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The Liminal Freelance Landscape: Geography, Proximity and Community

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This article features nationally recognized multimedia artists candidly discussing the shifting landscape of their freelance work. For these professionals, soliciting clients is intrinsically linked to their global or local networked community. Therefore, the topography of freelance is not about land in the same way as geography is not simply about location. Rather, place is about where these professionals find themselves in relation to the economy, community and other influences that allow us to understand the relational layering of freelance work. This is a starting point for a conversation that recognizes liminality, community, and proximity as a way to navigate a more expansive, socially constructed view of freelance.

You have to be able to function as if you are on the frontier again. There's no backup. The twentieth century was all about moving from the rural—spreading out and centralizing in the city. That's now breaking down. People are pulling back out to work in exurbs or small towns like where I am – and staying connected to a big city for the purpose of coming together every so often for face time or to sell a new client.”
Bill Cavanaugh

Rather than being marginalized, freelancers are now being institutionalized within the business structure. As the job market morphs into a new model free of perks, offices, insurance or the promise of a steady paycheck, it is important to study how freelancers navigate this shifting workforce culture. Film, television, music, video gaming, advertising and Internet-driven industries regularly employ contract workers and this phenomenon is growing across all business sectors. Professionals with varying skills come together for relatively short periods of time, contribute to a project, then leave. Some production and creative teams retain the same loose-knit network for years.¹

Eleven project participants, intersecting with many multimedia domains teach us invaluable commonsense strategies about organizational teamwork—and who works. The participants' individual conversations create a composite image of life as a migrant creative at

¹ This article contains excerpts from a significantly longer chapter in Laine Goldman, “The Migrant Creative: U.S. Media Freelancers at the Border of a Changing Work Culture” (Ph.D. diss., Tilburg University, Netherlands, 2013).

the border of a changing work culture; these lessons are pertinent for all consultants. However, participants demonstrate that the liminal tension of waiting for work is reduced when the freelancers extend their relational web, learn new skills, anchor their body with energetically calming strategies and frame their career knowing they will engage in many work styles: full-time, freelance, part-time and many will be simultaneous.

The second part of the article explores location, community and geography as critical factors when securing work and demonstrates a diversity of participant opinions. The conversations were different for all of the media arts entrepreneurs regarding the importance of location and it was contingent on the types of projects. There is no one-size-fits-all formula followed with ironclad conclusions. It is not only the entrepreneurs' body of work but also their relational connections that foster many of their opportunities. These shape-shifting connections often start with proximity but also change with time because of technological improvements in communication.

The migrant creative story is one of early adoption and adaptation of the freelance work style. It is a story of media freelancers, many with 15 to 30+ years of experience, who are improvising and reinventing their lives both personally and professionally. The participants, ranging from a Guggenheim recipient to Emmy winners, are the drivers of inventive projects across diverse disciplines including documentary work, experimental film, the recording industry, journalism, the Internet, advertising, reality television, game shows, screenwriting, radio, and comedy. As Marc Jaffe, a project participant and former *Seinfeld* writer notes "Everyone is a freelancer now – they just don't know it." It is in this changing work context, that I invited these colleagues to discuss the shifting landscape of their freelance media work at the crossroads of technological change.

The participants include: Jimi Izrael, a moderator on NPR's *The Barbershop* and author of *The Denzel Principle: Why Black Women Can't Find Good Black Men* (2010); Kasumi, a 2011 Guggenheim recipient; Carol E. Beck, an international video producer for name-brand corporate accounts like Mercedes Benz, The Coca-Cola Company, IBM, Panasonic and others while also following her passion for Buddhism by documenting monastic projects for the Emory-Tibet Partnership in India; Marc Jaffe, a comedian and writer, incorporating both of these skills in his foundation, *Shaking With Laughter*, which raises money for Parkinson's disease research; Alan McElroy a screenwriter, whose latest screenplay is scheduled to be produced by *X-Men's* Ralph Winter and directed by Akiva Goldsman (*A Beautiful Mind*, *Cinderella Man*); Steven Tatar, an Internet designer and former creative head of American Greetings and entrepreneur currently rebranding Ohio Knitting Mills; Kate Farrell, a reality television executive producer with WE-tv; Ayad Rahim, a former *New York Times* blogger and radio show host focusing on the Middle East, currently in graduate school; Sheryl White a copywriter for major national accounts; Laura Paglin, a filmmaker and documentarian; and Bill Cavanaugh, an audio mixer MTV, VHI, History Channel, *Nova*, Discovery and many others.

WHERE ARE WE? THE OFF-ROAD CAREER TREKKER

Using the metaphor of travel, the media freelancer would be the off-road trekker on a career journey. The route is not a predetermined destination but a serendipitous path of choices and concessions that often offer less in terms of financial predictability and security but more when it comes to flexibility and creativity.

The geography of soliciting and finding clients is intrinsically linked to their networked community, whether global or local. Proximity or spatial closeness to clients is a variable depending on the level of collaboration required. Therefore, the topography of freelance is not about land; it is where we have landed. Geography is not just about place but where we find ourselves in relation to the economy, community, family, friends and the confluence of influences that allow us to better understand the relational layering of interdependent work. This is the starting point for a conversation that recognizes liminality, community and proximity as a way to navigate a more expansive, socially constructed worldview of freelance.

Introducing Liminality as an Anchor in Chaotic Times

Liminal, from the Latin word for threshold, is defined in Merriam-Webster dictionary as “relating to, or being an intermediate state, phase, or condition; in-between, transitional.”² Anthropologist Victor Turner referred to this liminal condition as “betwixt and between” when describing a rite of passage in *The Forest of Symbols*.³ Freelance is the personification of a liminal life—working while simultaneously seeking employment. One is in constant transition, which makes for interesting and exhilarating life. Freelancers are always open to something new, yet at times this can be terrifying when work is not on the horizon.

This article approaches liminality as the psychological space of being in “limbo” and then situates the spatial, physical embodiment of this concept as it relates to the media and freelance experience. The physical is not only about geography but the importance of bringing a whole-body perspective to work. Many of these participants discuss healthcare practices that are vital to recalibrating the body in a high-energy creative profession—especially to counter the liminal experience of restlessness that comes with waiting for work—while allowing the participants to remain vital, balanced and active.

