

WHERE DO YOU BELONG?

AN EXPLORATION INTO THE
'TRANS- GEOGRAPHIC'
STATE, FELT BY PEOPLE
WHO BELIEVE THEY WERE
BORN IN THE WRONG
PLACE



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Abstract

The notion of “trans-gender” is well known, it represents those who do not feel that they “fit” within the cultural constraints of the gender they were assigned at birth, but what if we could also be “trans-geographic” in that we do not feel that we “fit” within the space and society where we have grown up?

This research explores the views of a handful of informants on their personal experiences and perspectives of different cultures and why and how they relate their sense of “belonging” to somewhere other than the place where they have mostly lived their life. During the research, the experiences of Dr Gregory Smith came to light and through personal communication it was also possible to include the theories which his research and experiences had uncovered in this process. This research was inspired however, by the desire to explore my own sense of “belonging” to a culture and land other than that where I was born and grew up. Therefore, this is mainly an auto-ethnographic exploration of my own sense of “belonging” to Amsterdam and unpicks the reasons why such a “trans-geographic” state has manifested. These views are then compared to those of the other informants to see whether each case has separate personal reasons for this, or whether there are recurring themes which influence the “trans-geographic” state occurring, such as “belonging”, *communitas*, kinship, cultural norms, psychological factors, environmental impact and cosmopolitanism.

This is therefore an exploration filled with reflexive views of self and others, of one culture versus another and most of all of how environmental factors are integral to our sense of “belonging”.

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Helen Pulman-Slater: thank you for keeping me sane

Friends: "you can't call a person without wings angels, so we call them friends"

Dr Gregory Smith: thank you for your correspondence.

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Mr 'King Dread' James Basjoe: thank you for looking after me when you did not have too. I love and miss you! I get very upset every time I walk past your old shop. I will never forget you, peace cousin!

List of Photographic Plates and Maps

Plates

Plate 1: View of Amsterdam, *Holland.com*. [online]

<https://www.holland.com/global/tourism/destinations/amsterdam.htm> (accessed 14th July 2020) (Title Page)

Plate 2: View of the Nieuwmarkt in the city of Amsterdam [online] Microsoft Word online image. Photograph by Unknown Author, licensed under CC BY-SA (accessed 2nd august 2020)

Plate 3: View of the centre of Shrewsbury town centre [online] Microsoft Word online image. Photograph by Unknown Author, licensed under CC BY-SA (accessed 2nd august 2020)

Plate 4: View of a Menorcan street at night-time [online] Microsoft Word online image. Photograph by Unknown Author, licensed under CC BY (accessed 2nd august 2020)

Contents

Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
List of Photographic Plates and Maps	iii
Introduction	1
Methodology.....	2
Main Themes and Theories.....	3
Culture and environmental factors	3
<i>An introduction to each place</i>	3
Interpersonal relationships	5
<i>Amsterdam, Netherlands</i>	5
Political Perspectives.....	8
Belief systems	9
Cosmopolitanism	9
Communitas and Liminality	10
Ethnographic Findings	10
Auto ethnography.....	10
Informants	12
Informant A.....	12
Informant B.....	13
Informant C	13
Informant D	14
Case study: Dr Gregory Smith.....	16
Critical Analysis	17
Conclusions.....	18
References.....	19
Appendices	22
Appendix 1: Introduction to Research and Consent Form.....	22
Appendix 2: Questions asked of informants	24

Introduction

This dissertation will explore the term “trans-geographic” which has been newly coined for the purpose of this piece of research. What this term represents is the feeling of belonging elsewhere to where you have been born. This concept initially developed after conversations with friends about a personal love of the Netherlands, especially its capital Amsterdam, and the sense of “belonging” that these location offers, in comparison to any other place personally experienced. There are as we know people who are trans-sexual or trans-gender, they feel like, or in some cases know deep down inside, that they belong in a different body (OutLife, 2020). Similarly, I feel like I belong in a different place or home, hence trans-geographic is the most reliable term that has been available to explain this sense of being.

For my entire life I have always felt a bit out of place, for instance not feeling that I belonged where I was born, which is the town of Shrewsbury in England. When nineteen, I first visited Amsterdam on a “lad’s” holiday, it changed my life. I knew that it was not any old place but did not yet understand why. As soon as the plane landed there was a sense of relief, like a massive weight had been lifted of my shoulders, I had become comfortable and at ease, feeling able to tackle whatever the day and the world could throw at me; this is a feeling that I still get and feel every time I arrive there. After visiting (to date twelve times) I began to question the reasons why such a strong feeling emerges there, and this research hopes to find answers to this.

This research is largely autoethnographic and will primarily focus on reflexive perspectives of experiences encountered during the last ten years of my life, with some additional aspects going back to earlier memories. It will also have some input from other informants via interviews and research, looking at their own similar experiences. The themes being considered in the analysis of why people develop trans-geographic viewpoint are the influence of cultural norms, political perspectives and the influence of the physical environment plus its fauna and flora.

Many people have been spoken with about this concept and some have expressed the same feelings about Amsterdam and one source focuses upon Menorca. These people are both male and female ranging in age from twenty up to sixty, all of British origin. Feedback from these informants upon their views of Amsterdam and the Netherlands will add to this research, in addition a secondary location to be explored as a comparison will be the island of Menorca, just off the coast of Spain, which is the place of “belonging” for another informant. There is one additional informant who is less connected to a particular country or town, but more to a specific environment, his input will also be used as a comparison to reflect upon with regards to whether culture or environment have the strongest influence upon the trans-geographic state. There are some other extra informants involved with regard to these places who are mostly people originating from Britain but also include some sources from the Netherlands; all information from informants was accessed through interviews.

