Appalachian hikers' digital journals: collective writing for an unruly landscape

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Abstract

The Appalachian Trail – a hiking trail in the eastern United States – is for many an icon of the American wilderness experience. It is an unruly landscape, one which is yearly being re-made, re-marked and 'reclaimed' to wilderness. Within its corridor of trees, the Appalachian Trail hides decaying farms bought by forced purchase, ghosts of old cemeteries, and many different paths through the trees. There is a palpable sense of possibility, of constant change and of what could have been. In this article, drawing on recent research in cultural geography which emphasises the unsettled and unsettling nature of landscape, I will introduce the potential for new, digital literary-spatial forms made on the Appalachian Trail to write and to enact this unruly landscape.

Keywords

Appalachian Trail, hiking, landscape, landscape writing, mobility and travel writing, online media.

Introduction

These early years of the twenty-first century have witnessed a change on the Appalachian Trail (also known to its community as "the AT"), America's oldest planned hiking trail: the rise of digital writings and images, hosted online, created by hikers themselves. Hosted first on specialist websites such as whiteblaze.net and trailjournals.com, later via general-purpose social media platforms such as Instagram, these digital representations created (and often uploaded) by hikers whilst standing on or near the trail itself, represent a clear departure from the pre-digital era tradition of hikers writing their memoirs of the trail after completing it, after returning home. To date there has been little scholarship that focuses explicitly on hikers' digital journals. Where scholars have discussed this rising practice, they have sought to interpret it through existing lenses: either as a development of the pre-digital (but still extant) hiker practice of communicating to each other through paper-and-ink trail journals; or in terms of the general and growing popularity of self-presentation through blogs and social media. As such, scholars have focused on certain aspects of hikers' digital representations – their utilitarian, communicative function; their focus on (re)presentations of the self – leaving others untouched.

In this short article, following the productive conversations at the 2020 Unruly Landscapes colloquium, I will lay the foundations for bringing a new interpretative frame to bear on Appalachian Trail hikers' digital representations, looking first at example digital blog posts from trailjournals.com. I will read them not only as tools for social bonding or personal reinvention, but also as novel, even unruly forms of landscape writing. In doing so, I will place emphasis here on the characteristics of hikers' digital representations - including their attention to the embodied realities of being in place and on-the-move, their focus on more-than-human relations, and their origins from within the landscape of the trail itself - which

both reflect the workings of "traditional" landscape writings, while also challenging these writings' emphasis on a distance between words and the world.

Appalachian writing moves online

In the introduction to her recent and excellent collection of Appalachian nature and landscape writings, Jessica Cory says: "Let's be clear: Appalachian nature writing is nothing new".[1] The very same statement could be made about Appalachian Trail hikers' writings. Since Earl Shaffer, the very first to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail (hiking the entire length of the trail, in either direction, in one go), published his account of that hike, called *Walking with Spring*, in 1948, hiking the Appalachian Trail and writing the Appalachian Trail have gone almost hand-in-hand. Hikers regularly write in register or journals: notebooks and pens left at convenient locations along the trail by those who maintain it;[2] so regularly, in fact, that a hiker called David Miller has referred to reading and writing in these journals as "yet another thru-hiker mannerism".[3]

It is through this framework of hiking and writing, primarily as a tool for communication or the sharing of personal experience, that some scholars have interpreted hikers' digital representations. Kristi Fondren, whose *Walking on the wild side: Long distance hiking on the Appalachian Trail* remains the standard work on AT hikers' community development, takes such a position. Her account emphasises life on the trail itself, where paper-and-ink journals, whether communal or personal, still play a major role in recording and communicating hikers' experiences.[4] Hikers' digital representations are relegated to a subsidiary position, supporting this utilitarian communication of experience. Writing, for example, about the "numerous hiker webpages, trail journals, or other sites", she notes these are used for "shar[ing] stories about their experiences and offer[ing] advice on hiking the trail".[5]

Other scholars understand hikers' digital representations, or the technology they use to produce them, as marking a distinct break from earlier, pre-digital practices. While the proliferation of online blogs and Instagram accounts belonging to hikers suggests that smartphones and other digital devices are becoming a fixture on the Appalachian Trail,[6] Stelter and McCrickard characterise their small experiment conducted in 2017 as a first attempt to bring digital technologies to the trail in a controlled manner.[7] Their reflections illustrate the "many design potentials for future technologies with a focus on the trail" but make no mention of the popular use of digital technologies such as smartphones among hikers already, nor the rise in digital journals.[8] A similar study into the effect of smartphones on place attachment on the Pacific Crest Trail (the Appalachian Trail's western cousin) limit their conceptualisation of smartphones as devices for calling and texting and do not investigate their role in the creation of digital representations such as online journals or Instagram posts.[9]

