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Digital and non-digital representations as actors in the enactment of selfhood and community on the Appalachian Trail

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ABSTRACT

Cultural geographers working with non-representational theories have recently returned to thinking about representations as actors in the relational processes of making spaces, selfhood and communities. A particular focus for studies of literary texts is examining how representation ‘takes place’, how texts are part of what happens in the world, and how we can better understand the force of representations-in-relation at work. In this paper I will address this question, by examining the role that representations play as actors in the production of community and selfhood among hikers on the Appalachian Trail. As hiker representations straddle digital and non-digital media in the twenty-first century, scholarly approaches continue to view them as little more than mediators, or ersatz forms of, in-person speech. Here, I take a non-representational approach to hiker writings to focus on the relationships that develop between AT hikers and the writings they encounter as a means of understanding how these representations-in-relation take place on the trail, and how they contribute to what happens – that is, to the production of community and subjectivity among Appalachian Trail hikers.

Les représentations numériques et non numériques: acteurs de la mise en œuvre du soi et de la communauté sur le Sentier des Appalaches

RÉSUMÉ

Les chercheurs en géographe culturelle qui travaillent avec les théories non représentationnelles ont récemment recommencé à envisager les représentations comme étant des acteurs dans les processus relationnels de fabrication des espaces, de la conscience de soi et des communautés. Pour la recherche de textes littéraires, un accent est mis en particulier sur l'étude des façons dont la représentation « prend place », dont les textes font partie intégrante de ce qui se passe dans le monde, et dont nous pouvons mieux appréhender la force des représentations-relativement en action. Dans cet article, je vais aborder ceci en examinant le rôle que les représentations jouent en tant qu'acteurs dans la production de

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la communauté et du soi parmi les randonneurs sur le Sentier des Appalaches. Tandis que les représentations des randonneurs chevauchent les médias numériques et non numériques dans le 21^e siècle, les approches de la recherche continuent de les considérer comme guère plus que des médiateurs du discours en-personne, ou des ersatz de ses formes. Ici, j'emprunte un angle non représentationnel par rapport aux écrits des randonneurs pour me concentrer sur les rapports qui se développent entre les randonneurs du Sentier et les écrits qu'ils rencontrent afin de comprendre comment ces représentations-relativement prennent place sur le sentier, et comment elles contribuent à ce qui se passe - c'est-à-dire, à la production de communauté et de subjectivité au sein des randonneurs du sentier des Appalaches.

Representaciones digitales y no digitales como actores en la actuación de la individualidad y la comunidad en el sendero de los Apalaches.

RESUMEN

Los geógrafos culturales que trabajan con teorías no representativas han vuelto recientemente a pensar en las representaciones como actores en los procesos relacionales de creación de espacios, individualidad y comunidades. Un enfoque particular para los estudios de textos literarios es examinar cómo la representación 'tiene lugar', cómo los textos son parte de lo que sucede en el mundo y cómo podemos comprender mejor cómo operan las representaciones-en-relación. En este artículo abordaré esta cuestión examinando el papel que desempeñan las representaciones como actores en la producción de comunidad y personalidad entre los excursionistas del sendero de los Apalaches. A medida que las representaciones de los excursionistas se sitúan entre los medios digitales y no digitales en el siglo XXI, los enfoques académicos continúan viéndolos como poco más que mediadores, o formas sustitutivas del habla en persona. Aquí, adopto un enfoque no representativo de los escritos de excursionistas para centrarme en las relaciones que se desarrollan entre los excursionistas AT y los escritos que encuentran como un medio de comprender cómo estas representaciones-en-relación tienen lugar en el camino y cómo contribuyen a qué sucede, es decir, a la producción de comunidad y subjetividad entre los excursionistas del sendero de los Apalaches.

Introduction

In *Walking on the Wild Side* (Fondren, 2016), Kristi Fondren's book-length study of social connections among hikers on America's Appalachian Trail (AT), she writes about a peculiar practice engaged in by the hikers who stop at Priest Shelter. Like many similar, three-sided wooden structures, erected for hikers to find overnight cover from wind, rain and bears, Priest Shelter is furnished with a 'register' in which hikers write or draw. In this register one can find 'confessions' written to 'the Priest' of the shelter:

Some confessions may be humorous, whereas others may be personal testimonies or discussions of “sins” recently committed by the writers and detailed in hopes of forgiveness by “The Priest”. (p. 87)

It is worth stating here that the Priest of Priest Shelter does not exist – so who are these hikers writing ‘to’? And what purpose does their writing serve? Fondren interprets these writings as an opportunity ‘to confide in others, which at times is easier to do with strangers’ (Fondren, 2016, p. 87), situating hikers’ writing in the Priest Shelter register in the same group as those who use trail registers as tools for communication. In this paper I take a different angle, to focus on the fact that there are two participants in this confessional act (three, if we give imaginative credence to the Priest as well): the hiker and the register in which the hiker is writing. This article puts front-and-centre these acts of relating to representations as key components in the co-production of hikers’ identities and community on the Appalachian Trail.

