

## Facilitating Authenticity:

### Terms of exchange between host and guest in CouchSurfing

**ABSTRACT:** The internet and tourism have played integral roles in accelerating physical and informational border crossings in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. CouchSurfing – a membership-based website dedicated to coordinating free home stays between locals and travelers – marks one potential confluence of these two infrastructures that greatly alters movements through the ethnoscape. This paper examines how CouchSurfing reconfigures the relationship between “host” and “guest” by exploring the terms by which hosts negotiate their encounters with guests in the absence of monetary expectations. Through ethnographic research on Oahu supplemented by five years of personal experience in the CouchSurfing community, including travels in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, I analyze three alternative forms of host-guest exchange – profile building, enablement, and intimacy. It is precisely these forms of non-monetary exchange that allow the quick, structured intimacy necessary to the trope of “authenticity” as invoked by CouchSurfing members. This paper further illustrates the enduring importance of “authenticity” as a discursive device, and suggests that in the case of CouchSurfing “intimacy” and “authenticity” may be re-conceptualized as two related tropes negotiated vis-à-vis the common analog of “alienation.”

The internet and tourism are two modern infrastructures that are having a profound impact on transnational flows of commodities, information, and people (Appadurai 1996; Clifford 1997).

Thanks to advances in transportation costs and efficiency, tourism has undergone a massive transformation from an upper class indulgence to an expected part of the lives of the middle classes (MacCannell 1999; Urry 1990). It is now the single greatest export in the world, responsible for 940 million border crossings in 2010 (World Tourism Organization UNWTO 2011). Meanwhile, the Internet has re-configured conceptualizations of space and revolutionized the ways that people interact both within and without their immediate physical environments.

Social networking websites in particular have had a tremendous impact on mediating relationships and the formation of new kinds of local and transnational imagined communities (Smith 1999; Anderson 1983; Gershon 2010; Itō 2010; Boyd 2008). In such a way, both tourism

and the Internet greatly reconfigure the composition of and interactions within the “ethnoscape” (Appadurai 1996).

“CouchSurfing” ([www.couchsurfing.com](http://www.couchsurfing.com)) is a website that combines tourism and social networking via the internet, greatly reconfiguring possibilities for cross-cultural exchange. The term “CouchSurfing” is both the name of an internet-based social networking site and a noun used by its 3 million members to describe the act of staying at the homes of locals while traveling, though the latter is often simply referred to colloquially as “surfing.” But on what terms do CouchSurfing hosts and guests negotiate this encounter? This paper explores how alternative forms of non-monetary exchange facilitate the relationships of hosts with their guests in the CouchSurfing community on the Hawaiian island of Oahu.

## WHAT IS COUCHSURFING?

CouchSurfing is a B Corporation that runs a free website by the same name, which facilitates relationships between over 3 million members worldwide<sup>1</sup>. Encounters mediated by the CouchSurfing website primarily take three forms: “couch requests,” meet-ups, and soliciting advice from locals. I focus on the first two components. First – and most central to the concept and success of couchsurfing.com – is the system of “couch requests,” by which visitors can seek to stay overnight with local residents at their homes. To initiate a couch request, a member enters a destination and may select from a number of preferences about a host including gender, age, languages, or if they provide a photo. The location and preferences are then checked against the database of members, and a list of profiles that are a ‘best-fit’ is generated, ranked by a

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<sup>1</sup> The NPO B Lab designates as “B Corporation” businesses that it sees as proving economically viable while ensuring some public benefit. For more on B Corporations, see <http://www.bcorporation.net/>

combination of a potential host's experience, couch availability, and activeness on the CouchSurfing site. The member can then look through the profiles of potential hosts on the generated list and send a "couch request" with a personal message and the dates the applicant is requesting. If the hosting member accepts the couch request, the server sends pre-entered information on the hosting location to the guest and the two parties negotiate the logistics of meeting up. There is no money required to join the website and no money is provided to hosts for their services.

The second function of the CouchSurfing website that I explore is the facilitation of meet-ups, which involve the gathering of residents and visitors for some kind of activity. CouchSurfing members can register for "groups," which range from cities (e.g., Honolulu) and regions (e.g., Oahu) to interests (e.g., Hawaii Cyclists Bicycle Club). There are over 200,000 groups and sub-groups in the United States alone. Each group has an autonomous forum where any CouchSurfing member can create a post, which is how meet-ups are organized. Typical meet-ups in the Oahu group involve outdoor activities (e.g., hiking and kayaking), food (e.g., pot luck parties), and nightlife. There are some types of meet-ups that are shared by CouchSurfing groups around the world, such as the popular "Free Hugs" event where members gather to give out hugs to passerbys at high traffic public locations. Invitations for meet-ups are open to everyone and can be made by anyone by creating a post on a group forum, or through the "create an event" function, which collects and displays events in one's local area. Such a formation of relationships based on common interests and activities make CouchSurfing – the online, social network infrastructure – an example of an "interest-driven practice," in which "specialized activities, interests, or niche and marginalized identities come [before friendship]" (Itō 2010).

