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Moral Modes of Attention:
Transformation of the Self, From Addict to Ultramarathon Runner

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of Master of the Arts
in Anthropology

by
Courtney Evelyn Cecale

2015

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Moral Modes of Attention:
Transformation of the Self, From Addict to Ultramarathon Runner

by
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Master of the Arts in Anthropology
University of California, Los Angeles 2015
Professor Christopher J. Throop, Chair

For individuals whose conditions of daily life are undesirable, even painful, turning attention away from these experiences can serve as a form of relief, and ultimately a method for more long-term coping with their lifeworlds. Building on Thomas Csordas's somatic modes of attention, this paper looks at the way different modes of attention are actively sought with and through the body for a particular group former heroin addicts turned ultra marathon runners. The individuals introduced, instead of undergoing attentional relief through the reception of narcotics, alternatively found they could achieve a reportedly comparable form of relief with an active body's movements through a psychologically gripping and meaningful landscape. Explicitly comparing running ultramarathons to the feeling of being high, these runners find temporary relief through the ephemeral suspension of the demands of both life and the embodied expectations of sober moral transformation. Ultimately, this presentation interrogates what it means to be high, and demonstrates the needed consideration of landscape and space in therapeutic modes of attention.

This dissertation of Courtney Evelyn Cecale is approved.

Suzanne E Slyomovics
Douglas W Hollan
Christopher J. Throop, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2015

This paper is lovingly dedicated to the memory of Micael Merrifield.

Sláinte, old friend.

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INTRODUCTION

We had just sat down for an evening interview on the empty patio of a nearly-closed Whole Foods when it began to lightly drizzle. Unfazed, Adrien opens the can of beer he had just purchased to accompany our traditional interview snacks and I watched him sip in silence. Just a handful of years ago, Adrien was in a rehabilitation program for heroin addiction, which he grappled with in his late teens and early twenties. And yet there we sat, casually drinking alcohol while we reviewed his life. Not long into the interview, I nervously asked him if he is ever worried about slipping back into addiction, I gestured to his beer. I knew I'd hardly taken my eyes off of it, and I felt guilty for my simple-minded question. He laughed confidently, "Never," then proceeded to tell me about the Olympic weight lifting competition he lost just earlier that morning.

BACKGROUND

As it currently stands, addiction in the United States is treated by medical¹ and juridical² bodies as a permanent condition, a chronic physiological disease that, once triggered, will grip a subject, haunting them for the remainder of their life. These definitions alone are hardly of consequence, but their pervasiveness shapes drug-treatment programming, criminal prosecution patterns as well as broader social and moral stigmatization. While individuals are tied to an identity of a perpetually gripped addict, bodies of bio-political governmentality put discovered addicts through the ringer.

Once outed as an addict, people often suffer the loss of their social and professional networks. Many addicts lose their livelihoods as drug-use, even outside of the workplace, is a termination-worthy offense. There are also possible legal consequences for discovered drug-use: from expensive fines to incarceration. Once in the system, addicts are typically forced through rehabilitation programs that are rarely successful (Dodes 2014) and they are required to adhere to the programs sometimes questionable tenets under penalty of further incarceration.

The most common recourse for addicts trying to avoid these penalties is to enter a 12-step program³. These programs not only help individuals by providing a community of support to

¹ The American Society of Addiction Medicine defines addiction as a manageable chronic brain disease. <http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/media-guide/science-drug-abuse-addiction-basics>

² The National Institute on Drug Abuse, a legal body that writes and suggests policies on how to deal with addiction penally defines addiction as "a chronic, relapsing brain disease that is characterized by compulsive drug seeking and use, despite harmful consequences." <http://www.asam.org/for-the-public/definition-of-addiction>

³ The principles of common 12-step programs are free, available online in various versions, accessible through anonymous meetings, and are even the foundation of most rehabilitation programs across the country.

stop immediate drug use, they also aim to train individuals not to relapse in the future by teaching them various coping without drugs strategies that they can and should enact in their daily lives. In this way, addicts who are expected to transform incur what Jarrett Zigon calls “an ethical process of making a new moral personhood,” where the self is radically transformed from their very foundations of being into a new type of sober personhood (Zigon 2011). These sober individuals should have the serenity to accept the things they cannot change, the courage to change the things they can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Purveyors of these programs adhere to the idea that by going through certain steps (namely, 12 of them⁴) in a particular order, that this transformation to a sober individual is more likely to be successful. According to these steps, addicts should acknowledge their powerlessness over this biological disease. They must relinquish their ability to heal themselves and they are to rely on a higher power to do so. They are to continuously check in with and reflect on the self and daily life. And they are expected to make amends for past wrongdoings. Not a single one of them says “Do not do drugs.” Instead they are about being a particular type of person, and from this new and transformed personhood comes sobriety.

