– ARTICLE –

'SHE'S FROM BOTHY SIKE'[1]:
CHALLENGES TO RESEARCH AND THE EXPERIENCE OF BELONGING

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ABSTRACT

All too often, we see what we expect to see and it is easy to miss what we are not looking for. Using a personal narrative approach, this paper reflexively explores the unexpected opportunities that research challenges can raise. The following experience forms part of a broader ethnographic project concerned with the performance of belonging and community in rural villages. Challenged by limited research funding, I chose to reduce my costs by volunteering at a nearby youth hostel in exchange for accommodation. I soon realized that I was seen to belong to the hostel community, not only by my fellow workers, but also by residents of the nearby villages. I reflect on how staff at the hostel formed and maintained a bounded community and a sense of belonging through the use of ritual, humour, and communal storytelling. Ultimately, this paper proposes that researchers embrace research challenges and be open to the unexpected advantages and experiences they can provide.

INTRODUCTION

This is a story about a journey I undertook in search of one thing, but in the process found something else. The intention behind this paper is to convey my experience of negotiating fieldwork challenges. It will discuss the choices I made, and the repercussions of those choices. It will discuss my experience of volunteering at a youth hostel (or backpackers) at my research site in exchange for accommodation, in response to limited funding, and the process of coming to belong to the hostel community. It is about discovering the advantage in seeming adversity and ultimately, it is about being aware; about taking the blinkers off and not being so focused on finding exactly what I went out into the field to find, that I overlooked the unexpected. It is a journey–both a physical one to my fieldwork site, encompassing a pilot study and two summers of field research, and a reflective one as I explore how I became part of the hostel

community. In this paper I argue that fieldwork challenges can be beneficial if the researcher is open to the unexpected. Further, I argue that community and a sense of belonging can be created by adherence to social boundary and bonding mechanisms, specifically communal storytelling, in which the researcher can participate. The paper briefly describes the three main challenges to my fieldwork: money, time and the unexpected, and the responding opportunity of volunteering in a hostel. Next I explore life as part of the hostel community; the initiation into the hostel rules and rituals and how such processes inculcate boundary making and bonding in the hostel, culminating in the analysis of communal story telling and its impact on belonging for the tellers. Finally, I reflect on the various layers of belonging and how a person can add belonging layers through adherence to the processes described. I conclude by reflecting on what I have learned from this experience, not only by responding to fieldwork challenges, but also on the processes involved in coming to belong to the hostel community.

RESEARCH SETTING AND METHOD

Bothy Sike is on the map, although it is not a town or a village, but a youth hostel inside the boundary of a National Park in what is know as 'Hadrian's Wall Country.' There is a pub just down the main road which runs from the east to the west coast across this narrow strip of northern England. During my time at the hostel, the exact number of staff varied only slightly. There were five full time and three part time staff as well as three other volunteers during my assignment. Although most of us were new to the hostel in my first summer of research, there was one substitution where a member of staff was replaced in the second year. All of the volunteers came consecutively for no more than two or three months. The part time staff all lived within a few miles of the hostel. All of the permanent staff and volunteers were from other parts of the British Isles and the World.

There is a garden in front of the hostel which is maintained by the hostel staff, including a lawn that can be used by guests. The tiny hostel reception area doubles as a small shop selling basic items such as toothpaste and soup and is also a bar. The hostel has a license to sell alcohol and stocks locally produced beers and a small selection of wines and spirits. There is a large lounge for the guests as well as a self-catering kitchen. The hostel can also provide meals on request. The original building dates back to the 1930s and was refurbished during the 1980s. It has not received any upgrades since that time. Its shabby appearance and lack of modern conveniences are all reasons The Manager maintains for charging off-peak pricing year round.

Bothy Sike is four very hilly miles from the nearest village and seventeen miles from the nearest sizable town. The area is rural, the alternating boggy and rocky land used primarily for grazing animals. The only crop grown is silage for the livestock. However, farming is in decline and the primary industries that once dominated the area: textile manufacture, milling, and mining have completely disappeared and been replaced in some small part by tourism, which, owing to the inclement weather, is seasonal. Tourists come to see one thing–Hadrian's Wall. Attributed to the Roman Emperor Hadrian, the wall is almost two thousand years old and runs from coast to coast for eighty three miles. Bothy Sike is close to one of the most impressive stretches where the wall and other archaeological sites have been preserved and the landscape is especially dramatic. In addition, the area is littered with castles and fortified dwellings, the majority of which were built in the thirteenth century as defensive strongholds, some of which were later expanded and are still maintained and inhabited. Others lie ruined on desolate hilltops. All are surrounded in a rich and bloodthirsty body of history and folklore.