Putting representations and their relations with the hikers who read, write and carry them to the front of my account, I am following a theoretical path cleared by cultural geographers in recent years: an approach to understanding cultural practices which recognises that representations do things in the world, that they possess a force or ‘material-affective liveliness’ and can incite, move, anger, transform, delight, enchant or otherwise affect’ (B. Anderson, 2018, p. 1). In this paper I aim to further this theory of the force of representations, by paying attention to ‘how representation takes place and how texts are part of what happens’ and to the ‘mechanisms by which language [here in the form of representations] enacts a generative force, none of which reduces language to replication, referentiality or explanation’ (Daya, 2019, p. 365; see also Hones, 2011; Rossetto, 2015; Yap, 2011 in this journal). Representations made, shared and consumed by hikers on the Appalachian Trail offer a very useful means of exploring the affective liveliness of representations as actors in the co-production of the world. As I will demonstrate, there are many examples of hikers relating directly to writings or books and even of describing living people as avatar-like embodiments of their own writings.

My aim is also to bring attention to the innovative, yet quotidian, mix of digital and non-digital representations and practices in which Appalachian Trail hikers engage. Those who adopt digital devices or platforms to create and encounter representations, like the hikers I discuss here, do so in a way that is entirely bound up with the material elements of their environment. In this way I aim to contribute to furthering cultural geographers’ understandings of what Ash et al. term ‘geographies *produced by the digital*’ (Ash et al., 2018, p. 29) by emphasizing the reality that digital geographies are firmly embedded within/of material and non-digital worlds.

Attending to Appalachian Trail hiker representations, both the digital and the non-digital, will also allow me to begin placing these texts and images in current scholarly debates about how long-distance trail hikers forge identities and communities. Current research into these practices, led by scholars in leisure and tourism studies, asks questions such as ‘how does the long-distance hiking community sustain itself in the absence of continued face-to-face interactions?’ (Fondren, 2016, p. 13; also Lum et al., 2020, p. 165). In this paper I argue that paying attention through a non-representational lens to the oft-overlooked representations created and consumed by hikers (including material and

online journals, writings in shelter and other trail registers, books carried and shared, and photographs posted to social media sites such as Instagram) can help to answer this call.

Here, I explore the multifaceted relations between hikers and representations on the Appalachian Trail. Through reading accounts of hiking the Trail by two hikers – David Miller, a mid-30s man walking in 2003, and Rahawa Haile, a young Ethiopian-American woman walking in 2016 – I demonstrate the different ways in which their, and others', relations with these representations enact their identities as hikers and their belonging to the long-distance hiker community. Miller (hiking under the trail name AWOL) shows the affective power of representations-in-relation to create bonds of community and belonging. Haile (hiking resolutely as herself) demonstrates the ways in which performing belonging in place in relation to the 'black books' she carried can generate 'an incredible sense of self' (Haile, 2017a) – where this self is a black woman hiking through a territory defined by histories of minority oppression. My discussion of Haile's relations with representations seeks to engage with earlier work in this journal which discusses the importance of mobility, place and representations to the development of minority or racial selfhoods (see Crang & Zhang, 2012; Hickcox, 2018; Merriman et al., 2008; Robertson, 2017). Before I turn to these two hikers, I will set out the scholarly and intellectual basis for my argument.

Trail of texts

The Appalachian Trail was born from texts. Benton MacKaye, its founder, first proposed his 'project in regional planning' in an essay published in the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* in 1921 (Nelson, 2019). The entanglement between text and trail continues to this day. Much of its appeal as a leisure destination for Americans and hikers from around the world is due to the existence of hikers' memoirs, which have broadcast the existence of the Trail and its promises of physical, psychological, spiritual and even patriotic transformations to those outside any hiking subculture (see Aldridge & Aldridge, 2014; Hall, 2000; Luxenberg, 1994; Moor, 2016; Winters, 2001). Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail* (Bryson, 1998) is arguably the most popular text, and has been influential in drawing a new, international generation of hikers into America's Eastern woods (Fondren, 2016, p. 6). On the trail itself, writing in journals, in shelter registers – 'a notebook and pen usually found in a plastic bag' at each overnight rest stop (Fondren, 2016, p. 86) – or in online blogs and regular Instagram posts (see Stanley, 2019), as well as reading other hikers' writings, continues to be a core practice among hikers. Despite this abundance of hiker writings, the role that writing as practice and writings as representations play in the formation of hiker subjectivity and community remains understudied.

This is particularly noticeable given the recent academic interest in long-distance hiking on America's major trails, predominantly the Appalachian Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail. Despite more than a decade of research by geographers into walking, trails, and landscapes (see Anderson, 2004; Brace & Johns-Putra, 2010; Ingold, 2011; Laurier et al., 2016; Lorimer & Parr, 2014; Wylie, 2002, 2005), this renewed academic interest in hikers and hiking on long-distance trails has emerged not among geographers but from leisure and tourism studies (see Fondren, 2016; Fondren & Brinkman, 2019; Lum et al., 2020; Lee, 2020). Much of this work takes a sociological approach, focusing on 'social relationships

and social interactions' (Fondren, 2016, p. 7; also Kyle et al., 2003, 2004) among hikers and between hikers and non-hikers which underpin the formation of groupings, or subcultures. There is an assumption in much of this work that hikers practice an oral culture – and that interviews are the most appropriate means of investigating the formation of subjectivity and community among hikers *in situ*. The primacy of talking and walking as twin identifiers of 'hiker' sense of self – on an individual and social level – is encapsulated in Terry and Vartabedian (2013) statement that 'before hikers "talk themselves into being", they walk themselves into being first' (p. 347).