⁴ The Twelve steps according to Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous (the most popularly prescribed and legally mandated rehabilitation programs): “1. *We admitted we were powerless over [drugs]—that our lives had become unmanageable.* 2. *Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.* 3. *Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.* 4. *Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.* 5. *Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.* 6. *Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.* 7. *Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.* 8. *Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.* 9. *Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.* 10. *Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.* 11. *Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.* 12. *Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.”*

In his book about addiction rehabilitants in post-Soviet Russian Orthodox church rehabilitation programs, Zigon argues that all therapeutic programs have at heart the goal of “remaking one’s moral way of being in the social world” (Zigon 2011). In his fieldwork in Russia, rehabilitants were expected to transform their embodied ways of being, that preclude them from participating in a “normal” life (namely, addiction), into a range of available varying moral personhoods, embedded in global, historical ideologies. Successfully remade individuals reflected the assemblages⁵ of post-Soviet neoliberalism and the Russian Orthodox church. However, the rehabilitants he mostly discussed struggled to fulfill both roles, nationalist and religious, as they often contended with one another ideologically. Zigon’s work highlights the importance of ideology in framing how care centers understand and treat the moral, psychological and ideological root conditions of addiction - as opposed to just the drug addiction itself. While different to the U.S. example in many ways, his work stands as an exemplar of how rehabilitation programs attempt to remake moral personhoods as the necessary intervention to prevent future drug-use.

Outside of broader global, macro and historical processes, all of which no doubt helps us to understand the landscape in which individuals are coping, micro patterns in transformation also must be considered. For instance, in many American 12-step programs, which are certainly laden with global and historical assemblages, two of the 12 steps involve personally reflecting, taking an “inventory” of the self, and analyzing it in moral terms: one for the initial inventory (step 4), and the other as a continued process (step 10). In theory, by psychically tracking moments of questionable morality, one is able to identify personal patterns in their discretions

⁵ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987)

and to prevent future slippages with this knowledge. This involves checking in specifically with moods, desires, dreams, daily wrongdoings, social blunders, and the like, and can be seen to function as a form of self-governance to keep individuals on a sober track. By cultivating a constantly reflective technology of the self,⁶ individuals are imagined to be able to sense their eternally existing addict-like impulses, and thus through their training, are able to quell them before acted upon. While these steps are demanded in virtually every 12-step program that I encountered in my research, the process is usually subsumed under an idealized practice, and it does not work seamlessly for all addicts.

For individuals whose conditions of daily life are undesirable, even painful, turning attention away from these experiences can serve as a form of relief, and ultimately a method for more long-term coping with their lifeworlds. For instance, reflection on and attention towards undesirable life worlds can often be painful, leading one to dwell in hard memories or realities without providing any relief. In her book, “The Pastoral Clinic,” Angela Garcia demonstrates the ways that for Norteños in New Mexico, perpetual dwelling⁷ can lead to addiction relapse (Garcia 2010). Garcia uncovered that, for some individuals, programs that emphasized attention towards the past unearthed the pain and guilt of transgressions too burdensome to bear, making it difficult to ever transform into a sober subject (material conditions allowing). As compared to the daily

⁶ According to Foucault, technologies of self “permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality.” (Foucault 1997)

⁷ In Shelter Blues Robert Desjarles also touches on the idea of using attention to cope, but Garcia’s sleepless addicts and connections to addiction recovery were more salient here.

relief brought about through sleep, Garcia pointed to the need for other types of relief from pain⁸ in order to cope with the world - sometimes relief even from the self. With the intensity of incessant physical withdrawal symptoms and the persistence tumultuous inner psychic worlds, Garcia's interlocutors eased their burdens through the highs of drug use. For the families in Garcia's book, the rehabilitation programs at the pastoral clinic were rarely successful in creating lasting sober individuals, but her assessment of the importance of relief achieved is of crucial importance to this project.

As I have demonstrated, not all methods for achieving relief are socially and historically acceptable. For instance, heroin use as a method falls outside of the range of possible normal⁹ choices, and is thus highly governed. However, this paper explores another option, outside of the relief of drug use and the weight of continual self-evaluation. To aid in the process of maintaining moral transformations, I will demonstrate the way that temporary therapeutic modes of attention (Csordas 1993, Throop 2008, Duranti 2009, Throop 2010) act as a method to achieve relief from the experience of suffering or living in unwanted lifeworlds. This type of relief is a form of phenomenological foregrounding, made possible through modifying and focusing attention in particular ways. And relief is also in part spatial, in that it relies on the natural, geographical relief - the variations in elevation, slope and texture of the land surface of a given area in the context of a given landscape - to facilitate active foregrounding.

⁸ In the pastoral clinics, there were noted examples of addicts trying sober up who suffered severely from insomnia. The insomnia naturally prevented them from sleeping - and eventually contributed in large part to their relapse. Additionally, the landscape, a constant reminder of historical dispossession, was also an unavoidable burden - and contributed to relapse. Finally, the inter-generational relationships of care through heroin were also seemingly impossible to be untangled from contributed to relapse.