## THE RULES OF COUCHSURFING

Couch requests and meet-ups are predicated upon quick, structured intimacy, and are thus not mediated by explicit sets of rules, which would mark the encounter as formalized. The host makes prospective guests aware of the specific conditions of the home stay on his/her profile page under the category “Couch Information,” which guests are presumed to have read when they submit a “couch request.” These conditions may include potential number of guests, the host’s work schedule, the living/sleeping arrangement, and dos and don’ts (e.g. no smoking, no staying out late when the host must work the following day). To ensure that Couch Information is read, many hosts who receive high volumes of requests plant a piece of trivia in the Couch Information section such as ‘mention the name of my dog Toby in the subject line of your message or I will not respond to the request.’ The CouchSurfing host rarely provides the guest with a list of house rules on site, such as might be expected at a bed & breakfast.

Most importantly, there is absolutely no money required for membership, nor for any of the interactions between members. Hosts do not expect payment for housing, and are often even reluctant to allow a guest to pick up the check at a restaurant. If a guest wishes to express gratitude to the host, he/she may give a small gift (e.g., a bottle of wine, snacks from one’s home country) and/or write a “reference” for the host on the latter’s CouchSurfing profile. On the website, the only place that monetary payment is solicited is for the “verification” process, which is meant to be a security measure to ensure that members are trustworthy individuals and not scammers. “Step 1” involves simply saving a first and last name and one’s country. “Step 2” requires a credit card contribution of a recommended minimum of \$25. CouchSurfing then sends a postcard containing information to finalize the verification to the member’s home address for “Step 3.” Before becoming a B Corporation, these contributions were the primary

source of revenue for CouchSurfing. In fact, both the “contributions” solicited during the verification process and the move to B Corporation status have been met with resistance by several CouchSurfing members. As this paper will show, any exchange of money in CouchSurfing is fundamentally opposed to a shared ethos that places primacy on “intimacy” and “authenticity.”

#### THE RECONFIGURATION OF “HOST” AND “GUEST,” “HOME” AND “AWAY”

I have been a member of CouchSurfing since 2007. I first heard about CouchSurfing from a female traveler who I met at a hostel in Stockholm, Sweden. I don’t remember much of our conversation, but what I do remember was being intrigued by the prospect of simultaneously cutting back on my finances and getting out of the hostel backpacker scene. I had just flown to Stockholm from Singapore after spending four months traveling there overland from Beijing, China via Southeast Asia. My budget took a big hit as I went from paying less than \$5/night for a private room in Southeast Asia to \$30/night for a 10 person shared dorm in Stockholm. I had also grown weary of the hostel experience; though I always enjoy the eccentric and enthusiastic people who stay in hostels, I found that I was spending all my time sleeping, eating, and exploring with other visitors. I registered a CouchSurfing username ([www.couchsurfing.org](http://www.couchsurfing.org) at that time), created a profile for myself, and immediately began to search for hosts for my next destination in Tartu, Estonia. I have since “surfed” in 11 countries, and continue to alternate between hostels and CouchSurfing homes while on the road.

I didn't find out until three years later when I became a graduate student of anthropology and read *Culture on Tour* (Bruner 2004) that what was causing my unease with hostel life is the "diurnal rhythm" of traveling, of being largely "home" in tour groups and tourist facilities even while "away." One of the arguments against asserting a typology of "backpacker" (or "traveler") in distinction to "tourist" is that both types conform to the same pattern of travel, the former simply does it on the cheap and in a less organized way: "Backpackers are adamant in distinguishing themselves from tourists, but they are, after all, the children of the middle-class mass tourists they despise, and their travel represents just a stage in the life cycle within the touristic enterprise" (Bruner 2004: 15).

Where the "tourist" stays in "hotels," the "backpacker" stays in hostels, but both rarely leave the accompaniment of like-minded travelers and experience a diurnal rhythm. Alternative travel social networking sites such as CouchSurfing alter that model greatly, as the diurnal rhythm of travel is replaced by more ideal states of "home" and "away." At the same time, I would argue that the intimacy involved in the bringing/being brought into a home instead of a place of business greatly alters the negotiation of traditional home-away and host-guest dichotomies.

As someone who has been a guest on the beds, couches, and floors of local residents, the benefits of "surfing" are less of a mystery to me than of hosting; the risk involved with staying at a stranger's house is much less than the reverse, the host provides more for the guest in monetary terms, and the host loses privacy while gaining responsibility. Explanations such as 'cultural curiosity' and 'living vicariously through others' travels' fall short of providing a satisfactory explanation to the question: 'why do CouchSurfing hosts shoulder the risk and responsibility of bringing people into their homes without any apparent restitution?'

I aim to show that there is restitution exchanged in these encounters, but that they are made in non-monetary terms of enablement, intimacy, and profile building. Furthermore, I argue that this ability for restitution to occur in tacit, intangible terms greatly re-configures the host-guest relationship, and that CouchSurfing forces us to reconsider basic assumptions such as states of “home” and “away” and front and back stages.

