand, composing themselves in preparation for what they will soon face outside.

The passengers apparently returning home, on the other hand, are mainly jovial and excited, reaching for their handbags and jostling towards the front of the aeroplane.

Passing through customs in a state of mild disbelief, you swing your backpack on, take a deep breath and plant your hiking boots on the worn pavement outside the terminal. For a few moments you simply stand there, observing, allowing the reality of the situation to sink in. Sounds, visions, crisp morning air, car exhaust fumes, dust and smoke arrive through the sense organs and confirm for you that this is really happening. After all that anticipation, suddenly "out there" has become "right here" by what almost seems like magic. No sooner does your sense of wonder and astonishment arise than it gives way to gripping anxiety as you realise that not only are you there, but you are there alone and you must act. Your breath becomes short as this realisation takes hold outside the international terminal. In a matter of seconds you find yourself surrounded by an onslaught of shouting taxi drivers, hotel representatives and small children with big eyes and open hands. You reach for your sunglasses and hide behind the safety of dark lenses. The sounds of car horns and revving engines, slamming doors, ringing cell phones, jets roaring overhead, twanging sitar music and electronic drum beats blaring from cheap speakers erupt and enter your porous body from all sides. Other bodies touch you and faces appear in vivid detail as a multitude of voices compete to be heard over the clamour:

"Where you go, I take you!" "Very cheap good sir!" "Rupees, hello, rupees please!" Beep! Beep! Beep! "Best guesthouse in Kathmandu!" "Very nice hotel, take a look." Slam! "Cheap for you!" "Ganja? Girls?" Bang! "Hello my friend! How are you?" "My friend!"

A disruption in the normal order of things first solicits us in terms of pathos or affect as a kind of pre-reflexive suffering or irritation. As Waldenfels (2006/2011, p. 53) writes: "We are touched by others before being able to ask who they are and what their expressions mean. The alienness of the Other overcomes and surprises us, disturbing our intentions before being understood in this or that sense". Brushing against foreign bodies, some grabbing you by the arm, you wander through the crowd in search of a man with a sign for the Hotel Vajra, where weeks before you had made an online reservation and were promised an airport pickup. No such man or sign appears, and you realise that nobody is coming for you. The crowd seems to sense your confusion and diminishing energy, which only seems to excite them more. You find yourself surrounded, wandering with a multiplying number of bodies. Waist-high children

latch onto your legs and tug at your sleeves, begging for rupees.

Despite the kinetic intensity, the sadness and fear you feel in the face of this inhuman spectacle, you feign an air of cool. Behind your dark glasses, you focus on showing that none of this affects you. Finally you are carried away by a taxi. Gazing through the window, you ponder the low brick buildings and bright signs displaying unfamiliar script, the strange faces and colourful clothing of people in the streets, the emaciated dogs, meandering cows and piles of rubbish. The shock of arrival is marked by sensation and vehement emotion that should not be overlooked in favour of higher order thinking. As Russell (2006, p. 68) writes:

Any feeling, no matter how basic, is already a highly complicated event, though feelings, like the rest of our sensory apparatus, are highly integrated, organised, seamless, and for the most part, a relatively silent level of organization.

Sensing and feeling, as Waldenfels (2006/2011, pp. 51-52) says, could be called an “incarnate form of thinking” (*leibhaftig*), yet one which is not at our free disposal or reducible to voluntary decisions. Being affected and responding reveals the human as a being who moves and responds, but not purely by his or her own volition. The space moved through when travelling is not empty or immobile, but filled with other moving bodies, objects, buildings and machines, light and shadows, sounds and smells. Moreover, the Others that appear and solicit us are not necessarily external or secondary phenomena, but co-constitute a body’s relational subjectivity. As Waldenfels writes, “... my own body could be described as a half-alien body, charged by alien intentions, but also desires, projections, habits, affections, and violations, coming from others” (2006/2011, p. 56). We are thus not masters of our own house, because being-in-the-world is always being-with.