When hiker writings are discussed in existing research, they are either passed over quickly as of little importance, or presented as mediators of speech and communication, the texts themselves sublimated into the fleshly reality of speaker and listener. Two examples from Kristi Fondren's *Walking on the Wild Side* (Fondren, 2016), to date the only book-length scholarly treatment of Appalachian Hiker sociality and the processes by which hikers form their own senses of self, illuminate these impulses. First, introducing her research, Fondren notes the power of popular hiker memoirs, such as those by Bill Bryson (1998) and Cheryl Strayed (2012) as inspirations for others to hike their own hikes (pp. 6–7). However, she makes it clear that these texts are less important to understanding hikers' identities and communities than ethnographic, participant observation of hikers' social practices on-the-move. Secondly, Fondren introduces the idea of hikers' writings as a possible source of community, as 'a ritual of sorts, which reinforces hikers' new relationships and identities' (Fondren, 2016, p. 86) but passes over this idea in one line, preferring a sustained focus on face-to-face hiker interactions.

It is likely that hikers' writings have been overlooked in recent research due to their reputation as literature. Ian Marshall's *Story Line: Exploring the Literature of the Appalachian Trail* (Marshall, 1998), for example, situates hikers' published accounts of their walks in the woods alongside classic works of nature literature from Henry David Thoreau, William Bartram and Annie Dillard, firmly placing them in a new-found genre of literature relating to the experience of hiking the Trail. Similarly, David Emblidge's *The Appalachian Trail Reader* (Emblidge, 1996) weaves extracts from hiker's published journals together with literature from many of the same authors cited by Marshall. Both texts rely on hikers' published accounts, suggesting something of a necessary temporal, perhaps even material, gap between walking and writing that removes writing from the immediacy of being on the trail. Fondren, too, references some of these texts, writing that 'at least 35 hikers have published memoirs of their time on the trail' (Fondren, 2016, p. 7). Her categorisation of hiker's published accounts of memoirs evokes aspects of memory, reflection and textual order which suppose a distance from the lively, relational and bodily immediacy of social life on the AT.

Marshall and Emblidge relied for the most part on printed hiker accounts of their journeys. In the years since, many hikers have turned to digital platforms such as www.whiteblaze.net and www.trailjournals.com to write and post updates on their hikes in the form of digital journals, almost in real-time (see Miller, 2010). The past decade has also seen younger hikers enthusiastically embrace Instagram as a way of putting themselves and their hiking out into the world. While scholars have recognized the sea-change that these digital tools are bringing to the Trail experience (Cory, 2015; Stanley, 2019), scholars have mostly relied on these new sources as evidence to illustrate a point (Fondren & Brinkman, 2019; Marx, 2019; Svarstad, 2010). This arguably reflects a longer-standing

ethnographic approach, where academics themselves keep their own hiker journals as evidence of participant observations, quick surveys, and interviews on the Trail (Fondren, 2016; Fondren & Brinkman, 2019; Lum et al., 2020; Rush, 2002).

What else do these representations do? Discussing the recent turn in cultural geography towards the importance of stories and new uses for storytelling (Cameron, 2012; Geoghegan & Woodyer, 2014; Lorimer & Parr, 2014), Mitch Rose argues that often geographers use stories as evidence in the service of our investigative, empirical, argumentative ends. Geographers are used, he writes, to 'positioning these stories at the back end of our work, using it to justify the credibility of the thinking that occurs (and that we subsequently claim)' (Rose, 2016, p. 138). This practice obscures any real attention on 'the present [of the story and of our acts of thinking], and the issues, anxieties and problems the present consistently presents' (133). It would be more honest, to 'move [stories] to the front, tracing and illuminating the encounters, events, and happenstance that allowed a certain trajectory of thought to transpire' (138). Rose is calling on us as geographers, interested in how life unfolds in social, material and more-than-human forms, to recognise the power of stories not simply in 'affirming community values' (136) or evidencing our intellectual arguments, but as ongoing enactments of the multiplicities of life. Translated into my interest here in Appalachian hiker writings, this call asks us not just to accept these representations as evidence of hikers' thoughts, or communications, or sociality, but to ask: what do they do, in the context of hikers' senses of self and community formation? Of which 'encounters, events and happenstances' are they a necessary part? In this article I attend to hikers' writings themselves looking to better understand these processes and texts' roles in them. In the next section I discuss my use of non-representational approaches to representations as a means of better attending to hikers' writings themselves.

