Seeking sense of place: Reflections on study abroad, becoming an international geographer and living a mobile lifestyle

Nicholas Wise ORCID: 0000-0002-4154-8932

Introduction: The Journey

My journey into academia is founded on my international experiences. I teach, research and work abroad, and travel to explore new places and gain new knowledge. Fast-paced lifestyles can become so overwhelming that we forget to appreciate many of the simplicities of living in a new place. As a visitor to a new place we expect to experience a sample of what a place has to offer, but as a professional working and residing abroad, this is a chance to immerse oneself. I work and live abroad and my research takes me (further) abroad, but I find achieving a true sense of place and immersion is a challenge, given that I have only studied or worked, but due to my immigration status I have not necessarily settled permanently in another country. This chapter reflects on my longitudinal mobility experiences since high school when I spent a semester abroad, through my undergraduate and postgraduate international study/research, to my professional journey abroad. As I geographer my research has focused on sense of place and sense of community. In this chapter, I reflect on my mobility and sense of place/community from a different perspective to address how this has shaped me as an international academic today. While my research aims to understand people's lives in a particular place, I overlook the complexities surrounding my place in all these different places where I have studied or worked. As a professional migrant whose research follows a neohumanist view of the world, based on how I view and experience my ever-changing surroundings, which I have not really explored, reflected on, challenged or even critiqued. Based on this, my own perception of sense of place has been 'lost in translation' along the way.

I have always aspired to be an international academic, wanting to build networks around the world pertinent to my research, bidding for funded projects, and to inform my teaching. It started with an experience in high school where I spent six months in Australia. This would define my professional journey. Later as a PhD student my dissertation work built on geographic and sociological traditions by addressing sense of place by incorporating abstractions of cultural landscapes in human geography. Characteristics of place are dependent upon its identity, identity is relative to community, and each of these interacting variables are expressions imprinted in the landscape by social actors. For instance, New York City is characterized as a global city; the city's identity is driven in many ways by a community composed of international business representatives and migrants from around the globe. But while I research these concepts, little do I reflect on these myself. At the time of writing this chapter I have now visited 100 countries around the world. I will not discuss each experience but selected ones that define my academic and professional journey. Before doing this, I discuss one of the key areas of research that I focus on, sense of place, as this is important to outline as a concept and I refer back to.

Sense of Place

Sense of place refers to a special connection or feeling that people have with a place, such as where they live, or even a place people regularly visit. For me, I recall the connections I had in places where I played sport with my friends, such as my backyard where we played baseball and American football, or the Bart Township Fire Hall or Gap Park where I played inline hockey. From a research standpoint, sense of place helps us understand social and cultural landscapes, sense of community, and place identity (see Wise, 2015d). My PhD research sought to understand sense of place by socially understanding how sports landscapes were experienced, constructed and used by those who interacted with them each day. Given I have a strong connection to sport, I focused on sense of place and sport landscapes shared by Haitians and Dominicans (Wise, 2014). Everyday landscapes are represented and constructed differently around the world in various places. Thus, my work built on

more traditional approaches to sense of place and cultural landscapes (Adams et al., 2001; Wylie, 2007). Socio-geographical understandings are complex, but time in the field helps make us more aware of everyday challenges people face. Also living in different places around the world means we need to constantly challenge and question our surroundings, based how people live in and experience place and sense of place. Sense of place refers to a sense of belonging, socially and emotionally through attachment and collective community identity (Wise, 2015d). Moreover, Rose (1995, p.88) states, sense of place:

is the phrase used by many geographers when they want to emphasize that places are significant because they are the focus of personal feelings...to refer to the significance of particular places for people. These feelings for 'place' are not seen as trivial; geographers argue that senses of place develop from every aspect of individuals' life experience and the senses of place pervade everyday life and experience.

The general practice of thought among humanist geographers is that 'place' is created by social participants (Tuan 1976).

Adams et al. (2001) acknowledge that nascent humanist thought is concerned with social and material constructions, adding validity to the multiplicity of contexts involved when evaluating sense of place. It is with this perception, that evolving complexities, heterogeneity, and juxtapositions of identity are increasingly becoming involved with sense of place explorations. As Lewis (1979) argued, we consider territory, imaginations, and genius loci, but for Relph (1997) we have moved beyond simple explanations and descriptions of places to more critical and exploratory trains of thought in order to make 'sense' of places. Since then, neohumanist geographers have adapted and developed more critically conceptual approaches to position meanings involving everyday experiences.