The main place that this paper will be focussing upon is the capital of the Netherlands, Amsterdam, and will be compared to Shrewsbury in England to consider why one is more attractive than the other. The main aim of this

research is to determine whether trans-geographic is actually a viable term, and equally to explore the term itself, trying to find some answers and guidance to my own life.

The main themes section will consider the cultural, political and environmental factors which may impact on the discussion of trans-geography and these themes and theories will then form the structure for the ethnographic findings and critical analysis sections before conclusions can be made.

Methodology

Through largely autoethnographic reflection and interviews with informants, this paper aims to explore and attempt to find an answer or outcome to the feeling I have of belonging to another place. In short it will cover belonging, *communitas*, kinship, culture, psychology, cosmopolitanism, reflexivity and auto-ethnography. This study has been a work in progress for the last three years academically but has been a consideration for the last ten years and is likely to continue for the rest of my life. It particularly focuses on the sense and feeling of belonging elsewhere to where you were born or live and is a predominantly auto-ethnographic piece. Such types of research require a great deal of reflection on the self and this can be an emotional experience therefore there is a duty of care for myself as much as any other informant with regards to how much can be disclosed and what the consequences of a breadth of disclosure may be. Auto-ethnographic research requires a great deal of reflexivity to avoid asking leading questions of informants and of interpreting findings in a biased way due to the close connection with the subject, therefore this has been assessed regularly throughout the research process.

The main informant group for this research are adults ageing from eighteen up to sixty, consisting of males and females from Britain and the Netherlands. The data collection methods used are informal group interviews, informal one to one interviews which are recorded, open qualitative questions (appendix 2), participant observation, a reflective journal, autoethnographic observation, case studies and reflection and secondary supportive evidence from academic theories and theorists.

Risk management was taken into consideration when conducting all research, first and foremost the safety and wellbeing of all informants, secondly to minimize risk to the participants' anonymous status. After completing the research, this written work has been mindful of minimizing the chances of participants identities from being revealed. All recordings and notes were kept stored away safely in a locked cabinet and destroyed after the research process was complete; the ASA and UWTSD research and ethical guidelines were adhered to throughout.

Informants were asked to read a research statement of intent and sign consent forms (appendix 1), either handed out in person, or sent by email, prior to answering any questions or offering any input to the study. Where this was not possible verbal consent was recorded including a full explanation by myself of what the

research entailed and how it was to be stored and utilized, plus the confidentiality of any disclosures from informants. All informants were offered a complete copy of the final paper on request.

The most recent visit to Amsterdam was the most reflective period of study of all visits to the city, due to the questions raised by this research causing a new way of seeing what had previously been taken for granted. It was noticed that this made the experience even more emotional than it had previously. Being so immersed in the research questions of myself and others with regard to Amsterdam clarified the reasons which underpinned the importance of the place for myself and the other informants and this made it very difficult to leave and created a highly emotional response to the loss. Critical analysis of an experience can often cause a removed perspective from the personal experience and apply logic to the reasons why individuals (even the self) respond to certain things in certain ways. However, in this instance the feeling of not wanting to leave strengthened the original thesis of the study and indicated that the sense of belonging in the Netherlands is deeply engrained on many levels and rationalised analysis only increases this.

The perspectives from the informant who identifies trans-geographically as belonging in Menorca were selected as a comparison as the landscape and cultural influences are quite different to those from Amsterdam. Similarly, the perspectives of a further informant who identifies as belonging to a specific environment, in this case a forest, offered another perspective for comparison. This collection of different states of trans-geography help to assess the different influences offered by culture versus landscape to understand what role they each play in a trans-geographic state arising. The individual perspectives on these factors were then assessed using related key anthropological themes and theories to try to understand why the notion of trans-geography may manifest in a person.

Main Themes and Theories

This section will go into the themes and theories that are relevant to this research, ranging from cultural and environmental factors to interpersonal relationships.

Culture and environmental factors

Cultural and environmental factors can possibly impact greatly on a sense of belonging, simply not liking the look of a place or the people that are there can influence where a sense of belonging can develop or not. The cultural rules surrounding a place also are a contributing factor to this as if we do not like or understand them then we are unlikely to be content with where we are.

An introduction to each place

The Netherlands, like Britain, has historically made itself on trade, for example the East India Trading Company, South Africa, Indonesia and Suriname are all Dutch colonies; the Afrikaans language is the daughter language of

Dutch, and Dutch is the official language of Suriname; influences from all of these locations has therefore impacted upon a lot of cultural diversity in the Netherlands (Hogan-Brun, Mar-Molinero and Stevenson, 2009) Today the Netherlands is a very diverse place, which is full of very individualistic people from all walks of life (Subeliani and Tsogas, 2005). The Dutch are a very proud and straight forward people, they get to the point and they are very efficient with what they do and say, and how they do and say it (Expatica, 2020). The landscape of the Netherlands (the Lowlands is a common translation of this) is famously very flat much like Norfolk in England, the city of Amsterdam itself has very long streets with crossing alleyways and many side streets, each separated by canals and bridges (burgs). The architecture is very distinctive with tall narrow buildings built on stilts causing them to often lean slightly.

My birthplace of Shrewsbury in Shropshire England is a very hilly agricultural place, two to three hours' drive from the sea, full of traditional buildings and ways of life, farmers and urban families walk the same streets and do the same things. This is a very 'conservative' town, having mainly white British families with a small number of other races and cultures living there ranging from Irish, eastern European, Africans, Asians and former Gurkhas (Shropshire government website, 2017) The hilly nature of the landscape makes it very tiring navigating the town centre, but it makes for a nice view with the street lined with cobbled roads and Tudor buildings and even a medieval sandstone castle in the centre of town.