My focus is on who the researcher is and how they are situated, grounding the researcher as an actual person at work in a real social setting (Stanley and Wise 2006). I agree with Murphy (2008) that the fieldworker is not 'the other' nor are they as Jackson (2008) suggests, a liminal presence caught betwixt and between, but rather the fieldworker is bodily 'in' the field, actively participating in the social. As such, the fieldworker can belong to the community under study. Which begs the question, in what capacity? Here I am interested in Stanley's (2008) concept of social location, including the fieldworker's role, for example, as researcher, visitor, hostel worker, or member of a walking group.

I have found defining this paper to be no easy task; is it Ethnography? Autoethnography? Biography? Life Story? It is all of these at different times and not in any tidy, linear order, as I agree with Geertz (1983) that they are 'blurred genres.' Although informed by a broader ethnographic project concerned with 'belonging' among Hadrian's Wall Communities, this paper is an expansion of one small piece of it. Also included are elements, such as the challenges to my research, which lie outside that ethnography. I thought using the term *personal narrative* or its often used synonym, *life story*, would provide a more accurate description of this piece of writing. It also draws attention to the ontological position of the researcher, located at work in the field, and the subsequent knowledge claims made as a result of that experience. What is a *life story*? Maynes *et al.* (2008: 4) propose 'a *personal narrative* (we also sometimes use the more common term *life story*) in our usage is a retrospective first person account of the evolution of an individual life over time and in social context.'

This includes, for example, oral histories, autobiographies, in-depth interviews, diaries, journals, and letters. But excluded are conversational accounts of a person in a specific set of circumstances and moment in time; for example narratives of illness or divorce. However, the term *life story* is defined by Angrosino (1989: 3) as 'a narrative that highlights a few key events or focuses on a few important relationships,' as opposed to a *life history* which would include the subject's entire life span.

Taking these two useful characterisations into account, my working definition of a *life story* as I use it here, is a retrospective first person account, related by me, the researcher, focused on a few important relationships; primarily, those of my colleagues at the hostel and to a lesser extent, with residents of the surrounding villages over the course of my fieldwork. In this *life story*, I use participant observation, conversations with fellow hostel workers, as well as reflections on my fieldnotes. It is then written down, after the fact, furthering the temporal element to infuse the past events with my thoughts about them at the time of writing. Furthermore, the end product, this paper, is written down with a specific audience in mind which further contextualises what is written, what is omitted, as well as the choice of rhetorical style and authorial voice used (Stanley 2006; Riessman 2001; Laslett 1999; Denzin 1997; Tonkin 1992; Atkinson 1990).

This *life story* concerns my experience of coming to belong to the Bothy Sike community. There are many different ideas about belonging and community and I have found the following to be the most useful: Cohen's (1982) and Strathern's (1982) conceptualisations of belonging and community as well as ideas about identity claims proposed by McCrone *et al.* (1998), McCrone (2002), Kiely *et al.* (2005), and Bechhofer *et al.* (1999).

How and in what ways do people belong to a community? Cohen suggests that 'belonging to locality is mediated by membership of its more fundamental structures – kinship, friendship, neighbourhood, sect, crew and so forth' (Cohen 1982: 14). It is through membership of such things that the individual becomes part of the community as a whole. Despite birth being a predominant marker of identity, belonging is more complex than simply being born in a place; there must be a sense of commitment. The extent to which someone is regarded as belonging has to do with their involvement and attachment to these local groups. Belonging is defined by social structures and experience and every community, Cohen suggests, does this in unique ways.

