

Becoming a Time-Space Compressor: A First Person Account

Paper for AAG Session William Mangold April 9, 2008

Yesterday afternoon, for the first time ever, I watched the NCAA Men's Lacrosse Championship on television. For me, the experience of spending a weekday afternoon watching a lacrosse match suggests that some fundamental changes have taken place in my life. These changes have taken me from rural poverty to urban middle class within a few short years. Perhaps by examining these changes it will be possible to understand my own circumstances as well as catching a glimpse of some disturbing processes at work in our contemporary milieu.

With this paper, I wish to probe a very simple and obvious thesis: Lifestyle practices are inextricably linked with time-space circumstances. I will explore this relationship by analyzing my own deeply ambivalent lifestyle and space-time history, but before proceeding, a number of interesting theoretical issues underlie the relationship between circumstance and lifestyle.

First is the philosophical contention between existence as a condition of "being" or of "becoming." While this debate has a long history, the increased use of time to measure and calculate all aspects of life has allowed Becoming to replace Being as the primary mode of understanding human experience in the West since the 19th century. Becoming implies that past, present and future are actively determined by the possibility inherent in each moment. In this conception, life is constantly undergoing change; thus meaning, values and outcomes are uncertain and subject to ongoing reconfiguration. In this way, Becoming brings with it the struggle for power to control the outcome of change over time.

Therefore, the second concept that underlies the relationship between circumstance and lifestyle is the issue of power and control. While power and control take many forms, I wish to consider how normative judgment contributes to the constant striving for upward mobility, and how that mobility offers the possibility of control. Upward mobility entails taking advantage of circumstance in order to achieve increased income, enhanced resources, and better opportunity, which all lead to greater power.

Presumably this power allows for more control over circumstance and thus further opportunity and more self-determination in lifestyle choices.

The path of upward mobility mirrors the stereotypical ‘rags to riches’ narrative, which has been popularized in the U.S. However, this narrative is problematic because it neglects the spatial and temporal dimensions of social mobility in favor of the economic. Instead of following the formulaic ‘rags to riches’ narrative, I want to introduce a time-space model for autobiography that can better account for the conditions that shape lifestyle practices. Here it is necessary to consider the issues raised by two prominent geographers.

In his book, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey details a pattern of economic, cultural and technological changes indicative of what he calls time-space compression. The many examples he uses boil down to two crucial phenomena. First, “Time [is] accelerated by virtue of the control established through organizing and fragmenting the spatial order of production.” And secondly it is possible to “collapse space into the simultaneity of an instant in universal public time.” (Harvey, 266) In time-space compression, the most basic building blocks of society are profoundly altered: time is accelerated and space is collapsed.

Overall, Harvey is highly critical of the consequences of time-space compression particularly those that increase the accumulation and power of capital. The effects of space-time compression create difficulty especially for the poorest and least-able by forcing them to adapt to the increasing demands, movement and pace of space-time compression. On the other hand, it is possible to be sympathetic, and even indulgent in the bounty reaped through the power of capital and the compression of time and space. It would be hard to abandon our technologies that allow for almost instant communication; our refrigerators stocked with produce from all over the world; our ability to travel to even the most exotic locales; or our ever-increasing opportunity to take employment and purchase real-estate in the places most suited to our preferences. Where hardship is created or intensified for some people, opportunity simultaneously opens for others in a position to take advantage of the economic shifts, earning opportunities, and products available.

Subsequent to Harvey's innovative analysis of time-space compression, Cindi Katz has used this concept to demonstrate its opposite: time-space expansion. Katz documents¹ the changes that occurred in the Sudanese village of Howa due to agriculture programs that forced villagers who had traditionally relied on subsistence farming to work in cash-crop projects. While Katz doesn't dispute Harvey's conclusions about time-space compression at the broadest scales, she argues that the consequences at the scale of the African village are reversed. Instead of shrinking distances and intensified pace, Katz found that the life of Howa villagers became prone to longer days and increased distances in order to acquire the necessities of life.

Furthermore, while in time-space compression commodities are routinely consumed and replaced for the pure pleasure of their owners, in Howa such goods are used to "hedge against debt or calamity." These examples, among others, suggest that in some situations the conditions of time-space compression may be inverted, creating a situation of time-space expansion. And while Katz makes clear the difficulty imposed by these circumstances, she also suggests that it lays the grounds for three types of positive response: *reworking*, *resilience*, and *resistance*.