⁹ (Zigon 2011)

THE PROJECT

The men introduced below, instead of undergoing attentional relief through the reception of narcotics, alternatively found they could achieve a reportedly comparable form of relief with an active body's movements through a psychologically gripping and meaningful landscape. Explicitly comparing running ultramarathons to the feeling of being high, these runners reported finding temporary relief through the ephemeral suspension of the demands of both life and the embodied expectations of sober moral transformation. In this paper, I will explore the ways that people enact therapeutic modes of attention through ultramarathon running in a way that demands them to turn away from the undesirable lifeworlds in which they are thrown. And instead, through their active and moving bodies, they attune towards a more immediate, intense experience of the body, emotions, and landscape - a landscape that brings into relief certain aspects of the world and not others, and which, in so doing, provides relief of the pain of addiction and daily life. Building explicitly on the work of Thomas Csordas, this paper expands on his concept of somatic modes of attention¹⁰ by incorporating active attention turning and landscape more explicitly as contributing factors to the ways individuals attend to and with their bodies (Csordas 1993). Ultimately, this presentation interrogates what it means to be high and still morally transformed, and also demonstrates the needed consideration of landscape and space in therapeutic modes of attention.

In order to uncover how this therapeutic mode of attention works, first I will introduce the lives and relevant worlds of four ultramarathon running competitors who previously

¹⁰ Csordas defines *somatic modes of attention* as “the culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one’s body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others.” (Csordas 1993).

struggled with heroin addiction.¹¹ I will then demonstrate that through running ultramarathons, these men have been able to achieve a particular type of psychic and existential relief. And I will conclude with an analysis of relief and moral transformation.

METHODOLOGIES

I began this project serendipitously as part of a person-centered ethnography course, imagining that I would focus on how it is that people come to do something so painful and challenging as running ultramarathons. I wondered what about someone's life experiences would lead to the choice to become such an extreme athlete. And, more interestingly, what did it feel like?

In one of my first interviews for class with my primary informant, Adrian, I asked him. I was surprised by his answer: "It feels like being high." Unaware of the gravity of the content that would surface, and in large part because of my participation in an adjacent adventure sport (rock-climbing), Adrian divulged the details of his personal narrative with addiction. He, and other runners I eventually met at races and through research networks, explained it was actually quite common for ultra-runners to come from a background of addiction or hardship - that several of

¹¹ I interviewed two other addicts turned ultrarunners whose stories were commensurate, but not exactly as concise. And I interviewed four ultrarunners whom were not former addicts, mainly out of curiosity. Their contributions served more as informants and guides than respondents, but only solidified my assertions.

the top competitors in the world struggled similarly, and yet those experiences were only beginning to be more commonly known.¹²

Each runner mentioned in this piece agreed to spend an hour here or there with me, in mostly free form, open-ended, and recorded interviews - at cafes, houses, stores, in tents, at race sites, and cars to and from events. I have so far conducted nearly 45 hours of interviewing and I have attended four races so far (one in California and three in Colorado). I've acted as a curious observer and a crew member (where I was responsible for delivering hydration and nutrition at crucial intervals along the race course to a racer). And I've attended as a researcher, conducting interviews before and after the race.

Through all of this, I uncovered what is to follow.

RUNNERS¹³

The experiences in this paper belong to four men, from the ages of mid-20's to mid-30's, all former heroin addicts and current high-achieving ultramarathon competitors, who have been "clean¹⁴" for at least three years. They are from various socio-economic backgrounds (from

¹² In meeting a number of rumored former addicts, I confirmed that nearly all of these stories were true. However, I in no way feel like I have a statistical grasp on the number of current ultra runners who are addicts, nor do I want to suggest that the experiences outlined in this paper are exemplary of all addicts turned ultra runners. Instead, I happily and readily believe that the rich experiences of a few can do just as much to introduce new thoughts to psychological anthropology, as an extensive survey of many with rich statistical data.

¹³ Because the ultramarathon community is quite small, to protect the anonymity of my interlocutors, I will exclude as much personal information as I can, while still providing as much *necessary* background as possible. One of my interlocutors, after having read an earlier draft, divulged his pseudonym to members in the ultra running community - I've since changed it and tried to further muddy individual details. Not that individuals don't have the right to access and share stories produced by ethnographers, but until I can be certain to protect all participants, I'd like to keep it as anonymous as possible.

¹⁴ Colloquialism for "sober"

working class to upper-middle class families). They identify with different ethnically diverse groups (Latino, White, Indian-American), with various nationalities (French, Indian, and American). All have all spent a considerable amount of time in the US since childhood, share English as their primary language, and primarily identify as “American” in their dispositions (valuing narratives such as “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps,” while two have served time in the United States military).

While some of them come together at ultra-marathon races, they live most of their lives all over the country, from Washington, Colorado, Virginia to Southern California. Some remain connected throughout the year via email, Facebook and other various social media resources. When “racing season” is in full swing from May-October, those that are friends with one another see each other often, sometimes every other weekend for months. They camp together at race sites, work on each other’s support crews¹⁵ when not racing themselves, run together when their timing and ability allows, cheer one another on, share training tips and diet strategies with one another, and know about each other’s pasts with addiction.¹⁶

Every one of the runners that I interviewed struggled with the transformation expected of them in their 12-step rehabilitation programs¹⁷. To begin, all of them are atheists, making their negotiations with a higher power (Steps 2-3, 5, 7, 11-12) somewhat of a challenge. They

¹⁵ This involves the delivery of food and resources to runners at various aid stations throughout the course of the race - often driving through the night.