Also explored is how geography, proximity and community serve to orient and anchor the freelancer within the liminal landscape. This article advocates an appreciative stance as one way to positively reframe living with uncertainty; this reorientation allows the freelancer to consider new scenarios while also engaging emergence. As Henry Miller notes, “One’s destination is never a place but rather a new way of looking at things.”⁴

² Merriam-Webster Online, s.v. “liminal.”

³ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967).

⁴ Henry Miller, *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1957), 25.

The Liminal Experience: Somewhere Between Flying and Falling

There is a rush of anticipation and heightened awareness leading to a new job or project for a freelancer—and a sense a relief when it is complete. Kasumi, an experimental filmmaker and Guggenheim recipient, aptly describes this experience: “Freelance is a cross between flying and falling.” Media arts freelancers were already wandering through the liminal landscape of uncertainty before the financial meltdown.

What is a liminal life? It is the experience of transitioning and changing but not quite sure where you are going or even how you are going to get there. One is suspended in the exquisite in-between, feeling the tensional pull of “possibility” on one end and “not knowing” on the other side. There is a heightened state of awareness when one’s intuitive antenna is activated and fear is momentarily pushed aside while embracing the uncertainty of seeking work or completing a new task. A successful freelancer needs to muzzle the fear or they cannot focus to create either the work or an opportunity. As Deepak Chopra mentions in a discussion about what is important in life: “I embrace the wisdom of uncertainty, because if everything is certain, where is the creativity?”⁵

Though the original application of the term was brought to life in the field of anthropology, it has since flowed to psychology and urban studies, then migrated into a more interdisciplinary realm. Liminal, a lyrical word, belies the paradoxical life that media workers and others inhabit. For freelance media professionals, liminality is place that straddles work and home. They connect with clients both globally and locally, busy creating the culture they consume and ironically working in an environment that brands lifestyle but does not always pay a living wage.

Self-employed workers seldom describe themselves as laid-back. There is an inherent vigilance as they surf for their next job while being acutely aware that the undercurrent of uncertainty can pull them under. The actual surfing, the task of working on a creative project, is a short-lived experience. The metaphor of surfing can romanticize the free agent experience but it presents a visceral spin on the danger and excitement of working in a sea of change. This requires emotional balance and the long-term perspective of remembering that work is cyclical and comes in waves. Marc Jaffe, a comedy writer and entrepreneur, captures the temporality and long-term perspective required of freelance:

“Because of the nature of the business, you’re a freelancer always. Even when you have a job, it’s a temporary job. Even if you get a job on a TV show, a *Seinfeld* is rare that it lasts for so many years. So many shows last a year or a couple of episodes and then they’re yanked. It’s not even whether it’s a good show or not. It’s rare for people to even stay on a show for two or three years. A producer can change. Everything is a part-time job – it’s your focus for a while. You have to look at freelance as a whole career and there will be times when I will have a steady paycheck and times when I won’t.”

⁵ Oprah Winfrey, “Oprah Talks to Deepak Chopra,” *O, The Oprah Magazine*, June 2012, 144.

Everywhere and Nowhere

The University of Chicago's website on media theory suggests that media is inherently liminal: "Media may adapt a multitude of forms, even including what can be considered to be 'formless.' As it is both 'everywhere and nowhere,' conceptualizing media as liminal does not seem too far-fetched."⁶ This "everywhere and nowhere" concept can be further extrapolated to include the media freelancers' world of working for many clients, yet not being specifically anchored to one. Indeed, this liminal passage is also extended to include the creative morphing from an unknown concept to an embodied media form. This phenomenon can also describe how the media freelancer feels in an oversaturated world of nonstop communication.

Liminal dislocation can also be attributed to the increase of individuals passing through our lives at a rapid pace due to increased travel and technological advances. This "intensifying interchange" of evanescent relationships is recognized by Kenneth Gergen: "One can scarcely settle into a calming rut, because who one is and the cast of 'significant others' are in continuous motion."⁷ It is this continuous movement of accelerated Oz-like comings and goings that the freelancer recognizes as the part of the job and seeks to balance; yet these waves of encounters provide moments for connection, creativity and potential opportunities.

Liminality Challenges Work Organizations and Learning

Freelancers are expected to come and jump into an existing structure and improvise with a new or existing team. Sue Tempest and Ken Starkey suggest that temporary workers breathe new life into an organization:

"For organizations, the release from structures that bind too tightly can be positive for organizational performance, for example promoting innovation as liminal situations are conducive to transcendence and play. This, in turn, creates a new image of the temporary worker, challenging organizational orthodoxies: 'The liminal person (is) an ambiguous figure, capable of upsetting normative orders and of transcending boundaries by their continuous entering and leaving.'"⁸

Another side benefit for the freelancer is that they are extending their relational web and learning new practices at each site. The disadvantage is that many firms are reluctant to hire outsiders without the exact experience they are looking for and hesitate to train on the

⁶ The University of Chicago, "Glossary: Liminal, liminality." Accessed September 7, 2012. <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary/2004/liminal.htm>.

⁷ Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 67.

⁸ Sue Tempest and Ken Starkey, "The Effects of Liminality on Individual and Organizational Learning," *Organizational Studies* 25 (2004): 509.

job, so freelancers interested in learning new skills are inhibited by hiring specificity. Carol Beck, herself a production freelancer, notes:

“In Atlanta, 80 percent of the people I hire I’ve known for five years. When I do have to bring on unknowns, like a low-level production assistant, I get them from friends. ‘All my PAs (production assistants) are booked up, who do you know?’ I never hire anybody who just sends me a resume... That is the most ineffectual way to get a job imaginable. They need to work for free. It doesn’t even have to be an internship. They can go to a production company and say, ‘On your next production I will work for free.’ You cannot get work experience until you have work experience. Nobody is going to pay you to test you out.”

Within the socially constructed territory of freelance work, there are no steadfast rules about what works and who works. All of the freelancers interviewed mentioned the importance of relational connections and the ability to perform at the high level as contributing to their career.