To situate conceptualizations of place and the landscapes that surround us, it is important to consider both collective representations, reflective of community and also interpersonal feelings that express some sense of meaning, as Basso (1996, p.57) stated:

places and their meanings are continually woven into the fabric of social life, anchoring it to features of the landscape and blanketing it with layers of significance that few can fail to appreciate...people are forever presenting each other with culturally mediated images of where and how they dwell...they are forever performing acts that reproduce and express their own sense of place, and also, inextricably, their own understandings of who and what they are.

Here, Basso (1996) reflects on personal social-psychological senses of place. Casey (1996, p.25) adds to this statement by noting "the holding issue in the gathering of place reflects that layout of the local landscape." What must be gathered is people reflect their sense of place in cultural landscapes. However, in the case with my research with Haitians in the Dominican Republic, it is not 'one' sense of place that needed acknowledged, as both Haitians and Dominicans and their respective sports identities have manifested multiple layers of meaning—suggest layers of the landscape (Wise, 2014).

My PhD research on sense of place focused on one community in the Dominican Republic, and I was concerned most specifically with heterogeneous sporting identities, where both Haitians and Dominicans used one sports field, which resulted in layered, multiple senses of place (see Wise, 2011b, 2014, 2015c). While I have done much research on sense of place, I have worked in and conducted research in numerous places, and while I continue to research sense of place, I do not always find a sense of place outside the realm of research. But as we navigate through different places in our lives,

it is important to realize and recognize our journey to show how that shapes different interests, and if we can reflect on our own sense of place in new and unfamiliar surroundings.

Reflections on Experience

Referring back to some points considered in the introduction to this book, Humanist geographers put 'self' and 'experience' at the center of research inquiry. By the late 1940's, though more so into the 1950's—1970's, humanism emerged as a human-centered epistemology in human geography and a response to positivism (see Johnston and Sidaway 2004; Ley and Samuels 1978). To trace the contemporary beginnings of humanist thought in geography, in 1947 geographer John K. Wright presented a conceptual overview of places, landscapes and imaginations (see Wright 1947). He used the term *terra incognita* to refer to these unknown geographies. Humanist geographers began to explore unknown geographic phenomena to present outsiders with an imagination, or a way of producing knowledge of places, landscapes and associated histories founded on experiences. From this I acknowledge the importance of accessing personal journeys through different places, so to navigate our own experiences.

Tuan (1976) in his book Space and Place outlines how we perceive and understand space and place is based on our ability to move and is shaped by our surroundings. Tuan's book is an ideal starting point for reflecting on early mobility, as these experiences shape our early interests and our decisions later in life. I have always been fascinated about different places and cultures. I used to draw maps as early as I can remember, then read about the places and just wonder what it would be like to see it for myself one day. I have written papers discussing 'home' (see Wise, 2011b), but I always wanted to see what was around and outside my home. I was really inspired in my 8th grade Integrated Geography class to understand the world, and from that point I knew I wanted to be a geographer. So I started with a bicycle around my home county and to a neighbouring state. I had travelled the USA, but it was the opportunity to spend six months in Australia that channelled my interest to explore geography as a student in university and later go on to conduct research around the world.

It was these early educational encounters and mobility that led me to seek opportunities at all stages of my education from high school, through my PhD, and into my career. I will now discuss my student mobility experience.

Student Mobility: Widening my World and Appreciation

It is safe to say that I caught the travel bug in high school. Like most students in high school I had an idea of what I wanted to do and become, but with so many possibilities it can seem overwhelming that we need to make decisions that will guide the direction of our futures. I was always interested in exploring and understanding the world around me, I was not aware of conceptual notions of sense of place at the time but I excelled in my geography and history classes as I truly loved studying and getting to know about places. In 2000 the Olympic Games were held in Sydney, Australia and watching the games I wanted to learn more about Australia. I wondered what it would be like to see the country. The day that changed my life was when a representative from Youth for Understanding gave a presentation during my 11th Grade Spanish class where I learned I could spend 6 months there, so I informed my parents and they were supportive. I went through the steps of applying and preparing for travel which also made me feel more independent. Through that experience which involved interacting and engaging with people from different cultures, I wanted to expand my horizons, seek further study and travel opportunities and educate students. I would start my undergraduate degree in August of 2002 shortly after returning from Australia and from the first week I wanted to be an academic, I did not know exactly how at that point, but I wanted to learn, travel and work abroad in different places around the world. I decided to study at Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania because they had a well-established network of international collaborations and I could complete a degree on four continents.

