Belonging on the Appalachian Trail: An Analysis of the Thru-hiking Community

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This project was an extension of my anthropology summer research about Appalachian Trail thru-hikers, people who choose to hike the 2,180 mile length of the trail in one season. My summer research suggested that immersion in wilderness is not a central reason for thru-hiking for many thru-hikers but that the set aside time and place of an AT thru-hike creates the conditions for the production of a community with an alternative set of behavioral norms. During the academic year I continued my fieldwork by interviewing thru-hikers in Maine and at the Appalachian Long Distance Hikers Association Gathering in Athens, West Virginia. I also conducted a focus group at the Gathering. In the interviews and the focus group I asked questions about the characteristics of thru-hiker identity and about the behavioral norms of the thru-hiking community.

These data aided my exploration of the construction and performance of an Appalachian Trail thru-hiker community and identity, the meanings that community and its moral code hold for members, and the various contradictions embedded within the performance of thru-hikerness. Thru-hikers expressed that they see people’s behavior on the trail as more genuine or authentic than their own and others’ behavior in their regular lives. Thru-hikers are cognizant of at least some of the expectations and guidelines shaping their behavior in the regular world, and many feel off-trail behavior is contrived. On the trail, thru-hikers feel that they no longer have to conform to societal norms and, freed from their usual social roles, can instead be their “real” selves. In my thesis, I argue that this classification of authentic on-trail and disingenuous off-trail behavior is rooted in thru-hikers’ understanding of thru-hiking as a process of “stripping down” or simplifying one’s appearance and behavior and in thru-hikers’ shared goals and experiences.

Even with this view of authenticity, there are actually prescribed ways of performing thru-hikerness are required to be accepted as a member of the thru-hiking community. The appearances, behaviors, and thoughts that make up the thru-hiker front are not natural consequences of being on the trail and “away from society”—even though people imagine it as such—but are instead learned along the way, through observations of others’ behavior as well as through conversations, stories, and written comments in trail logs about people who have failed to present basic thru-hikerness or who have breached expectations for appropriate behavior. By analyzing stories thru-hikers told in interviews, I demonstrated that storytelling is one way people perform thru-hiker identity and reinforce belonging and the boundaries of the community.

An examination of the thru-hikers’ discursive presentation of their community and the characteristics of the thru-hiker front highlights the way that the thru-hiking community operates with a different moral code than in they do in their regular lives. This examination brings to light the contradictions within thru-hiker behavioral guidelines—most notably the contradiction between the egalitarian ethos of the thru-hiking community and the manner in which elitism and class privilege shape the community. The detailing of these guidelines also reveals the necessity of performing the thru-hiker front to demonstrate that one has earned one’s place within the thru-hiking community and can, therefore, be trusted to interact according to a thru-hiker moral code. This front and its maintenance contain intriguing contradictions that reveal much about the challenges and norms of maintaining a community based on assumption of front-less authenticity.

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