Representations-in-relation

This paper uses a non-representational approach to hikers' representations (including digital and material texts, and digital images such as those shared via Instagram) to understand how they are a part of what happens on the trail. Recently, cultural geographers are turning the lens of non-representational theories back onto representations themselves. This movement recognises that, although '[o]rdinarily representation is bound to a specific form of repetition: the repetition of the same' (Doel, 2010, p. 117), representations are not merely agents of mimesis, of repeating life as it is recorded within them. They are also 'part of what happens' (Daya, 2019, p. 365): that is to say, representations can be generative of life, of spaces, of what happens in the world. Anderson describes this new direction in cultural geography's non-representational approach to the world like this:

The sub-discipline is in the midst of a renewed attention to the work that representations do; to the material-affective liveliness of images, words, and art works as things in the world . . . representations do things – they are activities that enable, sustain, interrupt, consolidate or otherwise (re)make forms or ways of life. (B. Anderson, 2018, p. 1)

Representations are not simply mediators or expressive of meanings and values, not simply a glue to bind social actors together in spaces such as the Appalachian Trail. Rather, by exploring 'how a representation operates and make a difference as part of a relational configuration' (B. Anderson, 2018, p. 3), we can better understand representations as actants in themselves, participating in relations with people and other things, every bit as real, as affective and as social as hiker-to-hiker relations. As I shall demonstrate in relation to AT hikers' writings, readings and photographic representations, this approach to representations helps to fulfil Rose's call to 'move [stories] to the front, tracing and illuminating the encounters, events, and happenstance that allowed a certain trajectory of thought [and practice] to transpire' (Rose, 2016, p. 138).

Recent work in literary geographies, which focuses on the ways in which texts are themselves actors in the relational processes that make fiction, can help guide an approach which focuses on texts as actors in social processes. Starting with research by Sheila Hones (2008, 2011, 2014), literary geographers have spent the past decade characterising the encounters between readers and texts as spatial events, as *happenings* in the world (Alexander, 2015; Anderson, 2015; Bratt, 2016; Hones, 2014; McLaughlin, 2018, 2019; Saunders & Anderson, 2015). Central here is a recognition that reading is a performance, where stories are not contained within the pages of a text, as if suspended in time from an author's initial utterance, but rather each is enacted as 'a geographical event, a dynamic unfolding collaboration happening in time and space' (Hones, 2014, p. 32), emerging from the interaction between multiple actors – readers and texts, but also authors, other people, times and spaces. David Hare's explanation that, '[a] play is what happens in between the stage and the audience' (Richardson, 2015, p. 13), provides a useful illustration of this process.

A literary geographical approach to reading as a performance involving multiple actors in the co-production of stories and spaces does not deny the relevance of any one participant. Rather, this approach allows us to recognise that texts or other representations are not empty carrier of meanings, but are equal partners which 'make a difference in relational configurations' (B. Anderson, 2018, p. 1) which include both authors *and* readers. For my purposes here, literary geographers' focus on the multiplicities of the co-production of fiction, stories and meanings is worth pausing on. This line of thought emerges from Doreen Massey's argument that spaces are 'multiplicities of stories-so-far' (Massey, 2005, p. 11; also Hones, 2014, pp. 33–34) – which here means the actions of life, rather than fiction – and reflects the assertion of Walter Benjamin that we can sometimes fail to recognise that 'stories are forged from multiplicity . . . from the collective wisdom of social experience' (Rose, 2016, p. 135). We can see this idea at work in, for example, Saunders's conceptualisations of writers' rooms as highly relational and social spaces: 'the material places where pen is put to paper . . . exist in social worlds' (Saunders, 2015, p. 175), and in Bratt's reminder that 'literary works take on their own life and motion' once they leave an authors' grasp (Bratt, 2016, p. 193).

These related scholarly foci – on the affective force of representations-in-relation, underpinned by a non-representational approach to what representations do in the world; and on acts of reading and writing as spatial happenings in the world, where stories and meanings emerge from the encounters *between* readers, texts, authors and others actors – can help us to better follow Rose's call to 'move stories to the front' (Rose, 2016, p. 138) and therefore better understand their role as relational actors on the

Appalachian Trail. But what exactly is that role? What do these stories do? In this paper I argue that representations – writings and images, digital and material – created and consumed by hikers on-the-move play a central yet overlooked role in co-producing hikers' identities and communities. Questions about how hikers form their identities and communities are driving current research into Appalachian Trail hikers in leisure and tourism studies. Yet, much of this research focuses on 'face-to-face interaction' (Fondren, 2016, p. 16) and understands hikers' writings as ersatz forms of such interactions (Lum et al., 2020; Rush, 2002). Here, I argue that we can use a non-representational approach to understand hikers' texts as relational actors in the co-production of hikers' identities and communities. In doing this, I am not seeking to deny the importance of in-person interactions among hikers, nor of the realities that hikers 'talk themselves into being ... [and] walk themselves into being' (Terry & Vartabedian, 2013, p. 347). However, by focusing on hikers' texts as relational actions, we can illuminate their generative power and so enrich our understandings of how hikers enact sense of self and community while on-the-move.

Methodology

To illustrate the affective force that the representations created, consumed, carried and left behind play in the enactment of subjectivity and community on the trail, I focus here on accounts written by two hikers, David Miller and Rahawa Haile. Both accounts exemplify modern Appalachian Trail hikers' mixing of digital and non-digital representations in the woods and illustrate the multifaceted ways in which hikers produce, consume and relate to representations while on the Trail. Miller's account, originally written as emails sent out from trail towns and later published as an e-book through Amazon Encore (Miller, 2010), illustrates the intense relations between hikers and other hikers' non-digital writings which emerge in the woods. Rahawa Haile, walking thirteen years later, uses Instagram posts and articles published online (Haile, 2016, 2017a, Haile, 2017b) to discuss the affective intensities of the relations she maintained with a selection of non-digital books written by black authors. By producing accounts which use digital representations to focus on material and embodied relations, both Miller and Haile reflect the increasing popularity of using digital platforms to share hiking experiences (Marx, 2019, p. 106) and demonstrate the innovative ways in which these diverse media are increasingly reinforcing each other as tool for, and partners within, the enactment of selfhood and community among hikers.

