

MY PERSONAL JOURNEY

Kristina Dryza

A common question asked of me is how I came to be in London, and the uncommon answer I give is one of 'I don't know'. There was no real plan to come to London to pursue a career. A plan to come and experience the city, save some money and travel the world. Plans to take a step back from my life in Australia and reassess my future. Put simply, there was no plan.

Each of us within the diaspora has our own journey to undertake, whether it's professional, spiritual or personal. Is it to come to London for a couple of years and work hard and save for a deposit to buy a house back in Australia? Is it to experience living in another city, taking on its quirks, charms and mannerisms, enveloping yourself in your inherited city's routine? Is it your chance to try to find yourself without the constraints that familiarity puts on you back home?

For me when I look at the 22 year old I left behind in Adelaide, and the 26 year old now writing this article in London, the only invariable thing I see is my name. My identifier in this world, yet a constant to continuous change.

In early 2000 I arrived in London a lost soul. I didn't know who I was running away from being in Australia, or who I in the years since have come to be, but what I do know is in London I found a voice that has never been more truer to myself. The thoughts and ideas in my head no longer manifest themselves solely in that space, for I now have an outlet for them. My actions now truly represent me. Their authenticity and their direct correlation to my beliefs mean my behaviour and my attitude are now symbiotically in line.

It was in London where I could truly be myself, whoever that person was. I couldn't understand if it was the physical distance between my old life and my new life, or the emotional distance between the past and the present that allowed me to imagine a future. One that in Adelaide I had great difficulties envisioning. Even greater difficulties believing.

In hindsight, I believe it was the fact that I wasn't bound by the usual constraints of time and place that allowed me to create the life I now live for myself. Being away from Adelaide – home – a community I belonged to for 22 years, gave me the chance to discover who I was without the confines of reality and practicality. I wasn't burdened by the realities of adult life. In London I lived in this never-never land where there weren't any consequences to your actions, and no importance or

significance was attached to your behaviour. Your successes you could share, your failures you could hide.

In London I existed in a vacuum where ideas could exist that didn't have to be substantiated; dreams didn't have to be logically reasoned; wishes would never have to be rationalised. Without that restriction, you had the chance to become whoever you wanted to be. Or at the very least, let whoever you were find a way out; the means for expression became so much easier.

A more rounded person came to bear, as in a small city such as Adelaide, you can occasionally be swathed in a one-dimensional state. You never get the chance to demonstrate the finites that go into our multifaceted selves. Living in London, and not living one lifestyle exclusively – but rather existing on the periphery of many social groups and gatherings – I no longer felt defined by any one of my extra curricular activities. This was primarily as there was no singularity to which you could attach definition. One night I may go the ballet, the next watch unsigned bands play their heart out in the hope someone in the audience would give them a recording contract. There'd be no inter-relatedness between the events and activities. The only inter-relatedness was myself, as the friends and environment would also never be the same.

The issue of my nationality

The question of my nationality has always been a tricky one. To the question of 'What nationality are you?' my answer of Lithuanian-Australian has already raised another onslaught of questions for me to respond to.

I'm technically considered a first-generation Australian. My grandparents were all born in Lithuania, my parents were born in Germany after the war and I was born in Australia. It should by rights make me Australian with Lithuanian grandparents. Though growing up in Australia, my life was lived through the perspective of the Lithuanian rituals, language, food and cultural activities.

Even my closest friends were Lithuanian. This world, shared and mutually understood, was like a private joke. Your parents telling you off in Lithuanian in front of your Australian friends. Being able to walk into a department store and gossip about the shop assistants in Lithuanian. Travelling in the car with your traditional Lithuanian costume on, stuck in traffic, with people staring at the crown fastened tightly to your head; amber, the national stone, swallowing your neck. Never quite fitting in at school, as the ascension to popularity was through sport, which was played on Saturdays: while you were learning the grammatical peculiarities of the Lithuanian language.

As a child, my other friends were mostly of Greek or Italian origin. Being Lithuanian was a touch exotic. No one really knew where Lithuania was. Was it one

of the countries that made up the USSR? It allowed for you to be in control of your own heritage. People have preconceptions of most of the larger countries in the world, especially Australia. I could – in a certain way – create and control the perception people formed of Lithuania by my words and actions, as none in their minds yet existed. A most enticing proposition. Certainly not something you can do as an Australian.