## METHODOLOGY

I examine these two functions using qualitative, ethnographic methods based in grounded theory. Between September and November 2011, I conducted interviews with three CouchSurfing hosts in the Oahu area, engaged in participant observation at Oahu group meet-ups, and monitored the Oahu group forum. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide and featured open-ended questions, so as to allow the interviewees to draw upon the widest range of possible answers according to what they perceived as the important points, and to allow both myself and the interviewees a degree of freedom to pursue emergent topics. I then transcribed each interview. Participant observation consisted of attending three meet-ups posted on the Oahu group forum, two of which were pot luck parties at Kailua Beach Park, and the other was the Honolulu leg of the annual meeting of Meet, Plan, Go!, an organization dedicated to enabling professionals to take time off work to engage in adventurous, long-term travel – what they call “career breaks.” I kept detailed notes during these events and then afterwards expanded them into detailed field notes for subsequent coding (Emerson 1995).

Finally, I read through the forum posts and made weekly field notes about the nature of the postings and the responses they received. Employing analytical techniques of grounded theory, I subjected all interview transcripts and field notes to an initial round of “open coding” followed by two rounds of “focused coding” (Emerson 1995) in order to develop emergent themes that spoke to how CouchSurfing hosts negotiate their past relationships with guests. These themes – profile building, enablement, and intimacy – reveal not only how hosts negotiate their encounters with guests, but also the terms by which they expect to be compensated.

The ethnographic portion of this study is limited in its scope as an analysis of a small portion of the Oahu group of CouchSurfing members. Like every community – imagined or real, the Oahu group is embedded in unique social, political, and historical conditions. The great majority of CouchSurfing members on Oahu are non-native, both in the sense of not being Native Hawaiians and not being Hawaiian natives. All three of my interviewees, and almost everyone who I have met at meet-ups on Oahu, are either from the continental United States or abroad. The conditions of the Oahu group are thus very different from all other locality-based communities that I have seen in CouchSurfing. On the other hand, the fact of their non-nativeness does not seem to alter hosts’ confidence in their ability to provide a ‘local’ experience for their guests. The version of “authenticity” sought after and presented to guests tends to deal more with ‘getting off the beaten path’ and camouflaging one’s identity as a tourist than it does engaging social problems. Guests to Oahu thus remain largely unaware of tensions that exists between non-white locals and *haole* (white people) – epitomized by the oft-heard “*haole* go home” jeer – or power imbalances of what Hanauni K. Trask (1999) refers to as “cultural prostitution” in tourism. It would be interesting to see how guests negotiate the value of nativeness in hosts in light of such conditions.



Finally, it is important to note that this study is informed by my own observation of CouchSurfing as both a guest and a participant in meet-ups since 2007, registering, creating and building a profile, writing couch requests to over 50 members, and being a guest in diverse set-ups from sharing a room with a political dissident blogger in Shanghai to sleeping on the floor between beds of a homosexual couple's tiny studio apartment in Krakow. The themes that I have induced from ethnographic research for this specific project are in accord with these experiences, but further research must be conducted in other localities with these themes in mind to determine their veracity and to explore how CouchSurfing articulates with the life histories of its members across borders.

#### RESTITUTION IN COUCHSURFING: PROFILE BUILDING

The first theme, which is of the most practical importance in understanding the negotiation of relationships in CouchSurfing, is profile building. Every member of CouchSurfing has a personal profile page where they can provide as much information about themselves as they want to reveal, from basics such as name, age, and hometown to interests, ambitions, and photos. In addition, there are sections for "friends" and "references" that require the approval of others. The "friends" section works like the popularized Facebook system, in that one member sends a "friend link request" to another that, if accepted, adds the members to the "Friends" list on each others' pages along with information on the degree of friendship and how the two members became acquainted. The profile page serves as the basic tool of reference for all other members of CouchSurfing who want to find out about someone who is posting to one of the forums or about a potential host or guest. All forum posts, all private messages, and

all “couch requests” are linked to a member’s profile, which is the primary status marker within the CouchSurfing community.

The most important section of the profile in terms of facilitating CouchSurfing encounters is the “references” section. Having good references is like having good credit, as references are often the first place that potential hosts or guests will look before sending or accepting a Couch Request. I have been told by several hosts over the years that their biggest pet peeve is when guests neglect to leave a reference on the profile of the host afterward. One of my hosts in Shangahi, China told me that he makes a point to give negative references to anyone he hosts who does not leave a reference of some kind. Mark has a similar opinion of the importance of leaving references:

“That’s how the whole CouchSurfing system works, it works off of your references... I was hosting all these people that wouldn’t leave a reference and I’m like, you know, this is kinda crazy... In Waikiki I was in a prime location, but if I was somewhere else that’s not such a good area... some people get like maybe 1 request a month and if one person doesn’t leave a reference and you’re just starting out, it’s like... you know, you can’t build your profile. It’s like a credit card, you know, the better your credit is, the more you get, so people look at it and think ‘oh this guy’s got 150 references’ – in all reality, right now I should have well over 200 with all the people I’ve hosted that didn’t leave references... they’re staying with you, you host em and give em a place, the least they can do is leave like a reference.”

Building a profile is thus very important to active members, who very literally see it as “credit.” In a way, guests pay hosts by giving them positive references, thus boosting their credit in the CouchSurfing community.