What is a community? When I think of Hadrian's Wall Communities, I im-

mediately think of towns and villages–places where people live as their permanent residence, which is why initially, I had not considered the hostel as one of those communities in its own right. Strathern (1982b: 253) very helpfully reminds me to avoid the over simplified notion that 'community' equates to 'town.' Belonging, Strathern proposes, is much more complicated than simply being a member of a local group, a certain neighbourhood or workplace. And belonging to what? Strathern (1982b: 256) suggests that the perception of community is subjective, stressing that outsiders may perceive an 'organic village' where as insiders are aware of divisions between local interest groups. Labels such as 'local resident' or 'incomer', for example, are ambiguous and may depend in large part on who claims these labels and how the claims are received and accepted (or not) by others. Furthermore, an individual may anticipate the rejection of their claim to belong and adjust their claim to ensure acceptance (McCrone 1997, McCrone *et al.* 1998, McCrone 2002, Bechhofer *et al.* 1999, and Kiely *et al.* 2005). This is a useful way of thinking about belonging claims because it takes into account the complexities and flexibility with which such claims are made at different times and varying contexts. However, in order to explore these issues in the field, I had to over come three major challenges to my fieldwork.

CHALLENGES: MONEY, TIME AND THE UNEXPECTED

> A more reflexive and flexible approach to fieldwork allows the researcher to be more open to any challenges.
> (England, 1994: 82)

It was my first year of postgraduate research and I had limited funding for the ethnographic study I had proposed. Coming to Hadrian's Wall Country for the Summer would not only incur cost, but would also necessitate leaving my part time job in one of Edinburgh's Whisky Bars and thus accruing considerable debt; not something I felt comfortable with. This was a major challenge to my research and one many researchers face – how to fund it? I had already completed a short pilot study in the area attending two public events: the bi annual Walking Festival and Summer Carnival. I realised, as a result of this study, that most public events happened during the summer months so it was imperative to conduct my fieldwork during this time. In addition, I had made positive connections with potential informants and I wanted to pursue those leads sooner rather than later. While chatting to the bar's chef one evening he explained that he was from New Zealand and was working his way around the world by volunteering to work in various backpackers and hostels in exchange for accommodation. As the above quote from England (1994) suggests,

flexibility is key in dealing with fieldwork challenges, so I contacted several hostels near my fieldwork area, explaining that I was a research student and enquired if there were any volunteering opportunities. One hostel responded and I was offered a voluntary post involving some cleaning and kitchen duties in exchange for free accommodation and food. The hostel Manager explained that I would still need to complete a questionnaire explaining why I wanted to volunteer. I felt really positive about this as it gave me the opportunity to fully disclose my intention to research Hadrian's Wall communities as part of my PhD thesis before the voluntary post was confirmed.

However, the solution to the challenge of funding: to volunteer my time in the hostel, gave raise to a second challenge: time to do the research. If I was volunteering in the hostel – how would I get out and research 'belonging' among Hadrian's Wall communities? In addition, I did not realise until I got to the hostel just how much of my time free food and accommodation would cost– up to thirty hours a week, often a split shift. I discussed my concern with The Manager, who then ensured that I had time off to attend public events and weekly activities such as joining a local walking group. However, simply having time off was not enough, as I would soon discover.

I gave two weeks notice to quit at the Whisky bar, thinking that everything was organised as well as it could be. Shortly before leaving for the field, I received an email from a friend. It contained a link to a video on YouTube entitled: AWARENESS. This raised the third challenge to my research; of seeing what is not looked for. The video clip begins with a basketball game, and the task of the watcher is to count the number of times the team wearing white shirts pass the ball. I counted diligently. Then the watcher is asked: 'But did you see the moonwalking bear?' The video is rewound and played back. This time I was looking for a moonwalking bear in the same clip I had just watched, and it was there, right in the middle of the basketball players! I thought this was a trick so I rewound the video clip back to the beginning and instead of counting how many times the team in white passed the basketball, I looked for the moonwalking bear. It was there. It was there all along and I did not see it because I was focused on something else.

