Figures of strangeness: blending perspectives from mobile academics

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‘(...) the arrival of a Stranger has the impact of an earthquake . . .
The Stranger shatters the rock on which the security of daily life rests. He comes from afar; he does not share the local assumptions and so becomes essentially the man who has to place in question nearly everything that seems to be unquestionable to the members of the approached group’.

It has now become a cliché to say that, since the late 1980s, major changes in the economic, social, technological and political structures of most countries have given rise to new migratory spaces and populations. Even though each type of mobility differs in its forms (physical and/or virtual), contents (tourism, immigration, displacement,...) (Urry, 2000), as well as in its spatial and temporal features, the vast majority of movers share the same characteristic, that of strangeness to the ones they meet. The quote by Bauman supra puts into words the impact of all these strangers on the world map: they are very often perceived as anomalies, questioning what seems to be normal and presenting those they encounter with difference. Yet, strangeness is not a homogeneous phenomenon: it is perceived, utilized and articulated differently, according to whom the stranger is and those whom s/he encounters. In light of the changes that have been remarked since the Second World War (that some call Postmodernity (Maffesoli, 2003) or hypermodernity (Aubert, 2004), it seems that reflecting on strangeness and its effects is increasingly a necessary task (Harman, 1988) – at least as much as for such concepts as intercultural communication.

Our paper looks at one type of mobility, which is not new but expanding considerably: Academic Mobility (AM hereafter). This chapter is based on a review of the concept of strangeness within the sociology of the stranger, postmodernity and studies on international mobility. It finds its roots in the hypothesis laid down by Dervin (2006) that mobile academics, and especially the most visible population, exchange students, are liquid strangers. Inspired by Zygmunt Bauman’s paradigm of liquid modernity (2000), which he has defined as the zeitgeist of our times, we want to discuss a conceptual dichotomy that we sum up under the following headings: solid strangeness and liquid strangeness. We concentrate on how mobile academics experience their time abroad and aim at identifying potential similarities in their experiences of strangeness.
Solid vs. liquid strangeness

The concept of Strangeness

The stranger has been a predominant figure in literature, philosophy and human and social sciences for centuries. In Chapter XIV of his Laws, Plato already discussed strangeness and the treatment of strangers in the Greek city. He proposes four figures of the stranger and exposes rules and ways of treating each and everyone of them: ‘birds of passage’ (tourists in the summer), ‘spectators’, ‘he who comes on some public business from another land’ and ‘he who comes from another land to look at ours’. Though it seems that every single century has produced similar literature, the early 20th century is probably the richest in terms of scientific production on the stranger, especially in the USA where foreigners, exiled and refugees, put best into words the anxiety and strangeness that are associated with modern times (Lapierre, 2004: 112). Since the publication of the sociologist Georg Simmel’s essay on The Stranger ([1908] 1950), the topic has been introduced and examined under various orientations: the marginal man (Park, [1928] 1950), the sojourner (Siu, 1952), the modern stranger (Harman, 1988), among others. More recently Lapierre (2004: 70-115) and Bauman (1993) have reviewed and completed the analysis of the concept. We do not intend to undertake a comprehensive review of all these theories. Rather, we will engage in a selective discussion of concepts that are directly relevant to the purposes and population of this chapter.

The works of Simmel, Schutz and the Chicago school (e.g. Robert Park who was a student of Simmel, (Lapierre, 2004: 72)), all three being usually referred to as ‘the sociology of the stranger’, have been considered as the most influential contributions to the topic and can be summed up as follows:

- The stranger is busy decoding the new culture and not ‘thinking as usual’ (Schutz, 1964: 499);
- The stranger has a paradoxical spatial position: s/he symbolizes nearness and remoteness, i.e. s/he is both inside and outside or in-between (Simmel, 1950: 402-403);
- The stranger experiences temporal discontinuities: her/his history is unknown to the ones s/he meets; her/his present is full of events and novelty in the host country (Ibid.: 16-17);
- The stranger is a social eccentric: s/he has left her/his group in order to join a new group;
- The stranger has an ambivalent position: he is objective because he is new; the relationships that he creates are more abstract (Simmel, 1950: 25)(cf. also Bauman, 1991).

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1 Cf. Also Siegfried Kracauer (about the strangeness experienced by train travelers), Nel Anderson (the hobo), Hanna Arendt (the Jew) but also Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Arjun Appadurai, Edouard Glissant, etc.
2 Cf. Negative Socialisation. The Stranger in the Writings of Zygmunt Bauman by Niclas Månsson (2005) which offers a synthesis of the concept of strangeness in Bauman’s work.
Rapoport and Lomsky-Feder (2001: 487) summarize and classify these theories on the stranger as follows: ‘each theory develops a different perspective of society and social reality by examining and elaborating a different dimension of the stranger: the stranger as a cultural reader (Schutz, 1964), the stranger as demarcator of social boundaries (Simmel, 1950) and the stranger as a trespasser of social categories (Bauman, 1991)’.