## RESTITUTION IN COUCHSURFING: ENABLEMENT

Another theme that emerged in my interviews with CouchSurfing hosts on Oahu is the role that guests and other CouchSurfers play in facilitating a lifestyle ideal for the host. For the CouchSurfers I interviewed, this ranged from providing companions for activities involving shared interests to enabling self (re)discovery and even divorce.

When Mark moved to Oahu in 2010, he was staying in a Waikiki hotel for the first two months he was there. At that time, his room was a revolving door for CouchSurfers, where he spent a great deal of time and energy coordinating the schedules and move-in/move-out dates of his guests. He had minimal privacy since he was always sharing his room and sometimes even his bed. For Mark, the effort was rewarded by the new friends he made who shared more of the same interests than his other Oahu acquaintances.

“For me, I had just got here to Hawaii... since I was by myself, and most of my other friends who are here are older, married, got kids, and they’re in their different type of thing... so for me I was like ‘wow, I’ve got a travel buddy, I’ve got people to do stuff with,’ so it was really exciting. You know, when I want to go out, if I want to go out to the club or anything, I got somebody to go out... I woulda been in a hotel, you know, I probably woulda went out by myself, but then I look like some kinda creeper, you know what I’m saying? Plus I was just doing cool things, like a lot of these people would come in with these guidebooks and be like ‘hey, I’m thinkin about checking out the Arizona Memorial’ or ‘I want to check out this,’ and I’d be like ‘hey, I haven’t been there yet, let’s go,’ you know. I had free time, so... for me, it was great.”

As Mark expressed, he saw his hosting of CouchSurfers as a way of making ‘travel buddies’ with whom to explore Oahu and enjoy Honolulu nightlife. Mark is relatively old for the lifestyle he enjoys – especially the ‘party scene,’ and he had found that he lacked friends to partake in it with since most of his acquaintances had moved to more family-oriented priorities. As Mark said, he would have felt awkward going out at night by himself, and the youthful, energetic people who he hosted facilitated partaking in the lifestyle he enjoyed. CouchSurfers seeking companions for nightlife was common in the Oahu CS forum, where more than half of the meet-up invites were to bars or nightlife events such as Chinatown’s block parties (e.g., Halloween, “First Friday”).

Tom had a similar problem to Mark’s. Tom lives for adventure hiking, but has trouble finding people whose interests and free time match up with his; he works at a Christian camp on the North Shore of Oahu in a relatively isolated location and works weekends, when most of the people he knew outside of CouchSurfing had their time off. He explains that some of the greatest connections he’s made with CouchSurfers have been through going on dangerous hikes together.

“...where I’ve hosted people that really connected was the hiking part. You know, for me, a lot of my friends that live here aren’t really into... some of them are kind of into the hiking and stuff. I’m the kind of guy that’s like ‘the sketchier the hike the better.’ I don’t want to die, but if I do, ‘oh well, I had fun.’ You know what I mean? So, I’ve found some of those on CouchSurfing that have come and stayed with me cause they see the hikes and stuff, on the group posts. So they’re like, ‘yeah I want to stay,’ and so I’ve done some amazing hikes with CouchSurfers that I’ve hosted. So that’s what’s really

connected us, especially the guy in Phoenix. We've done some crazy hikes here. So that's kind of been connecting for me."

Because Tom is so isolated, only people who really take the time to read his profile and share an interest in the outdoors request to stay with him, the party goes opting to stay in Honolulu instead. Tom feels like he's connected the most with such CouchSurfers who have made their way to his neck of the woods to join him on adventure hikes. Tom would not be likely to take on such dangerous hikes without company, and most of the people he knew outside of CouchSurfing had either different interests or conflicting schedules. For people like Tom, the compensation for hosting is made in terms of sharing and enabling outdoor experiences. Shared interest in the outdoors features prominently in Oahu CS, and many of the meet-ups and open invitations made via posts to the Oahu CS forum are outdoor activities. In fact, the most well-attended and regular meet-up activity is barbeque and beach volleyball at Kailua Beach Park, which happened twice in October 2011.

A final example of CouchSurfing's role in enabling lifestyle choices is Stacey's self-re-discovery and subsequent divorce. When Stacey moved to Oahu, she was excited about being in Hawaii and spent a lot of her time outdoors. When she married a Japanese man who owned a restaurant in Honolulu and kept irregular, nighttime hours, she found herself doing less and less during the daytime, and fell into a crowd that only indulged in an insular Asian night scene. Though Stacey had been acquainted with CouchSurfing since 2006, she was inactive on the site until late 2010, the period of time when she grew unsatisfied with her lifestyle in Hawaii and with her relationship with her husband. During that time, she estimates that she hosted 16 or 17 CouchSurfers over a four or five month period. She credits CouchSurfing with helping her through the divorce:

“[CouchSurfing was] the catalyst that just kind of made me say ‘this is it...’ I knew at that point that the life that I had with [my ex-husband] was just not what I wanted. It’s because of CouchSurfing, basically. I know it’s kind of weird, actually to say, but... it could have just been a coincidence in timing, or whatever, but had I not met the people that I did, I think it would have been a lot harder for me to move on and find myself. Cause it was the one time I could be like ‘this is who I am, this is who I want to be, and I can be whoever I want.’ And before I was just so into him and tried to make a life for us, and you lose that identity after a while.”