Menorca is a small island off the coast of Spain and, like Spain, has quite a hilly landscape, but also has its fair share of flat areas; it is a very warm and windy place. It remains a traditional Spanish island with summer festivals reigning supreme and it is best known for its ancient Neolithic standing stones, and the people having a relaxed way of life, enjoying the sunshine and good food and wine that comes with it (Informant D's observations)

The concept of landscape is potentially hardwired into human beings, and Arhem (1998: 78-103) puts forward the idea that different indigenous groups on the globe have the same perspectives. Western culture may have moved away from that relationship with nature and landscape, at least within their theoretical values, but it can still be important in a subliminal way, because we are all humans with the same origins, we all have a need and a want for the bare essentials of life, water, food and companionship (Jones, 2007) These things require us to go and hunt, farm, or work to earn food and water and not having them creates anxiety and fear.

A forest can offer a place of habitation, even in this ever growing modern world of concrete, it is a place where cultural interaction is almost non-existent, people can go there and live and have all of their needs taken care of by themselves and not be bothered or have to even see another person.

Modern Western cultures rely on historic factors to make sense of themselves and their values (Edwards, 1998: 147). History adds to culture, it enforces the people's comfort in their own culture history and traditions and in turn keeps these alive. Architecture is an example of how this is represented; literally the buildings, streets, and everything in the towns reflect cultural values. In Amsterdam, there is a rich diversity of examples of architecture,

from grand royal palaces to small houseboats, all of which are intertwined in traditions and culture as can be witnessed in the Kings Day celebrations there.

Interpersonal relationships

Events in many cultures represent a social interactive time, such as Christmas and Easter in Christianised communities, such as the Netherlands and Britain, football matches and school, or other community events which are annual norms of the smaller localised traditions. Many of these occasions bring families and local communities together with a single cause to celebrate and they can often include gift giving and performance and other social exchanges which build a reciprocal and respectful community (Ashley, 2004).

Amsterdam, Netherlands



Plate 2: View of the Nieuwmarkt in the city of Amsterdam (Unknown Author, 2020)

In Amsterdam there are many social interactions that occur which create a sense of community (Muller, 2011). The city is laid out in what looks like a “wonky” bullseye, a central square with long streets and canals and many side streets and alleyways, as mentioned before the buildings are tall and slightly askew. There are many markets in the city, the largest in Europe being the Albert Cuyp market, people from all over the country come to buy and sell all sorts of things ranging from fish to flowers, cheese and fresh produce (The Albert Cuyp market,

2020) . With Amsterdam being a coastal city naturally there is a big trading and fishing community, and this is further enforced by the Dutch love for preserved or pickled fish (Unger, 1980).

The city is renowned for its arts culture, the many museums and art galleries including the Vincent van Gogh museum (Van Gogh Museum, 2020; Rijks Museum, 2020). Nowadays all these factors contribute to a lot of micro-cultures within the city itself. The Dutch also have an annual national celebration known either as “kings” or “queens” day (depending on which gender the current monarch is), it is usually at the end of April when the weather is starting to warm up, the entire country descends onto the streets and canals for a nationwide street party. Drinking and music is the order of the day as well as wearing bright orange and decorating your homes and vehicles in anything orange. This is because the Dutch royal family are the house of orange (The Royal Family. Holland.com) this is a result of the Dutch revolt against the Spanish, the succeeding Dutch royal family were the royal house of Orange-Nassau; carrots were originally black or purple and were bred orange in honour of William of Orange and they are the norm for such a common food today (Winston, 2015; Craig, 2015).

Shrewsbury, Britain



Plate 3: View of the centre of Shrewsbury town centre (Unknown Author, 2020)

The town is a traditional market town, a central church with lots of streets coming out of the centre. Streets with names like Fish Street, Market Street, Butcher’s Row, all still exist and were once well known for trading in their

respective fields which match their names. Now these same streets are modernized but still retain their Tudor buildings and cobbled streets and Fish Street still holds its traditional name but in the form of a pub by the name of The Three Fishes (Original Shrewsbury, 2018). Each year the Christmas market is held in the Market Square which brings people together for trading and interaction; even if these people do not believe in the origins of Christmas, it is still a time of year for togetherness (Hirschman and LaBarbera, 1989). There is a big drinking culture in the town, attributed to the many pubs that line the cobbled streets. The pub is centre to a lot of people lives, whether it is the pub themselves is a family income or weather the pub is a place for celebration for birthdays or anniversaries; most people will go to a pub very regularly as a part of life.

Menorca



Plate 4: View of a Menorcan street at night-time. (Unknown Author, 2020)

Interestingly some Menorcan towns are laid out similarly to Amsterdam and Shrewsbury, if you look at their maps, the designs and layouts of the towns are remarkably similar, a central church with radiating streets coming out from the centre.

The island is primarily made up of Menorcan with a few expats and other minorities, Informant D stated that “there are Spanish people from the mainland, there are people from South and Central America, not just from the Spanish speaking countries”. The primary jobs on the island seem to be the fishing and tourism industries, both provide a lot of jobs and income to the local economy. Although during the tourist off peak season which is October through to may, the locals primarily rely on the fishing industries and homeland jobs such as teachers, police, public transport workers etc

Political Perspectives

The political views and laws in the Netherlands make it a very appealing place for a lot of people, they have very relaxed laws on drugs such as cannabis and psilocybin mushrooms (Government of the Netherlands) making it for a lot of people who recreationally use these substances an appealing place. The Dutch view on sex workers and prostitution are also very relaxed as is evident by the infamous red-light district; people are not judged for paying for sex or sitting in a coffeeshop and smoking a "joint" (Buruma, 2001).

