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Moving over mountains: a woman on the Appalachian Trail

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MOVING OVER MOUNTAINS: A WOMAN WALKING ON THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

A Thesis
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in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
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by
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ABSTRACT

This project will examine the experience of a woman on the Appalachian Trail. It is my aim in undertaking this project to evaluate my own personal experiences in order to explore the way the Appalachian Trail is conceptualized as a space, and then experienced as a place. My own experiences will be connected to and contrasted by experiences I have with other hikers. It is through my own experiences and those of others that I hope to highlight the ways that spaces and mobilities are gendered in our society and the ways that those expectations are usurped.

The wilderness might be one of the last places in the United States considered by many to be male dominated physically and ideologically. While this might be enough to keep some women away from the trail, the women thru hiking the trail have given up on that notion and embarked on a six month long journey into an imagined unknown and an actually well charted territory. Understanding more about how gendered spaces are negotiated within the space itself will further our understanding of the ways that conceptualizations are adapted to meet with experience. After all, ideology and practice do not always match up. Just because there is an understood rule or set of expectations does not stop people from pushing the limits and overturning the conceptions. I believe that for the women walking on the trail, they have successfully overcome the expectations and made a place of their own.
INTRODUCTION

This project will examine the experience of a woman on the Appalachian Trail. It is my aim in undertaking this project to evaluate my own personal experiences to make a statement about the way that the Appalachian Trail is conceptualized as a space, and then experienced as a place. My own experiences will be connected to and contrasted by experiences I have with other hikers. It is through my own experiences and those of others that I hope to highlight the ways that spaces and mobilities are gendered in our society and the ways that those expectations are usurped.

My research is working off of several presumptions and emerging from a life-time of experiences. Let me then begin with some of the background that inspired my academic curiosity in the trail. I have spent much of my young life playing outside, climbing trees and running barefoot in the fields. I was fishing before I was talking well, and I was riding horses before I was half way old enough to drive. I had brought home my first buck by age ten. I loved to be outside; it is where I preferred to spend my time. While I was learning to love the outside other girls were learning that I was a tomboy. Something about my behavior wasn’t acceptable.

The gendering of the outdoors begins early. I was becoming a tomboy because I played outside; I was not doing the things other little girls were learning little girls should do. In a sense I was crossing outside of an acceptable gender role and becoming a “boy” (or, at least, a boyish girl). Still how did other kids my own age know that I was becoming a boy? They were instructed, but perhaps not just by parents or older kids, but also in the stories that they read. The outdoors is gendered in bedtime stories such as Little Red Riding Hood, or Goldie Locks and the Three Bears, where the woods are filled with maleficent characters, and their presence makes the woods especially dangerous for little girls. Many girls are taught to play inside and are often chastised, if they choose to play outside. From a very early age the wilds are places that western women have been instructed are not for them, where they are not to venture, and especially to not venture alone. Still nevertheless little girls and women alike have found their way into the wilderness.
For many women their adventure into the wilds begins with overcoming social roles and expectations applied to their gender. Many theorists have looked to evaluate gender for what it is as well as what it isn’t. So what is it about the way gender is socially constructed in the southeastern US that allowed me to become a boy, for preferring to play outside. Simultaneously I wish to consider what role this social construction plays in the way that women experience the Appalachian Trail.

Even now as an adult when I reveal my desire to go hiking on the Appalachian Trail I am met with resistance. People are at first taken aback and then question whether or not I plan on taking someone along with me, and if I intend to carry a gun while on my trip. It is this instance, this current line of questioning, which first brought the Appalachian Trail to me as an area of research. I was puzzled what about the trail could have triggered these responses; eliciting these reactions from people who are well aware of my outdoor experience. Is it something about the notion of me walking into the woods and following a footpath for an unknown number of miles? Is it one or the other, or both?

In Western societies there is a notion that women are associated with nature, but the trouble perhaps for me is that women were associated with civilized gardens and the gentle flowers therein and not the long mountain path (Women and Geography Study Group 1997:180). The trail is long and rugged in some areas while well maintained in others, but certainly it is not a part of the garden scene with which women are associated. Yet many women have taken to the trail since it began.

Continuing to think about the question of location it becomes necessary to think critically about the way that people conceptualize the Appalachian Trail. The general conception of this trail is a path through the wilderness. It is a vision of general isolation from the “civilized” world. It is a picture of nature uninterrupted. Though the trail is well maintained and marked, crossing fourteen states, most people don’t imagine the trail as an integral part of the numerous towns it crosses. It is onto social and individual imaginings of the trail that people project their own socio cultural norms and expectations. The Appalachian Trail like other spaces is wrought with meaning. It is understood as being a certain type of space, a wilderness, outside of and opposite of cities.
Over the past two hundred years women have made great strides in gaining social recognition. Still, today in the 21st century women have not gained equal opportunity with their male counterparts. The ability of women to exercise self-determination is a primary interest in assessing gender difference and bias. Mobility, the ability to move about one’s world, is in my opinion is a key indicator of self-determination. Many scholars have reflected on and theorized women’s experiences with gendered spaces in the past. However, my intention is to investigate the experiences of women hiking along the present day Appalachian Trail. This interest combines how women’s participation along the Appalachian Trail is perceived and how spaces are gendered. Women on the trail are in opposition to traditional ideas of femininity. By hiking and by being in the forest, they are defying an ideologically male space (Little 2002). Yet they are there on the long path staking out a claim of their own from Georgia to Maine. In essence these women are moving mountains with each step.