Where Stacey speaks of what she had become during marriage in terms of a ‘loss of identity,’ she speaks of her experience with CouchSurfers in empowering terms:

“[The CouchSurfers I host are] from a different country, so they have a different perspective to give me. Also, there’s something romantic about the idea that they’re gonna be gone soon, so there’s this intense, short relationship. You know it’s gonna end, you know about the expiration date on this relationship. So it’s kind of like ‘we gotta do what we can while we can,’ so you have this kind of go-to attitude. You know, ‘we have to enjoy every moment and have that energy,’ and you’re already kind of going off their energy. They’re excited to be in Hawaii, and I kind of lost that, you know. I lost that after being here four years, or whatever. I was like ‘eh, it’s Hawaii.’ Then these people are like ‘I’m in Hawaii!’ and I’m like ‘fuck yeah, we’re in Hawaii!’ And then I was doing stuff that I hadn’t done in a long time and to see them just be so excited to do those things, it made me kind of refreshed.”

Stacey believes that her interactions with CouchSurfers reinvigorated an excitement in her that characterized her pre-marriage self that was lost in her married life. As these cases

demonstrate, guests and compensate their hosts by enabling them to enact certain lifestyles and even catalyze self re-discovery.

## RESTITUTION IN COUCHSURFING: INTIMACY

The final theme that emerged from this study – which I would argue has been the most central to CouchSurfing’s success – is intimacy, which is tightly interwoven with what people see as the mission of CouchSurfing and how hosts define what makes someone a good or bad CouchSurfer.

Intimacy figured greatly into hosts’ perceptions of their guests as good or bad. CouchSurfing attracts two types of people, those who are enticed by the prospect of connecting with people, whether that be romantic or platonic, and those who are enticed by the prospect of free services such as lodging, transportation, and food. Tom feels like there is an increasing number of the latter due to the popularization of CouchSurfing:

“It just seems to be that there’s a lot of people now connecting that have heard about it but aren’t really into, we’ll call ‘the project’ of CouchSurfing, you know, like they don’t really support the project, they’re just kind of there for the free place to stay, you know? They’re not about the culture, they’re not about learning the stuff, but just like... and that’s what I found with the one I gave the negative reference to. It was just a free place to stay for the night, which, if I know that in advance, I personally don’t care, you know? Tell me up front you’re just looking for a one night, you’re passing through town, I’ve had that and I’m okay with that, but if it’s just like kind of using you in that sense, that’s where it’s like, it’s not okay with me anymore.”

From the way hosts talk about their positive and negative experiences with CouchSurfers, it is clear that the former correlate with people committed to “the project of CouchSurfing,” while the latter are generally those who are not. Stories from this latter category are characterized by lying, inconsiderateness, ungratefulness, and generally abusing the generosity of the host. Tom, Stacey, and Mark’s stories of bad CouchSurfers involved all of these characteristics. Mark’s worst experience was hosting an older Brazilian woman who he trusted despite references due to the fact that she was a mother and had her own real estate business. This excerpt from his story illustrates the imbalance in host-guest exchange in CouchSurfing:

“...one thing that she did right off the bat that pissed me off : we were riding around the island, we went to Matsumoto Shaved Ice, cause some people in my bike group, they’re like ‘oh yeah you should go there.’ And I’ve already been there a hundred times and didn’t really want to go, the line was long as hell. So she’s like ‘yeah I really really want it.’ So we get there, and you know it’s like \$1.50 for a shaved ice, and she like puts her hand in my face [asking for money] after I order for the \$1.50, and I’m like ‘holy crap.’ You know, I was gonna pay anyways, I was gonna pay for my own ice, but it’s the whole fact that she’s like, you know... after I just drove a half hour to pick her up, over an hour to Waikiki and back in my truck, which is – I probably must have spent like... my truck sucks up gas like crazy, it’s like almost \$10-15 to drive to Waikiki. Plus, the next day I drove her all the way around the island on my motorcycle, so right there I must have spent maybe \$30 in gas total, and then she sticks her hand in my face for like \$1.50. But, you know, it’s just the whole point, so she pissed me off with that.”

Asking compensation for small amounts of money for food purchases was actually something that Stacey touched on as well. Though neither Mark nor Stacey expected free meals



for their hospitality, rather it was the cold insistence and perceived ungratefulness that got to them. Perhaps it makes such an impression on them because sharing food and meals is such an intimate activity, and the bluntness of insisting on separate payments serves to undermine the kind of intimacy that hosts expect in their relationships with guests. In fact, food figured prominently into Mark's recollection of his best CouchSurfing experiences as well, talking about pot luck events in Richmond, his Hungarian hosts who cooked for him while he was a guest, and his own CouchSurfers that cooked for him. Home cooked meals are an intimate affair, and in Mark's case, he was single, living alone in a house, and didn't do much cooking for himself. Additionally, his multi-ethnic CouchSurfing guests made exotic foreign foods for him that allowed him to experience another culture without leaving home. This is the kind of intimacy that CouchSurfing provides its members and what makes Mark remember the meals people made him most fondly.