To be sure, how strongly affected travellers are by foreign situations varies, as my interviews confirmed. Nepal and India were experienced differently by different people, and this seemed to depend on a number of factors, including previous travel experience, personality type (e.g. introvert/extrovert, allocentric/idiocentric), levels of confidence and ontological security, age and rigidity of habits, the proximity of the home and alien cultures, sensitivity and anxiety thresholds, state of physical and mental health, and so on. Such factors dictate the relative openness to new experiences and ability to adapt and cope with adversity. Not all travellers were strongly affected by the shock of arrival, while others were. Marisa, a twenty-two year old New Yorker I met in

Darjeeling, explained how, upon arriving in Delhi, she spent the first three days locked in her hotel room:

I was too afraid to go out. I don't know exactly what happened, but I just got really freaked out when I arrived. I knew it would be intense, but you don't really know until you get here. I cried in my hotel room for three days, thinking I was going to have to go home. I thought I couldn't handle it. I felt depressed and really disappointed in myself. But I forced myself to go out, and, little by little, I learned that it wasn't so scary. I started small, by just walking around the neighbourhood around my guesthouse, gradually venturing further out. Eventually I passed through that phase, and now I feel pretty comfortable almost everywhere I go. I learned you just have to let go, get out of yourself, open yourself up and embrace the experience. India challenges you on so many levels. You gotta know how to handle yourself and manage your emotions in the face of all that intensity that is India.

Marisa was highly affected by her arrival in India, but gradually she passed through a phase of fear and apprehension and learned to “handle” herself and “open” herself to the experience. She was one of many travellers I met who spoke of India’s “intensity”. Asking if she could say what in particular had struck her as so intense, she replied:

You know, just the general chaos of India. It can be totally overpowering, especially at first. There's just so many people, so much noise and smells and weird, sometimes shocking, things going on. I mean, just walking down the street can be pretty overwhelming. All your senses are bombarded as you're taking in all the things going on around you. Sometimes I felt like I was hallucinating. It's just so ... different. I mean, for the Indians I guess it's normal, but when you're coming from a country like the US, it feels pretty intense and chaotic. You see things here you would not see back home. The poverty can be really disturbing, and the beggars with missing limbs, it's heart-breaking. And you feel powerless. I cried a lot during the first few weeks. But there is also so much beauty and wisdom here, so many small, profound moments that make you just stop and think. India is so alive. When you're here, you can't help but become caught up in all that life. There's a rawness to life you don't get back home. You don't really have much choice other than to embrace it, 'cause it's in your face from the

moment you arrive, as soon as you step out onto the street.

I heard many accounts similar to Marisa's initial impressions of India. While arrival takes place on the level of the lived body, this does not mean that it is fresh experience thrown onto a blank canvas. Firstly, travel is an embodied activity pursued in historically and politically defined places (Clifford, 1997, p. 8), meaning that the conditions of possibility of any journey are contingent on past configurations that, in a sense, pre-structure the present (Luhmann, 1971/1982). Secondly, and on a more micro level, individual travellers, whether tourist or ethnographer, bring culturally specific attitudes, discourses, imaginaries and embodied dispositions to the places they visit. This means that even immediate, corporeal access to other cultures, places and reality in general is always already mediated, and that there thus is no "pure experience".¹ Hence, foreign travel is relevant to phenomenology and anthropology in that it reveals the role that specific environments play in shaping the perceptions, practices and preconceptions of their inhabitants. As will be discussed in the next section, travellers experience disruptions or breakdowns in alien worlds because much of the tacit knowledge that is valid in the home world is suddenly called into question under new practical conditions.

Out of Practice: Embodied Learning through "Light Breaks"

Exercising a phenomenological epoché – the bracketing or suspension of what might be more accurately called the "cultural attitude" (Duranti, 2010, p. 18) – I attended to travellers' responses to not only highly affective events, but to everyday situations that challenged their, and also my own, practical sense.