Political views in Shrewsbury are quite different, drugs are illegal (Government of Great Britain. 2020) and a lot of people do not like to see people engaging in such things in public, therefore this creates a lot of fear, anxiety and paranoia for those people, as there is always the worry of being arrested, a worry that is almost non-existent in the Netherlands (Buruma, 2001). Prostitution in the UK is a grey area, selling your body in the street is illegal but licensed massage parlours are legal, yet people are judged for visiting such establishments (Plumridge, Chetwynd, Reed, Gifford, 1996). There are some other cultural groups in Shrewsbury, but it is predominantly white Christian town, with strong traditions of old English ways and customs.

Political views in Menorca are a troubled subject largely due to the rule of General Franco, which was a bad time a lot of Spaniards, not just for Menorcans. There were significant difficulties experienced by the Catalan people during Franco's rule, the people of Catalan were persecuted in a way which was equivalent to how the Jewish people were by the Nazis, they were seen as an abomination and to be excluded from the general population. Catalan language was banned, just speaking it or even saying the word Catalan was enough to have you killed. People lived in fear for many years and now they are very committed to preserving their culture. There are one community in Menorca, the Menorquins, who say they are not Catalan nor are they Spanish, they speak a local dialect, a version of Catalan known as Menorquin, and stand very firmly behind their specific beliefs, being proud of their Menorcan heritage and that their family lines survived Franco's wrath.

Part of Menorcan identity is based upon its agricultural relationship with animals, with great emphasis being put into breeding horses on the island due to their involvement in the local festes and also travelling on horseback is the best way to get around the rocky coastline on the "cami des cavalls" which roughly translates to 'pathway of horses'. Menorca also has its own breed of cow which is unfortunately endangered probably impacted upon by the very obvious sign of the English period of settlement and rule being the abundance of Friesian cows which were introduced to the island by the British.

Menorcan people are also very proud of its food and drinks, it has its own gin, 'Gin Xoriguer', which rather than using grains to make alcohol, actually goes more down the wine route, making it a very different gin to any we would be used to and is very strong. This gin is mixed with bitter lemon to make "Pomada" the festival drink, used for most festes but very much a part of the Sant Joan Feste at the end of June, so much so that even children in pushchairs are given a very watered down version (informant D's observations).

Belief systems

The Dutch belief systems stem back to the 1600's in which the country was predominantly made up of Calvinists and Catholics, but today the country is made up predominantly of atheists and agnostics but still have influences of Calvinism in its culture's morals (Expatica, 2020)

The Dutch have a very liberal view on the world, they strongly believe in the "individual" and are very tolerant of things such as, homosexuality, prostitution, drug use (Buruma, 2001) and religion; this tolerance, which originates from Calvinism, dictates that Dutch people accept responsibility for their actions.

"The Netherlands has an egalitarian society. Status and respect are obtained through study and work and not through family ties or old age. Every person is equal and should be treated accordingly, which may be difficult for foreigners to understand." (Expatica, 2020)

Beliefs in Shrewsbury work largely around followers of the Church of England, people who are spiritual and atheist or agnostic. Christmas is still celebrated each year for most people along with the annual autumn harvest festival; giving and receiving are both a strong aspect in both traditions (Jones, 1942)

Menorca historically has a strong Catholic background, although prior to this its roots lie in the Neolithic peoples who once inhabited the island, and there are several archaeological sites with impressive stone structures and circles. Life on the island often centres around agriculture (especially horses) and tourism. There are a lot of expats living on the island giving which creates a level of diversity in the cultures who reside there.

Cosmopolitanism

"The term "cosmopolitanism" refers to a diverse family of positions that affirm some conception of world citizenship, understood either literally or metaphorically (Werbner, 2006). In current moral and political theory, the term often refers to the thesis that human beings are equal, combined with the idea that a theory of global justice should address the needs and interests of human individuals directly, rather than via their membership in states, however, some Stoic and neo-Stoic cosmopolitans were not egalitarians. Moreover, the term is also regularly used for very different views, such as a particular conception of a modern form of cultural identity, or a theory about the proper relations among the states in the world" (Kleingeld, 2016).

In short, cosmopolitanism is the idea that human beings can belong anywhere, people have the same shared experiences and predicaments, they find their own community with other people in other places than they are used to and face those experiences and problems together and find their community through that togetherness (Harvey, 2009). It leaves the individual with a feeling of belonging in which the user intimately knows the fabric of their world (Fine, 2007: 9). This is something which personally resonates, and seems also to be reflected by some informants, the Netherlands is my fabric and experienced alongside other people who are there engaging

in the same things each day, regardless of where they have originally come from; we experience the place together as one (Hannerz, 2007)

Communitas and Liminality

Communitas was first coined by Victor and Edith Turner in 1969, it refers to an unstructured state in which all people in the community are equal and are able to experience something or a place together as one. This is usually achieved by a rite of passage of sorts. Communitas is a symptom of liminality being shared and experienced together (Turner, 1974). Liminality refers to a state of ambiguity or disorientation that happens in the middle of a rite of passage when an individual no longer has the pre-ritual status, but has not yet transitioned into the new status that they will have when the rite is over (Turner, 1974).