The purpose of this project is to examine the relationships between women and the Appalachian Trail. The Appalachian Trail is generally thought of as a male space because it is seen as a wilderness (Little 2002). The notion that the trail is gendered as a space is central to this research. The wilds are a place where western women have been instructed not to venture alone if they must adventure there at all. Nevertheless women have found their way into the outdoors. Several factors must be examined in order to initiate this research. First we must look to gender to seek an understanding of how it works to create social bodies complete with social roles and expectations.

Gendered Spaces and Mobilities

The study of gender and gender roles is by no means new to anthropology. Margaret Mead in 1935 stated that there are no naturally occurring gender roles and that those roles are culturally assigned, that they can be changed, and there is no biological determinism for gender roles. This theory of Mead's that gender roles are culturally established was perhaps one of the earliest arguments that sex and gender were not necessarily linked by biological necessity. In 1952 Simon de Beauvoir proposed that women are seen as something extra, that a person is assumed to be male unless it is explicitly stated that she is
female. Following Beauvoir, in 1974 Sherry Ortner postulated that differences can be accounted for because of the way women and men are associated with culture and nature. Men are associated with culture and women are associated with nature, and because culture is believed to be the way we overcome the baseness of nature, men are viewed as being superior to women. Also in 1974 Michelle Rosaldo examined gender roles and status in relationship to the separation of public and private domains with men occupying more public roles while women remain in the private spheres (di Leonardo 1991). Nancy Chodorow in 1978 postulated that women's role in child rearing lead to a male resentment and thus to male rule (di Leonardo 1991). In 1985 Ruth Borker points out that the domestic/private dichotomy was excluding the realities of lived events. This in turn eliminates the two spheres an explanatory factor as reestablishes them as a research question (di Leonardo 1991).

Gendered spaces put most simply are spaces that are associated with one gender or the other. While Daphne Spain (1992) asserts that gendered spaces reinforce gender hierarchies by excluding women from learning the knowledge men use to reproduce patriarchy it is not my intention to examine them in that way. Instead it is my intention to investigate the extent to which the Appalachian Trail is gendered, how that influences women’s experiences and the strategies women employ to negotiate the space on their own terms.

To consider gendered spaces it is necessary to evaluate geographic writings about space as it relates to gender. Gillian Rose’s (1993) work *Feminism and Geography* premiers the incorporation of feminism and geography. This work served to broaden the ways in which geographers consider the world around them. Notions of space, place, landscape and spatial divisions are now investigated from a feminist perspective. Without the path breaking work of Rose and others, proposing a paper concerning women’s experiences on the Appalachian Trail (as a gendered space) might be a far-flung idea.

In *Making Place, Making Self*, we see Inger Birkeland (2005) negotiating the construction of place and self. She examines what it means to travel and the various ways in which travel has been associated and perceived from a masculine perspective. Birkeland follows feminist geography’s advance and points
out that ways of viewing travel are related to gender. Perceiving travel as a linear journey equates to a masculine view while visuality translates to a more feminine perspective (Birkeland 2005). Perhaps travel was not more of a male pursuit and was instead an interest of women and men alike with the difference being that a man’s travel was sanctioned and receives recognition while a woman’s travel was not socially prescribed and with the exception of travel narratives went largely unrecognized by society. Birkeland not only indicates the importance of travel but the importance of the places being traveled. “Travel is a part of identity politics which always implies a politics of location” (Birkeland 2005). My area of interest is focused on the politics of women’s mobility along the Appalachian Trail. From here I will draw connections between the literature already reviewed and the politics of the Appalachian Trail today by situating mobility in the backcountry.

In order to establish an understanding of the theoretical basis of mobility one can turn to Tim Cresswell’s book *On the Move*. The section entitled “Metaphysics of Fixity and Flow” examines the ideas of the sedentary and the nomadic to theorize how we have come to view movement the way we do today and the history of the concept. Contemporary thought posits mobility as good and that, which is rooted as dull and of the past, but this was not always the case (Cresswell 2006). Mobility viewed from a sedentarist metaphysics is seen as suspect (Cresswell 2006). In a sense this means that one would only be mobile if it was necessary. Women who left their homes to travel became nomadic even if only temporarily. Thus the identities they assumed were physically and ideologically removed from their domestic place in the home. Mobile women became suspected not only of being unstable and dangerous for breaking from social norms and leaving their place in the home. This article utilizes the work of Janet Wolf and points out that free and equal mobility is a deception (Cresswell 2006). Women are ideologically positioned into a permanent domesticity, should they leave the home their femininity, reputation and social standing would be questioned.

Looking to discover adventure as a male pursuit one only needs to look toward historical writings that illustrate the lives of pioneering women. Jane Robinson’s anthology *Wayward Women: A Guide to*
Women Travelers, takes us into the lives of the early women travelers. Robinson sets the stage for these stories by opening with “Traditionally pioneering has always been a dangerous and male preserve. There was no room for women…” (Robinson 1990:1). This text does not recount the lives of these adventurous women, but rather uses their accounts to position the women within space and time. Robinson provides a sampling of the women’s lives and devotes the majority of her work to illustrating these women’s resistance to cultural norms. Who these women were, where they were from, whom they traveled with and where they went is the focus of each of the essays. This angle is helpful in understanding the social situations from which women travelers emerged. It appears that social status dictated which women were able to travel and under what circumstances. Women in advantageous situations financially and socially made up the majority of women travelers. Many of these women were forced to travel with male chaperones or escorts in the name of propriety. The presence of the chaperone restrained the ability of the woman to travel freely. Robinson gives us an idea of the way women’s independence and mobility progressed through the years. “With freedom came independence: male chaperones were no longer called upon as shields and defenders; they were rather pressed into service as expedition advisers, sponsors, and bureaucratic decoys” (Robinson 1990:2). While chaperones were placed into different positions their presence was still required and travel remained an activity pursued and documented by the elite.