A break or breakdown designates a rupture in experience. Husserl (1913/2012) distinguishes between "light breaks", as slight disruptions of normal experience in which things do not quite coincide (*stimmtnicht*) with previous experience, and "heavy breaks", which are major disruptions and "limit situations" (*Grenzsituation*), such as the death of a loved one or a devastating natural disaster (Steinbock, 1995, pp. 240-241). While breakdowns

¹ See Figal (2014) for an outline of what he terms "phenomenological realism" (as opposed to naïve realism). Figal argues that "reality is always given only in representation, that is, mediated by our access to it, but is not itself representation. It is an objectivity opposed to ourself, it has a particular place and it appears, but its appearance does not belong to the subject, it is simply there. Therefore, appearances are spatial and have to be described as such" (p. 15).

have been discussed fairly widely in anthropology (see, for instance, Biddle, 1993; Davies & Spencer, 2010; Jackson, 2009; Throop, 2010), much of it owing an explicit debt to phenomenology, there has been a tendency to focus on serious breakdowns associated either with fieldwork in radically unfamiliar environments or with the shocks and suffering associated with war, disease and other traumatic events. During my fieldwork on the intersections of tourism and pilgrimage in India and Nepal, what caught my attention were the innumerable "light breaks" that took place in practical, everyday situations, such as eating, bathing, interacting with locals, and finding one's way around. While such mundane tasks go largely unnoticed in the home world, I discovered that they can take on new meanings and even spiritual dimensions under different circumstances.

The act of bathing, for instance, took on new significance in Nepal and India, where plentiful hot water, modern plumbing and electricity could not be taken for granted. I learned this on my second day in Kathmandu, when I became trapped in a guesthouse shower during one of the city's rolling power outages. Lathered with soap, I suddenly found that the common bathroom had gone pitch black. I was not particularly distressed until the door latch broke and fell into ankle deep water, leaving me trapped in the shower stall. Crouching, I eventually recovered the latch, but in the darkness could not manage to refit it and free myself. I stood in the dark shower stall yelling for nearly twenty minutes before two men from the hotel arrived and demanded that I come out of the shower. Explaining that I would happily come out if I could, they used tools to pry the door, which eventually swung open, and found my naked body illuminated in the beams of their flashlights. Rather than offering an apology or explanation, the men seemed irritated and left muttering to one another. More dumbfounded than anything, I later reflected on how they must have been saying, "What kind of idiot gets himself stuck in a shower during a power cut?" And, in the context of Nepal, I supposed they had a point. A local surely would have known better. But, in the home world from which I had recently arrived, taking a shower was predictable and required little conscious attention, given that, as William James observed, "consciousness goes away from where it is not needed" (cited in Searle, 1992, p. 139). Yet, suddenly, greater attention and adjusted bodily techniques were required for bathing in Nepal, as I went on to discuss with Mike, a Londoner I met in Pokhara. He referred to the "bucket showers" he had gradually become accustomed to in Nepal:

At first I remember feeling like I was washing an animal, but it turned out that animal was me. I guess it's the way you have

to sit – crouching down naked – and pouring the bucket over yourself. When you're not used to encountering yourself like this, it's rather strange, feels a bit primitive. But actually I've learned to enjoy my bucket showers. I definitely don't take water for granted like I probably do at home. Back in London I could stay in the shower for ridiculous amounts of time. But here I've learned to be quick and efficient, and to appreciate water more, because it's limited and sometimes not available at all. At some of the places I stayed on the trek [the Annapurna circuit], you got a single bucket of ice water to wash yourself with. At first it seemed pretty rough, but you get used to it. You realize how much we take these basic but vital things for granted.

In many Nepalese guesthouses, the “geysers” (a small water heater) installed in the bathrooms typically produced one or two buckets of hot water, and even this was often contingent on the erratic power supply. In more remote mountain locations, as Mike pointed out, it was not uncommon to bathe with a limited supply of ice-cold water. This meant travellers such as he quickly learned to conserve and appreciate every drop of hot water, thus altering the way they relate to “basic but vital things” largely taken for granted in the developed world. Secondly, the foreign practice of squatting naked and pouring a bucket over one's body in what would be considered rudimentary facilities by western standards afforded a different relation to one's own body. Mike's feeling of “washing an animal” suggests he experienced his body as an almost foreign object. Bathing differently not only disrupted his habitual practice by creating a “light break” in his familiar body-world relation, but it also facilitated a reflexive self-distance that caused him to readjust his practice and attitude towards “basic but vital things”.²