While Harvey deals with compression in terms of labor, production and consumption at the level of globalized capital...and Katz looks at expansion in a specific community in Sudan...I wish to offer a first-person account of this experience in the U.S. at the turn of the 21st century. Using these twin concepts, time-space compression and expansion, my narrative will highlight difficulties encountered through spatio-temporal circumstance, as well as opportunities that open due to the same circumstances.

Before telling my story, I wish to quickly mention a number of other writers who have used the tradition of environmental autobiography to highlight and examine aspects of their own milieu. Erik Erikson is a well-known developmental psychologist who traced his own history to better understand moments of identity crisis. Claire Cooper Marcus has used both her own story and those of others to understand the significance of spaces people inhabit. Gabriela Torres Barbosa is a Brazilian poet who communicates the ambivalence of growing up and living in a favela while she attended university.

¹ In her 2001 article, "On the Grounds of Globalization

Carolyn Kay Steedman, in her book *Landscape for a Good Woman*, uses personal narrative to develop an analysis of class and social status by exploring the parallel and entangled lives of her mother and herself.

Fundamental to these accounts, is the notion that individual identity is, at least in part, shaped by social status and can be altered by shifts in spatio-temporal circumstance. Another defining theme is the strong ambivalence inherent in the lives of these authors. Where difficulty exists, so also does opportunity. Turning now to my own narrative, I wish to further demonstrate the ambivalent connections between circumstance and lifestyle and the opportunities that develop.

In many ways, my narrative begins with that of my parents. My parents were born in the mid-1950s to middle class families—my mother in Ann Arbor, Michigan and my father in the suburbs of Chicago. I won't describe their early life as sheltered, but suffice to say that they each enrolled in a tiny Lutheran college in Minnesota where they met in 1975. Perhaps fed-up with institutionalized religion, perhaps nostalgic for the 1960s hippie movement that they were too young to have experienced, my parents dropped out of school and embarked on a counter-cultural life.

I was born shortly after my parents married in 1978 and my first brother followed in 1980. We lived in Ann Arbor where my father worked in construction and my mother stayed home to raise the ever-expanding family. My sister was born in 1982 and another sibling followed every two years until 1990 when there were seven children (and an eighth sibling was born ten years later in 2000). As the family grew, we continued to move and because my father was a carpenter, this also meant that our homes were constantly under renovation. In the fourth home that we lived in, I occupied three different rooms as one after another was remodeled to provide additional living space for our family.

While life was far from comfortable and all of us worked to support our family, my memories of this time are generally pleasant. Our life together was lively and loving. At age 11 my monthly paper route earnings were helping to pay for groceries, and every autumn we bought our school clothes second-hand, but for me these were adventures that took me farther into the world than most of my peers. By the time I got to high school, I was at the top of my class academically and my siblings were equally advanced. Though

sometimes painfully conscious of the alternative lifestyle my family was leading, it seemed that most things were going right.

My life history took a sharp turn in 1994 when my family moved to Kansas. After careful consideration, my parents made the difficult choice to leave the relative security of employment and friends in order to care for my grandmother who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. My grandparents, living in Chicago at the time, hoped that moving to the small town where my grandmother had grown up would ease the effects of the disease. So just before my sixteenth birthday, my family packed up our modest possessions and moved to the little town of Winfield. Once in Kansas, life became extreme. Attempting to care for my grandparents with little support structure and almost no consistent employment quickly reduced my family to poverty².

After renting a small farmhouse for the first two years, my parents eventually found an abandoned warehouse in town that they purchased on land contract³ for under \$40,000 and hoped to renovate. We moved into the building in the summer of 1996 without walls, windows, plumbing, or heat. And while my mom spent her days with my grandmother; my father, my siblings and I tried to make the building livable.

In September 1996, I left Winfield to attend college in New England. I had been accepted to the Rhode Island School of Design on the basis of my portfolio and grades, and awarded a full scholarship because of my family's financial status. After a fantastic first semester in Providence, I was reminded of my conflicting reality upon coming home for Christmas to find my family, parents and six siblings, living in two small rooms warmed by a kerosene space heater.