Geographers working in the 'digital turn' remind us that, as much as technologies such as smartphones are becoming commonplace, 'the digital is reshaping the production and experience of space, place, nature, landscape, mobility, and environment' (Ash et al., 2018, p. 35) in many different ways. Following a recent taxonomy of emerging digital geographies research, Miller, Haile and other Appalachian Trail hikers' production of digital representations can be understood as a form of 'geographies *produced by the digital*' (Ash et al., 2018, p. 29, emphasis in original). To look at their digital representations from the trail is to think about 'how the digital is mediating and augmenting the production of space and transforming socio-spatial relations' (p. 30; see also David Cooper (2019) for a useful discussion of how this is affecting landscape writings). However, for my purposes here, recognising the potential changes that hikers' recent adoption of digital platforms

to share accounts of their experiences along the Trail (Marx, 2019, p. 106), serves equally to shine a light on what is *not* changing (or, perhaps, what facets of older practices remain): that is, the long-standing presence of non-digital representations as actors in the co-production of hikers' identities and communities. Just as geographers are now recognising the need to attend to the materiality of digital representations and the non-representational, embodied and affective engagements that they promote (Sumartojo & Graves, 2019, p. 3), so in this paper I maintain the necessity of attending to the materiality of non-digital representations within emerging digital accounts, and their relational role in the embodied, non-representational enactments of self and community, alongside new digital practices.

How, then, can we identify and understand these enactments? In his review of recent work in cultural geography which explores the implications of representations-in-relation to more-than-relational approaches to the world, Anderson argues that description provides a useful means of getting to grips with the work that representations do. He writes:

Much of the work concerned with the force of representations is animated by what is best characterized as a descriptive ethos and practice orientated to what something does in the midst of relations and other objects. Work on the force of representations therefore connects to a broader revalorization of description as mode of inquiry within cultural geography. (B. Anderson, 2018, p. 7)

This descriptive ethos suits my purposes of illuminating and beginning to understand the work of hikers' representations in co-producing selfhood and community, not least because it reflects well the descriptive methods practiced by existing scholarship about community on the Trail. Kristi Fondren's *Walking on the Wild Side* (Fondren, 2016), for instance, presents long passages from oral interviews with hikers and from Fondren's own hiking journal, rich with descriptions on social events, interactions and hikers' individual practices, as evidence with which to 'articulate their [hikers'] lived experiences' (p. 121; also Marx, 2019 who mobilizes descriptions as evidence). Such a descriptive approach, however relevant, does have some limitations. As Marc Brosseau has rightly noted, 'Most geographers' accounts consider poetic language and forms in strictly transitive terms that rest on an instrumental conception of literature whose relevance, therefore, is to be found outside itself' (Brosseau, 1994, p. 347). To avoid instrumentalising these hikers' representations, I have relied on a literary-analytical approach to better involve the creative, imaginative and yes, communicative, contents of the texts written and read by hikers on the Appalachian Trail in the work that these representations do.

My approach, therefore, involves two elements. First, to attend to the practices of reading and writing outside the intimacy of the writers' room, expanding our understanding of what Saunders calls 'the material places where pen is put to paper' (Saunders, 2015, p. 175) into the muddy, dirty, sometimes lonely but also highly communal spaces of the Trail, to start thinking about what representations do in these places. Secondly, to think about the generative and the reparative powers of hiker representations as they are encountered and related to on the trail.

‘I eagerly followed his journal’: enacting belonging

The first hiker I discuss here is David Miller, known to the AT community by his trail name, AWOL. During his 2003 hike he regularly updated family, friends and former colleagues of his progress via emails (which were also published in his local newspaper, *Florida Today*). Miller can be considered an ‘early adopter’ of the practice of writing and publishing regular online journals by hikers on America’s trails (Fondren & Brinkman, 2019; Lum et al., 2020). The many instances in which Miller mentions or discusses his and other hikers’ interactions with trail journals provides a good opportunity to better understand ‘how representation[s] operate and make a difference as part of a relational configuration’ (B. Anderson, 2018, p. 3).

AWOL on the Appalachian Trail is filled with rich descriptions of events in which hikers’ texts – whether they are journal or blog entries published online or material registers in shelters or at other important locations – play apparent roles in the co-production of the intangible elements of AT hiker community enactment. One passage which stands out among his many accounts of sleeping nights in Trail Shelters – lean-tos or other wooden structures built at irregular intervals along the trail to give hikers shelter overnight or, in some areas such as the Smoky Mountains National Park, protection from roaming bears (see Bryson, 1998) – involves an impromptu gathering of hikers taking turns to tell jokes to each other. At Rice Fields Shelter in Virginia, Miller tells us, the

shelter register has a theme: hikers are encouraged to submit jokes. Andy, Dude and Gray Matter take turns reading the jokes aloud until rain drives everyone to bed. Dude stays awake, sitting at the foot of the shelter reading the register jokes with his headlamp and alcohol, giggling into the night. (Miller, 2010, p. 77)

Miller’s telling of this event focuses not on the names or trail names of the hikers who left jokes in this particular shelter register but on the register itself as the source of their amusement. Rather than being only a conduit or mediator between hikers – where the register acts as a kind of pre-mobile phone communications device (Swift, 2015) – for Miller and his new-found community, the register presents itself as a collection of comedic stories bound together, with each new story affecting the ways in which readers relate to the ones before it, much like the eighteenth-century practice of binding multiple novels between the same cloth covers likely affected the ways in which readers encountered them (Brewer, 2005).