As Bourdieu (1979/1984, 1972/2002) has shown, what social actors perceive as normal and self-evident, along with what they find aesthetically pleasing, are relative to particular sociocultural fields. Like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu seeks to overcome subject-object bifurcations, arguing that knowledge schemes and perceptions do not exist in the mind as representations, but are embodied structures (re)produced through socialisation and enculturation processes. *Habitus* – described as a “feel for the game” – is based not on conscious mastery of rules or mental representations, but on tacit knowledge and strategies acquired through

² See Ingerslev (2013) for a detailed analysis of the relationship between bodily self-consciousness and self-distance.

embodied practice (Bourdieu, 1980/1990a, p. 63) and “pre-reflexive, naïve, native compliance with the fundamental presuppositions of the field” (Bourdieu, 1982/1990b, p. 68). The practical sense required to successfully navigate everyday life is thus a matter more of *knowing how* than of *knowing that*.

This is close to Heidegger's notion that being-in-the-world is a matter of “skilful coping” that is reliant on tacit knowledge built up through repeated practice and habits. When ongoing, non-reflective engagement in an activity is disturbed and our absorption broken, an aspect of experience becomes “lit up” (Heidegger, 1927/2010, pp. 62-76). The hammer or shower that is typically “ready-to-hand” becomes “present-at-hand” only when something has gone wrong. Dewey similarly observes how “the more suavely efficient a habit, the more unconsciously it operates” and “only a hitch in its workings occasions emotion and provokes thought” (in Dreyfus, 1991, p. 70). The significance of such “light breaks” is that, by challenging engrained habits, they force actors to adjust and expand their practices and take a reflexive stance towards a world that can no longer be taken for granted. As Yann, a German traveller I met in Sikkim, commented, “*India is all about challenging your assumptions*”. He explained how he found that, in India, a sign for a bus stop does not necessarily mean that a bus will stop there:

I waited at this “bus stop” [quotation marks hand sign] only to watch buses zoom by in clouds of dust and honking horns. In Germany, this would never happen. In fact we have digital clocks which tell us exactly when the bus will arrive. And it always arrives when it says it will. But in India ... nothing is ever this clear. I watched the locals, who give a little signal and just jump right on the bus wherever, sometimes while it's still moving. So, I imitated them. That's how it's done here.

In his essay, “The Stranger”, Schütz (1944) observes how, at home, cultural patterns offer readymade “directions for use” and “trustworthy recipes for interpreting the social world”. This allows everyday “thinking as usual” to go largely unnoticed and unquestioned (p. 501). Yet, by crossing a threshold, strangers or travellers encounter disturbances to the *doxa* and *habitus* they have acquired in, and bring from, the home world. Outside of the realm of the familiar, the stranger is “no longer permitted to consider himself at the centre of his social environment”, an experience which “causes a dislocation of his contour lines of relevance” (Schütz, 1944, p. 504). While the thwarting of expectations may bring about a sense of disorientation and even ontological insecurity, it also generates new forms of enquiry and experience.

The ways in which liminal travellers were challenged were largely in the basic spheres of everyday life, and, interestingly enough, these were the experiences that seemed most highly significant to the travellers I met. As Andreas, a traveller from Berlin whom I met in a Dharamsala café, reflected:

Travelling is like normal life, but more concentrated. In India, you start seeing all these small things you never pay attention to at home. You wake up to life, and that's the refreshing thing about being here. You don't even need to go looking for things ... interesting and amazing things are happening all around!

Given their interest and attention to “things”, the travellers I met sometimes sounded like amateur phenomenologists. It is important to remember that leisured travellers are in liminal positions, removed from the social roles and structures, habitual routines and relationships that define and keep them busy at home. While habits and routines serve a practical function by freeing us from the burden of constant thinking and problem solving, they also dull the senses and with age become what Beauvoir calls a “lifeless requirement” (Rodier, 2013). This helps explain why being removed from the home world allows the conditions for, as Andreas put it, “waking up to life”. As practising subjects, we are required to learn and adapt to our environments. For Dewey, all experience is a form of learning; we learn by doing, and we especially learn when we are challenged. Facing challenge is, however, not a singular process, but involves the dynamic interplay of habit, thought and emotion. Cohen (2007, p. 777) explains the process originally proposed by Dewey as follows:

Challenge arises when emotions are engaged by a task and established habits are insufficient to accomplish it. Cognitive powers are then mobilized to diagnose the reasons for the breakdown and to redeploy capabilities in new combinations that may be expected to succeed. As we endlessly repeat this cycle of emotionally engaged perception and activity, periodically interpreted by breakdowns and cognitively intense repair work, it generates a vast repertoire of reasonably effective – and mutually coherent – habits.