Building on the novelty of digital technologies on the Appalachian Trail, and linked to earlier efforts to re-frame the history of walking and wilderness areas as not an exclusively male pastime in exclusively male spaces,[10] feminist scholars and geographers are emphasising the role that digital representations hosted online can play in unsettling traditional narratives and creating new ones.[11] Phiona Stanley's research, for example, illustrates the empowering effects of digital community, expressed through digital representations such as Instagram posts, on encouraging so-called "unlikely hikers". This label (or badge of honour) is defined by the community Stanley investigates as "anyone who doesn't fit that image [cisgendered, white, thin, rich]. Bigger body types, people of color, queer, trans, gender nonconforming folks, differently-abled people and so on".[12] For Stanley, as for her participant, representation in online and publicly accessible spaces is a form of activism, expressly aimed at unsettling long-held notions of the relations between (some) people and (certain) places. As I shall

demonstrate, this understanding of digital representations' power to unsettle notions of who 'belongs' where gestures to their engagement with a central aspect of scholarly understandings of landscapes and landscape writing.

Kate Marx's anthrozoological studies of hikers' online writings about their encounters with 'autonomous animals – wildlife – [which] dwell on and around the trail' further suggests a connection between Appalachian Trail hikers' online journals and landscape writing.[13] Despite its anthrozoological focus, being specifically concerned with encounters between human and non-human animals as events in themselves, Marx's work is relevant to my investigation due to the way in which she thinks about hikers' digital writings. Like Stanley and Weatherby and Vidon she interprets these digital journals within the broader digital ecosystems, referring to them as 'blogs' and rooting her interpretative methodologies in internet-based research traditions.[14] Yet, reflecting the work of Fondren, Author and others who emphasise the continuity of hikers' writings between digital and paper-and-ink media, Marx also repeatedly emphasises that these representations are part of "the stories that people tell about their lives lived on-the-move and in place": in this case, stories about encounters between humans and non-human animals, between people and "wilderness".[15]

Taken together, the work of Stanley, Weatherby and Vidon and Author on hikers' digital representations' power to unsettle received notions of some people's "rightful" connections to the Appalachian Trail and outdoor hiking spaces in general, and Marx's insightful discussion of these representations as narrating personal encounters with wildlife and wilderness, suggest that Appalachian Trail hikers' digital representations may help to productively expand scholarly understandings of landscape writing and to help us rethink the relationship between writing and the representation and enactment of unruliness and unsettledness that they involve. Rather than only think of hikers' digital representations as another use of blogging or of social media, I argue here that we should think of them as new

forms of landscape writing. Their communal appearance (often emerging from collectively-produced websites such as trailjournals.com or social media platforms such as Instagram, or inspired by activist collectives such as Unlikely Hikers), and their breathless immediacy, often written (or snapped and posted) in the moment, on-the-move, may distance them from more literary writing about human and more-than-human landscape encounters. Yet in this distance lies their representational, interpretative and practical power. To begin to pursue this further, in the next section I turn to recent discussions over what landscapes are, and some issues apparent in existing literary landscape writing to address their unsettled, unruly nature.

Unruly landscapes, unsettled representations

Landscape, as a scholarly concept and as a lived experience has benefited from renewed attention by cultural geographers in recent years. Whereas scholars working in the New Cultural Geography of the late-twentieth century saw landscapes in primarily visual terms, as objects for distant interpretation, more recently geographers have sought to bring an awareness of humans' (and non-human animals') embodied encounters into play in their understandings of these nebulous, un-pin-down-able entities. The range of emerging research on landscapes is as broad as the range of landscapes encountered and enacted in the world: the range and focus of the articles in this special issue bears witness to this. For my purposes, however, it is enough to attend to those landscapes which, while not "wild", are characterised by human encounters with wildlife in its many forms: this certainly describes the experience of hikers on the Appalachian Trail, as Kate Marx and others attest.[16]

In thinking about landscapes that are not urban or rural, but not entirely wild or divorced from human activity, I am indebted to the work of John Wylie, who has spent much of the past decade attempting to define these landscapes: more-than-human environments such as trails, moors, and plains, wherein encounters with trees, earth and animals play an outsized

role in people's embodied experiences. Rather than see the un-pin-down-able nature of landscape as a problem, Wylie has embraced it, using it to define landscapes in stark yet productive terms. "Landscape is tension", he writes. "The concept is productive and precise for this reason and no other".[17] Elsewhere, he writes powerfully that:

> The salience of landscape as a critical term, I have come to believe, involves modes of thinking and feeling that chafe against invocations of homeland as a site of existential inhabitation, as a locus of sentiment and attachment, as a wellspring of identity. A landscape cannot be a homeland.[18]

Wylie's conception of landscape as by definition a place of unsettlement, unruliness and tension frames it as a critical term and an experience which reveals the complexity of the interstices between "homeland", where humans belong and dwell, and "nature" or "the wild" (as problematic as these terms are in themselves) defined as spaces where humans do not belong. With his focus on unsettling and tension, Wylie's "landscape" further emphasises the fact that these places are not always-already existing, but rather continually made and remade through "ongoing craft and creation".[19]

The Appalachian Trail provides a good illustration of the unsettled, unruly nature of landscape as a place of tension and in-betweenness. The Appalachian Trail was a communal endeavour from its earliest days: shaped by competing interests over its form and route and brought into reality by the combined efforts of private hiking clubs and government intervention.[20] This patchwork history of construction and maintenance has resulted in a trail that was, and is, always changing. The trail's route changes year-by-year, as old ways erode, and new paths are cut. In many places hikers can encounter the ghostly ruins of old farms and houses, slowly being claimed by wildlife. The trail's temporary inhabitants – hikers and backpackers, local volunteer work crews who maintain the trail, trail angels (locals who provide food and treats for hikers), and day-trippers – are themselves on-the-move or

engaged in making mobility possible for others. Finally, for a path celebrated as a wilderness experience, the Appalachian Trail passes through or near to many "trail towns", which have become as much a part of hikers' experiences as the woods themselves. As such, the Appalachian Trail is a particularly unruly, unsettled landscape.

Scholars and hikers often define their experiences on the Appalachian Trail - or in the woods that surround it - in terms of unruliness. Writing about her experience of hiking the Trail for her doctoral studies, for example, Leslie Rush notes that her account,

> involves times, places, seasons and people that were constantly changing as I hiked north through the six months of my data collection period. It is difficult to imagine a single context period that could include spring, summer, and fall; the myriad of people I met at different places on the trail; the widely varying terrain through which the trail passes; and the multitude of shelters, campsites, huts, hostels, trail towns, and roads I encountered.[21]

This unruliness, of the landscape and the people who make it through their wayfaring, appears even in imaginative accounts of Appalachia. Taylor Brown, in a short story about his youthful experiences playing around a landmark called Harper Falls, writes of his father's advice to him to "Be careful. The landscape is constantly changing and adapting like the people that hike up there".[22]

As the quotation from Brown demonstrates, much of what we might think of as landscape writing, particularly landscape writing about so-called wild places, including the genre of "New Nature Writing" which has emerged in Britain over the last generation, is characterised by a common use of "literary evocations of nature… tropes of the enchanted and eerie" and, above all, their promise to "offer readers access to epiphanic and revelatory writerly episodes".[23] As important as these literary styles are for evoking more-than-human landscapes and the authors' encounters, they are not the only way for landscape writing to

present its subject. As Tim Cresswell argues, a focus on the aesthetics of landscape writing should lead us to think about what practices or understandings can be excluded in these processes. In particular, how the landscape writings emerging in the early twenty-first century, by geographers and others, that paid attention to the practical enactments of landscape, have been defined by a "wonderful, expressive prose",[24] that is arguably exclusionary to other, less wonderful or expressive forms of writing about landscape. Highly literary forms of landscape writing, for example, appear as a "theology of the wild",[25] their pages elegiac for a sense of wildness and nature that modern society has lost. As such, landscape writings of this kind place the author and reader at a distance from the landscapes which their writing practices help to create. We can see this distance at work in Brown's *Harper*, a story of boyhood and memory told from a later time. It is particularly apparent in the work of New Nature Writers such as Robert Macfarlane, who draw distinct lines between, for example, a study as a place of writing and contemplation and a trail or path as a place of embodied encounter.[26] It is also apparent in many writings about the Appalachian Trail, which emphasise that walking and writing the trail are two experiences, distinct in time and space: first the trail is walked, then the experience is later recounted, once the hiker/author has re-joined the world beyond the woods, or returned home.[27]

If, as Wylie argues and as the Appalachian Trail demonstrates, landscapes are more unsettled and unruly than this distance between the world and the word would imply, we should look for forms of landscape writing that can bridge this divide and can both represent and enact the unsettled, unruly nature of landscape - both in place and on the page. In the next section I shall argue that AT hikers' digital journals offer just such a new, unsettling and unruly form of landscape writing.