¹⁶ I know this because I often met my interlocutors through already existing connections. However, it remains unclear how much this comes up. While it’s shared knowledge amongst them, it would be purely speculative to assume it is an important bond in their friendship - and in my experiences with them, they really never talked to one another about it when I was around.

¹⁷ From what I’ve gathered, one was a court-ordered state program, one was a Christian (for a non-Christian), and two were detox centers coupled with out-patient therapy and Narcotics Anonymous.

additionally also rejected the forever-an-addict who will forever struggle category as well, sometimes partaking in activities that were explicitly forbidden to them in rehab. For example, they occasionally drank alcohol - even to the point of inebriation - and even occasionally partook in recreational marijuana use.¹⁸ They do not see themselves currently as struggling addicts, and even expressed fearlessness when questioned about relapse. However, they all report recognizing the deleterious effects the stigma will have on them, likely for the rest of their lives. Though they exceed the category of “addict,” feeling like more than the category in which they've stuck, it had come to define them. It muddles who they have decided to become, and the work that has gone into their painful transformation into a moral person. Because of the weight of the former addict stigma, they rarely disclose their pasts with new or passing people in their lives, although it feels expected of them, and they each reported feeling trapped from time to time by their histories.¹⁹ So how do they cope? And what does it have anything to do with attention?

ULTRAMARATHONS

Many people are familiar with traditional marathons. Typically, runners line up on a weekend to race on foot 26.2 miles throughout major cities like Boston, Los Angeles or San Francisco, with established aid stations, exciting blaring music (occasionally a live band), port-a-potties for convenience, and supportive crowds cheering you along the route. Marathons are grueling. And though marathons are similar to ultramarathons in that runners cover long distances on foot in a single continuous push, ultramarathons are quite a different experience.

¹⁸ Legal in Colorado, and not uncommon at a race site.

¹⁹ Perhaps a milder chronicity, Angela Garcia's 2010 *Elegiac Addict*

To begin with, most ultra-marathons take place in drastically different environments. Most “ultras” take runners through isolated terrain, on dirt roads and even on hiking trails. They almost always take place outside of major city limits, amongst what are imagined to be wild natural spaces. The environment is a major component of the race - some pushing runners through freezing snowy mountains, and others through the Badwater Basin desert in record heat so intense that sneakers melt on the pavement. One of the most popular ultramarathons is the Leadville 100 race series, this year with a cap at 750 participants (used to be 1500). The Leadville 100 takes runners through the highest mountain town in the continental United States at over 14,000’ of altitude, around multiple lakes, and bombing down steep hiking trails in the dark of night.

Ultra marathons additionally cover a distance longer than traditional marathons - anything longer than 26.2 miles. Typically, these start at 50k (or ~31 miles) but they range, on average, up to 100 mile courses - with some multi-day races spanning literally thousands of miles.²⁰ They tend to start around 3-5am on a Saturday mornings, running into the night and sometimes into the next day. Ultramarathons additionally have cut-off times usually marked by sunset the following day (so if you’re still out in the mountains or desert racing at the cut off, even if you’re 96 miles into the race, you won’t qualify as a finisher unless you make the cut-off).

With less than 50% completion across all ultras, and closer to 30% on the more challenging courses²¹, these races are painful. Common injuries include blisters so severe it

²⁰ The Self Transcendence 3100 covers 3100 miles within 60+ days, averaging out to over 50 miles a day.

²¹ (Outside Online 2014)

becomes impossible to walk, severe swelling of limbs and appendages from rubbing and overuse, bloody nipples, toenail loss, sprains and strains, torn muscles, stress-fractured bones (most commonly legs and spine), tendonitis, dangerous dehydration and desalination, hyperthermia (can lead to a heat stroke), hypothermia (from the inclement weather conditions), kidney failure, and the list goes on. Some races have even resulted in death for participants.²² It's the kind of pain you cannot ignore and it lingers for days, if not weeks after the race.

Adrian, tells me that even without injury the pain can be blinding - and this is coming from a former self-proclaimed heroin “junkie” veteran who has served during war and dabbles in Olympic weight lifting. He laughs as he shows me a picture of him “in [his] pain cave” on his phone. It's a picture he's shared with his hundreds of followers on his personal blog, Instagram, and Facebook account. He's sitting on a log in the middle of the river, in his blue running shorts and dirty white tank top; his feet sitting lifelessly in the water during the Leadville 100 race. He's 60 miles in, and worried he won't make it to the next aid station before the cut off time²³. He looks beyond exhausted, covered in dust and mud from the knees down, drenched in sweat and red-faced nearly beyond recognition. His eyes are closed, elbows resting on his knees while he holds his head up with his hands. He looks miserable, but tells me that just after this moment was “like nirvana, totally zen.”