Ethnographic Findings

Auto ethnography

A lot of thinking and deliberating has been engaged with, in relation to why I feel that I belong in the Netherlands. Even after extensive thinking and analysing it is still not easy to understand the full extent of feeling on the matter of trans-geography. It began long ago, always the feeling of being an outsider, of not quite fitting in. It is still hard to describe even after all these years; when first visiting the Netherlands, I had already visited other countries around the world, France, Austria, Germany, New Zealand and Canada, however, the moment that I first arrived in Holland a tremendous feeling of relief occurred, like a weight being lifted off my shoulders; a feeling that had never been experienced anywhere else. I felt at home, at ease and above all happy and content, for the first time. The first and second visits, although hectic, fast passed, and full of dramas, involving getting lost and trying not to get hit by bikes (which is still the case today as there are a lot of bikes there), were very fulfilling, especially to be in a place that allows such things as are illegal in other countries. The Netherlands is world famous for their tolerant attitudes towards sex and drugs and this can release the pressure caused for people who transgress such rules in Britain, where the illegality causes the requirement to keep elements of your character and life choices hidden. In Britain you can potentially go to prison for possession a small amount of cannabis (a few grams), so no matter where you go or what you do you are always living in that little bit of fear of being caught and arrested, which could have repercussions for a person's future, insofar as getting jobs or references for a house. The illegality creates fear and paranoia, this in some cases may cause a person to act suspiciously and to interact with what society sees as criminals, meaning that to perpetuates the stigma, turning people into criminals and making them associate with other criminals for the sake of imbibing of a recreational drug which can be argued as being less life threatening, or crime inducing than alcohol, which is legal. *Pot vs alcohol* is a *YouTube* clip of the late great Bill Hicks who had some interesting views on life with regard to this subject (Hicks, 1991).

In the Netherlands this anxiety is removed, people can possess and smoke small amounts of cannabis and access this in specially designated coffeeshops. They are almost always a very relaxed and chilled out environment, places for all kinds of people from all walks of life. For me, as someone with mental health problems, including paranoia, it feels very healing to be there, anxiety and paranoia is gone, and I am truly happy and free to be who I want to be (Van Villet, 1990). It could be argued that the paranoia experienced in Britain relates to the action or that it is caused by the transgressive and illegal status of the occupation (Tennant, Ray, 2002)

I found that being in Amsterdam cured me of my mental health problems, at least while I was there, although it was not until my third visit to the city that things noticeably changed. I was working as a voluntary cleaner at the Christian hostel on the outskirts of the red light district (Barndsteeg, close to the Nieuwmarkt) this time I was not a tourist, but rather living and working there, albeit for one month, but that month was all I needed. I found that living there was slightly different than being a tourist, as I went about my days, I saw different groups of tourists come and go yet I remained, it felt more like home than ever before. I saw my life as if I were living there permanently, I made good friends and became very fond and familiar with the city. Generally speaking, the Dutch people I found to be very similar to myself, straight to the point and efficient with how they say and do things, neither they nor myself “mince our words”, as my grandad used to say. I have found them to have a direct manner which is generally honest, and they almost always have an opinion on things and are happy to debate that opinion, rather than the British approach which is often to not say what we are really thinking and to hold it in, usually through fear of upsetting or offending people.

Values from a culture's history is important to the culture today and how it became that way; it cements a culture. People from a certain culture will retain their values and traditions because it makes them who they are; it makes them feel safe and secure. Through the Kings Day celebration the Dutch confirm their link with their own history and traditions as being important, it is something that the whole nation does every year, people decorate houses and boats, some people even decorate their bikes; looking down on the street on Kings Day and all you can see is bright orange. Flea markets and organised events are popular for the Dutch, which also strengthens the traditions and the gathering of people. Is there anything about their traditions and ways that I find appealing? Yes, personally I like the idea of working hard all year and once a year letting go of work and responsibilities and having a big party, socialising and having fun with people that I have built bonds with over the last year, strengthening those bonds with fun and excitement whilst it being in the name of the royal family that runs this country, I find that concept very comforting and just. The Dutch value hard work and recognition for that hard work, not being valued through family ties (Expatica, 2020). This is something in Britain that I was also raised with, growing up in a family of builders and being taught from a young age that it does not matter who you are or who you are related to, it is your quality of work and your commitment that gets you further in life. This is something which seems to strengthen my tie to a place; so, belonging does not necessarily relate to the place I was born. So, what is it about British culture that is not working for me? I cannot stand British drinking and football culture, going on a night out makes me feel incredibly anxious and unsettled, the drunken and cocaine

fuelled crowds of people make me not want to leave my home. These specific crowds of people do not seem to exist in Amsterdam, in all my travels there I have not witnessed it, and hence why I find it so appealing. Yes there are large groups of people in the streets and sat outside of bars but those same situations anywhere else in the world will cause me to have anxiety attacks, but in Amsterdam I recognize the panic in my mind but then it quickly dissipates and is gone, I walk past big crowds and can cope without becoming overwhelmed; the place appears to cure me of my mental health problems. I have never been a people person or very sociable whilst being in Britain, to be honest I do not like most people, I have my partner and my close circle of friends and I am happy anyone outside of that and I have little time for them. In the Netherlands I am happy and sociable, as my informants can attest.

Informants

There are 4 informants whose data is being used. Informant A, B, C, and D.

Informant A

Informant A has travelled to Amsterdam once and also once to Spain. The informant is from Britain and of Welsh decent. Informant A made some interesting points on multiple different subject areas. Concerning the concept of “home” they responded:

“Amsterdam has a certain feeling of home, even though it is only a place I have visited. I felt embraced by locals who were enthusiastic to help me immerse myself in their culture”.

“Previously, when I have travelled to other countries, factors like being unable to speak their language made me feel awkward but in Amsterdam there was a laidback feel to the city that helped me feel at ease”.

Another key aspect is the landscape in Amsterdam, the layout of the city, how clean it is and especially the presence of water and the canals, all of these aspects have been very calming influences. It was not until recently when talking with a friend that we concluded that there is the possibility that the flatness of the Netherlands may also be a contributing factor to me feeling so calm and at peace. This is something that informant A also commented on:

“In Amsterdam, the architecture of the buildings and the extensive canals were so different to that of any place I have visited or experienced in the UK it really drew me in and intrigued me to what the city had to offer. It made it enjoyable to explore and was visually very pleasing to the eye. However, the largest element of the landscape was the lack of pollution and general cleanliness of the city.”