A second anthology of women’s travels, Barbara Hodgson’s No Place for a Lady pays homage to the travels of women by telling their stories. The social milieu, which permitted and constrained travel for women echoes from within the narratives. The upper class was still the primary traveler and the presence of the male escort was still required. However, another strategy to enhance travel options stood out time and again. Documented in the narratives is the fact that women would utilize men’s attire in their travels. According to Hodgson, it was practical for women to disguise themselves as men for safety and also because men’s clothing was more functional given the demands of travel. For these travelers presenting a male image allowed them to momentarily cross boundaries regulated by gender. While many women would don the apparel of men it was considered in bad taste to flaunt the disapproved apparel. For
example, Catalina de Erauso in the early sixteen hundreds had completely assumed a male identity and although she was highly respected as a man, once her identity was revealed, she was outcast as a woman (Hodgson 2002). This reflects that the assumption of male attire and the pursuit of male activities were only permissible insofar as they did not destabilize traditional gender roles. Still, many women who traveled equated dressing in men’s clothing to a greater range of movement both literally and geographically.

Women also legitimated their participation in travel was by asserting their superior knowledge over the locals and by bringing domesticity along with them. Karen Morin’s article “Peak Practices” examines women traveling within the U.S. during the boom years after the transcontinental railroad was completed. Among the fashionable destinations of the time was the great outdoors of Yosemite and the Rocky Mountains. Morin states her purpose is “to examine the production of gendered subjectivity in the texts, and to show how discourses of gender worked alongside and through imperialist, nationalist, and class discourses” (Morin, 1999:490). The ideas of class and nationalist superiority allowed women to be active in the assertion that local guides were incompetent and that they were themselves superior. In this sense Morin has examined one way that women were able to expand their notions of themselves while generating a new social space for bourgeois women (Morin 1999). In examining the language used by women to portray the outdoors Morin finds that in the wilderness women were able to conquer mountain peaks and assert an authority lacking from their everyday lives in Victorian society (Morin 1999). Women were conscious of social expectations and while adventuring outside of normal feminine activity reasserted the ways in which they still filled their social obligations. In order to reposition themselves women would at times confine themselves to gardens or to focusing heavily upon the elements understood as domestic and feminine. Through their use of the travel narrative women could discuss domestic subjects such as “proper dress for women, proper domestic relations, adventures and the conquest of their own physical limitations” (Morin 1999:510). These domestic elements helped to
legitimize their travel. However as these women were resisting typical notions of Victorian femininity they simultaneously recast themselves into a domestic image through their writing.

Sidonie Smith in her text *Moving Lives* examines women traveling in the Twentieth Century and in one chapter in particular pays attention to women who have traveled by foot. She follows three women’s journeys traveling by foot through the 1900’s, the most recent in the 1970’s. Smith is interested in women who have traveled in the last hundred years. These narrative journeys transcend femininity and update the perceptions of traveling domesticity left by the narratives of bourgeois Victorian women. As more women asserted their own agency in travel, more opportunities arose for them to travel as they wished.

In his earlier work on the politics of mobility, Tim Cresswell (1999) has considered how gender issues can traverse social expectations, reactions, access to mobility and the marginalization of traveling women. In his article on female tramps and hobos of the late eighteen hundreds Cresswell examines the nontraditional mobility of everyday women and the implications of such mobility, suggesting that mobility is embodied and thus gendered. Bodies as discussed here are used to illustrate how bodies out of place create a crisis in onlookers. In this case the bodies out of place are mobile women without a male escort and without the financial means to be considered a lady traveler caused much stress. The female tramp was a woman traveler, her presence signified that women no longer needed to be bourgeois in order to travel, she could very well be a woman of average means who was escaping her present situation or exploring the world. This possibility upset the balance because women were supposed to be in the home.

The notion that women might be mobile was so farfetched at the dawn of the twentieth century that women by legal definition could not be considered hobos or tramps. “The private realm was seen as stability, rootedness and feminine while the public realm was viewed as fluid mobile and masculine” (Cresswell 1999). Many women resorted to disguising their gender by means of hair and clothing styles to assist them in their traveling. The gender ambiguity reflected in clothes and haircuts added to the crisis being produced by these women who were not only out of place but did not reflect a proper place for them
at all. Their femininity had been traded for mobility, which left them in a position society recognized as neither male nor female. Cresswell’s analysis discusses the issues generated by these mobile women.

**Dangerous Mobilities in the Outdoors**

To look upon the question of mobility removed from location is counter-productive. The landscape and the history of the place being traveled is a legitimate weight placed on the movement. The history of a place helps to construct its present. Where better to see this than in the landscape itself? The “landscape becomes a text . . . because it tells, or at least initiates a story” (Marshall 1998:18). The physical appearance of the place and the names that are associated with locations play an active role in the construction of perception. It would be a fruitless task to hold a discussion of women’s mobility along the Appalachian Trail without first situating it within the trail itself.