I strategically planned ahead as an undergraduate student so that I could maximise my time abroad because I wanted to get a truly international degree. Most people have a group of friends. While my friends changed each semester, I maintained regular contact with an extended network of friends— since been made easier with social media. My undergraduate degree was truly international, where I spent my first two and a half years in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, I would spend the final three semesters abroad in China, England and Australia. To enable myself to do this, it took a bit of planning, but I closely reviewed my core degree requirements, when classes were offered and at the start of my second year, I then made a plan that would allow me to take all the essential degree requirements in Lock Haven not offered abroad and complete the general education requirements of my degree in three countries. J. Todd Nesbitt who is co-authoring Chapter 13 was my advisor and he influenced geography majors to study abroad—often sharing his own international experiences. It was my second visit to Australia that really got me developing my interest in tourism to complement my geography degree. I began organising trips for my friends and fellow students and this is something that I would go on to do as a PhD student (co-organising international field studies).

While my plan to study abroad and complete my degree on time was successful, I stated making plans to complete a Master's degree in New Zealand. However, the plan to study in New Zealand did not work out. I thought this was a significant set-back to my plan, but if something is not supposed to work out, we seek another opportunity. Another door opened in January 2007 when I started my Master's degree in Geography, back in my home state at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

Enhancing Employability: Going Abroad as a Graduate Student

After completing my Bachelor's in Geography I went onto do a Master's. Having to leap that hurdle of not getting accepted to study in New Zealand, this failed attempt allowed me to open new doors and create opportunities that continue to shape my research today. I signed up for a student field study to Costa Rica, then later that summer I volunteered in the Dominican Republic to gain necessary contacts that I reconnected with when I started my PhD fieldwork. This also got me interested in subsequent research on motivations to volunteer (Easton and Wise, 2015; Gellweiler et al., 2018; Benson and Wise, 2017). The summer after completing my Master's coursework I then worked on an archaeology project in Cyprus, this an opportunity to try something different—to gain some practical experience outside the traditional classroom setting.

Following my Master's I started a PhD in Geography at Kent State. It was here where I began to define myself as an international geographer, developing and expanding my research in different parts of the world. It was this training and networking where I made links that are sustained to this day. Having volunteered in the Dominican Republic as a Master's student, the contacts with the Non-Governmental Organisation that I had worked for allowed me to return to the same place to volunteer and conduct my research. Going back to the Dominican Republic for ethnographic fieldwork allowed me to explore issues related to sense of place, place identity and the notion of home. I lived, volunteered and conducted research with and alongside Haitians residing in the Dominican Republic. Here I began to explore how a community deemed out of place used sport spaces to define their place in the Dominican Republic so to connect with their home (Wise, 2015a; Wise and Harris, 2016).

Tourism research was really an accident, as I had written a paper on Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) for a research seminar I took at Kent State University. This led to presentations in Sarajevo, BiH and Novi Sad, Serbia when I met with colleagues and started fieldwork in this region that led to several publications as a PhD student (Mulec and Wise, 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Wise and Mulec, 2012). I would continue these collaborations in Serbia and commence new collaborations once I started my career (Wise et al., 2015; Wise et al., 2017; Wise et al., 2018; Wise and Mulec, 2015). I had considered applying to do my PhD abroad, but never wrote any applications as I was looking for a

place to study that was not far from my home in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Kent, Ohio was six hours drive so I could visit family on occasion. One of the benefits I found staying in the United States to pursue a PhD was the coursework allowed me to explore and critically examine other topics—if not for this I would not have written my initial tourism paper (Wise, 2011a) that led to aforementioned publications. Kent State offered much support for graduate students to apply for funding, as well as various awards encouraging travel to support professional development. I would use the funding from the university to present in BiH, Serbia, Mexico, Colombia and across the USA. Influenced by attending field studies as a Master's student and attending a Kent State Geography field study to the Yucatán, Mexico, I began to co-organise/co-lead international field studies to Peru and Costa Rica when the geography department was expanding their international offering—this was also another key part of developing my professional international-focused career.