**Strangeness and student mobility**

Of direct interest within the frame of AM are research works reflecting on strangeness and AM. Among others, Murphy-Lejeune (2001), Dervin (2006), Anquetil (2006), Podemsky (in this volume), and Rapoport et al. (in this volume) are some of the scholars who have recently discussed the concept of strangeness within student mobility. They have concentrated mostly on exchange/international students within the academy in Europe.

One of the most accepted analyses and terms associated with the population of student travellers is based on Murphy-Lejeune’s study (2001) in which she suggests calling them New Strangers. Her study was conducted over a decade ago and has had some impact on the current rhetoric and research on mobile academics (Dervin & Rosa, 2006). For this French scholar, new strangers are (Murphy-Lejeune, 2001: 38) as follows:

> European student travelers are defined as new strangers because their experience, close to that of other strangers, is nevertheless distinct. They are temporary strangers, mobile and moving, young, capable of adapting and changing. They are student strangers who integrate their experience abroad into their initial education and training. They are considered in their various dimensions, as individual subjects, social actors, foreign language and culture learners. The critical assumption is that student travelers represent an innovation in European research.

Though Murphy-Lejeune’s concept is thought-provoking, it is important to bear in mind that this new strangeness is also identifiable in many other forms of mobility such as tourism, expatriation, short-term professional experiences, etc. Besides, most of these types of mobility were present in the past (though the number of their representatives was much lower). Finally, the danger with such a figure (as with any other figures) is that it tends to become a model and be used in very general terms without being contextualised. In the case of AM, James Coleman has shown for instance that many and varied parameters play a role in the experiences of mobile academics and should be remembered when considering them (he identified twenty including duration, professional content, preparation, Coleman, 2006: 45).

In what follows, we wish to dwell on two figures (ideal-types) of strangeness and also deconstruct some of the ideas related to them. These ideal-types are based on conceptions of strangeness that circulate in the media as well as in research worlds represented in the literature which is derived from the ideas presented in the previous section. They are also the results of a previous research project on mobile students and their perceptions of strangeness (Dervin, 2007b).
A word of caution before we review both figures is necessary: one should bear in mind that there are differences between migrants. The experiences of migratory elites (metropolitan strollers, jet set professionals, cosmopolitan academics and leisure tourists) and ‘underclass’ strangers (victims of political exile, ethnic cleansing or economic poverty) who are denied access to society (cf. e.g. Agier, 2002 on refugees) cannot be compared. Our paper is based on relatively ‘easy’ AM and doesn’t deal with for example illegal students.

In the threefold model of strangeness that Dervin (2007a) has proposed, one finds:

Solid strangers are people who have moved to a different country and plan to stay there. They usually manage to get a job and get involved with ‘locals’, learn the local language(s), etc. In other words, they become ‘attached’ to the host country and fit in (but of course, they are free to ‘leave’ any time).

Liquid strangers are just passing and they usually have a scheduled return home. Their presence as strangers in the host country is therefore just temporary (though some liquid strangers might stay in the host country for a longer time).

Fizzy strangers may be just passing and/or staying. This figure could be illustrated, in higher education, by international students who take an entire degree at a foreign university. They may wish to stay in the host country after their studies or not, but at least their stay is long-term. They may learn the local language and be highly involved with locals (or not).

We are aware and agree with Nicole Lapierrre that the stranger is ‘not a model but a figure’ (2004: 26) and will therefore present two figures of strangeness in what follows. We put aside the figure of fizzy strangers in this chapter as we will deal with mobile academics that returned to their point of departure, and review the two remaining figures.

*Ideal-type 1: Solid strangers*

The first ideal-type that we wish to examine is that of solid strangers which corresponds to the model of assimilation that has been studied in cross-cultural psychology (cf. Berry & Sam, 1997: 297). A solid stranger has been in a foreign country for a long time, and has remained there since her/his arrival (and has just returned to his home country or previous country of residence for short stays). Since the birth of nation-states, the figure of the solid stranger has been categorised by her/his nationality in intercultural contexts. Solid strangers are the archetypes of strangers and have fed worldwide imagination on strangeness (the early 20th century theory on the stranger was mostly based on this figure).
A solid stranger could acquire any of the following crucial characteristics in terms of relations to languages and cultures, integration in the host society and relations to the same and others:

- **Relations to languages and cultures:**
  - speaks the local language(s) (though s/he will keep her/his accent...
    - can one not have an accent? - and s/he may use her/his mother tongue every day);
  - has stopped questioning the surrounding 'culture' and the everyday habits of the locals (which doesn’t mean that s/he can explain or accept them);
  - (thinks s/he) knows about the culture of the host country and passes as a specialist for outsiders.