I realised that I was so focused on getting into the villages of Hadrian's Wall country, and on visiting and attending public events with the specific agenda of looking for the ways in which 'they' belonged to a community, that I had put blinkers on myself. How did I as a researcher attempt to take off the blinkers and open myself up to see what was *not* the focus of my research? I planned to

write about my experiences in a field journal, but in addition to writing about events and observations as they occurred, I decided to record things my logical brain wanted to dismiss because they were 'not what my thesis is about.' I also wrote about my feelings regarding these experiences as they happened, not because I intended to write an autoethnography, but because I agree with Stone-Mediatore (2003), that stories about experience are always seen through some sort of ideological lens. I wanted to be aware of the lens I may have been looking through at the time, and not merely impose a meaning on the events listed in my journal without awareness of why I may have recounted them as I did. This is important because as Stanley (1988:135) suggests, 'from "the end" we can, we often do, read images and other biographical information backwards through time, to impose a real meaning with hindsight reading an account of what it all meant.' By this point I have begun to have doubts, can I do this? Is it possible? What if I miss something important? Should I be going into the field faced with such challenges? I am reassured by Behar (2003:17) that being challenged is positive and searching for the unexpected is what it is all about, as she writes:

> But the beauty and mystery of the ethnographer's quest is to find the unexpected stories, the stories that challenge our theories. Isn't that the reason why we still go to the field – even as we question where the field is located – in the 21st century? We go to find the stories we didn't know we were looking for in the first place.

NEW TO THE COMMUNITY

I packed my rucksack, booked my train ticket and began the 'quest', as Behar describes it, of my field work experience; in search of stories I did not know existed. On arrival at the hostel I was shown my tiny single room, given a staff t-shirt and told to report for duty at 8:00 AM the next morning. I was also invited to join the staff at 8:00 PM for dinner.

I learned that 8:00 PM marked the end of the dinner shift and time for the staff to eat, huddled, elbows in, sitting on plastic stools around a very small wooden table. One of the first things I learned, after everyone's names, was the image of the hostel held by the staff. One of them explained, 'we live in a bubble here; we are so far from reality, it's like the real world doesn't exist!' I thought she must be referring to the rural and isolated nature of the area. But I would come to realise, over the coming months, that there was something else going on here.

As they talked, I heard a mixture of accents. They talked about living in the hostel, about the weekly pub quiz to which I was immediately invited, which to me stressed the importance of recreation activities in belonging to this group (Frankenberg 1957). However, talk mostly revolved around the duties that have to be performed. I thought that I was being primed for what I would be expected to do on my first day. I was only half listening; my mind was on getting out of the hostel and into the nearby communities to do some 'proper' research.

I had already met some members of a local walking group while attending the bi-annual Walking Festival earlier that year. I discovered that after I had introduced myself to a few people and explained that I was doing research for my PhD, it seemed everyone knew who I was and why I was there. On several occasions while introducing myself I would be cut off mid sentence with something like, 'oh yes, you're that research student from Edinburgh,' said with what I perceived to be pride in their local knowledge. Even though I was meeting these villagers for the first time, they knew about me and as Cohen (1982:10) suggests, a commitment to belong includes knowing others within that community, if only indirectly. It seemed to me, that the story of the research student had already been told within this community. By asserting their prior knowledge of me, they also reaffirmed their own belonging to the village.

RULES AND RITUALS

My first shift was gruelling: I started at 8:00 AM by which time the breakfast service was underway as the paid staff began serving at 7.30 AM. I was dispatched to a huge industrial dishwasher where I remained until we took a break for breakfast ourselves at 9.30 AM. Every day had followed a similar format: help with breakfast from 8:00–9:30 AM, eat a full fried breakfast and drink lots of coffee from 9:30–10:00 AM, clean, clean, clean, from 10:00–12:00 noon. Take a few hours off and then start again around 6:00 PM to help serve dinner and wash more dishes. Eat dinner together at 8:00 PM. It was during this time I had the opportunity to observe social interaction in the hostel, particularly the importance of following certain rules.

> When I regard the behaviours of some staff members – specifically those that have been with the hostel for a long time, I am beginning to see… the commitment is not so much overtly to the hostel but to the rules, for example, no non-resident is allowed to park in the car park – even if that person is lost, exhausted and in distress… We must all wash our hands when coming into the kitchen – even though an old towel is hung on a nail next to the sink to dry them

on!!! The rules are adhered too without question and with almost
evangelical zeal
(Fieldnotes May 20).