The experience of foreign travel, despite being voluntary leisure, involves work of another kind. Marisa, for example, struggled with anxiety and confusion when she first arrived in India. By the time we crossed paths in Darjeeling, she had been travelling for approximately four months in India and was en route to Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet. Sipping a cup of tea, she exuded a worldly confidence that

made it difficult to imagine her crying in a hotel room for three days. She had remarked that it was crucial to “know how to handle yourself and manage your emotions in the face of all that intensity that *is* India”. Months after we had both returned from our respective travels, Marisa wrote in an e-mail: “*New York is easy after India. Everything is easy after India*”. This all suggests that she had been challenged, and, through a series of minor breakdowns and repairs, she had adapted and learned to cope in the alien worlds she encountered, ultimately emerging transformed by the experience.

Expanding Horizons: Embodying Cosmopolitanism

Travel is a form of practice, and it takes practice to become well-travelled. Jason, my weeklong travelling companion in Nepal, was a good example of a well-travelled person who had cultivated an embodied cosmopolitanism (Germann Molz, 2006). Originally from California, Jason lived in Phnom Penh, where he worked for the Cambodian government as an environmental planner. Prior to this he had lived in China and, before that, Indonesia. He was fluent in three Asian languages and, despite his tall stature and Anglo-Saxon appearance, did not seem to stand out like most freshly arrived travellers did. It was his body hexis, the way he carried himself and interacted with others, that demonstrated that he was a person who was highly adaptable, flexible and comfortable in a wide variety of circumstances. For instance, Jason described the nine hour bus ride we met on between Kathmandu and Pokhara as “smooth as an airplane”, whereas I found it terribly bumpy and uncomfortable. In our walks around Pokhara and Kathmandu, I noticed that he interacted with ease with locals, whether while buying fruit, bargaining with taxi drivers or encountering beggars. As opposed to other tourists, who often appeared nervous and/or confused and clearly out of place, Jason seemed comfortable and confident in these everyday scenarios. And yet this had not always been the case:

On my first trip to India, when I was in my early twenties, I was pretty freaked out by the whole place. I got sick and didn't get to know it as deeply as I would've liked to. But on this trip, it kind of clicked. You have to find the right rhythm in India in order to penetrate deeper into the culture. You have to be in sync with the energy; otherwise it can completely overwhelm you. But once you get it, once you learn how to be comfortable and engage with people, it's absolutely great. I can see why people keep going back. India takes time. It's an acquired taste. But I really dig it. I'm sure I'll be coming back. I think this was probably one of more trips to come for me.

Acquiring a taste for something means gaining an appreciation though gradual, repeated experience. Many travellers, like Jason, spoke of figuring out the “right rhythm” in India or Nepal. Like building up an acquired taste for certain flavours, this took time and repeated exposure, adjusting to new practical conditions and learning how to cope skilfully. For travellers, finding the rhythm meant knowing how to handle themselves comfortably and confidently in everyday situations. Syncing to local rhythms was a crucial element for what Jason called “penetrating deeper into the culture” and enjoying the experience. In this sense, being well-travelled means being challenged by situations of difference and cultivating not just a “flexible eye” (Germann Molz, 2005)³ but a *flexible body* that is equipped for coping skilfully in diverse environments.

Concluding Remarks: Travel as Embodied Dialogue between Worlds

Foreign travel, as discussed here, is an experience in which home-worldly subjects find themselves out of place and practice. The embodied knowledge schemes and culturally specific interpretative frames travellers bring to foreign environments can be related to the hermeneutic notion of “prejudices” (Gadamer, 1960/2004). Like habitus and doxa, as manifestations of a subject’s “embodied history” (Bourdieu, 1982/1990b, p. 56), prejudices shape understandings and self-definitions. However, these fore-meanings remain largely unconscious and implicit until there is a rupture or breakdown in normal experience. Just as dialogue can call our knowledge and beliefs into question by showing us that other possibilities exist, so too can travelling in alien worlds.

