

Thumbs Up: The Lived Spatio-Temporal Experiences of a Young Female Solo-Hitchhiker

By Sarah Latimer

Seeing scruffy backpackers emerge from the edges of the forest and thumbing it on Route 9D every now and then was just another part of growing up with the Appalachian Trail in your backyard. Although not as common as it once was, my sister and I would always revel at the sight of their receding figures as we passed them in a flash on our weekly hour-long ride up to Beacon, NY. This was quite a different feel to when my mother tsk-tsked as we drove past the dark figure of an older back-bent man an evening many years before. At seventeen, driving myself up to Beacon one Sunday, I saw an amicable bearded backpacker with a smile on his face and his thumb outstretched. My immediate curiosity did not translate into physical impulse, however, and I buzzed by him, giving him my best sympathetic shrug. For the rest of the drive, my attention wandered far from the road, imagining all the possible realities of an opportunity left unknown. I was a young girl driving alone... and lacking my favourite pepper spray can at that. But to tell the truth, I felt like that precaution was more my mother's voice in my head. That just wasn't the reason I didn't pull over. The stories he could have told me and the display of trust I could have extended into humanity were thus lost to the road.

Zoom ahead to winter of my first year here at St Andrews and you'll find my friend, Ella, and I stranded on the streets of

suburban Edinburgh around midnight. We had just ran from Sneaky Pete's to end up in a wild but brief taxi chase after the last bus leaving for St Andrews. As its taillights disappeared into the distance, the rolled-up band poster I just had to get before we realised the time seemed to weigh slightly more under the grip of my arm. It was the second week of revision and so spending the night in Edinburgh seemed a bit out of the question, as Ella had an exam the following afternoon. We started joking about how she should start practicing hitching a ride for the charity Race2 Barcelona she was going to partake in in January. We were laughing and pushing each other around as we jokingly stuck our thumbs out and the cars zoomed by on the seemingly endless road sprawling from the city. We actually jumped a bit when a black sedan pulled over to the sidewalk and the passenger window started to roll down. With not much thought and mostly impulse this time I stuck my head inside the opened passenger window and smiled at the kind eyes inside.

All the screaming societal precautions reified by the many years of watching Criminal Minds seemed to fade away with each mile that went by as our new companion shared his life story at our probing questions. He was an economics student at Durham University on his way up to visit friends at Aberdeen but was slightly nervous because he knew his ex-girlfriend would be there too. After long conversations about relationships and Bitcoin, I found myself climbing safely through the window of my room feeling like I had traversed through a loophole in which we gracefully sidestepped the confines of transit structural norms, acquiring a new pal along the way at that. I asked myself why I had ever bothered with public transport anyways.

This question later led me to the ‘mobility turn’ of anthropological writing in an exploration of what it means to be human in an age characterised by the “automobilised time-space” (Sheller and Urry 2006: 209). The mobility of modern transit we have become so accustomed to has undoubtedly transformed our conceptual understandings and lived spatio-temporal experiences of movement. Once inextricably entrenched in geographical domains, the lived spatial experience of movement has since become discerned through the temporal dimensions of the travel duration. The cultural ascendancy of the automobile has simply further compressed one’s associative awareness of physical distance into this experience of departing from point A to arrive at point B in a timely fashion (Urry 2006: 20).

In that sense, here enters hitchhiking as a practice worthy of the anthropological gaze and ethnographic exploration, as its very nature serves to subvert this spatio-temporal continuum of the automobilised journey. In doing so, the practice reveals rich analytical facets of what it means to be human in a relational and gendered world of social connectivity. Drawing on the language of the hitchhiking anthropologist, Patrick Laviolette, hitchhiking as a mobility can be conceptualised as a “stochastic modality of travel” whereby the transient practice of “interrupting or rupturing the average driving journey” inspires random and unpredictable encounters along the “road-scape” (Laviolette 2016: 380-1). It is thus from this random fracturing of the automobilised time-space that the lived experiences of gender and unique circumstances of social connectivity engendered by hitchhiking can be analytically explored.

With that said, this piece seeks to draw insights from a personal autoethnographic narrative and from the experiences of

my anonymised interlocutors from the Facebook group, Female Hitchhikers / Badass Travelers, a few hitchhiking friends, and from other academics writing on the topic. This can thus be considered a ‘mobile ethnography’ conducted through a field strategy of copresent immersion whereby I have followed the stochastic patterns of movement through intentional hitchhiking and employed a “range of observation, interviewing, and recording techniques” such as keeping a “time-space diary,” “cyberethnography,” informal interviews, and scholarly research (Sheller and Urry 2006: 217-8).