There were many other examples of rules and rituals being followed. The rules,
as I distinguish them, are the official rules of the hostel. Referencing the above
example, only paying hostel guests are allowed to use the hostel car park. The
rituals, as I define them here, are the ways we do our job. Strange rituals exist,
such as the 'right way' to clean a toilet. There are numerous other examples I
could cite, such as the ritualised cleaning of certain surfaces.

On my first day as a volunteer at the hostel I was assigned the task of cleaning
all of the hostel toilets. My helpful instructor showed me the hostel way of
doing it 'right'. Exactly how to put bleach down the toilet, and how, EXACTLY
how, I should use the toilet brush to clean the inside of the bowl. It must be
done the hostel way. A way, I suspect, that has been handed down from expe-
rienced hostel worker to novice, each new staff member becoming instructed
in the ways of the hostel, like a ritual of initiation and concurrent promise of
future performance. Such ritualised performances, Kapferer (1998: xx) sug-
gests, are aimed at transforming the participant, allowing the initiate to move
from outsider to insider. In this case, allowing me, a new member of the hostel
community, to be transformed from outside researcher into hostel volunteer. I
also could not help but wonder if having me clean the toilets first, as opposed
to the much nicer job of cleaning rooms or fluffing the pillows in the com-
munal lounge, was perhaps a way of asserting the hierarchy; with me as the
new volunteer at the bottom. This process of transformation, from outside re-
searcher to hostel volunteer, required understanding that 'one's place depends
on "playing the game"' (Masson 2007: 33).

The first week flew by and the second, mostly being steamed by the industrial
dish washer, or gazing into the bowl of a hostel toilet. Two weeks and I had
not made it out into the 'real' communities, two weeks without any 'proper'
research. Fortunately I had decided as I did not have any 'real' research to write
about, I would diligently record my hostel experiences in my field journal,
more than anything, to feel like I was doing something with a pen in my hand
instead of a toilet brush.

I came to realise that introducing new workers into the rules and rituals of the
hostel community was a way of ensuring that social boundaries were observed.
As I reflect back on my very first conversation with my hostel colleagues, it
was all about the rules and rituals of hostel life. This was in fact, part of our

communal storytelling even though I did not realise it at the time. I was being introduced to the rules that would permit me entry, and the rituals that would transform me into a community member.

BOUNDARIES AND BONDING

'After we have worked for the Hostel we can't be released to the community… We would need support workers, a whole new department of credentialed professionals would be needed to rehabilitate us…That's why I have all the meetings here – I can't leave the perimeter of the national park,' said The Manager. The Manager and the other staff continued to talk about how 'institutionalized' we all were and his comments, even though in jest, were really beginning to ring true for me.

Humour was widely used in the hostel as a way of inculcating a sense of belonging and communally telling the story of ourselves as 'living in a bubble cut off from the outside world'. As the above quote from The Manager suggests, humour was also used to draw very specific social and geographic boundaries around the hostel. I should note for clarity that the hostel sits on the very edge of a national park. Leaving the national park equates to leaving the boundaries of the hostel. This means going back out there, into 'the real world' a place that, according to the staff, was filled with untold dangers and too many people.

Joking was also used to mediate conflict. We all got along but inevitably, conflict did arise. When this happened, humour was the mechanism used to reaffirm social boundaries and ensure bonding. For example, the occasional lost temper was quickly swept aside and forgotten; someone would crack a joke and the atmosphere would relax as the following field entry suggests:

> It is imperative for everyone to get along. Far more important than how well they do the job – many inadequacies can be forgiven if the person is a good fit for the little hostel tribe… I asked Joy, what would happen if any of us did something which threatened group cohesion? She looked shocked, and said she didn't know, but she didn't think it would be allowed to happen, the rest of the group would stop the person from going too far and if they did, and everyone does something stupid from time to time, they would just be made fun of, as a deterrent from doing it again.
> (Fieldnotes, September 3)

Humour was continually used as the primary way to diffuse tension. As Cohen

suggests (1982: 6), belonging is inculcated in a community using the most available mechanism, which in this case was humour. Joking was also used as a mechanism to control behaviour and I agree with Masson (2007: 38) that such joking indicates 'not separation but sameness' and thus bonded the staff members together. Inappropriate behaviour would be 'made fun of' and the perpetrator ridiculed as a punishment for committing the offence and to deter them from doing it again. This avoidance of direct confrontation in order to maintain the status quo reminds me of Gluckman's (1958) ideas around subtle conflict as a form of cooperation. Here the conflict takes the form of humorous ridicule as a way to enforce social boundaries to bind the group together. This was imperative because the staff represent a small group of people, living and working together in the middle of nowhere. The stress of a lingering feud would have fractured the tiny hostel community. Conversely, maintaining the social boundaries through the use of humour proved to be an effective bonding mechanism.