- **Integration** in the host society:
  - does not have a scheduled return home;
  - is involved with locals (partners, friends…);
  - feels that s/he belongs to the place and among the ‘local people’;
  - is professionally involved in the host country;
  - is visible (in the media, in workplaces, etc.).

- **Relations to the same and other foreigners:**
  - has become a stranger to her/himself (i.e. feels different from her/his fellow citizens). S/he has become (s/he pretends to be?) an other / a 'local';
  - is considered by his countrymen and/or family as ‘an other’, a cultural other (though it may not be the case);
  - is critical towards her/his ‘culture’;
  - in terms of encounters with the same and other foreigners:
    - either s/he has hardly any contact with citizens from her/his country or other foreigners (because s/he wants to avoid them);
    - or s/he can have strong links with a few solid strangers (the same and/or foreigners in the same country).

In summary, a solid stranger believes/ is believed to have assimilated, i.e. s/he has become close to an other, or a local in the sense of a cultural dope, i.e. a copy of the ‘native’ in terms of language and cultural skills (Berry & Sam, ibid.).

**Ideal-type 2: Liquid strangers**

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3 Nathalie Auger (2007: 35) proposes that the ‘same’ is based on a relation ‘I-you’ versus ‘he’. In her study on Erasmus students, Vassiliki Papatsiba has shown (2003: 173) that the refusal of the same is commonly identified in the students’ discourse.

4 We agree with S. Bhatia (2002: 62) who questions the concept of integration in these words: ‘How does one know when someone is integrated or not with the host culture? Who decides whether an immigrant is pursuing a strategy of marginalization, integration or separation’. We will come back to this criticism later on.

5 Though we have been highly critical of the concept of culture (cf. e.g. our discussion on culturality in Dervin & Dirba, 2006; Dervin, 2007c but also Hannerz 1992 and his concept of cultural flow), we retain the term in this presentation as it is often used by strangers themselves, the doxa and researchers.
Our second ideal-type is called liquid strangers and is inspired by research on exchange students and other kinds of movers. Liquid strangers are invisible and not-truly-belonging-to-the-place, they are ‘in’ but not ‘of’ (in the local statistics and media), they come and go - physically and virtually (i.e. they are forgettable), and they cannot assimilate or integrate. Besides, in accordance with Levi-Strauss’ classification of the relation to the stranger, while solid strangers are ‘swallowed’ by the host society, liquid strangers are ‘vomited’ (Cf. anthropoemic vs. anthropophagic attitudes to otherness in Lévi-Strauss, 1955: chap. V). This segregation is puzzling for the liquid stranger and s/he thinks that the other, the ‘local’, is to be blamed. As Franco La Cecla puts it (2002: 128): ‘there is an inescapable relation between misunderstanding and otherness’ (our translation). Other characteristics of liquid strangers include:

Relations to languages and cultures:
- Language and societal learning are left to her/his fancy and s/he can communicate in a lingua franca, her/his mother tongue or in another foreign language;
- The ‘local’ culture is seen through the lens of exoticism and stereotypes (tourist-like visions);
- Believes s/he knows the locals (through stereotypes and representations) though s/he hardly has any contacts with them.

Integration in host society:
- Return home is scheduled;
- has difficulties in encountering locals;
- has no bid for membership with the locals (though s/he may have a wish to do so);
- feels segregated and blames the ‘locals’.

Relations to the same and other strangers:
- Doesn’t (feel s/he has) become an ‘other’ (i.e. a local);
- Experiences être-ensembles (i.e. temporary togetherness, Dervin, 2008) and tends to remain with other liquid strangers (not solid strangers, i.e. immigrants) because they are ‘heterotopiaed’ (Foucault, 19846), i.e. they have their own ‘space’ in the host country;
- Identifies with and values other liquid strangers;
- Refuses the presence of the same as her/his stay in the host country is short-lived (‘separation strategy’, cf. Berry & Sam, 1997: 297); s/he wants to meet as many people from other countries and speak as many other languages as possible.

Examples (archetypes) of liquid strangers include: expatriates, businessmen, international trainees, language assistants, jet setters, and mobile academics.

**Criticisms of the figures**

Let us reflect on these ideal-types for a moment. Rapoport & Lomsky-Feder (2001: 487) suggest that theories and studies on strangeness need to move away from ‘universal account of strangeness and thus their blindness to its contextualised manifestations’ and artificiality. In a similar vein, we believe and argue that encounters, emotions and

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6 Rapoport and Lomsky-Feder (2001: 496) use the term ‘social enclave’ to describe the same phenomenon in Kibbutz.
activities of contemporary strangers vary in particular situations and contexts and have an impact on how strangers themselves perceive their strangeness (subjectivity) and how others see them as strangers (intersubjectivity). Rapoport & Lomsky-Feder (ibid.) also add that power relations between individuals have an impact on the perception of strangeness.