Concerning the coffeeshops and red-light district, informant A stated:

“In Amsterdam it is legal to buy weed from ‘coffee shops’ which creates a safe space for those who may wish to take this recreational drug. However, in my hometown you often hear stories about

gang violence linked to this drug as it is illegal here. The eliminate of drug dealers and knowing people can use this drug in a regulated environment also made the city feel safer... the legalisation of prostitution and the safety that is provided to sex workers allows sex workers to work in an environment where they are protected. Currently in the UK it is illegal to run a brothel therefore prostitutes have to working on streets and illegal establishments. Women often fear seeking help from police when needed and their working environments are very unsafe. I would like to see similar legislation in the UK to protect sex workers."

Informants C's final thoughts support the thesis of this research well:

"In Amsterdam the city feels very vibrant and welcoming and genuinely feels like a place of huge growth and success."

Informant B

Informant B has travelled to Amsterdam four times and has also travelled to Australia and France once. The informant has lived and worked in various different areas of the UK which is there birthland.

Informant B stated, "On our journey you were confident, focused and brimming with positive anticipation."

Similarly, when asked if I seemed happier in Amsterdam than when in the UK, informant A stated:

"Yes, in Amsterdam you seem more relaxed and therefore more confident and all round happier. When I travelled with you, you seemed to feel more at home as opposed to going on a holiday. You had excellent knowledge of local history and culture which I felt showed your true connection to this city... It was obvious that you were more content and connection to Amsterdam than other country you had lived in or travelled too."

Informant C

Informant C has travelled to Amsterdam twice and also to Iceland, France, Greece and Italy

Informants have stated that I am visibly and noticeably different when I am in the Netherlands, informant C said:

"you're different here, and in a good way, you're sociable and...happy, I like it." They also stated "You seem much more alive and smiley. In Britain you are often worried about how you are seen; in Amsterdam nobody is looking."

Concerning the environment and landscape the informant said some interesting things:

"The first place that comes to mind in regard to emotional effect is Iceland. I was hiking for a few days and camping in the wilderness with a group and was given the opportunity to visit a stunning waterfall. You were able to walk behind the clear crashing water through a small cavern in the rock. Being there, with only the peaceful sounds of the waterfall echoing gently through the cave and the glistening light bouncing off the rocks is one of my most treasured sensory memories. I felt the sensation of complete calm. Amsterdam is bustling but somehow relaxed. Everyone seems to feel

at ease with themselves which promotes a stable energy. It is certainly one of the most grounding cities I have ever visited.”

“Softness in sound and light. Nature makes me feel the most secure because it is so pure, untainted by the problems of human intervention. I think this is because a natural landscape is where we come from.”

“I find the roads to have a negative effect on my mental state. This could be because they are loud but also because a car can kill you, so they make me feel uneasy. Especially as a pedestrian. The pollution around main roads also makes me uncomfortable.”

Cultural and human factors:

“Companionship when you’re in Amsterdam you are never alone. There is always someone you can talk to or ask for help. It seems a most unassuming place. I think human companionship is the best thing to make people feel grounded and sustained. This is the case wherever you are.”

“The culture of consumerism in Western society. I think that people today can buy almost anything, and this has meant we no longer value the right things i.e. health, shelter, food, nature and companionship. When we lose the ability to be grateful and happy with what we have, people become ignorant towards what really matters and jealous of others who have more stuff than you.”

Different spaces:

“Walking through the red-light district in Amsterdam feels slightly surreal but also strangely normal. As a woman I think the only thing that makes me uncomfortable is that most of the women working in the red light have a lot of plastic surgery and Botox. I think it could be confusing for young people to see unrealistic representations of sex and the female body. However, the windows do seem to divide the world around, from the world on the other side of the door. The parks in Amsterdam are a really nice interlude from the narrow, busy streets. They feel like places to reflect on the city in a way. Thinking space.”

Informant C also made an interesting comment about cultural acceptance:

“What people think will always matter so this is certainly something to think about when choosing a place to live. However, it depends on what kind of environment you want to live in as to how much ‘what people think’ should influence your decision. In a city, where there are lots of people around it would be very important to me that I could be accepted, and I think Amsterdam is one of the only cities where I have felt relaxed. If one is moving to the forest, then it may not matter so much whether the culture accepts you because there are few people.”

Informant D

Informant D has travelled to Portugal and Amsterdam and lived in Menorca for several years and has visited numerous times since. The informant said about Menorca:

“It’s like coming home, it’s where I spent many of my formative years, I did my growing up here.”

About the landscape:

"The sea, just seeing and breathing it in makes me so much happier, it improves my health and my mental health tenfold." They also stated: "Being in Menorca gives me a sense of freedom, which is hilarious because its 268.6 square miles of land, just being surrounded by the sea makes me happy, having a fresh sea breeze every day, always being able to go for a swim, I had no idea how fit and healthy I was when I was living there! It's a shame to be back in grey England where it's always the same old repetitive work, sleep, repeat. In Menorca its work, play, sleep, repeat and it's so important to have that down time with others.

In relation to the landscape of their current home:

"The weather, living in such a grey country where it's always cold is just miserable, I used to be able to go out every day all day and just swim to my heart's content, walk to school? Go for a swim. Walk home from school? Go for a swim. Get bored? Go to a beach. Get bored of that beach? Try on of the other 100! There was always something to do that kept me outside and healthy, here you just want to eat food and stay inside".

In relation to positive cultural and human factors in their chosen place:

"There's a huge sense of belonging and pride for the history and culture and I was accepted into that, actually I was thrown into it and it was terrifying for about three months, once I'd made friends though and found my place it was like Disneyworld!."