Life in Providence was an intense introduction to the striving and competitiveness underpinning professional life, and life generally in the northeast. While I continued to learn and explore, I remained slightly distant and always critical of the artistic and

² Poverty in the U.S. is measured using a formula established in 1965 during the Johnson administration's "War on Poverty." The formula essentially sets the poverty line at three times the annual cost of a nutritionally adequate diet based on the number of persons per household. In 2002, the year I left my family to move to New York City, the poverty level was set at \$8,860 plus \$3,080 for each person in the household. (U.S. Health & Human Services Website) Thus, for my family, (excluding myself and my brother who were not living at home) the poverty level would have been established at \$24,260; however, the family income that year was approximately \$21,000.

³ A land contract is a legal agreement in which a party purchases a piece of property by making payments directly to the owner, without a mortgage or involvement of a bank. Without adequate credit, the only option for my family was to agree to the terms of the land contract proposed by the owner.

academic production I witnessed and was a part of. It seemed to me that somehow this production both masked and caused the circumstances in which I saw my family. At the same time, creative energy had been the basis of my family life and seemed the best opportunity to generate positive change.

Each summer, after the self-gratification of art school, I returned to Kansas usually to find my family in deprivation. The roof constantly leaked and many times the electricity was turned off because of unpaid bills. The heating situation was improved by installing a wood-burning stove, but this meant scavenging shipping pallets from the friendly farm co-op. The renovation of the warehouse continued slowly as did the care of my grandparents. Arrangements were made⁴ to move my grandparents into a house across the street from my family's building to eliminate my mother's daily 2-hour drive to their home. At the same time we established a shop, studio space, and gallery on the ground floor of the building in order to develop a local art scene and generate income. So while I spent the school year in the pursuit of my career interests, I used my student loan money and my vacations to put my training into practice and support my family.

Rather than continue here with a linear narrative of my life, I want to step back and look at the conditions surrounding these early circumstances before going on to focus on a few specific transitions that shaped my more recent time-space experience. While it is complicated to analyze the structural conditions that shaped my life, my first-hand experience can illuminate and give voice to a few things.

First is the mismatched relationship between economics and opportunity that can arise from an unconventional lifestyle. Though living in the oppressive consumer culture of the U.S., by questioning and restructuring the relationship between work, home and social expectation, it was possible for my family to pursue opportunity beyond its means. Through self-employment and craft-based production, my father was able to adjust his work schedule, modify our living spaces, and pass his craft on to his children. In addition, the collective attitude of my family multiplied our resources and opened the door to endeavors outside the normal range of our economic status.

⁴ Moving my grandparents involved considerable effort to first put together a legal trust to take donations in order to purchase the house, and then in the renovations to make it accessible for my grandmother.

Secondly, it is important to highlight the predicament of caring for ailing family members. In the case of my family, it meant leaving an established network and income and moving 1000 miles. Either circumstance can put a family in a difficult financial position, but the combination of both was financially devastating. However, it was again possible to find a level of sustainability by adapting the family dynamics to rely on my mother's income⁵ and allow my father and siblings to care for the household.

Thirdly, I want to recognize the significant impact of geography upon cultural and economic opportunity. As could be expected, moving to rural Kansas left my father unable to find a market for the quality of his craft, and reduced our exposure to fashion and the arts. But, at the same time, the rural setting was far less economically demanding and my family was able to get by through an assortment of arrangements, barter, and piece-meal projects that would have been less realistic in a more exacting place. The conditions in Winfield allowed my family, despite our lack of conventional means, to purchase a building in which to live and work and ultimately spawned a dynamic and resourceful environment.

While this account portrays some of the contradictory conditions of my childhood circumstances, to understand my present situation it is necessary to look at the transitions of the past few years. After graduating from RISD in 2001, I felt compelled to return to Kansas. I appreciated the opportunities Winfield provided so I took a job teaching at the local college and continued the efforts we had begun with the studio and gallery. At the same time, I realized that this implicitly meant I would continue in collective support of my family. But unsurprisingly something had taken root in Providence that made the difficulties of collective family life and the lack of conventional opportunity in Winfield less and less appealing. After a year in Kansas I made plans to move to New York City.

If the move from Michigan to Kansas inducted my family into the time-space expansion characteristic of the drawn-out circumstances of rural life, then the move to New York thrust me head-first into the phenomena of space-time compression.