Hosting couples versus hosting single individuals also yields different levels of intimacy, and Mark expresses his dislike of hosting couples:

"I've hosted some couples – like seven couples, but I stopped hosting couples because... the first two couples I hosted, I hosted a couple from Iran, they were great, the best couple I ever hosted, and I hosted a couple from Brazil, they were really good. But then I hosted 3 couples from the United States and it was horrible... Well not really horrible, it was good, but they were just too much of lovey-dovey. I felt more of like an unpaid tourist guide than part of the group, so I'm like a third wheel vs. when I host someone that's single, you interact with them more, you can do stuff, you can go here, I get more out of it than hosting a couple like 'I'm here, I'll drive you around.' I had one couple that

they both sat in the back of my truck... and I'm like 'this is stupid, I don't wanna host couples.'”

The sentiment of feeling like a “third wheel” or an “unpaid tourist guide” illustrates the loss in intimacy of a host with guests who prioritize their own shared experiences, rather than looking to share experiences with their host. Mark’s referencing of hosting couples as a bad experience is indicative of the importance that CouchSurfers place on such interactive, personal encounters. Guests thus also pay hosts with intimacy.

#### INTIMACY BUT NOT ROMANCE?

Romance, the most intimate of encounters, is a subject that is met with a great deal of ambivalence within the CouchSurfing community. Most of the negative references that I have observed on the profiles of CouchSurfing members in both Oahu and elsewhere are reports of sexual advances left by females on the profiles of males. In fact, the only significant controversy that occurred on the Oahu CS forum from September to October 2011 was fallout from an invitation made by a male exclusively to females in a post on September 18<sup>th</sup> that read:

“Any girls looking to party? We’ve got a massive house and we’re here for the week. Jacuzzi, outdoor, wet bar, surf boards, you name it message me! Come by for surf during the day! Girls only sorry, we have enough guys! Cheers.”

The post received 25 responses before the moderator put an end to the discussion, with slightly more members disagreeing with the spirit of the post than defending it. Most of the people in disagreement with the post stated something like Glenny Palomino (username) did on September 20<sup>th</sup>:

“...couchsurfing is about making friendship, connections and experiences and friendship does not specify gender. that's what couchsurfing is about where I come from, just friendship and if something else comes out of that, then awesome! But first comes the idea of just being friends no matter if you are a guy or a girl.”

This sentiment seems to be the general consensus amongst CouchSurfers, at least in terms of how members speak about the appropriate place of romance in CouchSurfing. Like Glenn Palomino, most agree that “if something else comes out of that,” then it's fine. Situations where romance is actively sought, however, is seen by many as an abuse of the organization, such as a CouchSurfer that Tom once hosted at his camp on North Shore:

“His whole thing was he traveled with... he always traveled with a box of condoms to his host's house cause he never knew who he was gonna meet. And he preferred to stay with girls, you know... he traveled in Europe and he stayed with some girls and they had romantic times and you know, that was it. He stopped traveling to other places on his thing, cause, you know, they hooked up. And so he was kind of expecting that here with people he hung out with in the day time... Whereas I was like, ‘you know, when you signed up and you agreed to CouchSurfing, you agreed that that's not what your intentions are. You know, if that happens, okay, but if that's what you're coming into it, then I think you've kind of missed the concept... that's not what CouchSurfing is about, you can't go looking for that.’ That's what e-Harmony or match.com is set up for.”

Tom had never had a romantic relationship with anyone he hosted, stayed with, or even knew through CouchSurfing, and as such should be placed at one extreme end of a spectrum of the degree to which people use CouchSurfing for sex. Mark also echoed Tom's take on the inappropriateness of using CouchSurfing specifically for sex, but admits to having had sexual

relations with CouchSurfers. Stacey is on the other extreme end of the spectrum from Tom and chooses many of her guests based on their potential as sexual partners:

“Yeah. First off, obviously looks, number one thing. Two is probably where they’re from. If I have an interest in that culture, I’m definitely gonna be more open to... or if I’m planning to go that country or want to go to that country, then that’s another thing. Also music and books are a really big thing. And movies. Anything art associated is a big thing for me, cause I can tell a lot about a person, I think, by their art and then also their pictures, like the type of photography they do. All the artistic aspects I look at a lot, cause those are the type of people I like to hang out with.”

The things and order in which Stacey looked for in a potential guest were the same kinds of things that one might look for on a dating site such as match.com: looks then background and interests. Out of the 16 or 17 people she hosted, she claimed to have had sexual relations with at least four.

Consensual sexual relations are undeniably intimate. How can CouchSurfing hosts recall their best and worst experiences with guests in terms of intimacy or lack thereof, while chastising those who seek sexual relationships?

### THE “PROJECT” OF COUCHSURFING

The issue that is central to how hosts negotiate good and bad guests and the (in)appropriateness of romance in CouchSurfing is, as Tom expressed, the shared ethos behind the “project of CouchSurfing.” When questioned about the essence of CouchSurfing, members most often refer to the ‘authentic’ nature of CouchSurfing as opposed to other forms of travel.