Tempest Starkey asks “...how long term goals can be pursued in an economy devoted to the short term and how mutual loyalties and sentiments can be sustained in institutions which are constantly breaking apart and continually being redesigned.”⁹ The answer is the power of relational connections as a sustainable force: “It is ongoing relationships and the sense that a career can be created out of the flux of changing projects that provide stable points of reference, trust, and learning that serve both individual and organization.”¹⁰ As more jobs become contingent, the power of relationships will challenge our attitudes about competition and demand more cooperative alliances.

Attention to Balance and Perspective Grounds the Liminal Experience

The notion of liminality can also connect to how it is embodied in the physicality of the freelancers’ lives. For many participants, the importance of nurturing the body and taking time for self is critical when one works with the fast-paced frenzy of individuals passing through your life. Quiet time becomes a touchstone for centering and many freelancers in this project mention needing recovery time to regroup and regain their creative vitality. Freelancers recognized long ago that harnessing and balancing their energy is critical to performance. This idea is slowly gaining momentum as Tony Schwartz (founder and CEO of The Energy Project) suggests that in business we are witnessing a personal energy crisis:

“Energy, after all, is the capacity to do the work. In the face of relentlessly rising demand, fueled by digital technology and the expectation of instant 24/7 responsiveness, employees around the world are increasingly burning

⁹ Ibid., 524.

¹⁰ Ibid.

down their energy reserves and depleting their capacity.”¹¹

Schwartz recognizes the growing disconnect between the high energy demand required of the workforce and the return:

“The vast majority of organizations—and CEOs—have failed to fully appreciate the connection between how well they take care of their employees; how energized, engaged and committed those employees are as a result; how well they take care of clients and customers; and how well they perform over time.”¹²

Freelancers, early on, recognized the physical and mental demands of creative work and know how to recalibrate, rest, and appreciate their freedom during leaner times. This “running on empty” phenomenon is a professional liability for the entire workforce, but deadly for the freelancer who must continually recharge her creative juices while staying open to new opportunities. As Carol Beck, a videographer says, “The hardest thing about freelance is finding time in the day to be good to yourself—to exercise, to meditate, to make healthy meals... to do those things you need to maintain balance...”

Here, the idea of liminality can be repositioned in a full body context to include replenishing one’s emotional, spiritual and physical reservoir as an anchoring device. The idea of creating a generative work environment is an emerging trend that stellar companies recognize and incorporate in their culture: offering healthy food, on-site fitness, flexible hours, encouraging community service, providing creative and leadership opportunities and profit-sharing to name a few. Companies such as Google, Zappos, and SAS Institute are raising the bar for workplace standards and productivity.¹³

Precarity Exacerbates Liminality

Working on one job while searching for another or waiting for the check is a precarious work environment creating a sense of “not knowing.” Additionally, there is a “pull of possibility” that is sometimes coupled with an undercurrent of impending doom. The glory days of risk and reward are definitely more about risk than reward as people are trying to adapt to the new digital economy coupled while weathering economic uncertainty.

Before the economic meltdown, the liminality of uncertainty was already a reality for media freelancers. Now we have the precarity of an unstable economy added to the mix. There were many freelancers during the development this article that went back to school, secured a full-time job and developed their own creative projects. Others that have postponed retirement and continue to work at a frenetic, exhausting pace. Bill Cavanaugh,

¹¹ Tony Schwartz, “Share this with your CEO.” Accessed July 2012. <http://blogs.hbr.org/2012/06/share-this-with-your-ceo/>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See CNN Money, “List of the Best Companies to Work for,” accessed May 25, 2014, <http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/best-companies/2012/snapshots/50.html>; and Tony Schwartz, “The Twelve Attributes of a Truly Great Place to Work,” accessed October 16, 2012, <http://blogs.hbr.org/2011/09/the-twelve-attributes-of-a-tru/>

an audio engineer at RazorMix, acknowledges that risk has always been there but it is increasing in media:

“The fact of the matter is that there’s always been a risk and the risk is increasing in this business. If you work for a company, you don’t see the risk elements because you have a steady paycheck. You don’t see the elephant charging until the boss comes in and says, ‘I’m laying you off.’ You’re not ready for it. I have to be the guy that chases down the money without pissing the client off and keeping it friendly. I know what the true financials are. I did a job in December and they didn’t pay me until May. So that becomes an issue. You have to chase the work down, do the work, and then you have to chase the money down.”

Alan McElroy, a Hollywood screenwriter, describes the limbo of living in the space where the work is finished, you’ve been paid, and you’re not sure if and when the project you created will come to life—while still worrying about when the next job will appear:

“I have nothing in production. Everything is on the five-yard line and nothing is getting across the goal. If twenty-five years ago, I said to myself ‘Guess what?’ In 2010 you’re going to have a project you sold in a bidding war with 20th Century Fox with an Oscar-winning screenwriter said to direct. You’ve got a script at Screen Gems and the president of production said it was his favorite script and he was calling about it. You’ve got an NBC pilot. A Fox Television studio pilot. Everything is in position and guess what? You’re not making any money. I’ve been paid to write everything. Everything is sitting in limbo and the clock is rolling. Nothing new is being generated. All those things are paid up. So you would automatically think: I should be getting work all the time. I have a lot of people coming to see me for ideas but nothing is locking in. It’s a weird limbo I’m in.”

The reality for journalists is that rates were radically reduced Jimi Izrael mentions, “The market in my opinion has devalued about 60 percent since 2003 or 2004.” In the past, it was primarily journalists who took the heavy hit, but now the workforce compression extends to those in other freelance media venues. Cavanaugh chimes in with a similar price reduction of about half even though he is working nonstop. Everyone is looking for a deal and the sustainability of working as a media freelancer is tenuous and driving the new precarity. At the same time, it fosters career improvisation in the nonprofit and entrepreneurial realm, as demonstrated by these freelancers. There is clearly a shift emerging, driving freelancers to the nonprofit or entrepreneurial sector; Jaffe creating a philanthropic organization *Shaking with Laughter* and Steven Tatar starting a knitwear company *Ohio Knitting Mills*.¹⁴

¹⁴ See “Shaking with Laughter Foundation,” accessed April 10, 2012, <http://shakingwithlaughter.org/>; and Steven Tatar, “Ohio Knitting Mills,” accessed February 19, 2012), <http://www.ohioknittingmills.com>.

