Thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail: Opportunities for Reflection and Change in “Wilderness” Spaces
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Data from my previous research about Appalachian Trail thru-hikers led me to understand the process of thru-hiking as a liminal experience, characterized by anthropologist Victor Turner as a time when individuals “live outside their normal environment and are brought to question their self and the existing social order through a series of rituals that often involve acts of pain…[they] come to feel nameless, spatio-temporally dislocated and socially unstructured.”¹ Past thru-hikers described the thru-hike as a time and space in which, freed from the distractions, obligations, and expectations of their everyday lives, they could reflect on their lives in a way that was not possible off the trail. Further, after enduring months of these reflections and physically grueling days, they felt irrevocably changed from the experience. Their narrations led me to explore how people understand the process of thru-hiking to influence their lives with a focus on people’s beliefs about what contact with “nature” or “wilderness” does for them. I hoped to gain insight into wilderness as a space in which individuals may alter their conceptions of themselves (and their lives) and as a space which allows for or even requires the rigorous qualities of thru-hiking to evoke that change. By exploring individuals’ decisions to traverse the Appalachian Trail in its entirety and their shared ideas of nature’s function, I hoped to uncover the practices that produce wilderness as a particular kind of space with particular kinds of relationships.

I pursued these questions using ethnographic research methods during five weeks of fieldwork on the Appalachian Trail. Hiking two different sections of the trail, I interviewed 20 thru-hikers and engaged in informal conversations with many more. Participant observation while on the trail allowed me to observe how thru-hikers interact with each other and with non-thru-hiking individuals on and off the trail. Further, engaging in the same processes as the thru-hikers helped me understand the routines thru-hikers go through, as well as establish rapport with my informants. Following this fieldwork, I spent five weeks on campus transcribing interviews, reading about performance theory and the history of nature and wilderness ideologies in the United States, and discussing themes and patterns that arose in the data with my faculty advisors.

While thru-hikers tended to share the opinion that the less evidence of human impact there is, the more “wild” a space is (and, consequently, the more fulfilling an experience in that space is), the personal stories and opinions narrated in the interviews create a more complicated picture of why people thru-hike and what they believe they’re getting out of it than I initially imagined. As I continue to work with these data for my honors project, I hope to make sense of this diversity by organizing the characteristics and beliefs of thru-hikers into ideal types, analytical constructs that accentuate and organize characteristics into categories against which concrete cases can be compared to identify patterns of similarity and deviation. Despite the diversity of responses, many themes and patterns became apparent this summer. Most informants were ambivalent about whether they would be changed due to the trail. For many, neither communion with nature nor backpacking as a form of recreation centered as motivations for thru-hiking. Instead, the arduousness and separation from what thru-hikers call “the real world,” on a trail with a clearly defined beginning and end, draws people specifically to the Appalachian Trail, not just any outdoor excursion. My time spent on the trail led me to understand that thru-hiking is not clearly isolated from life off the trail but that liminality might be maintained by the structure of a thru-hike and the unique social role thru-hikers fill.

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¹ Bjørn Thomassen, "Liminality" in The Encyclopedia of Social Theory (London 2006) p. 322