It is the encounter and dialogue we carry out with the Other that expands our horizons and allows for self-knowledge (Gadamer, 1960/2004). Explaining what a third trip to India meant for her, a twenty-four year old Swiss traveller named Katia explained:

*I expect to know myself even better than today.
I also expect to know about life, people,
society, values. I look forward to seeing nice*

³ By “flexible eye”, Germann Molz proposes that a particular cosmopolitan perspective is derived through mobility, detachment and multiplicity, as opposed to rootedness or national affiliation. Analysing internet travel narratives of round-the-world travellers, she demonstrates how encounters with difference can produce cosmopolitan virtues proceeding from tolerance to interconnectedness and cultural understanding. While the metaphor of a “flexible eye” does imply an eye that is already fixed or trained (i.e. culturally mediated), I would argue that it overemphasizes the visual while neglecting other senses, affect, and the embodied practices that constitute much of the travel experience itself.

*colours, true smiles, uncomfortable life ...
commodities. I like to get over my limit and
India is the country for that.*

Overcoming perceived limitations, experiencing other ways of life and expanding horizons were oft-cited reasons for journeys of this type. Being exposed to challenging, uncomfortable or even dangerous situations, travelling can be seen as a form of learning that follows the ancient formula of *matheín – patheín*, “learning through suffering”. As Yann reflected on his three months of travelling through northern India:

*It’s been a hard trip. I can’t say it’s been so
fun. Actually, I suffered a lot. But I have
learned many things, and this seems to be the
point of coming here. I didn’t come to India
on a spiritual journey or pilgrimage. If I can
say why I came and what I will take from this
experience, it is perspective. I’m sure I will
see my life in Germany quite differently when
I return, for the good and the bad.*

Departing from the relative predictability of the home world, western travellers such as Katia, Yann and others embraced challenge and risk as necessary ingredients for not only self-knowledge, but self-transcendence.⁴ This is not to say that there was no pleasure or enjoyment involved in such journeys; most people were very positive about their experiences despite the various hardships they faced. As a ritual process, tourism and pilgrimage are predicated largely on potentiality and transition, which result from crossing thresholds and assuming a liminal position (Turner, 1973). And yet, rather than relating to reaching specific sites or end goals, the self-transcendence respondents described often took place in the realm of everyday embodied practice. The “light breaks” travellers experienced when faced with “uncomfortable life” led to a “waking up to life” and greater awareness of “basic but vital things”. Thus, rather than participating in institutionalised pilgrimage or spiritual practices, visiting famous sites or standing atop a particular mountain, it was the everyday practices of material life that typically led travellers to describe their Himalayan journeys as transformative. As one traveller put it, seeing and experiencing how the Sherpas live in their rugged, high altitude environment was even more significant than reaching the base-camp of Mount Everest. Other Himalayan trekkers made similar statements, praising what they perceived as simpler, slower, less materialistic and more authentic and spiritually rich lives than those in the West. Liminal encounters with

⁴ See Lyng (2012) for a related discussion of existential transcendence achieved through a combination of high risk practices he calls “edgework” and hermeneutic reflexivity in late modernity.

Himalayan environments and alternative modes of dwelling revealed that radically other ways of being-in-the-world exist. This realisation, achieved through movement, embodied practice and reflexivity, manifested a form of secular self-transcendence grounded in material life.

Encounters with different forms of life not only illustrate the role of the lived body in travel experience, but indirectly affirms the existence of a habitus. Contra postmodern claims that, with the increasing movement of not only people and goods, but information, place and home are now a matter of mere nostalgia, the body subject always comes from

some place. Scholars interested in mobility should not overlook the fact that, during their formative stages of development, most people are moored in a particular place where language, culture and techniques of the body are acquired. Although nomadic modes of “dwelling-in-travel” (Clifford, 1997) are certainly more possible in the twenty-first century than ever before, this does not mean that place and the embodied dispositions acquired in place are cancelled out, as is demonstrated by the travelling body out of practice. At the same time, accumulated travel experience shows that, while the habitus is indeed a set of durable dispositions, it is written in flesh rather than stone.

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