Either during the ride on my iPhone notes app or afterwards in my journal, I recorded logistical aspects like where I was, if I was with anyone else, and who was in the car, as well as experiential descriptions such as the circumstances of obtaining the ride, the bits of life story that were shared with me, and any perspectives or opinions on hitchhiking that were expressed. I then further conducted a “cyberethnography” that entailed interviews over Facebook messenger and video chatting with seasoned female hitchhikers in their late twenties, as well as informal interviews with friends. In employing hitchhiking as a methodological praxis, I was effectively positioned “on an equal footing or even in a dependent relationship with many informants” in an interactive process of data-generation that served to subvert the traditional researcher-researched power dynamics of ethnography (Brown and Durrheim 2009: 927; Laviolette 2016: 382). It was thus from a reflexive analysis of my relational positioning to those I encountered while hitching rides that the two following analytical themes regarding gender performativity and social connectivity emerged from my phenomenological research.

So, unsurprisingly, the first reaction I encounter when broaching the topic of hitchhiking centres around the initial shock of my willingness to expose my vulnerable young female body to the possible perils of the road-scape. All of those years of watching sensationalist crime shows that just happened to be my mother and sister's favourite choice of dinner-time entertainment evidently did not help mitigate my internalisation of these sexist narratives when on the road. As a consequence of the constantly reproduced and, in turn, reified societal discourses warning of danger and fuelling suspicion, one cannot avoid the acknowledgement of gender when hitchhiking. To investigate how these embedded discourses have materialised in the lived experiences of female hitchhikers I took "an explicitly gendered focus to analyse [one's] experiences of social spaces," whereby the notion of a gendered body was analytically rendered "a 'vehicle' through which the person experiences and makes sense of their relation both to others and to place" (Bridger 2013: 288, 290). positions on gender. I found again and again that female hitchhikers are faced with the same sexist stigma. In the words of a Finnish informant from the Facebook group who had solo hitchhiked 10,000km throughout West Africa, Europe, Asia and Australia:

"A lot of people easily just categorize it as nuts they're just so hung up on either how brave you are or how dumb you are to really discuss the experience"

However, contrary to the common reactions of disbelief, being a female hitchhiker actually routinely proves to be an asset on the road. Popular sexist narratives are often strategically appropriated through gender performativity in such a way as to empower one's mobility on the road. Gender performativity, as coined by the well-

known scholar, Judith Butler, refers to "the mundane way in which [repeated] bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler 1988: 519). As hitching a ride fundamentally depends on one's ability to make a good impression, whether that be when thumbing it on the side of the road or approaching people in other settings, gender performativity proves to be an insightful analytical prism. When not solo, I have only ever hitchhiked with other girls my age in pairs or in groups of three. Interestingly, from my informal interviews with men, they repeatedly admit that soliciting a ride becomes exponentially easier when hitching with females as they "appear less threatening." A male informant in his late twenties from Spain, very theatrically showed me how a girl must "sonrisa" with all her teeth when approaching a potential ride opportunity.

This demonstration highlighted how one's performative ability is integral to the very essence of the practice. He further emphasised to me that in Spain, you absolutely need to show your character in order for that person to extend a leap of faith in taking you in their car. As "car-drivers control the social mix in their car just like homeowners control those visiting their home," one must prove themselves to be trustworthy through a persuasive performance of their character (Urry 2006: 27). My own hitchhiking strategies attempt to maximise performance potential by situating myself in gas stations and parking lots to allow for a longer first impression. In that position, I am able to approach prospective rides with an overly friendly wave (at times staged with a slight touch of desperation) and a scripted explanation of my troubled circumstances. In conversing with other female hitchhikers, an array of ways in which one can exploit sexist narratives of gender to their benefit were illuminated.

As one female informant wrote:

“Women are less seen as a threat and its also programmed into peoples heads that young women should be rescued. a lot of people have said that they didn’t want to take me in but felt an obligation because I could be in danger with someone else”

Appropriating these embedded discourses through a performative strategy demonstrates the agency of a female hitchhiker on the road-scape. The strategy of approaching potential rides further balances relational power dynamics in the favour of the hitchhiker who can gain some jurisdiction over who they deem has a trustworthy performative appearance. In this sense, a hitchhiker’s ontology inevitably reflects the “relationality of places and persons connected through performances” (Sheller and Urry 2006: 214). I have frequently found myself tending to scope for specific identities, i.e. middle-aged women, older couples, or people my age, and avoiding others, i.e. creepy older men.

However, when thumbing it, this demographic is a common reality. In this case, which turns out to truly be the occasional exception, the same manipulative performance can be readily employed. As one informant put it:

“it’s weird but as a girl it’s also possible to just flirt yourself out of those situations, not sure a guy could do that”

To return to Butler, it is important to note that these enactments of gendered identity must be understood within a particular “constituted social temporality” (Butler 1988: 520). It is thus within the transient encounters of hitching a ride that certain performances are employed, and others shed. How one acts will thus change as their relational position shifts from soliciting a ride to maintaining it for whatever desired duration to navigating a

drop-off. The same Spanish guy who gave me all that insight into hitchhiking in Spain later turned to me at the end of the ride to inquire, “¿Sarah, quieres darme un beso?”. I’d like to think he was able to decipher the clear message of “seriously, you’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” written across the arch of my raised eyebrows. However, upon further reflection a few hours later, perhaps he got this ghastly wrong impression from the intimate hours we had just shared together in the close confines of the car ride from Malaga to Huelva, Spain. From this encounter I came to realise how the unique spatio-temporality of hitchhiking comes to foster intimate conditions for social connectivity between two utter strangers. In a quest to reconcile some of my pride, a possible analytical explanation for this pitiful misunderstanding of our relationality will now be explored.