We are alluding here to the fact that the boundary between liquid and solid strangers is very fuzzy and discursive as some of the characteristics listed above can apply to both categories (ex: even though a solid stranger is thought to be ‘here to stay’, s/he may disappear anytime; the same goes for the liquid stranger who is probably considered as another by his peers when s/he returns home – even though her/his stay was short and void of significant encounters with the locals). This makes it very difficult to assess the ‘authenticity’ of strangeness and of how strangers declare they perceive their strangeness and identity. Some strangers may feel solid or liquid and be perceived as liquid or solid. On the whole, it seems that the discussions and definitions supplied above are reminiscent of and linked to the discussion on the multiculturalist and interculturalist paradigms in intercultural communication and education (Dervin, 2006b; Ogay, 2000). The multiculturalist research traditions tend to accept identities as objective and based on cultural/national memberships (in solid strangeness, a stranger abandons her/his ‘culture’ and adopts another one). While what we call the interculturalist approach (Dervin & Dirba, 2006; Abdallah-Pretceille, 1986) recognizes and works on identities and cultures as co-created through interaction and in discourse.

Images and representations on solid strangers are engrained in the mind of contemporary individuals and the current doxa on strangeness. Hetero-stereotypes as well as auto-stereotypes on solid strangers (Boyer, 1999) sometimes uttered by solid strangers themselves are common (cf. one example heard from a former exchange student: ‘I have become French now because I am always late’). In times of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000), where identity is increasingly understood as something contextual, unstable and in constant change, the figure of solid strangers seems to be a remnant of the Enlightenment or the Modern era, and is ‘constructed certitude’ (Beck, 1992). Many scholars have shown (e.g. de Fina (2003) and her work on illegal immigrants) that all individuals are potentially strangers to others (even to their peers) and to themselves (Kristeva, 1991). One could go as far as saying that strangeness is no longer a temporary condition but a way of life (Harman, 1988; Hermans & Kempen, 1998) and that it has replaced familiarity as the basis of social organisation – which could equate to the potential end of Solid strangers.

In what follows, we examine two representatives/representations of strangeness and their experiences of international mobility.

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7 For one of the authors of this chapter, this concept allowed very fruitful discussions with returnee students in September 2006. One of them was even shocked by the fact that one could avow that one is a different person nearly each time one opens one’s mouth.
Mobile academics: solid or liquid strangers?

Contexts of the study and Methodological considerations

The corpus of this study is composed of two interviews carried out by the authors. One interview was done with a Latvian assistant professor who recalled her various sojourns in England when she was a postgraduate student and the other with a Russian student who had had several experiences as an exchange student in Finland. Though the two interviewees differ in ages, experiences, status, etc., we thought it would be interesting to compare their narratives and possibly find links in the images of strangeness that they put forward. The interviews were both carried out in English as a lingua franca and followed the same protocol.

The main theme of the interviews was the daily life of mobile academics but they also concentrated on general questions on stays abroad. Interviews are a very special type of interaction, especially when they are recorded. According to Guernier, interviews are a ‘social game of positioning and symbolic negotiations’ (2001: 3). Boutet (1994: 67) adds that consequently the context of interviews allows a researcher to observe ‘the social construction of meaning’ of the reality. The answers to the questions given by the two interviewees are therefore constructions of the reality, the Self (-ves) and Otherness – constructions for which the interviewers themselves share responsibility since their questions, presence, similarities or differences (e.g. in status) and the context of the interviews have an impact on what is said and how it is said. What follows is therefore necessarily based on imagination, shared and ‘built up’ with other mobile academics, the locals (Finns & British here), the media, and the interviewers themselves (some of the questions were inevitably ‘biased’). Though the interview protocol was the same, we are aware that the contexts of the interviews differed and that the intertextuality between the people involved was unique in the sense that the interviewer and interviewee in Latvia knew each other (they were actually colleagues) while the interviewer and interviewee in Finland didn’t. We must bear in mind that this probably had an impact on what was said and how it was said, but that we cannot identify these elements.

About the participants

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and especially since Latvia joined the European Union on May 1\textsuperscript{st} 2004, academic mobility of university teachers in Latvia has increased rapidly. Before that, most university teachers could only dream about moving outside the borders and isolation created by the Iron Curtain of the Soviet Union. Nowadays, it is common to be mobile in the society of Latvia - if financial circumstances allow. After regaining independence and the transition to market economy, people in Latvia have become mobile in different ways and have regular experiences with otherness. Many Latvians have now chosen to leave their motherland for richer countries, especially Ireland\textsuperscript{9}. Solveiga (pseudonym) was chosen for the interview due to the fact that she has

\textsuperscript{8} Our translation.

\textsuperscript{9} Young people are used to travelling to and from Ireland, England, Germany, Italy and Scandinavian countries, doing mostly unqualified jobs to earn money for paying their tuition fees for their studies, buying
spent several years doing research and undergoing some of her postgraduate studies in a university in the UK, even before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Solveiga was interviewed about her academic mobility during a break between lectures at the University of Latvia in autumn 2006.