The Why of Living with Liminality: An Appreciative View

Why do these people chose to live in limbo when it comes to work? Tatar beautifully articulates “the why” of his freelance choice:

“People don’t say I want to be a freelancer. You say I like this type of work and it happens to be work that is not typically employed but treated as contract service. I’m a freelancer because I got laid off at the end of the huge burst of an economy. I never really found a job that I was willing to do. I can get a job – but I don’t want to get one that isn’t aligned with my strengths, my interests, my passions, my intent and vision for my professional life. That vision is everybody’s dream – at least creatives. A lot of people don’t bother dreaming because they said, ‘It’s a job you’re not supposed to like it.’”

The tradeoff for uncertainty and unpredictability is to find work that is emotionally and creatively satisfying. According to Daniel Pink, this new work ethic is one of “...having freedom, being authentic, putting yourself on the line and defining success on your own terms.”¹⁵ The liminality of the freelance lifestyle is supplanted by creativity, scheduling flexibility and autonomy. When securing payments and finding work becomes disproportionately difficult, freelancers start improvising and begin to consider full- or part-time work, retirement, starting their own business or other combinations. This is expanding and changing our definition of what it means to have a “regular job.”

Although the uncertainty of freelance is difficult, many participants suggested that a 9-5 position is becoming increasingly less stable. When one is no longer soliciting or advancing a personal network, it becomes a fast-and-furious “catch up game” when the position is eliminated. As Cavanaugh noted earlier, “You don’t see the elephant charging until the boss comes in and says, ‘I’m laying you off.’ You’re not ready for it.” With Forbes’ prediction that one-half of American jobs will be freelance by the year 2020, media arts freelancers are not complacent; they realize they will be entering multiple work style configurations at the same time.¹⁶

The Liminal Antidote

A good freelancer is always acquiring new skills on the job, living a moderate lifestyle because they anticipate down cycles, making sure they reenergize after stressful assignments to prevent burnout, while also keeping up with their network of colleagues, and soliciting new connections.

Another critical factor when it comes to securing work and reducing liminality is having a suitable location for freelance or having the relational contacts to find work outside of your region. The following sections explore the many facets of geography; however, there are

¹⁵ Daniel Pink, *Free Agent Nation: The Future of Working for Yourself* (New York: Warner Books, 2002), 82.

¹⁶ Elaine Pofedlt, “What you’ll need to know to be the Boss in 2020,” *Forbes Online*, accessed May 26, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/elainepofedlt/2012/04/03/what-youll-need-to-know-to-be-the-boss-in-2020/>.

no easy conclusions articulated because the participants' experiences are highly diverse. *The Takeaway* recognizes that the freelance driver is primarily relational connections whether the jobs are globally or locally situated.

COMMUNITY: THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF FINDING WORK WHERE YOU ARE SITUATED

We can summarize the preceding discussion as follows: a good freelancer always acquires new skills on the job, lives a moderate lifestyle as she anticipates economic downturns and reenergizes after stressful assignments—all the while maintaining her network of colleagues and soliciting new connections. A critical factor when it comes to securing work and reducing liminality is having a suitable location to freelance or possessing the relational contacts to find work outside of your region. There are no easy conclusions formed in the remainder of this article as the participants' experiences are vastly different.

Community and relationships, which are at the epicenter of social construction, are also clearly central to the vitality of freelance work. If freelancers were not engaged in a conversation with community and enterprise, there would be limited awareness of where their talents and interests could connect, contribute and make a difference. Even though freelancers are often perceived as “independent” since they have multiple employers, they do not work alone. Their actions must be coordinated with others.

Tatar resonates with the idea of coordinated action when he expands the vision of creativity from an individual process to a relational process—one that incorporates community.

“You use the word ‘freelancer’ and in my mind I use the term ‘independent creative.’ In my mind, more than anything else, it’s about community. It’s about having the benefit—emotional, professional and sometimes even financial as a reflection of oneself. It’s about the creative process. That noise in your head—not between you and yourself but among people who resonate with me—is the single most important element.”

It is the participant's relational connections (a seemingly unimportant discussion in a coffee shop or a chance encounter) that indirectly pull the freelancer to the next position. They often use the term “luck” to describe a happenstance moment but freelancers have the improvisational ability to seize on a situation, alchemize an opportunity and make it their own. Jaffe remembers the importance of his agent convincing him to see Jerry Seinfeld's performance in Cleveland, which prompted a subsequent writing job. It was through referrals, relationships and making the effort to connect that he started writing for *Seinfeld* and then continued to develop his own unique projects from game shows to the Elijah Cup.¹⁷

¹⁷ Michael Heaton, “Comedy Writer Marc Jaffe devises Seder Cup that drains itself,” accessed May 25, 2014, http://www.cleveland.com/people/index.ssf/2008/03/comedy_writer_marc_jaffe_devis.html.

In coming to terms with his wife's Parkinson disease prognosis, Jaffe co-created a play titled *Side Effects May Include*. It not only involved his local community in fundraising efforts but resulted in co-developing an organization (*Shaking with Laughter*) that raises awareness, money and support for Parkinson research. (The funds are coordinated with both the Michael J. Fox Foundation and the Cleveland Clinic Foundation). Here, fundraising efforts reach the Hollywood community where Jaffe's friends in the industry extend their "star value" and contribute time, tickets and personal involvement with his Internet auction. The highest bid, for \$17,500, was a 20-minute minute pitch meeting with Larry David (co-creator of *Seinfeld* and creator of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*). The new freelance is about realizing that the creation of opportunity can take place on a stage other than Broadway or Hollywood; the ripple started locally in Cleveland and now extends to a more global stage.