Writing unruliness through collectivity

There are many ways in which Appalachian hikers' digital representations work to unsettle our notions of landscape writing: from the mixing of spaces of home and away; to their visceral affectivity borne of their being written in the landscape; to their deliberate use of non-literary language and emojis – too many to include in this short, foundational piece. In what remains of this article I will present one of these attributes of AT hikers' digital writings – their collective presentation online at sites such as trailjournals.com.

Unlike published examples of landscape writing about the Appalachian Trail, from Earl Shaffer's *Walking with Spring* to Mark Allen's *Average People, Extraordinary Trail*,[28] hikers' digital representations hosted online are not presented primarily as the collected thoughts of one, lone hiker. Instead, any visitor to a site such as trailjournals.com finds journal entries from multiple different hikers, sorted by date of publication. This arrangement is deliberate – the website's algorithm collates and presents the journals in this way (Fig. 1) (Website users can resort the page to view all entries by one hiker, for example, or can navigate to a different window and click through one hikers' journal entries one after the other, but neither of these options is the default and each much be actively chosen by the viewer.)

Figure 1 here.

Screenshot of the Appalachian Trail page of trailjournals.com. Hikers' digital journals are presented in date order with posts by different hikers jumbled together.

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When thinking about hikers' digital representations as forms of landscape writing, this algorithmic arrangement is striking for two reasons. First, the collective presentation of hikers' online journal entries in this manner effectively, if unintentionally, represents the unruly nature of the Appalachian Trail landscape which other writers have sought to impress

on their readers. This presentation of hikers' writings as a collection of different people, different times, and different places brings vividly to life Leslie Rush's comment, quoted earlier, that the trail is made of a "myriad of people… widely varying terrain… and [a] multitude of shelters, campsites, huts, hostels, trail towns, and roads".[29] At the same time, this collective presentation works to subtly but importantly unsettle any attempt by the hikers posting online to create a continuous and stable sense of identity that is grounded in place – or what Wylie would refer to as 'homeland' thinking. Any attempt to layer journal entries upon entries to build up a coherent narrative (what Tim Ingold referred to in the Unruly Landscapes Colloquium as 'stratigraphic' writing) is disrupted by the presence of other hikers' writings, stories and journeys with which any one hiker's writings are digitally gathered.

Secondly, the algorithmic arrangement together of hikers' representations in this way, as parts of a collective and ever-growing whole, emphasises the repetitive nature of each hiker's journal, to which they return time and again over the course of weeks or months. Seeing this repetition *en masse* provides a new avenue for thinking about the work of writing in the more-than-representational enactment of landscapes. Drawing on David Crouch's idea that "the repetitive doing of things is affirmative of, and can impel, a powerful sense of being",[30] Tim Cresswell argues that the enactment of a landscape, such as the Appalachian Trail, is an ongoing, creative process which rests on the repetitive doing of things - such as the repetitive creating and posting online of digital representations by many different hikers. In this way, we can see that hikers' collective, repetitive writing or posting of digital representations is itself affirmative of, and works to enact, the unruliness of the Appalachian Trail landscape and of hikers as becoming within and of that landscape.

Conclusion

In this article, I have set out to introduce the case that Appalachian Trail hikers' digital representations be taken seriously as landscape writings, with their own power to represent and to enact this unruly landscape. By collectively presenting their journal entries in real-time on websites such as trailjournals.com, Appalachian hikers' digital representations subvert our expectations of how landscape writing should be formed: their short, breathless, highly affective lines speak of the immediacy of this form and its power to bring to life the embodied experiences of the trail. Further, as I have demonstrated here, the medium in which they are presented – as mini-blogs, presented alongside older writings by many different hikers, serves to illustrate John Wylie's assertion of the unsettled, unruly nature of landscape, by bringing vividly to life the collective, mobile and anti-stratigraphic character of life within this Appalachian landscape of mobility and change.

Taken individually, Appalachian Trail hikers' writings do many things: they form short-term connections between hikers; they help individuals to reflect on the landscape; they provide an outlet for the small agonies of hiking. Yet, taken together, these writings form a complex, shifting and communally produced form of writing, suited to an ever-changing, unruly landscape.

Author biography

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