Outside of the hiking community the conception of wilderness as a male only space appears to be dominant. However the women who participate in hiking have negotiated this gendered space and activity to enjoy the backcountry, as my research project investigating website discussions has shown. Women hiking along the Appalachian Trail are not only traversing a male space but are participating in a masculine activity. Women who step onto the trail face a multiplicity of challenges that they must negotiate in order to claim their place and their participation as legitimate. By participating in the Appalachian Trail many women are violating gender role expectations in the wider world. Women who participate in this activity employee a number of strategies to reach the trail and pursue their hike; whether or not they consciously think about it they are (re)asserting their right to occupy and use that space on their own terms.

The social gendering of places should be considered in relationship to which spaces and in what capacity those spaces are portrayed as available to women. In 1997 Ann Filemyr wrote “Going Outdoors and Other Dangerous Expeditions”, in which she examined the ways in which women’s access and experiences in the outdoors are limited. “Outdoors remains gendered as male space, racialized as white space, and sexualized as heterosexual space” (Filemyr 1997:160). The narrative style she used highlights
that women are encouraged to stay inside where it is safe. The outdoors is too dangerous for girls and women to go about alone. The ideology that women are not safe in the outdoors without an escort persists today and is in part why a woman hiking alone in a male space creates a crisis of fear. Ann asks us to consider “how does the interplay of oppressions shape perceptions of, participation in and relationship to the outdoors” (1997:160). It is the interconnectedness of these oppressions and perceptions that I feel impact women’s mobility in the context of the Appalachian Trail. Take for example, a more recent account of women involved in outdoor activities, the murder of two women along the Appalachian Tail. Murder itself and the fear it instigates exemplifies how oppressions can shape perception of and participation in hiking the Appalachian Trail. Authorities would not declare the motive behind the crime leaving one to ponder why the crime occurred.

For a woman to participate in activities such as hiking destabilizes femininity, submerging it in maleness. She is participating in an activity that is understood to be outside of her gender role. “Attitudes about body influence women or men’s use of space” (Little 2002). Men ideologically have power over nature and landscape as penetrators and thus ideologically over the woman who is viewed to be passive like nature. Thus a man is permitted to enter into and conquer the natural, but for a woman to do the same indicates that she is in competition with the man. Rural environments are one type of space where a man defines his masculinity (Little 2002). Theoretically, a woman’s presence in that environment threatens to emasculate the males who are in the processes of defining their masculinity. Her presence instead shows that masculinity is not something which is required in the backcountry. Thus a woman crossing through many rural environments while hiking along the Appalachian Trail is moving through a place where she is destabilizing ideas about the place and ideas about masculinity. Such factors contribute to hiking and other outdoor activities being perceived as dangerous for women.

Women branching out from the home into areas not portrayed as their own have often drawn criticism down upon them as they are perceived as placing themselves and others at risk. In “Mobilizing the Movement” Cresswell turns his attention to the impact of the automobile on women’s mobility. The
history of the automobile is fraught with masculine ideas such as the control of space, sexual conquest and power of control over one’s own destiny (Cresswell 2005). Taking control of that destiny and potentially having futures aside from a staying at home confounded many people as cars rolled onto the scene. Because the act of mobility was viewed as a masculine activity, women were assumed to be transgressing their assigned and socially accepted roles when they began driving (Cresswell 2005). There was a backlash against women drivers and many cartoonists would portray them as she-males (Cresswell 2005). Cresswell presents a wealth of ideas in this article, among them are that mobility is gendered, mobile women destabilize ideologies of the feminine, and ideology and power pervade attitudes toward and practices of mobility. Cresswell points out reasons why women who assumed control of the automobile posed serious questions for the individual as well as the society (2005). The points drawn out here concern more than just the use of the automobile; these ideas illustrate a bounded propriety to which women have been expected to conform. If taking the wheel is taking control of one’s own destiny, moving further away from the home, then throwing off the home, the auto, and walking into the woods for six months on the Appalachian Trail could certainly be understood as an a threat to ideas of femininity.

If women walking into the backcountry are abandoning or restructuring notions of acceptable behavior surely there are ways in which they are expected to behave while they are there. In this vein let us consider how it is and was suggested that women on the Appalachian Trail behave. Cheryll Glotfelty’s (1996) work examines the how-to texts available to women in the United States during and following the women’s movement of the 1960s. Glotfelty points out that there is a vast discrepancy between the backpacking guides with implicit male readers and those directed at women. Notably not only were the women’s guides of the day less technically involved than the unisex guides but they emphasized with particular attention ways a woman could maintain her femininity while on the trail (Glotfelty 1996). The texts encouraged women to bring along something special to remind them that they were feminine such as
a pair of lacy underwear or a pair of earrings (Glotfelty 450:1996). As she points out, the primary concern in these guides is reassuring women that they can preserve their feminine identity.