The freelance projects these participants engage in usually start with a relationally-driven recommendation that originates from those who recognize that a freelancer can perform at a high level. Freelance is predicated on the notion that people want to work with individuals that can do the job, but also a person that is compatible. Facing long hours and collaborative intimacy, a media freelancer with exceptional talent and poor relational skills would not last long. "It is, in other words, not only about being good at something, it is also about carefully cultivating the image of being good."¹⁸ The reflection on the freelancer's contribution to the project is often casually unpacked in after-hour social gatherings. As Tatar notes, "Business is about relationships. It's face time. Let's have a drink time. Hanging out 'till you get it time." Seth Godin, a media innovator, also reveals the power of personal connections:

"The connection revolution is upon us. It sells the moment short to call this the Internet revolution. In fact, this new era marks the end of the industrial age and the beginning of something new. The industrial revolution wasn't about inventing manufacturing. It was about amplifying it to the point where it changed everything. And the connection revolution doesn't invent connection, of course, but it amplified it to become the dominant force in our economy. Connecting people to one another. Connecting seekers to data. Connecting businesses to each other. Connecting tribes of similarly minded individuals into larger, more effective organizations."¹⁹

Relationships Matter: "Freelance Is a Team Sport"

Certainly, we are acutely aware of the Internet's power to transform and change, yet we are standing at a chaotic crossroad. It presents an opportunity for reinvention and renewal. What I have discovered with all the freelancers is that relationships matter. It is essential for innovative individuals to engage others in the creative process in all steps, from concept to

¹⁸ Mark Deuze, "Workstyles in the Media Production Industries: Mapping Media Work" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Boston, Massachusetts, July 31, 2008. Available at http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/2/4/1/2/0/pages241206/p241206-1.php

¹⁹ Seth Godin, "Stop Stealing Dreams: What is School for?," accessed March 27, 2012, www.sethgodin.com/sg/docs/stopstealingdreamsscreen.pdf.

completion. As Tatar notes:

“Partnerships are so important. The bottom line is that freelance is not an end to itself. It’s where you live. It’s like having a one-bedroom apartment. It doesn’t mean that you sleep alone. It’s still a team sport.”

For most freelancers, there is fundamental trust in the ability of the other project participants to not only complete the job, but to make it exceptional. This is relational knowledge of having worked together in the past, knowing their performance skills and level of commitment.

Bridging A Divergent Community Jumpstarts Discovery and the Economy

Geography, proximity and community are vital in the world of freelance work.

Community is an important driver for discovery as freelancers hear about jobs or potentially beneficial situations while on the way to do something else. These everyday conversations requires nuanced social skills. The following section exemplifies the importance of secondary connections (called “bridging”), which Richard Florida describes as “...looser ties that extend across and connect different groups. Bridging activities provide the conditions for creativity, for the Eureka moment when new possibilities suddenly become apparent.”²⁰ Clearly, secondary bridging activities often lead to surprising opportunities.

Discovered Gold While Searching for Steel

A bridging moment organically occurred when Tatar discovered a vintage knitwear company, Ohio Knitting Mills, while he was scouting materials for an art project. He was also looking for a new community development meeting location in Cleveland when an acquaintance mentioned that the Mill had significant space. Tatar was a bit surprised to find the shell of a working knitting mill and arranged a meeting with the owner. The mill was in the shuttering process and the owner was interested in selling off the remainder of knitwear stock. The discovery was a pleasant surprise. He remarks:

“We were snooping around. I walked in and there were these old knitting machines in operation still knitting. There were thousands and thousands of cones of yarn. They were in the process of packing it up and shutting it down. But they were still running out a few contracts and orders. There was a skeleton crew of about a dozen people at the max. It was clearly on its way down. The vibe was so real. It was old school.”

Tatar envisioned greater branding possibilities for this vintage knitwear collection (1947-1974), which prompted the rebirth of Ohio Knitting Mills He is seeking a partnership to

²⁰ Richard Florida, *Who’s Your City: How the Creative Economy is Making Where to Live the Most Important Decision of Your Life* (Toronto: Random House 2009), 124.

further the venture and is poised to produce some limited edition items in the United States. Tatar opines: “I am all about repurposing in a structural way.”

He is also concerned about reigniting the American imagination to the beauty of “made in America” and notes:

“The new frontiers are not the Wild West. It’s not the Gold Rush. What can we discover in the left behinds? What is it in our cities and urban places and our former industrial places—in the manufacturing—that is beautiful? Yes, it’s neglected but it’s not something to throw away. This is our soul. This is the essence of who we are. We need to embrace it—put it back together and put our future together.”

Although cities and environments shape us in profound ways, this commentary is also an example of how we shape our community by discovering beauty and opportunity where we are situated.

CREATIVE FOLKS LIVE EVERYWHERE: CLEVELAND IS NO JOKE

The freelancers involved with this project, all with a long history working in media, demonstrate the survival instincts, tenacity, relational and improvisational skills needed to thrive in less than ideal situations. That can sometimes include location. Seven of the eleven media freelancers hail from Cleveland, Ohio, yet their sphere of influence is national and even international in scope. With a gritty postindustrial backdrop, Cleveland is a community that offers affordability and culture. It is an underdog location (much like Detroit and other Rust Belt cities) and a tough place where people provide the color in a frequently steel-grey landscape. The motto “Cleveland, you’ve got to be tough” is no joke. When media comes to mind, Cleveland is not first and foremost on anyone’s list as a location conducive for freelance work. Yet creativity abounds.

Richard Florida’s solution for post-recession future growth is the encouragement of mega regions: “...the great mega-regions that already power the economy, and the smaller, talent- attracting innovation centers inside them—places like Silicon Valley, Boulder, Austin and the North Carolina Research Triangle.” He further opines that the challenge in Rust Belt cities is “...managing population decline without becoming blighted” and suggests that “the economy is different now. It no longer revolves around simply making and moving things. Instead, it depends on generating and transporting ideas.”²¹

In my view, we need to move beyond location and view the imagination as a way to jump-start and fuel the economy. Cities, housing markets, and popular destinations are always in a socially-constructed flux, yet creative individuals can greatly impact a city or region wherever they are situated. Even the term “Rust Belt” starts with a deficit discourse that does not allow one to imagine a richer, more vibrant scenario. Imagination will be the

²¹ Richard Florida, “How the Crash will Reshape America,” *The Atlantic*, accessed September 25, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/print/2009/03/how-the-crash-will-reshape-america/307293/>.

driver of the new economy wherever people are situated and many seem to agree. “*Rust Belt Chic: The Cleveland Anthology*” captures Cleveland’s creative appeal:

“America is in the grips of a budding ‘roots movement.’ Desires for the splashy are giving way to a longing for the past. Many are turning back toward the Rust Belt and geographies like it to find what they’ve been missing. Rust Belt Chic is churches and work plants hugging the same block. It is ethnic as hell. It is the Detroit sound of Motown. It is Cleveland punk. It is getting vintage t-shirts and vinyl for a buck that are being sold to Brooklynites for the price of a Manhattan meal. It is babushka and snakeskin boots. It is babushka in snakeskin boots.