Tom: “I think CouchSurfing is all about staying with people that live in the local area so that you can learn the local culture. If they’ve grown up there, great, then you’ll learn a lot more or if they’re people who moved there or are staying there temporarily, they’re gonna at least understand the local area better than if you went to a hostel and you just stay with other tourists. So what I like about that is that... I like to learn about the areas that I’m going. I’m really not the downtown kind of person, even when I’ve traveled and stayed in hostels, we’ve always stayed out in a suburb, outskirts, or in the country so that we can get more the feel of what that place is about. So I find that staying with CouchSurfers is that, it’s kind of a quick path to finding out what the local area is or what the culture’s like, where’s kind of the good areas to go that’s not in the tourist books. So, it’s a culture, people getting to know other people that are just like-minded.”

Sean: “How do forms of traveling like backpacking and staying in hostels compare with CouchSurfing?”

Tom: “How does it compare? I don’t think it does. My personal thing is, again, to stay with people and to learn the culture rather than hanging out with a bunch of other tourists, you know, and my thing usually when I think of a hostel I think of a bunch of young drunk people. You know that go there, they tour a little bit, but they kind of get side-tracked, you know. And it’s like ‘oh yeah I ended up at a party and I just ended up going to that same place the whole time’ and you kind of miss the adventure thing. Whereas I kind of like to go off the beaten path a little bit, so if I can experience that area, that’s where I’d rather stay with CouchSurfers, because... and the thing is I get to pick who I’m staying with, rather than I have no idea who’s going to be sharing my room tonight in a hostel.”

Tom's responses reveal his valuation of CouchSurfing as a tool to gain local perspective and expertise, and also to empower him to choose exactly which local he will stay with, as opposed to chancing his roommates in a hostel dormitory. Stacey also describes CouchSurfing in terms of an authenticity mediated through relationships with locals:

“I think [CouchSurfing] totally plays off this whole beatnik movement, you know, it's kind of like a new age beatnik kind of thing, like how traveling and stuff like that, and taking different routes of travel, I guess, like looking at it more from a local's perspective to get that real experience, I think that's the biggest thing about it. So many of these people I get, they make plenty of money, they can be put in a hotel, but when you get put up in a hotel, it totally closes you off to what else is out there, especially staying in Waikiki... you could never leave this place and you don't ever see what Hawaii is, and I see that happen a lot to people working in hotels and stuff. They just see the same old shit and I'm like 'wow, that isn't even what Hawaii is, you know.' ”

It is interesting that Stacey likens CouchSurfing to such a romanticized period of American writing that conjures up images of freedom and adventure on the open road totally divorced from organized tourism and the alienation of the postmodern condition. To synthesize some of the language that Tom and Stacey use to talk about CouchSurfing, their negotiation of the “project of CouchSurfing” is that it is constituted by a “culture” of “like-minded” people who go “off the beaten path” to try and find “a local's perspective to get that real experience.”

Put in such terms, the central ethos of CouchSurfing appears to be very similar to MacCannell's (1999) conceptualization of tourism as a “quest for authenticity.” This quest for authenticity refers not just to tourism, but to the postmodern condition more generally:

“Modern interest in science fiction (as well as in existentialism and sightseeing) is motivated a collective quest for an overarching (solar or galactic) system, a higher moral authority in a godless universe, which makes of the entire world a single solidary unit, a mere world with its proper place among worlds” (MacCannell 1999:16).

In this conceptualization, religion or ‘ordered meaning’ is replaced in postmodernity by authenticity. Tourism has thus often been likened to spirituality and pilgrimage (Graburn 2004; MacCannell 1992). One possible explanation for the inappropriateness of romance in CouchSurfing is that under such a paradigm, “authentic” experience – perceived as a noble, religious pursuit – is cheapened by hedonism. Furthermore, the uniqueness of CouchSurfing (and thus its own authenticity) relies on its not overlapping in function or ethos with such oft disparaged dating websites.

## INTIMACY, AUTHENTICITY, AND ALIENATION

It is worth unpacking and examining the connectedness between these related terms of “intimacy” and “authenticity,” as well as their common analog “alienation.” Alienation has been a central characterization of the contemporary condition of man in economic, sociological, and anthropological theory. Marx’s own critique of capitalism relied heavily on the link between money, labor, and alienation (Marx 1974). “Alienation” implies a lack of “intimacy,” so it is no surprise that Marx makes appeals to the damaging effects of capitalism using the dichotomy as a metaphor:

Assume *man* to be *man* and his relationship to the world to be a human one: then you can exchange love only for love, trust for trust, etc... Every one of your relations to man and

to nature must be a *specific expression*, corresponding to the object of your will, of your *real individual* life. If you love without evoking love in return – that is, if your loving as loving does not produce reciprocal love; if through a *living expression* of yourself as a loving person you do not make yourself a *beloved one*, then your love is impotent – a misfortune” (Marx 1974).

Such a sense of loss is not merely a trope of Marxism, but also characterizes the past several decades of postmodern theory and its precursors (Ivy 1995; Harvey 1989). For tourism, alienation can come in forms such as a sense of loss of an idyllic past in the modern world (Ivy 1995) or in the more Marxist sense of man’s relationship to his labor (MacCannell 1999). While Marx writes in terms of ‘intimacy’ with the ‘person’ as the object, tourist literature uses more objective-sounding (paradoxically non-intimate!) terms such as “authenticity” with ‘culture’ as the object. However, both are described vis-à-vis a common oppositional force, alienation.