The racers that I interviewed reported that while the physical pain was immense, the psychological toll could weigh heavier. Adrian illustrates:

²² (Washington Post 2012)

²³ Typically, throughout races to protect the well-being of runners, and to prevent them from continuing to compete if it looks like they will not finish in a reasonable amount of time, established cut-off times are set for each aid station along the trail - as well as occasionally weigh-in stations to prevent unhealthy weight loss during the race.

“The only thing I can compare to this is all my experimenting in Chicago, and just getting out of hand. You’ll be on the top of the world, you get this really gnarly endorphin rush...5 minutes later, you’re- you hit a wall. You hit a wall. You hear like marathoners talking about hitting a wall...ultramarathoning, you hit like 20 walls. You hit it like every other hour. There are some races where I felt like curling up, and I kid you not, as dark as like this is, I think ‘I’m okay. I think I’m just going to curl up in a ball in this bush and die here. I think I’d rather do this. This bush right here looks really comfortable. I’ll go to sleep and if I don’t wake up, how romantic! I died in the mountains.”

And the racers laugh as they recount these relatively common, darkly humorous moments. One of my runners, Kev, explained to me during an interview: “It’s like falling to a black hole—really dark stuff. But then 20 minutes later you’re on top of the world [laughs], so, yeah.” Statements such as “I’ve never been so lost in my life,” “I literally wanted to die,” were common, as well as stories recounting severely depressed emotional lows and soaring highs unreachable in normal daily life - no doubt paralleling the forms of desperation and elations that come with heroin addiction and withdrawal.

Runners also report towards the end of long races, usually 100 mile-ers, that owing to exhaustion they begin to hallucinate and struggle to determine reality. Some of the hallucinations reported to me included encouraging and beautiful women running alongside them but just in their periphery, wild non-native animals dissolving into shadows,²⁴ and magically appearing RVs along the trail in the place of large boulders. While definitely silly in retrospect, the level of exhaustion was dangerous. Dangerous for all of the possibly injuries listed above, but additionally dangerous owing to the risk of running off trail, getting lost, and having to discern rocky, technical terrain in the dark miles from the nearest aid station when one isn’t clear headed. Because of this, races allow and encourage runners to use pacers - or friends to run with them the

²⁴ Tigers would quite likely be considered invasive in Colorado.

last 50 miles²⁵ - to make sure they stay on course (as sprinting off into the Colorado mountains at 2 am can very well get you killed) and to help you ignore the rogue mermaids in the brush.

In an interview the night before a race, Adrian recounted a time when he paced for a good “buddy²⁶” of his during an ultramarathon in another state. It was past mile 80 for his friend, mile 30 for Adrian, when the hallucinations gradually started to seep into his friend’s reality. The hallucinations weren’t extreme and didn’t prevent him completely from being able to think coherently, but after running past a large boulder his friend asked “was that an RV?” Adrian laughed and replied, “No, just a boulder.” His friend conceded, “Oh, okay.” This happened at least a dozen times: RV? No. Oh... RV? Nope, boulder. Ok. Adrian joked after his story, “Who wants to do drugs, just go run 50 miles! [laughs] You want hallucinogens? Just do a 100 miler!”

“It Hurts Good” - Adrian
THE BODY IN MOTION

It’s hard to imagine why someone would elect to run an ultramarathon. Of course, there are exercise-induced physiological changes that accompany a race like this. Some research groups have reported up to 5-fold increase in certain endorphins²⁷, a temporary release of human-produced opioids²⁸, and even an increase in the natural production of

²⁵ Just to clarify, these are people volunteering to run 50 miles of a race through the technical and difficult terrain without being able to qualify for any sort of race prize. People usually run as pacers before they transition to longer, harder races for themselves to learn the course, and to learn the tricks of race management.

²⁶ Not a term he often uses so it seemed of note.

²⁷ (Pestel 1989)

²⁸ (Freund 2013)

endocannabinoids.²⁹ These physiological changes have been affiliated with emotion and mood regulation - but all are produced in relatively small doses, at least compared to that achieved through drug use. They may produce a high like state, but according to the studies cited above, it wouldn't be a potent one.

There is also the additional advantage of identity making predicated on qualities like achievement, exceptionalism, triumph of the will, and moral redemption. The runners I spoke to report being called heroes and champions by friends, family, coworkers and strangers - which is a drastic change from the category of addict. But according to each one of the people I interviewed, this wasn't the reason they ran (although it was likely one of the many contributing factors).

The most reported and consistent reason given for running was because of what running does for and to them: it provides relief. One interview with Shawn a couple days before the Leadville 100 race this past summer pointed to the way that these highs and lows actually do something:

Shawn: Yeah, bonking³⁰ is the worst. It can take you out of a race. It's like depression, like you'll never be happy again, and you don't know why you even try. But you keep going...And when you get through it...I can't explain the feeling of zen, it's like becoming one with the mountain [laughs]. Everything just makes sense, and you're not even worried about anything.

Me: What would you be worried about?

Shawn: Oh, you know [laughs] (pauses for about pauses for ~4 seconds)...life?