Miller’s account suggests that the Rice Fields Shelter register is an actor in the social and communal experience of the evening. Two different hikers are shown communing with this particular shelter register – Dude, as the quote above indicates, giggling away with the register into the small hours; and earlier that evening a hiker known as Hungry Hiker, relaxing by ‘creating an elaborate sketch in the register’ (Miller, 2010, p. 77). Despite existing scholarship emphasising the primarily communicative or mediative role played by hiker journals – that they allow for communication between fleshy, lively hikers (Fondren, 2016; Fondren & Brinkman, 2019; Rush, 2002) – there is some recognition among scholars that there may be more going on. Fondren, for example, recognises the ‘ritual of sorts, which reinforces hikers’ new relationships and identities’ whereby ‘hikers will locate the journal, sign in, and read other hikers’ entries’ (Fondren, 2016, p. 86), although she does not dwell on this activity. Miller’s account also emphasises the

importance of this ritual, describing the practice of rushing to read the register as a ‘hiker mannerism’, arguably one of the ways in which hikers “talk themselves into being” ... [and] walk themselves into being’ (Terry & Vartabedian, 2013, p. 347). Yet, by providing descriptions of hikers such as Dude and Hungry Hiker encountering trail registers and not commenting on their purpose or motive, Miller leaves a door open to an interpretation that these hikers (and potentially many others like them) are encountering and relating to the registers themselves, as affective, lively material things. Arguably, Hungry Hiker’s drawing is not intended *for* anyone but himself, a practice encouraged by his encounter with the journal itself, its empty pages an incitement to create.

Reflecting on his preparations for hiking the Appalachian Trail, Miller suggests that it was his encounters with hikers’ online journals, and their affective force, which helped him to develop a sense of belonging to the AT hiker community. This is a facet of hiker community formation that is overlooked in existing scholarly literature. In *On Trails* (2016), Robert Moor mentions reading other hikers’ online writings as a means to gain further knowledge of the Trail, but says little more about them (p. 8). Similarly, Fondren’s book discusses the various texts that exist to help hikers plan their hikes, minimises the utility of hikers’ online blogs, and goes as far as to state that: ‘there really is no way to prepare for all that this quest or spiritual journey on the Appalachian Trail entails’ (Fondren, 2016, p. 73). In contrast, Miller emphasises the role that reading other hikers’ online journal entries had on him, emotionally and psychologically, in preparing him to be a member of this mobile community. He writes that:

Bono was one of the first hikers (if not the first) to start the trail this season, with a chilly January 1 start date. I eagerly followed his journal for nearly four months before leaving home, looking for the most current insight into what lies ahead. Each new entry of Bono’s journal exposed me to new sections of the trail, new places I longed to see for myself. (Miller, 2010, p. 142)

The affective power of Miller’s relationship with these journal entries remains with him throughout his time on the trail. ‘Each encounter [on the trail]’, he writes, ‘is a happy reminder that I am on a grand adventure, which evokes memories of reading the online journal entries of hikers who started before me’ (Miller, 2010, p. 142). Miller here suggests that the emotional bond (of excitement, perhaps of wistfulness) he created with the texts he read at home, before setting out, have created a distinction between texts and hikers – he relates to both texts and hikers in different, but equally social and emotional, ways.¹ There are further instances throughout Miller’s account which reinforce this focus on hikers’ writings as lively materials which play a role in the co-production of a hiking community. At Pine Grove Furnace State Park in Pennsylvania, for example, Miller encounters a trail register set up there next to an ice cream vendor which stands on the agreed halfway point of the Trail. The register is part of a hiker ritual or mannerism, whereby each hiker consumes a half a gallon (2.2 litres) of ice cream – and writes about their experience in the register. Miller recounts how he orders cookie dough flavour ice cream ‘at 2,880 calories per box’ and spends ‘fifty-two minutes eating’ it (Miller, 2010, p. 115). While eating, he reads through the register, copying the entries straight into his account:

“That was the most disgusting thing I’ve done, except for the pancake challenge.” —Gazelle

...

"1/2 gallon peanut butter ice cream: 48 minutes. Chicken nuggets & fries: 24 minutes. Biggest bellyache of my life: priceless. Some things money can't buy." —Mothman . . .