It is wear: old wood and steel and vacancy. It is contradiction, conflict, and standing resiliency. But most centrally, Rust Belt Chic is about home, or that perpetual inner fire longing to be comfortable in one’s own skin and one’s community.”²²

Hardscrabble cities like Cleveland, Detroit and Pittsburgh are making a comeback not because they are imitating other popular destinations but because they are “...offering the promise of a better (cheaper) quality of life—and yes, the ironic pleasures of bowling, pierogies, and polka—Rust Belt cities truly have become ‘chic.’”²³ Cleveland is an edgy city where creativity is thriving precisely because it lacks pretense. It is now enjoying an entrepreneurial buzz because of a reverse-migration trend (“brain gain”) as “...talented, educated, creative people are no longer fleeing the region – they’re flocking to it.”²⁴

The remaining project participants live in the New York City and surrounding Hudson Valley area, in addition to Atlanta, Georgia. Although this group lives in cities more amenable to independent media work, they share similar issues and concerns about securing and getting paid for media projects along with budget, time constraints, and proximity to their clients. These individual voices create a polyphonic chorus of divergent viewpoints when it comes to understanding how geography impacts their work. While this article highlights that creativity lives everywhere, the following themes represent contradictory, multiple perspectives regarding location.

Location Doesn’t Matter in the Global Arena: Coordination Counts

Kate Farrell and Carol Beck are two project participants who have—and continue to—work on large-scale overseas video productions. This requires a kind of openness to not only being able to quickly assemble a crew but also “mutually coordinating” their work styles.

²² Richey Piiparinen and Anne Trubek, eds., *Rust Belt Chic: The Cleveland Anthology* (Cleveland: Rust Belt Chic Press, 2012).

²³ Douglas Trattner, “Rust Belt Chic: The Cleveland Anthology,” accessed July 30, 2012, <http://www.freshwatercleveland.com/features/rustbeltchico60712.aspx>.

²⁴ Details, “The Rust Belt Brain Gain,” accessed April 7, 2012, <http://www.details.com/culture-trends/critical-eye/201204/rust-belt-revival-brain-gain-think-tank>.

According to Kenneth Gergen, et al, this means “trying to communicate across boundaries is not a matter of simply ‘decoding’ the meaning of the others’ action. Rather, it is a matter of coordinating actions with them.”²⁵ Mutual coordination can be experienced in the way relationships are experienced over time, a sense of knowing and anticipating their teammates performance styles, understanding the same professional language without needing to speak, creating a territory of tolerance and respect, and trusting the professionalism of the team to complete the job even when the demands are extraordinarily tough.

Carol E. Beck: Working Worldwide From Home

Beck has worked on media planning and production for name brand multinational corporations such as IBM, General Electric, Coca Cola, The Ford Motor Company, Xerox, Panasonic, Proctor and Gamble, Home Depot, Honda and others. Her professional expertise involves managing international logistics in Venezuela, Australia, Budapest, Germany, Amsterdam, Beijing and India. I teasingly ask if I’m missing anything—she nonchalantly responds “Japan and all over Europe.”

When working on large productions for corporate clients, the global dimension requires working with a large, international crew. Beck gives a wonderful example of IBM’s global investor’s meeting and notes how mutual coordination overrides geography:

“I’ll give you a really good example on how geography doesn’t play. I worked on a project for an IBM global investor’s meeting. The meeting was taking place in Bangalore, India. I was here in Atlanta at my desk. The executive producer was in New York City. My animators were in London. The technical director was on the ground in Bangalore. I had fabricators working in Singapore... I sat at my desk in Atlanta until the week before the meeting. It’s common on these large events that the team gets together from all over.”

Beck enjoys working on overseas projects. She says, “One of my favorite things to do is the small overseas job. I have worked with my friend Bill for 15 years. We go with a camera package and pick up a local crew—China, Amsterdam or wherever we happen to be. You meet fantastic people and it’s really fun working with crews. Crew people are the same all over the world. There’s a certain mentality and way of being.”

Carol also addresses the level of crew camaraderie after successfully working with an individual and how that inevitably generates future projects together:

“You’re used to being in the soup and trying to figure out how you’re going to do it. I worked with some guys in Australia—a line producer that I needed on the ground and a DP (Director of Photography). We had a fantastic time working together and the other crew people brought on were awesome. At the end of the

²⁵ Kenneth Gergen, Stuart M. Schrader and Mary Gergen, eds., *Constructing Worlds Together: Interpersonal Communication as a Relational Process* (Boston, MA: Pearson Education, 2009), 247.

job, we're like 'see you, nice to know you—have a good life.' Then a year later I'm calling them up saying, 'Guess what? We're coming to Australia.' You know that people do good work, they're fun, and when work is over you can go and have a nice meal together, have a beer, and share war stories. It's very relational."

Mutual coordination on any production or project, whether large or small, requires respect for the group performance, a strong relational connection and a high level of trust. Although production participants do not always speak the same language, there is a prescribed freelance code of ethics and behavior that is universal if you want to stay working. One of the highest on the priority list is trust: trust that a team member will efficiently and creatively complete the job, an assumption that it will be at a high professional level and that colleagues will respect your established client relationship.

PROXIMITY AND RELATIONSHIPS DRIVE FREELANCE: LOCATION MATTERS

Location, location, location

Throughout the interviews, there were two prominent opinions concerning geography. One viewpoint previously discussed was the idea that mutual coordination, more than location, is integral in the global production arena. However, on a regional and national level, it is proximity to the client along with talent and relationships that make a difference. For many of the project participants, the decision to move away from areas of commerce was prompted by family concerns. These participants candidly reveal how proximity intersects with their freelance work.