²⁹ (Raichlen 2012)

³⁰ A term used to describe when a runner "hits a wall" or starts to enter a low so noticeable and encompassing that it's one of the major reason runners quit races. Bonking can also affect race time and performance, slowing runners down drastically.

Instead of “life,” attention is paid to the pain of the active body (as opposed to the pain of an addicted body), as well as the erratic and foregrounded emotional mood swings, and the technical puzzle of navigating the landscape.

Shawn explains later in the interview that the pain of running ultras “gets him out of his head.” He explains, “It’s not that you’re really unaware of everything going on around you. It feels like it doesn’t matter. All you can think about is what you’re going through. It’s relentless forward progress.”³¹ Shawn also told me at a later date that through this way of attuning, he’s able to think about the problems in his daily life but “without all of the emotional baggage.” It’s not that life doesn’t necessarily cross his mind, but when it does, it’s experienced differently, with a different perspective and emotional valances.

After a race, Adrian shared:

“It’s like being high. You forget about everything else. You forget that rent is due the next day. You forget that you broke someones heart, you like forget everything and you’re in that moment and its just you, and it’s like ...releases a million endorphins throughout your body [laughs] and you’re just like “whoa...”

This was just one of many comparisons to drug use that was explicitly made.

Adrian continued later in our conversation:

“[When I run] I feel in the moment. I feel at ease. It’s like the heroin high. I mean, it sucks to relate it to that but it is that. In the moment, I’m forgetting about everything, I’m solely focused, my mind is shut off, I’m not thinking about ‘God, I’ve got a creditor calling me because my Sallie Mae school loan is due’ and all these other regular daily life stresses...It’s just one foot in front of the other.”

³¹ Incidentally, “Relentless Forward Progress” is the title of one of the most popular ultramarathon running instructional books.

Adrian touches on something important to this thesis. As he runs, he is focused on the race and his experience turned away from the parts of life he struggles with: debt, reflecting on relationships, exhausting social and moral obligations. He feels relief from them. Running ultras is a way of experiencing immediacy through the demand of pain that cannot be ignored, and through the intense emotions that overwhelm other horizons, and additionally, through the landscape itself. This mode of attention is therapeutic.³²

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF LANDSCAPE

"L'enfer, c'est les autres" - J.P. Sartre

Early on in this project, after realizing that ultra running *did* something, it became clear I would have to suss out the parameters of this way of attuning. Was it simply the pain? Was it the emotional highs and lows? Was it the achievement? I stumbled through trying to find the edges of the ultrarunning assemblage:³³ “What if you just worked really hard at the gym?” The answer was a resounding “no” from all participants. The experience could not be achieved on a treadmill, nor running on pavement through the city, nor even through the practice of other extreme sports. It is a specific movement through a particular landscape, running through nature³⁴, a commitment of practice, a way of being alone with 1,000 of your closest competitors

³² (Desjarlais 2011)

³³ Including all of the ritualized elements for the runners: camping the night before a race, a commitment to being in nature, pursuing knowledge of high-efficiency and health related information, participating in the aesthetic attire of the events, the actual, physical, emotional and attentional experience of running an ultramarathon, etc.

³⁴ Will be parsed out below.

on terrain that demanded more than endurance, but also occasionally technical know-how and attention.

Although ultramarathons take place in many different natural spaces (through deserts, canyons, on rock beaches, etc.) my primary research was done in the mountains of Colorado. I suspect that the findings about the technical demand that I outline below may not apply in the exact same way to runners in the desert, or along a beach, (nor did I ask if they did). However, I would be remiss to diminish their importance here, and the potential for their meaning in other contexts. All I can speak about is what I saw.

IN WILDERNESS

While attending races, especially in Colorado, I found myself marveling at the landscape that surrounded me, something my runners reported with great romanticism. Annually there are dozens if not hundreds of ultramarathons all over the country, but for the runners I interviewed, Colorado is Mecca with some of the most popular and highest quality trails available. They take place all over the state, but most the notable³⁵ of them begin in tiny mountain towns, tour through and beyond trails, follow ridges to the summit of notable peaks, and steadily wind back into town. The entirety of the race is spent mostly alone in remote, wild places occasionally passing other runners, and if you're lucky, in the company of your pacer.

But what makes a place natural? What does it mean to run through the wilderness? In American popular culture, the very nature of *wild* is embedded in erratic, unpredictable, and uncontrollable elements (for example, the Wild West). Wild is not knowing, or not knowing with

³⁵ Typically determined according to audience attendance and sponsorship patterns

any certainty, what lays just around the next corner, or over the next hill, or in the next encounter.³⁶ Wilderness is imagined to be, and likely is, out of the daily lives of most people, making it challenging to predict, and attention to surroundings necessary.