I learnt as a graduate student to not give up and keep pursuing opportunities. Applying for new opportunities gives you a chance. When you apply for funding, you will not always get it, and it can be difficult to face rejection but developing work and proposals is what is key to future success. I found publishing is the same. We read published works and look at academic CV's with extensive publication lists, but what we do not see is the papers that were rejected. I have had quite a lot of papers rejected, especially when I was a PhD student, and it is important to not let this discourage you. Sometimes the work may not be the best fit for a journal, or there are inherent weaknesses that just need developed. A rejected paper does not mean it does not have merit, it means significant revisions are necessary to improve its quality/standard for peer-review. My advice is if you plan to pursue a PhD it is important to start writing and submitting papers early so that you develop yourself early as an academic, especially in a competitive employment market. Moreover, you gain from different perspectives and learn from the advice and constructive criticism of reviewers/editors.

Professional Mobility

My international experience and foundation of published papers in international peer-reviewed journals made me a competitive candidate upon completion of my PhD. I had three opportunities, in Pennsylvania, China, and Scotland, and I decided on Glasgow to begin my professional career abroad. From an academic standpoint I consider myself foremost a geographer, but as my research relates to sport, events and tourism (e.g. Wise and Harris, 2017; Wise and Harris, 2019), I found myself teaching in these areas professionally, bringing a geographical perspective. It was from Scotland I expanded my research base, based at the Europe's doorstep I was able to continue my work in Serbia and Croatia. It was my ongoing and continued research in Serbia that influenced my desire to live in Scotland, opposed to the appeal of Scotland.

Funding opportunities exist for the purpose of enabling mobility to build on a strong research foundation. I found myself in a position to expand my professional mobility by teaching at Erasmus partners. In Europe academics can get Erasmus teaching mobility funding to visit and teach at another European partner university. I first visited a partner in Croatia to share my research with staff and students there and this has led to funded projects and numerous publications (e.g. Durkin and Wise, 2017; Perić et al., 2016; Perić et al., 2017; Perić and Wise, 2015; Wise and Perić, 2017). I was also involved with teaching and training in Switzerland and Germany, respectively, and the work in Switzerland allowed me to connect with researchers who would contribute to an edited book I coedited. Attending international conferences is where important networking takes place to develop further collaborations. In co-organising special sessions at the Association of American Geographers Meetings in Chicago and San Francisco I was able to co-edit some books based on the theme and content that came out of these sessions (Clark and Wise, 2018; Wise and Clark, 2017). I also started my own initiative titled Regeneration, Enterprise, Sport and Tourism (REST) which has resulted in a new network of researchers, a special issue to date (see Wise and Whittam, 2015) and a book (Wise and Harris, 2017b), with more scholarly works planned. Developing a research network and expanding

research opportunities has allowed me to develop subsequent publications in different places on a broad range of topics from tourism in Oman (AlBalushi and Wise, 2017), Italy (Aquilino et al., In Press; Aquilino and Wise, 2016) and Iran (Wise and Farzin, 2018) to sport and regeneration in Brazil (Wise and Hall, 2017), tourism regeneration (Wise, 2016); sports geography in general (Wise, 2015b; Wise, 2017a, 2017b; Wise and Harris, 2017a; Wise and Kirby, In Press), smart tourism (Wise and Heidari, 2019), perceptions of ethnic migration (Kusek and Wise, 2014), knowledge exchange (Vasin et al., In Press), farmers markets (Zhao and Wise, In Press), and assessing airline mission statements (Lin et al., 2018). These publications add to the foundation of research where my expertise can be extended from my first place of employment post-PhD.

A short experience teaching in Taiwan was an attempt to create a new network in East Asia while at the same time adding another international experience. This opportunity represented a different challenge as it placed me in a very different learning/research environment. It was this experience which challenged my sense of place due to the setting like Taiwan. The work atmosphere greatly differs from that in Scotland, but there were some similarities to that in the United States where working long hours and the need to publish in volumes made me focus almost extensively on writing as opposed to taking on more of a work-leisure travel balance. While I did not spend much time in Taiwan, my next move was Liverpool, England where I was familiar with the UK having started in Scotland—despite vast differences between Scotland and England. While I was attracted back to the UK given my familiarity with the working environment there, it was more about the research and funding opportunities that drove my decision opposed to the appeal of the destination. Having now worked and lived a few years in Liverpool my international experiences and opportunities expanded rapidly.