⁵ Under federal guidelines, a family care-giver can be employed as a home health aid up to 40 hours per week. My mother was paid an average wage of \$7 per hour for the eight years she cared for my grandmother.

In Winfield, I rented a 1600 square foot building for \$300 a month, whereas my first apartment in NYC was 400 square feet and I paid \$1500 a month. Undoubtedly the cost of living influences the pace of life, but there are also geographic factors at work. Paradoxically for me, the travel time to my first full-time job in New York was 45 minutes riding the subway, while in Winfield I could easily walk to work in under 20 minutes. While I quickly found advantageous opportunities in NYC, I also found myself compressed by the constraints of space and the demands of travel time.

After moving to New York I was offered a job with a small architecture firm in Tribeca. Within a few months I was promoted from draftsman to project manager because of my experience with construction. This marked a transition from the labor force into that of management. Up until that point, all of the jobs I held required manual labor and were subject to the direction of superiors. I had worked in construction, and experienced the piece-meal and labor-intensive side of the building industry, which puts many laborers in inconsistent and hazardous situations.⁶ However, the transition to management was rapid and almost immediately I found myself enjoying the comforts of a desk job in a climate-controlled office making three times my previous wages. Not only did the pay improve, but the responsibility of managing construction projects increased the power that I could wield—it was now me directing (or compressing) the efforts of numerous laborers. Yet, unlike the hourly jobs I had previously known where the demands stopped at the end of the workday, my new position brought with it the requirement of almost constant attention. I found that while I was compressing the efforts of the construction laborers, I myself was compressed by the demands of project, client and budget.

The income earned working as a management-level professional quickly changed my economic circumstances and marked the transition from poverty to middle-class wealth.⁷ This was perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of the changes I underwent. Increased wealth transformed my attitude about money, security and

⁶ For the most part I was fortunate, but in 2001 I nearly severed two of my fingers using a saw and to this day I have a distressing scar on my hand. My father also has also been fortunate, but a long career has taken its toll on his hands and arms, and each of my siblings, like all construction workers can show off their scars.

⁷ In New York City, I can only consider my income to put me in the range considered middle-class; however, in most parts of the country, and especially in relation to my family, my financial situation would likely be considered upper middle-class.

comfort, and also brought about changes in status, consumption, and socialization. Whereas as I had previously learned to be comfortable living day-to-day and week-to-week, I now sensed that having money in the bank dramatically reduced my concern for unforeseeable events and allowed for a more liberal approach to purchases and budgets.

There are other examples, but in any case, attempting to neatly summarize my narrative in terms of time-space dynamics or social mobility will only highlight the deeply ambivalent situation of my life. I would however, suggest that there is some correlation between upward mobility and the effects of compression as well as between downward mobility and the effects of expansion. While my means and lifestyle have improved in moving upward, I sense that I am compressing the lives of others, and I feel the compression my life has undergone. Upward mobility remains desirable for the opportunities and comfort it may offer, but it seems unlikely that I can indefinitely endure the demands of compression. On the other hand choosing downward mobility, or the counter-culture lifestyle of my parents, poses myriad difficulties many of which I have experienced first-hand. Yet this alternative remains desirable, for the notable experiences I have had as well as to break out of the pattern of compression. The question remains of how to counteract the demands of upward-compression, while mitigating the effects of downward-expansion. In advance of systemic change, I believe it advantageous to pursue the strategies outlined by Katz...

I have been able to *re-work* my schedule and set my own working hours to avoid the NYC rush hours by remaining self-employed. I use the strategy of *resistance* in relation to technology. While I recognize the benefits of cell phones and the internet, I am careful to make myself unavailable at times and, unlike many middle-class New Yorkers, I don't have internet or television in my home and refuse the instantaneity available from technology like BlackBerry. And recently the need to care for my parents-in-law after a car accident proved my *resilience* to the hardships posed by tending to ailing relatives.

Which brings me full circle to the circumstances of yesterday afternoon, watching lacrosse for the first time in my life. Having taken time off from my job, I was sitting with my father-in-law, hobbled from the accident, when we got a call from his friend who was watching the match. So, with plenty of time on our hands, we flipped on the TV and settled into a pleasant afternoon of Hopkins vs. Duke.

Selected Bibliography

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