After our shift finished one day, Fran and I went outside to sit on the stone wall bounding the perimeter of the hostel with our coffee. This became a tradition as the months wore on – something we looked forward to after a morning of cleaning. So much so that we would go out in the rain and take an umbrella and just sit on the wall and chat about nothing and everything. After only a few weeks, other staff members joined us so that we were all sitting outside on the wall. It seems that this tradition of sitting on the wall and drinking coffee together was invented for the purpose of 'establishing or symbolizing social cohesion' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2002: 9). We talked about our families, things we wanted for our futures, and problems we might be experiencing. We shared our hopes, our fears and our dreams, sitting on the wall, looking out over fields of sheep.

One sunny afternoon we were looking out onto the beauty of the landscape, commenting, as we always did, on just how beautiful it was and how lucky we all were to be living here. Fran said, 'you know, living in the hostel *really is* like living in a bubble – we are not part of the real world at all!' This was a phrase I had heard repeated numerous times, but the stress here, was a statement not a joke. Often when someone returned from a trip away, they would laughingly say they were 'back in the safety of the bubble.' The real world was something we glimpsed at occasionally in yesterday's newspaper, rescued from a bin while cleaning one of the rooms. Apart from that, nothing from the real world intruded here. It is, as Barth (1969) points out, at the boundaries of localities that what it means to belong becomes most meaningful. I interpret 'we live in a bubble here' as a kind of humorous communally told story, the purpose

of which formed a 'boundary mechanism' (Strathern 1982b: 253), delimiting where 'we' ended and 'out there' began.

TELLING THE STORY OF WHO WE ARE

What is 'the bubble'? It is the story of our 'institutional life' told communally with humour, reflecting a much deeper commitment to belong here. It is an affirmation of belonging and a definition of the boundaries of the community we profess to belong to. Our so called 'institutional life' is constantly reinforced by rules and rituals, our bonding and social control mechanisms and our conceptualisation of living 'in the bubble' cut off from the outside world. I can not help wondering if this is some bizarre example of Goffman's (1961: 11) 'total institution' which he defines as, 'a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life.' No, we all came by choice and were not committed as the inmates of Goffman's *Asylum* were. Although we are rural and the hostel itself appears isolated, we can leave at will. However, we have co-constructed the humorous concept of ourselves as if we were an institution, and as if we did live inside a bubble cut off from the outside world. We have created a sense of 'we are all in it together' whatever 'it' is. And perhaps it is what 'it' means to the members of the hostel that I should think about instead of trying to classify them by markers that I have made up in my own head, or interpreted from Goffman.

Despite my early fears around not being able to escape the hostel and participate with the walking group, I was able to join them most weeks for the walks. In addition I had been invited to several of their homes for dinner and joined them at their local village pub for drinks, attended various festivals and public meetings and even milked someone's goat while they were on holiday. Joining the walking group had been an education into local history and folklore, a topic about which the villagers were well versed, often competing with each other to have their own version of the story heard (Tonkin 1992).

It was only while I was washing the dishes one day, at my post by the industrial dishwasher, that I began to wonder, if people need to belong, perhaps one of the ways they can move from outsider to insider, for example, is to become knowledgeable about the stories that are important to that group. As Halbwachs (1992: 21) proposes, not sharing enough collective memory puts distance between people. In order to reduce that distance, they must be able to share in the collective memory, to share in the collective memory means

becoming familiar with its contents, its stories.