So, after getting over the initial reaction questioning why on earth would I ever hitchhike as such a young woman, I usually get asked why on earth would anybody want to purposefully put themselves at the mercy of a complete stranger for the sake of stochastic mobility. I have realised from both my own experience and those of my interlocutors that the choice to hitchhike is usually not much of a choice at first. One’s answer typically entails a story of being stranded somewhere (i.e. on the desolate streets of late-night suburban Edinburgh) and either coming to the realisation that hitchhiking may be your best bet of getting anywhere or it just kind of happens out of a series of chance encounters. But interestingly, again and again, I receive the same subsequent explanation that narrates a progression from realising that hitchhiking can be just like another mode of transit, to an alternative that is actually preferred over the social isolation of driving alone or taking public transport. As one informant explained:

Always been less about money or convenience. I just think there's much more value to spending the few hours chatting with someone new and being dropped off along the way in place you'd never see otherwise"

It is this reoccurring experience of intimate social connectivity born out of the random and unpredicted encounter of stochastic mobility that entices people to put themselves in that vulnerable position of adrenaline on the side of the road. The spatial confines of "a fuel propelled metal-sheeted cocoon" and the nature of a transient chance encounter creates a liminal space where the seemingly universal desire to share stories about "tragedy and beauty of a life" naturally flows between passengers (Laviolette 2016: 398; Jäntti, Kholina and Malla 2017: 48). I have welcomed many life stories and wise words of advice throughout car rides lasting for a mere five minutes or a seemingly infinite five hours.

Two Polish ladies once revealed to me that in life, "everything has already been done, you're just discovering it" and a Maltese man named Casimiro once explained with one hand on the wheel and a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth that in "Maaltah, if you go looking for problems, problems will find you." It is within this unusual automobilised time-space initiated by an extension of charity and trust that the character of one's humanity is left raw and exposed. Even after that Godfather-esque scene, my friend pointed out how Casimiro had considerably waited to light his cigarette until we had got out of the car.

Cultivating social connection is further in the interest of the hitchhiker as "talking gives the hitcher a more open appearance, threatening the driver less... a rider who

talks well may induce the driver to go out of [their] way to dump [them] in a favorable place" (Carlson 1972: 143). A male friend who had recently found himself on the Isle of Skye in Scotland having to hitchhike for the first time after realising the age to rent a car was indeed twenty-five, like in his home country of the United States, enthusiastically told me of his many adventures across fifteen rides in four days. He shared with me how he realised the genuine joy he felt when he could share so much about his life and identity to foreign strangers who were curious to listen and reciprocate. He showed me the personalised pocket bible a woman gave to him after a half-hour of existential chat and told me of the family that picked him up twice, giving him their phone number for any emergencies. The family confessed to him that they were actually looking out for his backpacking figure, calling him "The man that walks the Island." My friend embodied how "hitchers develop new contexts for the expression of community, trust and social acceptance" that serve to inspire relations of "mutual tolerance or affinity" between people from all walks of life (Laviolette 2016: 396). The chance interruption of the average journey along the road-scape posed by the sight of an outstretched thumb thus presents the limitless potential for intimate social connectivity unique to the spatio-temporality of the automobile.

So maybe the art of hitchhiking is not entirely lost to the more adventurous and trusting times of our past. Its practice entices more and more to break away from the often monotonous automobilised road-scape of today to have the more stimulating spatio-temporal experience of stochastic mobility. The vulnerable positions of relationality unique to hitchhiking create the potential to subvert societal norms of power, gender and social isolation. Dynamic enactments of gender

performativity that defy and appropriate sexist narratives serve to expose and challenge preconceptions of what it means to be a female in charge of her own movement through life. The transient spatial confines of the automobile further engender the potential for intimate social connectivity whereby complete strangers come to know one another through charity, curiosity and a leap of faith.

With this in mind, one day I know I will hike all 3,500 kilometres of the Appalachian Trail. Perhaps in a solo quest to find myself? Maybe. To feel a spiritual

reconnection to my long-lost East Coast American homeland? Who knows. Only one thing is for certain: I will be that scruffy backpacker emerging from the forest with a wide smile on her face and her thumb outstretched on the side of Route 9D. My passing figure will read: *“crazy young woman with an open ear to listen, open eyes for experiencing, an open mind for learning, and an open heart for understanding.”*

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