In relation to negative cultural and human factors in their current place of habitation:

"There's no sense of community here, last time I spoke to my one neighbour he threatened to kill my dog because he barked. We've gone through this entire pandemic and not spoken to a single person on this street, they keep to themselves and don't want to know. It's a shame because even just round the corner there are communities that talk and spend time together but in this country it's not very common anymore."

Language and communication:

"Spanish is a much more emotive language and you can really emphasis things whereas here that would be considered aggressive, in Spain it's simply a good debate to argue over something trivial and then agree to disagree and drink on it, that's just fun!"

When asked, "does cultural acceptance of different ways of living and being influence your desire to live in a certain place?" The informant said,

"yes, I'm considered odd because I like to eat my dinner around 10pm at night, that's NORMAL in Spain, it's the Mediterranean way of life, but here I'm told I'll make myself poorly so I must eat earlier which in turn does actually upset my stomach, people here don't get it. They eat dinner at 5pm and then binge eat rubbish all night long because they're still hungry, that's why were so unhealthy in this country!"

The informant also had some interesting things to say about Amsterdam,

“You can see the European lifestyle, everyone is so much more relaxed, they aim to enjoy life, take moments to enjoy the lifestyle. I like how in such a busy city you can get on a canal boat and just change the speed of your day completely, watch everyone else’s lives go by.

The only big city I have to compare it to is London, I can’t stand London, everyone needs to get through and get there now and they push past and don’t say hello or excuse me. I didn’t see that in Amsterdam, sure you have the bike thing where if you’re not looking out you will get taken out by a cyclist but that’s just fun.”

And when asked about differences observed in the researcher, they stated:

“You changed the second you were there, it’s funny I always say when I get off a plane in Menorca I stand up straighter and the smack of warm air across your face as you leave the aircraft is my welcome home present and I feel like I’m at one with the Earth. I could see that in you so bad it actually made me a little homesick for Menorca. We’ve seen you live your life for years and yet I’ve never seen you carry yourself with such self-assurance and confidence before that, you literally came out of your shell and it was lovely to see! It was also kind of nice to know I’m not crazy the way I feel about Menorca because I see you feel that with Amsterdam.”

Case study: Dr Gregory Smith

Gregory Smith is an Australian lecturer of social sciences at the Southern Cross University although much of his life was very different from how it is now. From a young age he suffered abuse from his father and later at an orphanage after his parents gave him and his sisters up. This led to many years of drug and alcohol abuse, violence and crime. After some time essentially being a drifter, Smith ventured down a dirt road and found himself in a pristine forest. This is where he stayed for many years, growing cannabis and making alcohol enabled him to trade for money and supplies. The forest was a place that he could be free of the torment of his past years. Interestingly Smith says in an ABC documentary (Smith, 2018) that when he was at the orphanage he would sometimes be punished by being locked into what was little more than a broom cupboard, when in this tiny dark space in the fear of it all he retreated into his own mind and created an imaginary forest in which to escape the horrors of the orphanage. Later on, he found that it was almost as if the world had provided the place he needed. After a few years in the forest drinking and taking drugs Smith started to develop psychosis, hearing voices and having hallucinations and after months in this state Smith had wandered off, leaving the forest, and came to a bench outside a hospital. This is when he had a ground-breaking moment, he realized that he was the cause of the problems in his life, after this moment he began to get his life back on track, he started attending school and after years of study he achieved his PhD in philosophy. He stated that when he started learning he kept seeing the word sociology, when he looked it up he found out that it was the study of society, and he thought “wow I want to study society and find out why I hate society so much”(Smith, 2018). For Gregory Smith the forest healed him and was a place for him to shut out and get away from all the things that brought him trauma and heartache and pain including society. The landscape helped with this for him, the sound of the water and the wildlife, the smells and sights.

Critical Analysis

Do we not all want to be happy? Regardless of where we are born or how we are raised or what we believe in, we all want to be happy. Happiness is possibly one of very few things that transcends culture, language or beliefs. It is highly likely that the notion of feeling where we 'belong' is related to where we feel safe and happy, Informant C said I am "different, happy" when I am in the Netherlands and Informant B agreed that "in Amsterdam you seem more relaxed and therefore more confident and all round happier...you seemed to feel more at home [and] had excellent knowledge of local history and culture which I felt showed your true connection to this city".

A hilly landscape, or lack of it, is a primary contributing factor to this research, as is the environment in the Netherlands and Menorca. Shrewsbury and Shropshire are very hilly, therefore psychologically a person may feel that they cannot see what is the other side of that hill and that creates fear and anxiety, that combined with the town being hemmed in by a large river (the Severn) creating more anxiety. The Netherlands however is famously very flat, therefore a person look out and see what is coming in every direction and know what is there and this can make them feel very safe and comforted. In addition, the canals everywhere also provide not only a calming environment but an access route out and away from any oncoming danger. Menorca one might think of as hilly, like Shropshire, but it is an island, where one can climb to the highest point and see out. Islands are surrounded by water, which is flat, making it easy to see what is approaching in all directions whether it be friend or foe; this can again be comforting (Arhem, 1998). For me Amsterdam is my 'forest' perhaps even my church or religion. I pondered this very thought on my last visit, late at night the church bells were ringing, and it got me thinking about religion. In relation to trans-geography perhaps the place or home we seek could also be seen as when we find that place it is like finding god or finding a religion (Jones, 2011).