Alternative to this trope, *wilderness* also popularly indexes a space without humans: pristine, pure and untouched by modern civilization. Historian William Cronon writes about this popular ideation: “being in nature is being in the presence of something irreducibly nonhuman, something profoundly Other than yourself.³⁷” In this instance, wilderness is an ideology born out of the establishment of the first national parks, and inspired by John Muir and early naturalists³⁸ that transformed the wild as a “place of satanic temptation” to a “sacred temple” worth protecting. For Cronon, the wilderness is a somewhat ironic space. It is clearly bounded and maintained through human creation, and yet:

“When we visit a wilderness area, we find ourselves surrounded by plants and animals and physical landscapes whose otherness compels our attention. In forcing us to acknowledge that they are not of our making, that they have little or not need of our continued existence, they recall for us a creation far greater than our own.”

It is a human created space, designed to be without humans, to remind humans that other things besides humanity exist with importance. As it relates to these runners, Cronon explains that the complexities of the wilderness become a safe haven for individuals who require respite from the metropole: “by imagining that our true home is in the wilderness, we forgive ourselves the

³⁶ This is a common finding throughout much of anthropology’s history, yet can be seen most relevantly through a phenomenological approach in Michael Jackson’s “Minima ethnographica: Intersubjectivity and the anthropological project” 1998.

³⁷ Very much not speaking about peoples who live in wilderness, Cronon also points to the systematic erasure of Native peoples forced removal from these lands, and the way that this hardly factors into the way that this trope is imagined and experienced.

³⁸ (Cronon 1996)

homes we actually inhabit.” Individuals enter these created spaces for relief from their lives and from other individuals, even though the very pristine space is the result of careful maintenance by other individuals.

The runners I interviewed were spoke with great love of the wilderness using this trope - the wilderness as without people, free from judgement and the “bullshit” of daily life (according to Adrian) - in a way that is liberatory to experience as well as unique and special to encounter. They mentioned being inspired by Jack Kerouac, the Dharma Bums movement, and the popular mountaineering stories that came out of the late 90’s.³⁹ These stories glorified survival in challenging non-human-friendly environments: at altitude, on rocky and technical peaks, in horrible weather conditions. Mountaineering writer Lionel Terray called this genre of adventurers the “conquistadors of the useless,” struggling for struggling’s sake - though that’s not really the reason for struggle here.

For days before, during, and after the race, the runners imagined what was just beyond visible from town - imagined the trail from photos they had seen, and stories they’d been told by other runners, imagined the rivers they’d have to cross, and imagined how they would feel at each leg of the race. No matter how many years they raced, knowing the in’s and out’s of the trail by heart was impossible - it would always be wild, it would always be unpredictable and lonely, and it would always be hard. Adrien has run the Leadville 100 thee times, and admitted to still worrying in the thick of exhaustion, while crossing over Hope’s Pass, that he might wander

³⁹ Stories that were explicitly brought up were John Krakauer’s notable adventure tales such as “Into the Wild,” “Touching the Void,” and “Eiger Dreams,” as well as the work of suffering, punk-rock mountaineer, Mark Twight. All center around the heroic adventures involved with conquering peaks, facing danger, and accomplishing achievements never been done (by white people) before.

off trail never to be found again. This inability to find comfortable knowledge in the race signals a necessity to pay attention at all times - demanding critical attention to the landscape itself.

The runners I spent the most time with told me about what being in the wilderness meant to them during their races. They pointed to the silence and stillness, described the cleanliness and purity of land untouched by humans.⁴⁰ The solitude was challenging, occasionally frightening, and that's what made it meaningful, special, and an accomplishment to run through⁴¹.

When talking about what he liked about the wilderness, Kev reported feeling “more alive” and “more himself” when he was alone in the wilderness. Even on race days when he shared the expansive trail with hundreds of other people, it was still a relief. For Adrian, it was similar. He mentioned wanting to get out of the “beige” suburbs where he lived and worked and into nature. There he didn't “have to pretend anymore.” Standing as a foil to the suburbs, the wilderness was rich with unpredictability and, most importantly, without whatever societal pressures placed upon him to maintain his new moral personhood.

“Try the meditation of the trail, just walk along looking at the trail at your feet and don't look about and just fall into a trance as the ground zips by. Trails are like that: you're floating along in a Shakespearean Arden paradise and expect to see nymphs and fluteboys, then suddenly you're struggling in a hot broiling sun of hell in dust and nettles and poison oak... just like life.”

- Jack Kerouac

THE TRAIL

⁴⁰ Never mentioning the maintenance done by the National Park Service nor the fact that people lived in these areas before being forcibly removed from them by the U.S. government.

⁴¹ Though this experience is often framed as a solitary experience, it's rare that one is on the trail entirely alone, never encountering others. Other racers jockey for positions, meet one another at aid stations and see each other along the way. But, somehow, the feeling of being relieved to be “away from it all” - I suspect away from select parts of “it all” - was reported unanimously.

Aside from the diminished quantity of encounters with other humans, and the meaning of wilderness, the landscape additionally provided another type of relief as well where the terrain itself shaped the type of attentional break one could achieve. After Kev had just completed the Hardrock 100 race in Silverton, Colorado, I asked him about which parts of the race were the hardest for him, expecting him to talk about a particularly rocky or steep section, running over loose scree, or a sharp incline at high altitude. His response stunned me: “There was a section... it was a 2 mile fire road sort of near the end, it was just brutal. Definitely the worst part.” How was this possible considering all of the other obstacles that Kev had to face? Why wasn’t it the back-breaking climb or the ankle-breaking loose rock? I imagined that the flat, easy terrain would bring about the moments when my runners talked about bliss and relief. I was actually exactly wrong.