Stories are important. People use stories to support their current or desired identity (Tilly 2006). How are stories impacting on identity among Hadrian's Wall communities? Which stories are alive? My prior reading informed me that if they are alive it is because they have meaning to the community in which they are told (Dundes 1984; Oring 1986), and that they construct and reaffirm the desired group identity (Nadel-Klein 1991; Norrick 1997). My many days out with the walking group, and visits with residents in nearby villages over the summer months, impressed upon me the importance of familiarity with the corpus of local stories. Certainly the old ghost stories attached to local castles and the stories about the Romans and Hadrian's Wall had this effect. Everyone has their own slightly different version of events, as one local resident told me, 'many in the town have their own particular version of stories from the perspective of their family'. It seems to me that those who want to belong need to know this corpus of stories in order to share in that sense of community. This knowledge stresses commitment; an implicit claim to belong (Kiely *et al.* 2005; Cohen 1982).

The stories people at the hostel tell are different to the local people; the locals tell stories connecting them to this area, and its history and in so doing legitimise their status as local. Similarly, the hostel staff have their own shared folklore and it includes our self-conceptualisation as 'an institution in a bubble, far from the outside world.' Part of that folklore is fictionalised, in the truest sense of being made up. But that does not make it any less true, or any less valuable. In writing about the importance of folklore, Delamont (1989) researched urban legends circulated by middle school pupils about the terrors of high school, one of which was an account of a ghostly nun in the toilet. Delamont argues that researchers have placed too much emphasis on rationalised accounts and paid little attention to folkloric and other personal narratives which can reveal underlying issues and concerns. The concern at the hostel is with a sense of cohesion and belonging, demonstrated by the following story which equates the hostel to a Monastic Community:

> The Manager joined us for breakfast this morning. He asked Kat and me how we would cope once we were released back into the real world after being members of our neo-monastic community here… We all started to chip in and build, communally, the picture of our monastic community – The Manager as Mother Superior, (he commented he even has a bald head like a monk) we have all taken the habit (our hostel t-shirts) we wear the skull cap and apron to further

identify ourselves, the black and white checks representing the purity of our community and the darkness to which we must return. We are all officially celibate, we all inhabit small cells with single beds, rudely furnished with a desk, chair and small wardrobe as well as a sink because cleanliness is next to Godliness. We rise early each morning and perform basic tasks, we feast like kings, we have much ale (from the pub next door) and even stock our own locally produced beer. Everyone is sniggering and sorting through bacon, eggs and cornflakes… We provide food and accommodation for weary travellers… Yes, we have everything except the bee hives and the vegetable garden... We are all roaring with laughter by this time. (Fieldnotes, September 11)

Male and female terms are intermixed without anyone losing the thread, The Manager, after calling himself Mother Superior, even points to his bald head and pot belly (which match the caricature of a monk not a nun) to support his position – every one breaks out in fits of giggles, despite the obvious contradiction, we are all on the same page as everyone understands what he means.

It was next day before I realised that something else had happened during yesterday's fictional creation of the Monastic Order of St. Bothy Sike; all present shared a background in Catholicism or Church of England. We drew upon our shared cultural tropes to create the story. Telling this story does several things: it reaffirms our sense of community, it reaffirms the hierarchy, with The Manager as mother superior, and finally, it creates a fictionalised story of who we are as we can not rely on history to do it for us. We have no communal history, but we do have a communal image, all be it a crude stereotype, of monastic life.

What is also interesting to me, is what is missing – religion. God is mentioned but next to cleanliness – we wake up and clean. However, as Douglas (1984: 2) suggests, 'rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience.' The analogy here has nothing to do with spirituality but of rituals, of the tasks performed, the way of life and the symbolism used to translate those ideas and make them map onto our own way of life at the hostel. Now the initiation to toilet cleaning, as well as the rules and rituals, were all starting to make sense.

Reflecting further on my field journal entry about the Monastic Order of St. Bothy Sike, I am struck with its completeness of description. It does not merely state 'facts', it is visual, it describes a picture of what our life is like at the hostel. In this communally told story, we describe ourselves and the way we look, what we wear, and why this relates to our purpose, weaving each individual

into 'the marvellously complicated fabric which constitutes the community' (Cohen 1982: 21). The black and white checks on our aprons and hats are equated with darkness and light, in jest yes, but there is a sense of higher purpose alluded too here. That what we do is important and has value. This is important as we are all here for seemingly different reasons; some are paid workers, others like myself are volunteers. I agree with Strathern (1982b: 248–9) that this consciousness of our own distinctiveness 'places little stress on cultural criteria – "local customs", ways of speaking, and such -and considerable stress on a sense of belonging.' Telling this story drew not on local knowledge, history or custom, but on our shared background knowledge of monastic structure. This commonality of existing knowledge, gained in different cultures and countries, was used in the present moment to recreate who we are as a hostel community.