The guidebooks discussed here hint at ways in which women can preserve the feeling of femininity while adventuring into male space. Interestingly enough there is an additional bit of information in the women’s guide books, to beware of men, both in a criminal capacity and in their macho risk taking (Glotfelty 1996). The performance of femininity and womanhood had not vanished with the additional activities becoming available to a larger group of women. It seems in fact that advice written about how to be a woman in the wilderness points to a larger issue of ensuring that women were still identifiable and in their proper social place in this uncharted male space. In her conclusion Glotfelty asserts that women hiking today no longer give any thought at all to being feminine on the trail (1996). I question the accuracy of this assertion. Perhaps women no longer worry about taking a pair of lacy underwear with them on the trail but I question whether or not we can say they no longer give thought to being feminine on the trail.

It takes a special person to make the estimated five million footsteps (AT Essentials 2008) from Springer Mountain, GA and end at Mt. Katahdin, ME. While the trail crosses near and through several communities, it is largely isolated from the immediacy of buildings except when passing along roads or towns. It is the sort of place where only those in proximity to you know where you are. This relative isolation combined with the idea that the outdoors is not a safe place for women constructs a paradox for women who wish to hike the trail. A woman setting out to hike the trail may feel isolated and experience anxiety if she allows herself to embody the socially perceived danger women face on the trail.

The perception of danger is heightened by the evening crime report and especially by reports about violence against women. The murder of Julianne Williams and Lollie Winans in 1995 highlighted the potential for violence to occur. Their murder also heightened the uneasiness that accompanies some women moving through the backcountry. Murder is not limited to women or to men, yet men and women at the time had very different responses after learning about the crime. While many of the male
respondents approached for commentary on the murders in 1996 said they were unwavering in their pursuit of the trail, women indicated a more cautious approach. Porter Teejarden commented that “‘For women it’s real depressing because men don’t have to worry about this half as much’” (Appalachian Trail 1996). This comment reflects the idea that men are less susceptible to violence of this nature than women. At the very least it points out that men are less prone to worry about it becoming a part of their reality.

These murders should be kept in perspective, but the apprehension they evoke is not unreasonable, and its expression echoes the idea that women must be hyper aware of potential threats. Many women who hike the trail are forced to give extra consideration to safety by the violence perpetrated against women by men. The perception of fear seems certain to alter the ways in which many women approach their hike on the Appalachian Trail.

The danger women face is echoed in the writing of some who have hiked the trail. The danger has not only been one of individual perception but it has also been echoed in local voices. Kelly Winters illustrates fear and violence in Walking Home: A Woman’s Pilgrimage on the Appalachian Trail. She recalls not only her own experience being chased by two men, but visits a local perspective on the murders of Lollie and Julianne. She reports a local woman as having said “‘I heard two girls got themselves killed’” (Winters 2001: 192). The girls are given agency in their own deaths when phrased this way. Winters questions why “everyone” phrases it that way (2001:192). If it were phrased in the passive, two girls were killed; there would be less responsibility on the girls. For some people the girls behavior, hiking and camping in the wilderness somehow invited this violence.

Women sometimes come to terms with the dangers associated with activities by ceding whole areas of their lives as too dangerous (Mantilla, 1996). Perhaps it is of little surprise that the dangerous areas of life are outside of women’s traditional spaces. “In the case of random attacks on women, instead of finding ways to make the world safer for women, individual women are advised to ‘be careful,’ and to
stay home” (Mantilla, 1996). This ideology represents a stance that promotes fear and justifies violence by suggesting that a woman out of place is asking for it.

Deborah Bialeschki examines the current perceptions of danger among women who involve themselves in outdoor activities. It is interesting to note that a majority of women feel concerned for their safety while hiking, but most of that fear is centered around other people and not on the natural environment. Some women refuse to cede this area of their lives as dangerous and will not give up their outdoor activities in order to be cautious. Most interesting in Bialeschki’s article is the perception of fear and the acknowledgement of a perceived threat simply for being female. It is in this vein that I am particularly interested in what women do on the trail. How do individual women perform their identities and present themselves to passersby? Are they meek on the trail and thereby pushed to the fringes of the trail in order to seek safety? To what extent does the presentation of self depend on (or affect) location?

As I prepared for my journey on the trail, even those who did not know me expressed concern for my safety. Men and women of various age groups expressed concern. Time and again my interlocutors conveyed their belief that the outdoors was a place full of danger for women. Most of these warnings pointed to vulnerabilities, most specifically safety, and other people, explicitly men as a primary threat. Notions of eminent human danger along the trail did not reflect the reality that most injury occurs due to poor planning, bad nutrition, and falls. The most common problems suffered by hikers are injury and illness, to which men and women report little difference in susceptibility (Boulware 2004). When discussing my own Appalachian Trail adventures, many people have questioned my ability to protect myself against an assailant, but not considered other elements of the trail. While it is possible that I could be attacked it is far more likely that I will sprain my ankle or be malnourished. Women generally are not socialized in the outdoors nor encouraged to participate in outdoor activities unless it is with an organization such as the girl scouts. This combined with the fear of violence limits women’s participation in hiking (Coble et al. 2003). In my analysis of a conversation taking place on a women hikers’ message board after Meredith Emerson was murdered in January of 2008, women responded to a post which
posed male danger as the greatest safety risk. Though agreeing that some men may be dangerous the respondents insisted that the trail poses a greater risk. The idea that the woods are not a safe place for women is just one obstacle that the women of the Appalachian Trail must navigate.