The second interview was done with a student from Russia (Irena) who took part in an exchange programme twice in Finland. Russia, Finland’s neighbouring country, is the 8th most important country that sends exchange students to Finland: 292 in 2006 (156 to Finnish universities and 136 to polytechnics) (Garam 2006: 20). The first seven countries are all EU members that send in exchange students through the Erasmus programme (the first three being Germany, France, Spain). A major in Finnish language and culture, Irena studied through exchange programmes between her home university and Finnish institutions of higher education. The interview took place in spring 2006 in the office of one of the writers. In the following analysis, we shall examine the interviewees’ discourse on their experiences abroad through the prism of the three characteristics that accompany the figures of solid and liquid strangeness.

Mobile academics as language and culture specialists?

At first sight and when considering the characteristics of both types of strangeness, both interviewees seem to meet all the characteristics of the solid stranger as they both know the local language (English and Finnish) and ‘culture’.

Culture

Knowing a local culture can appear in two ways, formulated somewhat simplistically:
- Culture with a big C which refers to cultural artefacts of a country (art, literature, cinema...), but also information on a nation-state (geography, history, institutions...);
- Culture as anthropological/sociological entities (ways of life of a people, sociological comparisons between different countries).

In both solid and liquid strangeness, though solid strangers may have had more experiences with local people (in hypermodern times, and depending on contexts, this is not automatic as one can live one’s live in one’s language and ‘culture’ anywhere), cultures 1 or 2, may be (said to be) known or ‘acquired’.

Solveiga asserts that she managed to learn about English culture while she stayed in Britain. Her conception of culture seems to correspond to culture with a big C. For example, when asked Did you try to learn the local culture? (note the bias in the question because it suggests that there is such a thing), she answers after hesitating: ‘we spent quite a lot of time in the Lake District, we visited museums, stayed with the lecturers, climbed the mountains, visited all kinds of local places’. So in her views, culture is not a matter of the people that compose a place but it seems to be more a matter of spaces

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a flat, a car and just keeping the family. Cf. the study Free Movement of the Workforce of Latvia. The example of Ireland. The collection of scientific articles of the Strategic Analysis Commission ‘Demographic Situation Today and Tomorrow’, SAC, Riga: 2006.
(museums and various sights) which correspond to an ideal of English culture: museums, the Lake District, the mountains. Noteworthy in that sense is the fact that she even alludes to the lines of a poem by the English Romantic poet Wordsworth, ‘we wandered lonely as a cloud’ to describe what her associations with English culture are. Her constant use of the pronoun we, which is not explained at any point, seems to suggest that she did these activities either in a group or at least with another person. We shall come back to this element later.

Irena, on the other hand, repeats several times, that she knows Finnish culture: ‘I know Finnish culture for many years’; ‘I used to know Finnish culture pretty well and I think it’s very specific’... She even uses that argument when she talks about how Spanish students were shocked at Finnish people’s behaviours (shyness, xenophobia): ‘for them it’s pretty strange for me it’s ok because I know Finnish culture, it’s normal’. Irena explains her assertions by emphasizing the fact that she studied Finnish in St Petersburg for ten years. In general and in opposition to Solveiga, Irena refers to the anthropological/sociological aspects when she talks about Finnish culture. In neither of the interviews do the two mobile academics question cultural aspects related to the ‘locals’, as they simply give the impression that they know the ‘culture’.

**Languages**

Both solid and liquid strangers may know the local language(s) and practise them with locals or other foreigners. Once again, in hypermodern times and with the widespread use of English as a lingua franca, this is not a must.

In England, Solveiga spoke English. Yet, she comments on what she refers to as the local dialect. Although she first says in the interview that, because of this dialect, it was very difficult to meet people, when asked if she learnt it, she answered: ‘I learnt the dialect and I still speak actually the dialect I have had cases when people say that they can’t understand my dialect and then I say that I stayed in X and then they say that’s clear then I use for example short a as in past in standard English you would say paaaaaaast but I just don’t like that I enjoy using the dialect’. In a way, this contradicts her comment on finding it hard to meet the locals because of the dialect. One could see here how she tries to solidify herself by asserting that she has, in a way, become like the locals. In the following quote, Solveiga uses as an authority to confirm this solidity the generic people: ‘People say that they can’t understand my dialect’, and she gives the impression that she has become an incarnation of the local dialect. As Solveiga says that she was often hanging around with foreigners, her use of English as a lingua franca could also represent part of her linguistic reality in England, but she does not comment on that aspect in the interview.