Steven Tatar: Freelance Relies on Regional Strength as Work Outside the Region is Contingent on Previous Relationships

For many of the freelancers, location is critical. Tatar's home base is Cleveland but he is poised to move if the right situation presents itself. He comments about the importance of location: "I think it's huge. So huge. Freelance is locative. It's a regional strength. Minnesota is not good at shrimping and New York is not good for steel production. Cleveland is not good for brand building and services now. It has been better in the past and it was a big advertising center."

He acknowledges that work outside Cleveland is contingent on relationships developed beforehand and mentions:

"Yes, I do work for clients outside of the region. Location matters. I'm of the opinion that every freelancer who is successful outside of their region is able to do that because they had a strong foundation to start with which was relationship based. They didn't just randomly get discovered by a west coast company to develop a new brand for a shoe line in New York. That's why

community is important—you need community not just for your sanity and to keep your soul intact. You need your community to build your business and keep your pipeline robust.”

Marc Jaffe: Geographically Challenged

The irony of the media industry is that Cleveland inspires comedy but is not the perfect location if you are interested in writing television sitcoms. Jaffe’s view is that geographical location is central to his line of work:

“Despite the Internet and emails that were kicking in during the 90’s, I was trying to do things from here. The situation had Paul Reiser with *Mad About You* and I was hoping to freelance a script. It took awhile and I finally got an assignment. I was thrilled. As it turned out, the show was going through a bit of flux at the time. As the process worked out, the episode never got made because the arc of the season got changed midway. What I was writing didn’t make sense for the characters they wanted to focus on which was some other season plot point. I spoke with Larry and he said, ‘When you’re not here, I need somebody because things are so fluid and I need to say, “Hey Marc, come in today”—you’re in Cleveland and I can’t do that.’ ”

Bill Cavanaugh: Greetings from Elba

Cavanaugh’s thoughts on geography articulate the choice facing media freelancers: “From a technical standpoint, I could do this anywhere. But you still need face time with these people. You need to be able to get to them. Because if there’s an issue, I want to be close enough to come and talk to them and will drop by in the city.” For him, proximity matters—clearly—yet he articulates a dimension beyond the work:

“Social contact is important. That’s why I still take jobs working in the remaining studios. I can go two or three times a month into the city so I can be around humans. That’s where the Elba line came up...just mixing up here and being by myself. I feel a bit like I’m reading books and waiting to invade Europe. I’m not going to invade Europe. I’m not going to invade Manhattan—I never completely pulled out.”

Cavanaugh used to affectionately refer to his home in Rhinebeck, New York, as “Elba,” a historical reference to the island where Napoleon was banished. Bill talks about the adjustment:

“When I first moved there, I felt a bit exiled. I had to sell a new model and would tell clients I could be there in two hours. I can get it to you in twenty minutes if you send it via the Internet, I can send it back as a full-time Quicktime movie with picture and everything. You can review it and say ‘Can you lower the music here?’ That’s what they did. In ten minutes, they would say,

‘Can you make this change’ and it would be uploaded again. Within a half hour, it would have gone through all channels and they would say it’s perfect.”

He stresses that proximity still makes a difference because clients have not yet acclimated to the new studio work method:

“I could be doing this in North Dakota with FTP (File Transfer Protocol) technology. The idea that I could be in North Dakota would be ridiculous. Rhinebeck is a well-known town outside of Manhattan. A lot of artists live here. It’s sort of the upscale Woodstock. There are a lot of musicians and studios up here. A lot of the engineers are the guys that left the studios in New York twenty years ago and they’re still in the mindset of the old studio system and haven’t changed their work method.”

Cavanaugh’s move to Rhinebeck opened up new regional clients in Boston as he was already working on *Nova* and *Nova Science Now* for Boston-based WGBH. He says “Now they’re comfortable enough with me to say, ‘You can do it in Rhinebeck and then come to Boston or New York to review it.’ I have proximity to both cities.”

Kasumi: Personal Contacts are More Important than Geography

Kasumi, a recent Guggenheim recipient, acknowledges that she should be in New York because “...no matter how [many commissions and big jobs] you can do in your own studio, (commissions and big jobs) you need the face time.” She suggests that although geography does make a difference, it is your personal contacts are more important when it comes to collaborative projects. She stresses the following: “Hired to do a job is one thing. But hired to do a job as a collaborator is another thing. It’s really important to understand the contributions of each person, as is the case in film. If you think your part is more important than someone else’s, then you will fail.”

Kate Farrell: Geography Influences The Type of Work and Friends are a Major Factor in the Choice

Farrell is no stranger to large-scale production. She is currently an executive producer at WE-tv where she works on reality television programming. When I interviewed Kate in 2013, she was living in Millbrook, New York and working freelance. Prior to our interview, she had quit working at WE-tv previously because of the everyday commuting strain:

“It was at least a two-hour each-way commute on the train. I did that but that was a job that I eventually left. I was looking for work in New York again and no one would really hire me as a ‘work from home’ person. Not in freelance. You have to go on shoots, go on location, be in the edit room. You have long days and you can’t commute two hours each way and pull a 12-hour day. It’s too exhausting.”

Farrell continues:

“Which coast you live on is another factor. If I wanted to work regularly in reality, I should be living in L.A. That’s where it’s happening. In New York, there’s only about four companies that do reality series in the New York area—maybe more I don’t know about. So you’ve already limited your scope. One of things that I’ll do in New York is to keep in touch with my sports friends. Another factor is friendships.”

Now, she has moved back to the city and is working at WE-TV again on a full time basis as an executive producer. She talks about that decision:

“I moved to the Hudson Valley as a personal choice. At the time, I could work from home but once I wanted to get back into TV, I found that I needed to be in NYC again. For awhile at least from my perspective, certain companies were allowing people to work from home but I think I’ve heard a little bit of a shift... that they want people to be in the jobs—and I’m not talking production jobs. I’m talking corporate or working for a cable company or network. They’re not as happy with people working from home.”

Laura Paglin: A Challenge Finding Actors in Cleveland

When Paglin (who typically works on fictional films) realized that recruiting acting talent in Cleveland was more difficult than expected, she adapted by creating documentaries. From working on a new project talking to the women who survived serial killer Anthony Sewell to her recent full-length feature-length documentary on an E-Prep (an entrepreneurial charter school with a compelling success record) Cleveland is always featured in her recent work.²⁶ The one advantage of living in a city with intense challenges is that there are plenty of topics to discover and document. Married without children, she can be somewhat versatile in terms of her lifestyle and project choices because her “...lifestyle doesn’t demand much. We don’t live beyond our means....It’s a way of adapting to what we do. We don’t have a ‘McMansion’—and we live in Cleveland.”