The ideology that the woods are dangerous for women is an example of what recreation studies describes as a leisure constraint. The threat of danger alone might be enough to keep a woman from considering hiking alone. There has been much work done on defining and evaluating leisure constraints faced by women who choose to participate in activities outside their assigned gender role. Hiking has been described above as a male pursuit and evidence supports that assertion. So let us say that hiking is outside of the typical female gender role. Let us also consider that “more women hike than play softball, basketball, tennis or golf” (Chordes and Ibrahim 1999) totaling over 11 million women (Coble et al. 2003). That is an extraordinary number of women who are participating in activities outside their socially designated role. Now consider A. Chasteen’s (1994) findings that 23 out of 25 women will avoid activities they enjoy out of fear if they are alone. This illustrates the huge number of women who could potentially be hiking but will not if they are unaccompanied. Women generally fear violence more than men although they are assaulted less (Metha and Bondi 1999).

Recreation studies considers the factors that prevent participation an antecedent leisure constraint, in this case the constraint is the socialization of gender (Auster 2001). In the instance of gender socialization, women are taught that the outside is not a space for them and that outdoor activities are male pursuits. Gender stereotyping is such a powerful force that it can prevent women from even considering hiking. If gender has this much power the impact it has on the experience of the Appalachian Trail must also be significant. This is all the more reason why studying women’s experiences on the Trail will highlight the ways in which women overcome constraints and negotiate their way through gendered spaces.

Nonetheless women are still interested in pursuing outdoor activities. Sarah Pohl’s work on “Women Wilderness, and Everyday Life”, discusses women’s outdoor activities in relationship to the
benefits of those activities. This by virtue acknowledges that society has recognized that women are participants in outdoor activities. She looks at women’s experiences in an outdoor environment for their helpful and positive effects. She states that women in the outdoors learn lessons of self-sufficiency, to experience a change in perspective and to become more secure with their place in the world (Pohl 2000). With exposure to and experience in the wilderness boosting women’s appreciation for themselves and for the natural world, the social walls keeping women out of the woods should be torn down.

**The Appalachian Trail**

The idea for an Appalachian trail began in the early 1900s with Benton MacKaye, who “sometimes claimed that the idea for the A.T. was born one day when he was sitting in a tree atop Stratton Mountain in Vermont” (AT History 2008). “The trail was envisioned as a first step toward a new socioeconomic domain where traditional American life ways would be rationally reconstructed in a modern context, where communitarian principles would order social relationships, and where need rather than profit would motivate economic activity”(Foresta 1987:76). The trail however was not simply to be based upon these principles; rather, those features were to be supplemented and supported by the human desire to be out of doors. “The project is one for a series of recreational communities throughout the Appalachian chain of mountains from New England to Georgia, these to be connected by a walking trail” (MacKaye 1921:6).

As we know it today, the trail connects many communities through fourteen states from Georgia to Maine. However it is not the communal collective of MacKaye’s vision. While the potential for reform in the wilderness sounds productive, the idea hit the intellectual marketplace a little late. The working class was largely unable and uninvited to take part in the construction of the trail or enjoy it after its creation. From MacKaye’s conception, the trail quickly became a recreational space constructed and inhabited by those who were in an economic position to afford it. The trail was completed in 1937 and fell into disrepair during WWII, to be completed again in 1955. Where the original trail was simply going to be a long path utilizing old forest roads, the trail today has been planned and constructed for hikers.
“Today’s route, though engineered much more elaborately, often requires more climbing, because it leads up the sides of many mountains that the old woods roads bypassed” (AT History 2008). These improvements to the trail have heightened its appeal and also served to increase the remote feeling of the trail itself.

The Appalachian Trail has stories to tell; not only those of yesterday’s traveler but those of the indigenous peoples who lived over its slopes. The names of places along the trail reflect the history of Appalachia that is rekindled by those who ponder their meanings. Places such as Blood Mountain, Slaughter Gap, Wayah (Wolf) Bald, Nantahala (noon sun), and Standing Indian Mountain invoke memories of a romanticized Appalachia. The Cherokee names of Wayah Bald and Nantahala highlight that Appalachia had a history before European conquest (Marshall 1998). The amount of history that hikers are aware of is largely unknown.

**Women in Appalachia**

The Appalachian region has a rich cultural heritage and to understand how women on the trail are perceived locally, it would benefit us to understand the history of women in Appalachia. Some of the accounts of women in the region are reflective of a domestic literary tradition and focus on life in Appalachia more than on adventure while others push beyond those limits. I am most immediately concerned with those women who wrote of experiences outside of the domestic sphere. For example, look at the works of Annie Dillard, notably “Pilgrim at Tinker Cliffs”. For Dillard, the pilgrimage is one of spiritual enlightenment (Marshall 1998:88). Dillard blends the Christian and scientific views, illustrating an understanding of nature as at once beautiful and horrifying. In her writing, the details “give the particulars of the place” (Marshall 1998:89), reflecting that the little things can generate meanings for the places to which they are attached. Her vivid description of the land and of the minute details of nature brings Tinker Cliffs and Tinker Creek to life. Tinker Creek itself has been sanctified for a few hikers lucky enough to have stumbled across Dillard’s work before their journey, I was only familiar with it because I was researching the trail.
Mary Murfree has also written about the Appalachian region. In Murfree’s stories, women are closely aligned with nature. Her most well-known work “Prophet of the Great Smokey Mountains” was published in 1855. In this work, the “protagonist Dorinda Casey feels protective of things in nature, finds solace there, close association while men are in opposition to nature and are unmoved by it, the male relationship to nature is one of conquest” (Marshall 1998:55). In both of these works, women share in a special relationship with the natural world, and each woman draws on spiritual elements in nature to tell her story.