I learned from my runners that the more technical elements of the course actually required more *attention*⁴² to not trip and fall, to determine if rocks were loose and thus dangerous, and to find solid foot holds. This intense focus also played a role in precluding the daily life - it even precluded moments of exhaustion and pain. I asked Kev to explain why the fire road was the worst part:

Kev: “When you’re cruising up hills, or lightly stepping through loose rock, you’re focused. You gotta be. So the whole race, I’m running up these hills, hit a couple of pockets of [scree] on the trail, bombed down this rocky section, then I get to the fire road, and I’m thinking ‘Yeah!’ but, yeah, I was exhausted, and I felt every step of it.”

Me: “[laughs] Did you not feel exhausted the entire rest of the race?”

Kev: “[laughs] Honestly, I wasn’t paying attention. I’m sure I did. [laughs] That sounds crazy, huh?”

⁴² Something reported by nearly all of my informants alike, whether or not they had any experiences with addiction.

Landscape itself shaped emotional experience in what it demanded from the runner. The more technical parts of the course demanded more attuned participation, where runners who were able to attune to the landscape, focused less on their bodies and more through their bodies on not tripping, falling or hurting themselves. Like positive psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's concept of flow, it was completely focused motivation. In flow states individuals experience a type of hyperfocus, where one is so enraptured with the task at hand that they lose awareness of other their conditions. The intense focus on the landscape that these ultrarunners needed to navigate precluded anything else at the time, including pain, whereas the flat fire roads, the moments with less demanding intensity, where critical reflection begins to seep back in, were credited as the lowest moments. The temporary relief landscape provided was topographical, attention-grabbing flow states, as well as the relief of likely not having to negotiate complex, and possibly fraught, social relationships.

SCRATCHING THE ITCH

I interviewed Adrian before and after a 50k race in Southern California - one of the shorter races he entered in the past three years. The race lacked the intensity of environment and distance that other ultramarathons offered (especially those in Colorado), but by any other standards, it was an impossible accomplishment. The race was just over 31 miles on dirt trails through relentless hills in the Los Angeles National Forrest, but Adrian was calm. He had been training almost religiously for years, he worked as a fitness coach, and, most importantly, he had become accustomed to the intensity of much longer races so he imagined this one would be easy for him.

And it was easy for him. He placed third in his age range, disappointed. He reported afterwards that he was unable to "get out of his head." The race was too short, it was too easy. Sure, he was tired, but he felt fine physically and psychologically, and he was already ready for his next race. Throughout our post-race interview and the rest of the afternoon driving home he was relatively silent, which was a radical divergence from his normally warm disposition - and different than how he behaved after other races. Heavy sighs, restless: "I should have pushed myself harder." And later on, "What a waste."

The relief from the experiential horizon, that Adrian was looking for was not accomplished, and when I asked him about it two weeks later during our next interview, he reflected that he just needed a break - ultras gave him that relief. Again, Adrian compared running an ultramarathon to heroin, "I think maybe there is an opiate receptor response where you are addicted to that rush." When too much time had passed between races, he explained that he "got the itch" for the feeling ultras gave him, and he longed for the type of relief that running ultramarathons offered him. His training and experience were working against him, and he would have to push himself farther and in harder races if he wanted to continue to achieve this relief.

CONCLUSION

This project doesn't attempt to suggest that all ultramarathon runners pursue or have the same experiences, or claim that all former addicts need intense relief in the form of possibly dangerous physical activities in order to remain sober. On the contrary, this modest paper simply attempts to map a very specific intersection of Zigon's moral rehabilitative transformation and Garcia's relief (in all of the above mentioned forms). I demonstrated the way that certain

individuals (in freshly transformed moral subject positions⁴³) experience ultramarathons provides them with a type of relief from the world previously achieved through the passive intake of narcotics, that is well within the moral and social realm normal life and is active. Through the body and space, these runners foreground certain modes and find meaningful moments of phenomenological and geological relief. What makes the experiences of these runners so important, are the ways that these individuals are able to still achieve certain states of feeling “high” through directed actions. Proving the complexity of governing attentional states, this paper ultimately shows the complexities of what it means to be a transformed moral individual, and how messy finding the endurance to live a normal life and care for the needs of the self can be. I provided an example of the multitude of ways that attention can be drawn, through the body, emotions, and through landscape (as a place of historical meaning and as an object in the world to negotiate moving through). And I demonstrated the way that the popular history of a landscape can come to invoke a mood or meaning that transforms what would otherwise be grueling labor into meaningful relief work - introducing the concept of landscape into discourses on phenomenology and ethics.

“Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.” - Simone Weil

⁴³ Not as current addicts and users, but former addicts, or addicts in recovery

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