THE TAKEAWAY: WHETHER FREELANCE IS GLOBAL OR LOCAL, IT IS RELATIONALLY DRIVEN

“If we are always arriving and departing, it is also true that we are eternally anchored. One’s destination is never a place but rather a new way of looking at things.” — Henry Miller

The media freelancer does not have time to ponder the state of the economy. She is too busy finding work, finishing work and then doing it again at a pace and price that is significantly compressed. Freelancers are certainly aware that the content “king” has been dethroned. The Internet, along with rapid technological invention, has had a profound

²⁶ Laura Paglin, “Facing Forward-Trailer,” accessed October 27, 2011, <http://www.facingforwardfilm.com/>.

impact on all the creative industries: “Attention has shifted from the ‘*what*’ of content to the ‘*how*’ of delivery, branding, and customer relations—in other words toward management.”²⁷ Journalists were the first to feel the impact, especially as newspapers imploded. As we rapidly shift from the industrial to the information age, structures and solutions that once worked are creaky and at a breaking point.

All the freelancers interviewed recognize that talent alone does not drive creativity or invention. Rather, it is a supportive community that can bolster our courage, renew our confidence and allow us to move forward together. As noted in *Net Locality: Why Location Matters in a Networked World*:

“The fact that the web is marching steadily along the path to localization is an indication that local communities, cultures, and contexts have always been relevant, and always will be. It would be naïve to deny the influence of global networks on local communities. However, what we can observe now, in perhaps comparable intensity, is the influence of local knowledge and local information in shaping global networks. It is in this tension between the local and the global that net locality unfolds. Net locality changes the meaning and value of the web, not because the technology has determined that to be the case, but because people have adopted networked technologies for local purposes. We exist in communities, neighborhoods, networks, and spaces...Meaning is produced locally.”²⁸

The extension of the previous idea that “meaning is produced locally” requires the tagline “when engaged in relationship” because it is at this junction where emergent possibilities for creative adventures and performances exist.

From “Me” to “We”

This place of chaos and confusion is really a birthing ground for change and growth. Where are we? We are at a crossroads where crisis is presenting an opportunity to move from an individualistic “me” orientation to a more inclusive and interdependent “we” sensibility. LinkedIn is not just a professional networking site but a metaphor for a new cultural connectivity. The era of the rugged individualist is now being slowly supplanted with an evolving view of interdependence and mutual cooperation. As Kenneth Gergen states:

“In the 1980’s evolutionary biologists began to question the Darwinian assumptions about the relationships among species. With careful attention to detail, an alternative view emerged. The relationship was not one of competition, but co-evolution. That is, the survival of various species could be linked to the survival of other species, with whom they existed in a mutually

²⁷ Chris Bilton, “The Management of the Creative Industries,” in *Managing Media Work*, ed. Mark Deuze, (London: Sage Publications, 2011), 31–42.

²⁸ Eric Gordon and Adriana de Souza e Silva, *Net Locality: Why Location Matters in a Networked World* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 179–180.

symbiotic relationship.”²⁹

Media freelancers were the early adopters of a work style that recognizes the importance of relational connections and collaboration as vital to their survival.

Free-range Workers Seek Opportunity wherever they Land

Cities are a cultural supercollider where different viewpoints, ideologies and ethnicities inevitably spark creativity and imagination. However, there are other cities that provide a respite from overstimulation. They allow for the kind of internal reflection that later emerges in an invention or imaginative recalibration that creates change. We are all given choices about where we want to live—some ideal and some not. A city, whether vibrant or dull, is only one factor that contributes to the socially constructed success of the free-range worker.

The innate life of the freelancer is one of finding an unusual juxtaposition of where their talents can be useful and getting up to speed quickly in order to produce, create or consult. Many media freelancers may have little familiarity with a topic but they have a willingness to explore, research and quickly learn. This is where they get excited and their creative ideas start percolating. Alan McElroy’s writing projects range from *Spawn*, to *Halloween 4* to the video game *Hellgate London*. These participants have the courage to jump in quickly because they have the experience of learning new skills and receiving recognition for their work. This reinforcement allows them to enter new domains with greater confidence. Yet it is not only a trust in your own ability but in your collaborators who must also believe in your capacity to transfer skills to another venue. Freelancers are always leaving the comfort of the familiar and heading to the new. What we can learn from them is the how they live in the realm of uncertainty.

Explore the Other

“Successful bonding calls for a transformation in narrative. The ‘I’ as the center of the story must gradually be replaced by the ‘we.’ The ‘we’ now becomes the major protagonist in the narrative of life, the central character to whom everything is related.” — Kenneth Gergen

Freelancers are natural explorers and researchers; they enter many domains through their work and leave again. In entering a new, unfamiliar domain, media freelancers explore the “other.” Laura Paglin has been interviewing women who have survived an infamous serial killer in Cleveland and is continuously documenting an entrepreneurial charter school in Cleveland. Bill Cavanaugh has done sound engineering for Grammy award-winning projects, television, M-TV, VH1, The History Channel, *Nova* and Discovery Channel. Sheryl White has written hundreds of commercials from telecommunications to

²⁹ Kenneth Gergen, *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 381–82.

pharmaceuticals for national clients. The media freelancer is adept at entering unfamiliar and familiar territory and then bringing it to life. All of these participants traverse many “othered” worlds.

Entering the “other’s” world is a shift away from the “me” as it requires one to suspend judgment and entertain other ways of being and doing. It requires creating a relational viewpoint that melds both parties together. As a “we,” there is a shared inquiry where many ideas are explored and “we” can create something newer and exponentially richer with possibilities together. As Henry Miller once wrote: “If we are always arriving and departing, it is also true that we are eternally anchored. One's destination is never a place but rather a new way of looking at things.”³⁰ When we look through the eyes of others, there is a lot more to see.

³⁰ Henry Miller, *Big Sur and The Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, 25.

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