The trouble is that, in Murfree’s time, the type of nature that women were associated with was that of civilized gardens and gentle flowers not the mountains they were writing about (Women and Geography Study Group 1997:180). Critics reflected that Murfree’s biggest “mistake was when she turned away from the garden party and took the long path up the mountain” (Marshall 1998:62). This criticism of Murfree helps to articulate an ideological boundary that a woman’s place was not in the wilderness in life or in literature. Even as Murfree put her pen to paper she was being discredited by critics for writing about a subject outside of a proper realm. Murfree also drew sharp criticism for her description of the landscape because she described it for the sake of itself and not as a plot contribution. To Murfree, “all aspects of landscape are participants not spectators” (Marshall 1998:63). Like Murfree, I share in the sentiment and believe that aspects of the landscape shape the experiences of the trail, though they themselves may or may not be the plot of the day.

From these two texts it seems that at least a few women were able to create texts dealing with women in nature. Common to both was that the male element represented civilization and only women had a special kinship with the natural world. Here I pause to ponder the implications of a world where women were understood as most closely aligned with all of nature, within their own minds, and were separated from it and relegated to gardens by critics.

The trail, though long and rugged, has attracted adventurous individuals since its inception. Many women have taken on the task of hiking the Appalachian Trail. One of the most notable of these is
Grandma Gatewood. “When Grandma Gatewood hiked the Appalachian Trail in 1955, she tramped all 2,170 miles in tennis shoes, her only shelter an army blanket, a raincoat, and a shower curtain” (Freeling 2002). At the time she completed her hike she was 67 years old. She later hiked the trail twice more becoming the first person to hike the entire trial three times. Imagine the bewildered hikers watching as Grandma Gatewood completed the trail. Partly due to the strain of the trail and partly due to the six months it takes to complete it only a small percentage of those individuals who begin the trail will actually complete it.

Planning, Methods, and Theory

This is a writing project unlike any other I have ever attempted. I combine my research and my personal experiences to tell a story about the experiences of women on the Appalachian Trail. The story to be told here combines academic analysis with life experiences, to reveal that the Appalachian Trail traces two parallel paths. One path exists in the minds of those who do not know it—those unfamiliar with its terrain and its characters. Another path exists for those who have followed its contours, encountering the many faces one finds when following the white blazes that mark the Appalachian Trail.

While my research is taking place along the Appalachian Trail this research project is not about the trail, in the way that you might be expecting. Rather this is a research paper about utilizing a particular methodology to gather data and how to apply the autoethnographic method in the writing process to highlight experience fostered by hiking and researching the Appalachian Trail. This is about researching and utilizing autoethnography. There are several factors that contribute to my selection of this method. I need to be frank about my own subjectivity, positioning myself simultaneously as a researcher and a hiker and also being able to account for the ways that previous experiences have shaped my approach trail and to research.

For the first time since I had first hiked on the trail I read trail journals, fact books and narratives, analyzed discourse on the trail, and talked with people both hikers and non-hikers about their
experiences with or ideas about the Appalachian Trail. I was trying to gage what other people thought about the trail and how it was presented in narratives. I wanted to see what the trail was made of for people both on and off the trail. Of course just reading about the trail would never be enough to try and make a statement about the experience of being on the trail. I was going to have to put my boots in the mud to see who was out there on the trail and what the long distance experience would be like for a young woman setting out alone. As I began to explore what it might mean to evaluate experience the Appalachian Trail I understood that it was imperative to go to the Trail. Not just to linger around trail heads, but to place one foot in front of the other and carry myself over the mountains. I understood from my upbringing in cultural anthropology that experiencing the Appalachian Trail and interacting with the other hikers would be the hinge from which I would hang my research. The element of experience is in essence a key to my credibility, much more so than my reading about women’s experiences on the trail (Knibbe and Versteeg 2008:47). The belief that experience enhances a researcher’s knowledge of and ability to understand an activity or a place, that their very presence gives them a leg up over those old arm chair scientists might be considered one way that research itself has embodied phenomenological ideals.

What I had not realized in the early stages of planning was the extent to which my initial approach to learning about the Appalachian Trail --learning from experience--had been influenced by phenomenology. This notion of how to approach research had sprouted from the early philosophy of Edmund Husserl questioned notions of the Cartesian split which isolated mind and body. For Husserl the key to understanding was consciousness; without something to be conscious of consciousness cannot exist (Knibbe and Versteeg 2008:56, Lindsay 1996:197, Husserl 1965). Understanding the way that we constitute the world is in essence the creation of life worlds. To Husserl, the motivations of thought were the important factor in understanding beliefs and ontologies. Consciousness was the intellectual vein mined by Husserl. Though this theory may seem far removed from my experiential approach to research the two are inextricably linked.
To explain this linkage it is imperative to first explain the paths that have been taken from Husserl’s first work. Martin Heidegger, one time assistant to Husserl, disconnected consciousness in its immediacy from phenomenology when he defined it as a formal method of “letting things be seen in the way they show themselves” (Luft 2005:147). Paradoxically this statement is at once very simplistic and quite complicated. What does it mean just to let things appear as they are, and what can be gained by such an activity? There are a few keys to explicating Heidegger’s approach to phenomenology. “Being-in-the-world” or “Dasein” is an analytical approach to the existential subject, presenting lived experience as a structure of intentionality (Lindsay 1996:198, Knibbe and Versteeg 2008:56). This means that the focus should rest on the mundane everyday experiences, and that these moments of being reveal our intent in action. Whereas Husserl emphasized consciousness, Heidegger emphasized being.