"I don't know why I did it but I did. Heed the warning; don't go for peanut butter twist." —Brew. (Miller, 2010, p. 115)

By copying these entries into his journal and presenting them as he encountered them, Miller emphasizes that this experience is not defined by his virtual encounters with other hikers. He does *not* write, for instance, 'my friend Hungry Hiker said . . .'. Rather, the image which emerges is of Miller encountering and relating, with a dry wit, to the register itself and the stories it presents. A similar account of participating in the half gallon ice cream challenge emphasises the ways in which hikers can relate to the 'material-affective liveliness' (B. Anderson, 2018, p. 1) of other hikers' texts as things-in-themselves, as partners in the enactment of social belonging. Speaking of her joy at encountering other hikers in a spontaneous gathering at Pine Grove Furnace State Park, Sunshine describes it as: 'Just everyone that we've been reading, [Kristi Fondren's] entries and Gus's entries and HeartFire's entries and T-Mac and Turbo, we all just came together in this one place and had an awesome afternoon with ice cream' (Fondren, 2016, p. 86). Notably, despite Fondren's characterisation of this meeting as a social gathering of people, Sunshine's words speak more of a gathering of the embodiment of the representations with which she has been relating on the Trail. It is not (or, not only) people, in Sunshine's words, who came together in this ritual of social bonding and community enactment, but rather 'entries' (that is, register writings).

'Where can I ship the contents of my blackness?': enacting a powerful sense of self

The second account I discuss here illustrates the reparative power of representations on the Appalachian Trail, their 'power to disclose other ways of living or other forms of social-spatial organisation' (B. Anderson, 2018, p. 6). I focus on Rahawa Haile's account of hiking the AT in 2016 and her relations with what she calls her 'black books' (Haile, 2017a). Rahawa Haile introduced this term in an essay for the website *Buzzfeed*, in which she wrote about her journey along the Appalachian Trail. Like Miller's account, representations both read and created play a central role in their own right in shaping Haile's experience of the trail: after all, her article is called 'How black books lit my way along the Appalachian Trail'. Haile argues that she carried these books and made new representations of her life with them, because they formed a part of her self in the wilderness. As she writes 'I can confirm that one does not hike 2,000 miles across the face of this country as a black woman without developing an incredible sense of self' (Haile, 2017a). This sense of self, of what it means to be a black woman hiking in spaces culturally understood as 'white' and 'male' (Graham, 2018; Haile, 2017a, Haile, 2017b; Weatherby & Vidon, 2018), came for Haile not only as an act of a resistance to the Trail's prevailing whiteness and maleness. It also emerged from her relations with representations. Here, rather than reading the books by black authors that Haile carried with her along the Trail as simply representing possible alternate ways for modern-day America to be (although

they do suggest that), it is Haile's encounters and relations with these books that is the crucible of the transformative, reparative power they bring to the Trail. Haile's black books are not carriers of meaning or value but partners in their enactment.

Reading is a common activity on the trail – hikers read trail registers and guidebooks, but they also regularly read fiction books. In *A Walk in the Woods*, for example, Bill Bryson mentions the thrill he felt when, having come to the end of the one fiction book he brought in his pack, he discovered that another hiker (or possibly a 'trail angel', a friend of the trail who does good deeds to make hikers' lives more bearable) had left a Graham Greene paperback in one of the shelters, which he took with him (Bryson, 1998). Like Bryson, Haile carried books with her, yet the ways in which she writes about them speak of a very different relationship to these texts – not one of entertainment, but of selfhood and belonging. She frames her books not as things, but as love:

Few nonessentials are carried on this trail, and when they are — an enormous childhood teddy bear, a father's bulky camera — it means one thing: The weight of this item is worth considerably more than the weight of its absence. Everyone had something out here. The love I carried was books. Exceptional books. Books by black authors, their photos often the only black faces I would talk to for weeks (Haile, 2017a).

Photographs posted to Instagram (see Haile, 2016) provide a glimpse of the love that Haile carried: *I love myself when I am laughing . . . and then again when I am looking mean and impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston reader; Kindred by Octavia Butler; and Aracelis Girmay's The Black Maria*. For Haile, these books, among many others, formed a part of her selfhood as a black woman hiking through a region defined, like so many in America, by histories of racial strife and the dispossession of black people, their lives and their voices. She makes it clear that these books do more than reflect, express or represent her selfhood: they are a part of her. In one memorable passage she recounts how the weight of these books prevents her from carrying more than one at a time. Because of this, Haile experiences the act of posting her black books northward, to post offices further down the trail, as an act of separating herself from parts of her own blackness. She writes: 'The pursuit of traveling with at least one book a week rapidly devolved into a game of "Where can I ship the contents of my blackness? How much of it can I permit myself to carry at a time?"' (Haile, 2017a).

For Haile, her sense of self as a black woman in Appalachia emerges through her relations with the black books she carries and the representations of these books she creates via Instagram. Haile communes with her books. From these relationships she builds her subjectivity as a black hiker. Haile's practice is reminiscent of Paul Simpson's argument, grappling with the impacts of non-representational theories on notions of subjecthood or subjectivity, that 'the subject is in some way emergent from encounters with various more-than human others/alterity' (Simpson, 2017, p. 2). In this instance, Haile's subjectivity as a black woman hiker on the Appalachian Trail (as opposed to another trail or path) emerges from her deliberate encounters with her black books.