#### THE PROBLEM AND ENDURING VALUE OF “AUTHENTICITY”

The concept of “authenticity” has abounded in tourism and heritage studies since MacCannell’s initial conceptualization of the ‘quest,’ but it is invoked in very different ways to very different ends. Indeed, “one never knows except by analysis of the context which meaning is salient in any given instance” (Bruner 2004:151). Herein lies the problem of authenticity: it is an ambiguous, ill-defined concept that is used as a tangible marker of value.

The nature and relevance of “authenticity” in tourism studies is a well-worn topic of debate that continues into the present day. While many dismiss it as an invalid or outmoded concept that ignores the processual nature of culture (Cohen 1988), it continues to recur as a



trope not only in recent editions of *Annals of Tourism Research*, but also in the ways both hosts and guests talk about tourism (Vail 2004; Westerhausen 2002; Martin 2010). What matters about “authenticity” is the manner in which it is invoked discursively (Bruner 2004; Martin 2010).

In the case of CouchSurfing, “authenticity” emerges as a trope as members seek to explain the ethos of the organization. The frequency of terms such as “real experience” and “local perspective” and talking about how a hotel “closes you off” from “learning the culture” certainly illustrates the importance of authenticity in the way members negotiate CouchSurfing as a form of cross-cultural engagement vis-à-vis tourism.

It is interesting to note that when the interviewees spoke of CouchSurfing in terms of “authenticity,” it was from the perspective of guests, of ‘getting’ (as opposed to ‘giving’) a local perspective. It makes sense that the people most concerned with authenticity would be the guests, as they are the seekers of ‘real experience.’ Meanwhile, when recounting their experiences as a host, the trope of “intimacy” seemed to wholly replace “authenticity.” It is possible that CouchSurfers recall their experiences in terms of “authenticity” while in the role of “guest,” and in terms of “intimacy” while in the role of “host.” I would argue that this is because “intimacy” and “authenticity” are not only related concepts, but are actually tropes used to describe the same object from different perspectives within the discursive space of CouchSurfing. Conran (Conran 2011) similarly shows that volunteer tourists in Thailand recount their experiences largely in terms of “intimacy,” and suggests that the “quest for authenticity” could be re-organized in these terms.

In fact, authenticity could be re-conceptualized as intimacy, in so far as it is invoked discursively by tourists as part of a value judgment. To laud a historical monument for its

“authenticity” is equivalent to expressing how the monument – as a signifier of pastness – compresses the spatiotemporal distance between the tourist and the sign, i.e. fosters intimacy with the signified past. When a tourist – or ethnographer (Greenwood 1989) – complains about the lack of authenticity in a festival that has become ‘touristy,’ he is referring not necessarily to the actual origins of the tradition, but to an emotional distance (i.e., alienation) that commercialization has created between the tourist and the sign. In such a way, a phenomenological re-conceptualization of “authenticity” as a discursive expression of intimacy might be more helpful in understanding tourism and the host-guest relationship.

## CONCLUSION

Whenever I explain CouchSurfing to the uninitiated, the most perplexing facet of the system of hosting is always ‘why would somebody want to allow a stranger into their home?’ I always answer this question in terms of “cultural exchange,” which is part of it, but – at least on Oahu, these three themes offer a more tangible explanation for the motivations of CouchSurfing hosts. Though CouchSurfing is a free service in terms of money, there are really several types of payment going on between host and guest. Guests make their most tangible payment by leaving references for their hosts, helping them *build their profiles*. In the cases of Stacey’s divorce, Tom’s hiking hobby, or Mark’s nightlife scene, the payment from the guests was in the form of *enabling* their hosts to enact particular lifestyles. Finally, guests pay hosts through *intimacy*, whether by sharing experiences, sexual relationships, or simply cooking and sharing meals. The ability of hosts and guests to negotiate payment tacitly and in non-economic terms greatly changes the dynamic of the touristic encounter, producing feelings of “intimacy” and “authenticity.”

Furthermore, CouchSurfing practices require a re-conceptualization of some of the basic assumptions of tourism. It is often assumed, for example, that obstacles such as “staged authenticity” (MacCannell 1973), “front” and “back” spaces (Goffman 1959), and the inherently commercial nature of the host-guest relationship (Vail 2004) impede the tourist ‘quest for authenticity.’ Within the framework of CouchSurfing, these obstacles become irrelevant. Additionally, tourism is generally spoken of as intangibly benefiting only the tourist, while the local receives only tangible benefits, such as commerce or infrastructural improvements. If anything, tourism is seen as psychologically damaging for locals, characterized by postcolonial imbalances of power (Kahn 2011). Meanwhile, for the tourist, tourism is a ‘quest for authenticity’ or a “transformative” encounter (MacCannell 1999; Di Giovine 2009). By mediating the encounter of locals and visitors through non-monetary payoffs, CouchSurfing reconfigures the host-guest relationship in such a way that its encounters can be “intimate” and “transformative” for both the hosts and guests. This study illustrates the need to explore how new forms of technology mediate the touristic encounter and how new ways of experiencing ‘the Other’ require a re-conceptualization of basic assumptions of the tourism literature.

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