Despite finding international success, I find a disconnect with place, especially when seeking a sense of place abroad. Being a mobile geographer, lecturer and researcher, my work continues to take me away from my place as a base, to research, teach and manage projects. For projects, the meeting place changes every few months. I consider my colleagues who I research and contribute to projects with part of my scholarly community and we fulfil as sense of community through our shared scholarly connections. Meetings are in Russia and China, my own research takes me to Croatia and Serbia regularly, so while I have found a strong sense of community by connecting with academics with related interests, there is no place connection that is regularly defined. While I have been fortunate to gain experiences abroad and work towards becoming an international professional geographer, there is one thing that eluded me—and that is a true sense of place.

Seeking Sense of Place

Humanist geographers implement subjective and reflective research techniques, bottom-up analyses aimed at understanding experiences, foundations of human inquiry, attachments to, and senses of place (see Adams et al. 2001; Ley and Samuels 1978). Relph (1981) encouraged researchers to understand places as they are, to understand value relating to human existence and social settings. Social and cultural geographers focus much attention on how people create a sense of place (Anderson 2010). Thus, such a bottom-up perspective helps gain insight into peoples' perceptions of the everyday spaces and places to understand local meanings.

My own research has built on humanist traditions in geography. As my research expanded, I developed more nascent humanist research approaches, building on neohumanism (see Adams et al., 2001) to challenge and engage in more critical evaluations of sense of place. To further promote and complement critical interpretations, neohumanist thought derives from a variety of social theories, including behaviorism, cultural materialism, feminism, and postmodernism (Adams et al. 2001). As suggested by Adams et al. (2001), epistemological depth from post-modernism complements neohumanist thought in recognizing multiple ways of seeing and knowing (Relph 2001). So as my

research in the Dominican Republic has shown, it is important to recognize the *other*, and social divisions structured based upon nationality, ethnicity and gender (see Wise, 2011b; Wise and Harris, 2014, 2016). These build on concepts of difference, and this chapter has noted how I have found myself in place/out of place living/working abroad. But how do we interpret our own journeys? Can we? or should we?

In an attempt to reiterate on my research and my place in the world, my research findings on Haitians in the Dominican Republic suggest that despite being faced with much difficulty, they seek ways to overcome prejudices and social dilemmas by playing football and creating a sense of place to reinforce their community (see Wise, 2011b; 2014; Wise and Harris 2014). I do not face the same difficulties as Haitians, but being different in the places where I work means I should challenge my place and my role. I study sense of place but I do not consider it personally. Our research often sits in a conceptual sphere, but when it comes to self-reflecting, our life is often separate from research realms. But in the Dominican Republic I was connected with the research participants base on our shared interests in sport, football (or soccer) with the Haitians and baseball with the Dominicans. I am surrounded by academics when I travel, so whilst we may not be connected based on racial, ethnical or nationalistic definitions, I am part of the academic community that bounds my existence whether I am in Liverpool (England), Kazan (Russia), São Paulo (Brazil), Novi Sad (Serbia) or Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia).

To this point my career progression and professional development has been guided by my mobile lifestyle. I will continue to seek international opportunities that arise, research abroad and speak at conferences around the globe. While I will always be from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where many of my family members still reside today, I have been fortunate to see the world, but I now lack a true connection with a place. I am still seeking a sense of place, as my belonging has strictly been based on my professional work in teaching, research and more recently project management. Even writing this last section I am sitting on a train on my way to Brussels International Airport to fly back to Manchester to connect to a train to Liverpool late at night to teach a class the next morning and prepare to attend another conference in Kazan, Russia just in four days, and then attend meetings in Malta just two weeks after that. I rarely take the time to acknowledge the places where I live because they are just a place where I work—and my time is dedicated to my role and the university. The places I have lived and visited continue to fascinate me and I would not have it any other way, but life also needs grounding. Connections and belonging to a place are what people seek, it is what I study, but I have not found that sense of place personally that I conceptualise through my scholarship.

Conclusion

My research has reflected on notions of the other and in place/out of place to critically evaluate sense of place. I live a very mobile lifestyle, but I could do more to reflect on how I perceive my own sense of place as I am technically out of place given I work abroad, and I differ from those where I live/work. I understand and continually evaluate, critique and experience the world around me, but I struggle to personally connect to the places where I have lived abroad during my professional career. The places have changed, the papers get published and I continually seek the next project or international collaboration, my connection with academics and academia. To me, my home and that sense of place perhaps, just relates back to when I was young and where I played sport all those years, as it is Lancaster County, Pennsylvania where I have a special connection, and a place that I can truly call my home. It is Lancaster where I have that true sense of belonging, based on family connections as opposed to professional connections.

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