Haile emphasises her books' active relationships with her by the ways in which she writes about them. For instance, she's not content to leave these books lodged in her pack, she brings them out to see the Trail for themselves. Haile writes: 'I wanted to show them beauty from heights that a history of terror had made clear were never intended to

be theirs ... I got to a view. I held them to the light. I told them, firmly, "This is yours" (Haile, 2017a). This performance of relations between hiker and book is an active attempt to enact a sense of self and belonging. It recognises the power of representations (both Haile's black books and her photographs shared via Instagram) to not simply record that an event has happened, but to take an active part in those happenings. This recognition is the source of my reading of the practice of hikers writing 'confessions' to The Priest of Priest Shelter, with which I opened this paper. Through her performances, Haile reinforces the reality that representations do not only show the way forward to new possible futures, they take part in their enactment. As she defines it: 'Active literary citizenship can take many forms ... there's more to writers than writing, and more to readers than reading' (Haile, 2017a). Her performances suggest that there is more to books than being written or read, too.

Notably, Haile's Instagram photographs indicate that it is the relationships she develops with the black books she carries, rather than the specific books themselves, which are the source of her 'incredible sense of self' (Haile, 2017a) on the Trail. By standing on mountaintops, looking out over a land scarred by histories of racial oppression, and telling her black books and their authors that the land belongs to them, Haile is also enacting this sense of belonging for herself. In a very real sense, Haile's actions can be understood as a reversal of scholarly approaches which look to critically engage with representations to understand how they contribute to the continuation of 'unequal classed, gendered, and racialized power relations' (B. Anderson, 2018, p. 1); in contrast, Haile does not find new ways of being in this still racially unequal world from inside her books, rather she and her books confront together the challenge of enacting new ways of being in the world. A telling example which demonstrates the extent to which Haile's 'incredible sense of self' is rooted in her performative relations with her black books, rather than in the books themselves, can be found in her practice of leaving many of these books behind in trail shelters and on mountaintop lookouts:

I created a library of black excellence along the Appalachian Trail. It cost approximately \$250 to build. It symbolized a great deal more. I hold no expectations of it lasting. Erosion is part of the point. Pages will be ripped out for fires. Rain and moisture will destroy the rest. For all I know, a trail maintainer has already stuffed a book or two of mine among her gear and grumbled about having to pack out the trash hikers leave behind. What matters is that I tried, and that it kept me whole, and that was good enough (Haile, 2017a).²

With Haile's 'library of black excellence' in mind, we get a sense that the pain of parting from her black books, during the necessity of shipping parts of 'the content of [her] blackness' (Haile, 2017a) across state lines is a pain born from the bonds of relation stretched tight over time and space. Yet, these bonds do not snap or fray when Haile chooses to leave behind many black books along the Trail. Instead, this act of leaving fellow actants in the construction of her sense of self behind for others to find and hopefully read, is itself another performance of belonging and self in the wilderness – one which, she no doubt hopes, brings more to the eventual finder than simply diversion or entertainment.

Conclusion

Writing about the ‘promise of non-representational theories’, Anderson and Harrison emphasise the role that work in this mould has ‘multiplied “signs of existence”, helping to introduce all kinds of new actors, forces and entities into geographic accounts’ (B. Anderson & Harrison, 2010, p. 2). My aim in this article has been to harness this facet of non-representational approaches and so to further the ways in which we, as geographers, understand the workings of representations as things in the world with their own ‘material-affective liveliness’ (B. Anderson, 2018, p. 1). In doing so I have also sought to contribute to ‘multiplying . . . signs of existence’ (B. Anderson & Harrison, 2010, p. 1) that can be found along the Appalachian Trail – to argue that hikers, ‘ridge runners’, trail angels and other fleshy, embodied people are not the only lively actors in these northern woods; among them move and act representations, both digital and material, which contribute to the co-production of its social life.

Thinking about hikers’ relations to representations, with a focus on hikers, representations and the relations in between, can help us to continue to rethink the correspondence between experience to writing – Miller and Haile’s accounts, and the actions of other hikers which they relate, speak to the messy, lively, entangled and of-the-moment facets of writing that deserve our continued attention as cultural geographers.

The hikers’ accounts that I have presented here both exemplify the ways in which hikers’ relations with a multitude of different representations contribute to the enactment of subjectivity and belonging on the Trail. Miller’s account describes many instances in which the relations he forged with different hikers’ writings – online, at home, and materially on the AT itself, helped him to realise a process of becoming a member of a wider community of hikers. By attending to his descriptions of relating to hikers’ *writings* and by taking these seriously – and not approaching them as, perhaps, metaphors for his spatially or temporally distanced relations with other hikers – I have attempted to show how hikers bond with representations as readily as they do with living, breathing people and that these bonds or relations are an important part of the co-production of community and belongingness. Haile’s account tells a different, though kindred story, of enacting and reiterating her selfhood as a black woman through bonds forged with her ‘black books’, in an environment and experience that is not traditionally welcoming to people like her. Haile’s deliberate practices of proclaiming belonging for herself and the books she carried shines a particularly bright light on the centrality of representations in the social, place-situated practices of AT hiking. By leaving copies of her ‘black books’ along the trail, she is leaving actors in the enactment of herself behind to help others ‘light fires, watch the grass grow [and] listen to the wind’.

Notes

1. Miller has recently switched roles in this relationship, becoming the author of a guidebook to the Trail, *The A.T. Guide: A Handbook to Hiking the Appalachian Trail*. Popularly known as The AWOL Guide, it recognises the role that representations play in forming community, billing itself as ‘made by hikers, for hikers’ (see theatguide.com).
2. The most complete accounting of Haile’s ‘library of black excellence’ is available via her Instagram profile: <https://www.instagram.com/rahawahaile/>.

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