Though Irena claims to speak Finnish, she seems to be using English as a lingua franca in most contexts of interaction in Finland. In fact, this is one of the specific aspects of exchanges in Finland: unlike many other European countries, most exchange students do not know the local languages (Finnish and Swedish) before coming to the country (Dervin, 2007a). Most of them live their lives and study in English as a lingua franca
since few have English as their mother tongue (that can also be the case of many immigrants in Finland). Many students actually say that they decided to study in Finland in order to learn or improve their English. They seldom know Finnish or Swedish before they come to Finland and they do not learn Finnish or Swedish while there (Dervin, 2006a). Though Irena is different, as she knows the language and is writing a Master Thesis on Finnish culture and language and the Internet in English, she says that she chose to come back to Finland to ‘practise my English with international students’. As for Finnish, she says that she never speaks it because:

it takes me a lot of energy to speak it when I go to shop or get on a bus and ask which way to go, first of all I ask do you speak English? and they say no but then they speak perfect English.

The short dialogue between her and an imaginary bus driver or shop assistant that she introduces in this quote seems to stand as an explanation for her not using the language.

As a preliminary conclusion, we can say that both mobile academics are on the verge of solid and liquid strangeness when it comes to foreign/host language and culture. On the one hand, they do not seem to question culture but present a limited and mostly stereotypical image of it and on the other hand, they both seem to be using the local languages to interact and English as a lingua franca. Irena’s case differs from Solveiga as her mobility context involves the use of a less-spoken language, Finnish, which she doesn’t seem to be willing to use.

Integration to the host society: mis-encountering the ‘locals’

Both interviewees have scheduled return home. Integration into the local society seems to be problematic for both interviewees, even though Solveiga has spent more time abroad and was more ‘professionally involved’ (she was a PhD student while Irena was an exchange student). Both interviewees have explanations for the feeling of segregation that they both describe: Solveiga, as we have seen, blames the local dialect, while Irena Finnish culture.

When asked if she met local people in England, Solveiga answers: ‘No. I wouldn’t say so. local people speak specific dialect and it is not easy to understand.’ She confesses that only during her stay with an English host family, did she have close contacts with local people – and this is how she learnt the local dialect. However, as the host family lived quite far from the campus, Solveiga moved to the student hostel later on. She doesn’t say anything about her neighbours in this accommodation in the interview, but all in all, her relationships and interactions with local people seem to have been limited. As we can see in the following excerpt, Solveiga refers very little to the local people that she has met and expends more energy on other foreigners:

Interviewer: Did you make friends with local staff members and students?
Solveiga: Yes of course I did, but not only local, you meet all kinds of people. For example, while doing a course in Essex University I made friends with French
and German students, we travelled to France and Cambridge together. You get to know lots of people.

Two interesting pronouns appear in this quote: you and we. We have already commented upon the use of we earlier, but, here, it refers clearly to Solveiga and her international friends; this may clarify the pronoun in the example of the section above when she described her cultural activities in England. The use of this pronoun in narratives on être-ensembles such as student mobility or tourism has been studied before (Dervin, 2007b) and shows that such contexts are lived as in heterotopias (cf. Michel Foucault and his study of spaces that are left aside, 1984) and lead to segregation. As for the pronoun you, which can allow taking distance from oneself, generalizations and seeking sympathy from the interlocutor (Boutet, 1994), Solveiga seems to resort to it to make a final statement in the quote (‘you get to know lots of people’). It is interesting to note that she seems to be avoiding the topic as she doesn’t actually provide any evidence in the interview of her making friends with local people. In this sense, it is noteworthy that her first visions of local people actually appear not to have changed with time:

First time when I arrived from the Soviet Union on the campus that was on Essex university I was horrified I thought that all the hell had broken loose all the people had sort of fancy hair and I don’t know you wouldn’t call these hairstyles and they were all around shouting and I had never seen anything like that I still remember my reaction was horrified I couldn’t understand what sort of people they are they were kind and polite they’d keep the door opened to you.

Contrary to Solveiga, Irena clearly claims that she hasn’t met any locals in Finland and explains this through typical otherizing discourses (Dervin, 2007d). Her context of residence is that of many exchange students in most Finnish institutions of Higher Education: she rented a room from the accommodation office of the Student Union and stayed in a shared apartment outside the city10. The cocooning11, or the fact that exchange students tend to stick together, is a logical consequence of that and many students wonder about the fact that entire buildings or shared flats are ‘exchange-students only’ and sometimes occupants in shared-flats are even accommodated with another representative of their own country. Irena is sharing a flat with another Russian student and a French girl. When asked if she chose to be with a Russian girl, she says:

Irena: I was really like surprised by why they made a decision to put us together
Interviewer: Did you ask them why?
Irena: No, but as far as I know, all Russians share an apartment with other Russians.
Interviewer: How do you explain it?
Irena: Maybe it’s difference in culture maybe complaints before 2005 that maybe some international students were complaining that… I don’t know.