One thing you experience as part of the diaspora is the all-consuming pervasiveness of the Australian perception and myth. Even those that have never been to Australia still have an opinion on the country and the people, together with an image and an idea of life there. This also means that people don't want to challenge these preconceptions, so rarely are you asked the questions as I am about Lithuania. Oh you're Australian they say, and it's off onto the next topic. With Lithuania, there is no assumed knowledge, and there's a desire to seek and learn. A certain inquisitiveness that leads to ruthless questioning of wanting to know and understand more.

The duality of my nationality has always been a hard one to balance. I feel more Australian living in London as in Australia I always had to prove my commitment to identifying myself as Lithuanian. I never had to prove my 'Australianess' in Australia as I lived there. It was taken for granted, never a source of contention.

In London a greater balance has arisen between the two cultures that have helped define who I am. London's neutrality gives each of them equal 'air time' as such. I appreciate the freedom growing up in the west i.e. Australia gave me, yet I can embrace my Lithuanian heritage in a more natural, normal manner. In London, I don't have to continuously make a conscious, overt commitment to it. There's no need for the external, public displays and demonstrations of being Lithuanian. It's just the way I do things, who I am.

Being away from Australia I can now recognise the culture's influence and affect on me. The more distance there is between us, the more I appreciate and recognise it. The openness in its people that runs parallel to the openness of the land; the determination of spirit that was so gallantly displayed by the Anzacs and continues to be expressed in each living Australian today; the egalitarian attitude embodied in our Constitution that gives you a healthy disrespect to any social oneness displayed in London.

Though in a city as large as London, you do miss the feeling of belonging that culture gives you, but you learn to find it in other ways.

The relationship with 'home'

You never quite realise how much effort goes into maintaining relationships, no matter where you live in the world. But with your family and friends back in Australia, you're not involved in the intricacies of their day-to-day life anymore. You physically can't be, you've lost that immediacy of contact. Of relevance.

The conversations centring around the fact that you've had a lousy day because your computer crashed, the electrician never showed and that the waitress put full fat instead of skim milk in your coffee, are never had. The banality of life is swept away. Yet it is in those 'ordinary' conversations, that life occurs.

They also aren't holidays back in Adelaide, but 'visits' where unfortunately the conversations usually consist of:

What have you been doing for the past year?

This is what I've been doing...

What are your plans for the coming year?

My plans are...

I'll see you in a year

It's also sometimes hard to move conversations beyond people and events to those concerning ideas. There just isn't the time. It's a continual struggle to make the conversations relevant and genuine, rather than a revisionist historian's recount of a major life struggle.

The future

As they say, who knows what the future holds. I'm nervous about going back to live in Australia as I wonder whether the imagined life in my head will ever be able to compete with the cold, stark reality. My family and friends are in Australia – so that connection will always exist. But, what of my personal relationship with Australia?

Like all relationships, it has its ebbs and floes. Sometimes there's closeness, sometimes there's aloofness, but the main issue is that the relationship never dies – it's like the tide's relationship to the beach (though between Australia and I there are unfortunately no tide times).

Australia can't be all things to all people. I draw an analogy between her and the supportive, believing parent-saying go out and discover the world, and when you're ready to come back, we'll be here to greet you with open arms. As the saying goes, 'If you love somebody, let them go. If they return, they were always yours. If they don't, they never were'.

Australia trusts you enough to let you go, as she knows you'll eventually be back. Again, like a parent, she only wants the best for you. She knows you have to go out there and make the most of the opportunities life presents, to go see and

explore the world, make your own mistakes, and to live your life on your own terms and enjoy it. She'll think about you while your away, as you will of her, but she'll warmly accept you back on your return, knowing both have benefited from the time apart, and the freedom and space you both gave each other.

A change of perspective is a wonderful thing. An altering of scenery; a breath of fresh air; the chance to look at the world through unsullied eyes. In the moment, it's sometimes hard to be appreciative. You can also have too much of a good thing. I certainly couldn't be grateful for the life Australia gave me, until I left it behind. Again another common saying comes to mind, 'You sometimes have to lose it to find it again'.

To me, being Australian means freedom – however I choose to define that. It's up to the individual to define what being Australian means to them, and how they then go about expressing it. I had a desire for greater self-expression, a craving for wider social engagement and a yearning for the chance to participate in deep, reflective thought. Through the borrowed identity and meaning of London, I was able to create my own world with my own values. The diaspora gave me ownership and autonomy over my own identity. The greatest ever-possible freedom. Thank you Australia.



Kristina Dryza, 26, was born and raised in Adelaide, Australia. She is of Lithuanian origin, and has been living in London for the past three and a half years. Kristina works in the City as a trends forecaster for lifestyle brands.

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