The Dutch through their Kings Day celebration, confirm the link with their history as being important, is there anything but their historic values which makes them attractive to me? Yes, there sense of community and getting together to celebrate their community. British culture still does not work for me, mainly because cannabis is still illegal and I feel constantly afraid of the police and being caught, also I am not into the football and drinking cultures that are associated with Britain. The big crowds make me not want to be there, I would not go outside for days at a time and my physical health would suffer because of this, this does not happen in the Netherlands.

Therefore, we can see that the relevance of the visual spatial and cultural influences come together to impact upon personal perspectives and experiences in relation to creating a sense of "belonging" (Jones, 2011).

Conclusions

In Shrewsbury, which is my birthplace and the place I lived for twenty-seven years before moving to Wales, I still feel uneasy, unhappy and out of place. The only conclusion I can come to with regards to why this is, is that it is not my home, other places I go to and live in including Wales I have the same feeling, except for when I am in the Netherlands, therefore the Netherlands is my home, it is where I belong. I love it more than I have ever loved or cared about my birthplace. The city is my religion, my home, my concrete jungle where I am “king”, one with streets, canals and the little alley ways; yes, I believe I was born in the wrong place and I have found my true home.

Feedback from informants does confirm in some cases the feeling that others feels but also that some people are simply seeking a place where they feel like they fit in. personally after this project I conclude that yes I am trans-geographic and so are others, it comes down to each individual and how they feel and relate to their surroundings and their environment.

However, from all the different views of informants and theorists, it is that perfect storm, where environmental psychological and cultural influences come together to create disillusion and discomfort in their current place of habitation and thus creates the “trans-geographic” state if that person discovers the place that allows this to happen.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Introduction to Research and Consent Form

FFURFLEN GANIATÂD CYFRANOGIAD	PARTICIPATION CONSENT FORM
TEITL Y PROSIECT: / PROJECT TITLE: Where Do You Belong? An exploration into the 'trans- geographic' state, felt by people who believe they were born in the wrong place.	

Name of Researcher: D Gwilliam **Please initial box**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 16th October 2019 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

☐

3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, articles or presentations by the research team.

☐

4. I understand that my name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentations.

☐

5. I agree to take part in the above study.

☐

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

D. Gwilliam

Researcher

Date

Signature

You may decline to participate in this study. You may end your participation in this study at any time. If you decide to remain anonymous, maintaining your anonymity will be a priority and every practical precaution will be taken to disguise your identity. If you prefer anonymity, there will not be any identifying information on audiotapes or transcripts of this or any interview. No-one will hear any audiotapes or see any transcripts without your prior consent. All materials generated from this or any interview will remain confidential.

When completed, please return in the envelope provided (if applicable). One copy will be given to the participant and the original to be kept in the file of the research team at: UWTSD Lampeter

ENW A CHYFEIRIAD YR YMCHWILYDD	NAME & ADDRESS OF RESEARCHER Daniel Gwilliam, UWTSD Lampeter, SA48 7ED
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TEITL Y PROSIECT: / PROJECT TITLE: Where Do You Belong? An exploration into the 'trans- geographic' state, felt by people who believe they were born in the wrong place.

Dear Participant:

My name is Daniel Gwilliam and I am studying for a BA in Anthropology in the School of Humanities at UWTSD.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research project. This project will be looking at the idea that some people may feel that they belong in a different country to the one that they are native and aims to consider why this may be the case.

Through your participation in the questionnaire and/or interviews/focus group, I hope to ascertain some recurring themes which can offer insight into why different places, their local cultures and/or norms are appealing and akin to certain people, thus implying a state of 'trans-geography'.

*Attached to this letter is a short questionnaire developed by myself which will assess views on the above subject. I believe your opinions will be extremely helpful to me. As this is a new project, your feedback is therefore important to the study, so I would be much obliged if you could complete it. I understand that your time is at a premium, but your opinions are very valuable to me. The questionnaire should take about 10 minutes to complete, but there is no time constraint. There are also no right or wrong answers. Attached to this letter along with the questionnaire is a consent form which I will need you to complete before I can use any information you offer on this subject. All information will be stored on an encrypted storage device, which will be kept in a locked filing cabinet, when not in use. The results of the research will only be fed back to my supervisor, Luci Attala.

All questionnaires will be kept strictly confidential to the researcher and at **NO** time will individual questionnaires be released to the general public. This gives you a chance to express your views on the subject in a confidential and anonymous form. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary so you can withdraw from the questionnaire at any stage.

After careful and precise analysis of the data obtained from this questionnaire, I will be happy to provide you with a copy of the findings at your request. The results of this questionnaire will hopefully enhance my understanding of trans-geography

Thank you in advance for your time and participation. If any questions do arise, feel free to contact me at your convenience.

ENW A CHYFEIRIAD YR YMCHWILYDD

NAME & ADDRESS OF RESEARCHER

Daniel Gwilliam, UWTSD Lampeter, SA48 7ED

Appendix 2: Questions asked of informants

1. How does Amsterdam or any other place you feel especially connected to make you feel emotionally?
2. What positive physical elements of the landscape effect you in your connected place and why do you think this occurs?
3. What negative physical elements of the landscape effect you in your current place of habitation and why do you think this occurs?
4. What cultural/ human factors impact upon you positively in your connected place and why do you think this occurs?
5. What cultural/ human factors impact upon you negatively in your current place of habitation and why do you think this occurs?
6. Thinking about the different spaces in your connected place, what are the pros and cons of each one on all levels- politically, culturally, sensorially, emotionally (for instance the red-light area versus open parkland, seascape versus canals, mountains versus flat plains)
7. Does language and ways of communicating influence your desire to live in a certain place?
8. Does cultural acceptance of different ways of living and being influence your desire to live in a certain place?
9. If you have travelled with me to Amsterdam, have you observed any obvious differences in me when I am there compared to when I am in Britain?
10. Please add any other thoughts you may have on this subject