10 Further analysis of the Finnish context is to be found in Dervin, 2006a.
11 Exchange students themselves use terms such as ‘bubble’, ‘no real life’, ‘summer camp’, ‘love boat’ to describe their experiences in Finland.
In her second turn supra, Irena is hypothesising (note the use of the ‘culture-alibi’ (Abdallah-Pretceille & Porcher 1996) in ‘maybe it’s difference in culture’) but she cannot find a suitable answer to the questions and eventually interrupts her explanations. Since the subject of her hypothesis in the second turn is ‘some international students’, and if we refer back to what she said earlier on in the interview about how some international students find it hard to share accommodation with Finns (which is a very rare case), because they don’t greet them nor speak to them, we can easily reconstruct what she was about to say. Through the voice of others, she manages to put forward representations of Finns and blame them for the forced être-ensemble.

In some excerpts, Irena’s comments are extremely negative about Finns: for instance, in her answer to the question ‘do you have Finnish friends here?’, Irena says:

No, it’s difficult to have contact with Finnish people, I think they’re just cold and euh shyness euh it’s a stereotype but unfortunately they work and at least in my experience.

She thus utters a stereotype of which she is aware, with a just in ‘they are just cold’ which, through its peremptory tone, can hardly be contradicted by the listener. This is followed by the sentence ‘unfortunately they work’ which contains a modal adverb which shows again that Irena is aware of the stereotypical content of her utterance but which also softens it. Another example is found at the very end of the interview when she is asked ‘do you feel that Finnish people are not too happy about exchange students being here?’ she replies (and repeats) that ‘every Finnish is not so friendly it’s ok but I think that Finnish people are very cold and they have their own world’.

So we have very clear signs that the two interviewees’ perceptions of their integration are mostly those of liquid strangeness. The visions are highly stereotypical and emphasize on the segregating aspects between locals and foreign students (which are much stronger in Irena’s interview). Finally, no signs of membership bidding appear in the interviews, both interviewees seem to be aware of their differences with ‘locals’ and accept them. In both cases, it is the other’s peculiarities or differences which do not allow for encountering and consequently lead to a feeling of segregation.

Absence of the same, realistic vision of the other

None of the interviewees assert that they have become like the other, even if Solveiga says that she has adopted the local dialect and indirectly hints at assimilation. Besides, relationships to ‘the same’ in the host countries are not commented upon in the interviews. Though Irena shares her flat with another Russian student, she doesn’t comment on her or indulge in hetero-stereotypes (cf. Dervin, 2008 on how French Erasmus students criticise the presence of other French students when they talk about Finland and other countries at the end of their stay in Finland). In her interview, Solveiga reveals general stereotypes on Latvians and Latvian-Russians (i.e. Russians who live in Latvia) but not about the fellow citizens that she met in England. At the end of the interview, for instance, she says:
Interviewer: Have you ever experienced negative attitude towards yourself because you are Latvian?
Solveiga: (…) I don’t think I have suffered, because of me being Latvian. I don’t know… I think it is not outside Latvia, but inside Latvia, we have a very peculiar attitude towards Russians here. I mean I personally like Russians in Russia but here because there are so many because of the amount and presence of Russian culture you develop a protective attitude towards Russian, Latvian has been affected so much it’s all mixed up (…) If we speak Latvian in Switzerland everybody thinks we are Russians. Our accent is Russian, and we look Russian. Everybody knows Russia, nobody knows Latvia, everybody thinks we are from Russia. I don’t mind anymore, I am used to it, there is not much difference, I quite agree with them.

Her discourse quickly evolves through spaces-times (England-Latvia-Switzerland) in her answer. She answers the interviewer’s question briefly and then expresses some irritation at the presence of ‘Russian culture’ in Latvia. Then she introduces the fact that people see her (‘everybody thinks we are Russians’, note again the use of we) as a Russian when she is in Switzerland – which could be a hint at the fact that people are prejudiced against her for the wrong reasons; she is perceived as a Russian but she is not. Yet, the end of this statement is a bit paradoxical as she seems to be confirming her perception and acceptance of Latvia and Latvian as ‘russianised’ when she says ‘I don’t mind anymore, I am used to it, there is not much difference, I quite agree with them’ (them being probably the Swiss).

As for relationships that both interviewees develop with students from other countries, both interviewees comment on the too few relationships/friendships they have had with the locals, but they both include several other liquid strangers in their narratives. When asked if she saw other foreigners as mere representatives of other cultures, Solveiga answers:

I think it is awfully important to get to know as many people from as many cultures as possible. For example, once I had a chance to stay with a woman from Palestine and since then I have noticed that I am watching the news on Middle East conflict completely differently. You have an insider’s knowledge of the region.
Interviewer: In what way differently?
Solveiga: People say they [Palestinians] are always fighting, every time they say that people in Palestine like fighting I always remember this woman who was so calm and peaceful.