What it also defines is our sense of commitment, in the way we dedicate ourselves to the service of 'weary travellers', and our commitment to living in our small and crudely furnished rooms, miles from anywhere. Commitment being the strongest claim to belong an incomer (and we all were) can make (Kiely *et al.* 2005; Cohen 1982). This story defines and describes, all be it humorously, our communal experience of belonging. We had co-created a fictionalised account of who we are and defined our purpose, demonstrating a commitment to our community through communal storytelling as a boundary making and bonding mechanism.

LAYERS OF BELONGING

I arrived as a research student, but following two summers of living and working at the Bothy Sike hostel, I was no longer *just* a research student. To the villagers, I ceased to be, 'that research student from Edinburgh' and became, 'Heather from Bothy Sike.' Working at the hostel appeared to have added an identity layer of 'local resident and worker' on top of the pre-existing 'research student', and therefore outsider. When introducing myself to local villagers, or more commonly, especially during my second summer of fieldwork, being introduced by someone I knew, the first question asked was, 'are you local?' To which I responded that I lived and volunteered at the Bothy Sike hostel. It was only after my connection to locality was established that I told them why I was there; doing research for my PhD. But this information became secondary, my local connection was the information solicited and given first.

What I have learned from this experience is that there are layers of identity like rings of belonging. Although not in any tidy or concentric order, rather they have fuzzy, shifting boundaries which, as Kiely *et al.* (2005) suggest, move

depending upon situation and context forming what Masson (2007:34) calls 'eclipsing identities'. For example, my own experience began as researcher. After making a commitment to joining the local walking group and volunteering at the hostel, I became an incomer. Finally after becoming an 'institutionalized' resident of the hostel and choosing to co-collaborate in telling the story of who we are, I became a 'local resident and worker' to the villagers and simply 'us' to my fellow Bothy Sikers. Through adherence to rules and cleaning rituals, the social control of humour, and various bonding mechanisms, through communally telling the story of 'who we are', we moulded ourselves into a community; an institutional life in a bubble far from reality.

GOODBYE AND GOOD LUCK (AND A CONCLUSION OF SORTS)

I felt sad to be leaving the hostel. I had spent two summers here; two summers living and working with the same small group of people day in and day out. Two summers of getting to know them and letting them know me, eating every meal together, sharing our free time together, and sharing our life stories. They made a leaving card for me, which is several pages long and more of a leaving booklet. Within its pages are cut-outs of my favourite snacks, photos of my favourite places, photos of us drinking coffee on the wall, of all of us at the pub quiz, and doodles on every page that represent little in-jokes that only 'we' would understand. It represents evidence that they know things about me, things that anyone outside the hostel would not know. The images connect 'us' together and to the hostel. 'Goodbye and Good luck' is printed on the front. It bears testimony to my experience of belonging.

Where are we now? The Manager has left Bothy Sike to take up another management position, one of my colleagues is teaching English as a foreign language in Vietnam, another has gone to university to begin an engineering degree, and another is in New Zealand, volunteering at a hostel. I am back in Edinburgh, reflecting on my experience, on the challenges to my research, on having to volunteer in a hostel in order to fund my fieldwork, on being frustrated at having no time to do 'proper' research, and thus writing about my hostel experiences. And finally, reflecting on the realisation that I was unexpectedly in a real research site, not only as a researcher, but as a member of that community. A community that used rules and rituals to define their boundaries, that used humour to dissipate conflict and most importantly, to communally tell the story of who we are, binding us together as a community in a bubble far from reality. We have all left the hostel. 'The bubble' is no more than a story about the past, a communal tale of the unexpected that I did not know I was looking for.

NOTE

1   The name of the hostel has been changed to respect the anonymity of the organi-
    sation.

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