Solveiga is thus conscious that her meeting with people from other countries has allowed her to go beyond stereotypes and limited vision of them. It is interesting though that, in her second turn, she includes the voice of ‘people’ (‘people say… they say…’) which cannot be identified and seems to represent the voice of the doxa. Is it actually her own
(past?) voice that she includes? This could show how much Solveiga valued the presence of other liquid strangers in her experiences of AM.

Irena’s discourse is also enthusiastic about other exchange students but, in opposition to Solveiga, she identifies a lot with them. The daily activities that she describes are mostly group-based (she uses ‘we’ all the time) and in her words, ‘we are like a big big big family’; ‘we appreciate everyday of being together’. Of interest here is a personal story that she tells during the interview about a relationship that she could have had with a Finnish man and which shows how strong her identification with other liquid strangers is. She says:

I want to say that I feel that I live in a community and there was one story with me on my private life like I met one guy and he’s Finnish and he… he liked me and… we were trying to date and I said no because he was a stranger for me you know I am used to live in my own community I don’t accept people from… because other people they are from other world… I don’t want to communicate with other students.

It is interesting that Irena seems to be either manipulating the interviewer or contradicting herself in this narrative. In ‘he liked me and… we were trying to date and I said no because he was a stranger for me you’, ‘we were trying to date and I said no’ (which is a direct represented self-discourse (Dervin, 2008), i.e. Irena’s own past voice) is paradoxical, even contradictory. ‘I said no’ seems to be an answer to a query but she first explains that they were trying to date. Is she inventing this or exaggerating? Does she want to over-emphasize on her identification with exchange students? The fact that she turns the Finnish person into a stranger here is also interesting as she reverses the trend (she is the stranger in Finland but as she uses her in-group to defend herself and give herself strength, the other becomes a stranger).

Attitudes and discourse on other foreign students tend to be both overly positive and, as we shall see now, realistic, honest and somewhat negative. This is quite clear in Irena’s narrative. Irena says that she knows the ropes as far as building up relationships with other exchange students is concerned since she has had two experiences as an exchange student. On the one hand, she is delighted to be with ‘my friends with my intercultural… like… international students’ (note the slip of a tongue on intercultural) but on the other hand she is aware that, at the end of her first stay:

Irena: of course we all swore oh you are my friend forever, you are welcome to me but after one month and then nothing
Interviewer: do you think that the same is going to happen here?
Irena: unfortunately yeah

The categorical tone of her utterance gives a very essentialist and programmatic approach to relationships within the exchange experience; what happened at the end of her first stay in Finland, will certainly happen at the end of the second. Solveiga describes the same phenomenon but in a more restrained and less ironical tone:
Interviewer: Are you keeping any contacts with people whom you met?
Solveiga: I would not rather say that I keep constantly in touch, but I always know that I can write to those people when I need, I know they will respond. I don’t believe in keeping in touch just for the sake of it. You don’t interfere with people, because everybody is awfully busy. I think I try to minimize my contacts. I know I am horrified by the amount of e-mail I’m getting and do not want not to take up their time without need.

Her explanations are more precise and she tries to save face in the answer: she is too busy to be in contact with others and besides she knows that her contacts have no time for her. The use of the generic ‘you’ here again shows that Solveiga is trying to distance herself from her own discourse. In summary, though ‘the same’ is totally absent from the narratives on their AM experiences, other foreigners form the core of the interviewees’ social networks. This être-ensemble is typical of liquid strangeness.

Discussion and conclusions

Our chapter has gone from a general reflection on strangeness and a review of the concepts of solid and liquid strangeness to the examination of two contexts of AM. Though the experiences of both interviewees are very different, there are some similarities in the characteristics of strangeness that emerge from their discourse.

It should be noted that one cannot guarantee the authenticity of the discourse which is constructed during the interviews and that therefore the boundaries between liquid/solid sometimes come forward as unclear. In any artificial situations such as interviews, people tend to look better, try to please the interviewer (or otherwise, depending on their attitudes towards her/him) so they might not disclose real feelings and thoughts. Yet, on the whole, we can conclude that both Solveiga and Irena can be classified as liquid strangers; though at first sight both interviewees seem to meet all the characteristics of the solid stranger (cf. their relations to ‘local’ languages and cultures).

All in all, it seems that both of them are aware of the feature of a new societal modus operandi, which has been described as typical of liquid modernity. First of all, both Solveiga and Irena are realistic about the short-lived contacts with other liquid strangers after the être-ensembles. Also, and unlike what Bauman had to say about the impact of the stranger in the quote that opened this chapter, it appears that the impact of both mobile academics on the host society is nothing like an earthquake. Their presence in the host societies appears to symbolise the paradox of presence-absence. These have implications: how to prepare mobile academics for these experiences?

It is hoped that our discussion of the figures of strangeness can be used as an alternative framework to capture the lived experiences of other mobile academics, be they staff, researchers, students, etc., blend them and find ways of preparing them…
References:


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