This brings us a little closer to understanding how phenomenology influences modern anthropology. It is imperative that I explain the way that these two early thinkers have been adopted by others. Two thinkers who have taken the original philosophy of phenomenology and expounded upon it are Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Pierre Bourdieu. These two authors have elaborated on earlier philosophies and their shortcomings to potentially leverage phenomenology’s greatest influence. Academics today would be hard pressed to talk about current theories of embodiment without utilizing the foundations poured by Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu.

Merleau-Ponty furthers Heidegger in his assertion that, “Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of ‘I think that’ but of ‘I can’ (1962:124, 137, Jackson 1983:327, 1996:31, Lindsay 196:198). This statement serves to illustrate the emphasis on the capability to do something. This aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s work is explicated when he claims, “‘a being-towards-the-thing through intermediary of the body’” (1962:137 in Jackson 1996:31). His stance is claiming again that the body is a source for the creation of knowledge. It is through the body that we are able to achieve being at all. “The meaning of a bodily action is not given to the action by some external agent but is in the action itself” (Jackson 1996:32). For Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology was a response to an objective positivist science.
Bourdieu, like Merleau-Ponty, is interested in focusing on the body. Moreover, Bourdieu is interested in embodiment of practice. In his discussion of the practice he adopts Marcel Mauss’ “habitus” which to Mauss represented socially patterned techniques of the body (Mauss 1973:73 in Lindsay 1996:198) Bourdieu adopts the concept but pushes it further. Looking at the actions of the body as being influenced by the environment through which it moves, the formation of habits are programmed by our interactions with objects and our relationships with others (Jackson 1983:334). It is important to stress here that one way the theory goes into practice is by observing the habits of the body; one can gain insights as to how the body learned those habits. For instance, I exercise some degree of proficiency when it comes to typing at this key board, but I have no skills when it comes to the telegraph.

Feminists have used concepts of embodiment to stress gendered social norms. A more gender-oriented look at the way bodily habits emphasize to social conditioning would be observing the difference in walking between boys and girls. Boys tend to have wider, broader stances, and longer strides, while girls tend to have shorter more narrowly defined strides. This reflects social expectations of gender norms, even though the differences in practice are subconscious.

Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu are aiming at the same target though they approach it differently. Both are trying to collapse dualities of perception. Merleau-Ponty, is working at that of subject-object, meanwhile Bourdieu is pushing the dichotomy of structure-practice, but both are utilizing embodiment as a methodological approach (Csordas 1990:8). Perhaps though, for the purpose of this thesis, it is not as important to expound upon the history of phenomenology as it is to point toward the directions it is currently taking in anthropology, or the directions anthropology is taking with phenomenology. If this is so, then it would be more relevant to understand what phenomenology can mean in a more contemporary context.

Phenomenology, with its emphasis on experience, is often misunderstood. “It is commonly but mistakenly thought that phenomenology is a kind of intuitive, solipsistic, or introspective philosophy that repudiates science” (Schutz 1962:99-100 in Jackson 1996:1). Rather than snubbing science as some
people suggest, phenomenology snubs the idea that there is only one way to knowledge. This notion is a favorite of postmodern scholars; it allows each phenomena to be investigated within its particular context. More specifically it emphasizes that knowledge is produced within the body. “Meaning should not be reduced to what can be thought or said, since meaning may exist simply in the doing and in what is manifestly accomplished by an action” (Jackson 1996:32). The bodily construction of knowledge iterates that all of the senses and physical experiences serve to construct the world just as the mind does.

Phenomenology emphasizes that the knowledge of the body is not open to evaluation in the same way that a physics equation is open to testing (Jackson 1996:31). Rather than being made up of hard and fast rules governing the elements involved, evaluations must be made on a case by case basis. Careful consideration of time and place are but a few of the concerns when embarking on a phenomenological analysis. It requires the suspension of our own situated assumptions of how the world works. The analyses of experiences of the mundane, everyday aspects of life require that we leave our preconceptions at the door (Berger and Luckman 1967:20). Anthropologist Michael Jackson emphasizes that because phenomenology is more subjective it is useful in bridging the gap between what academics know and what is known by those studied, he highlights this in the work of Paul Riesman and Lila Abu-Lughod (1996:7).

Phenomenology has found its home in the halls of academia being thoroughly integrated into many aspects of social science research. Its uses range from generalized theories to specific examples of phenomenology as methodology in sociology, anthropology, queer studies, and feminist research, to name a few. Phenomenology inspires renewal in theory and method within medical anthropology, the anthropology of religion, and also within theories of embodiment that strive to move beyond constructivism (Knibbe and Versteeg 2008:48).

Phenomenology, as updated and reincarnated in anthropology, is nearly ubiquitous. The original ideas of phenomenology have been pulled up and processed into diverse studies of embodiment, intersubjectivity, and experience. According to Jackson, many scholars are using some of the basic
concepts of the older phenomenology without realizing they are doing it. Many more state their
connections up front but push phenomenology beyond the perception of the world and the experience of
the world through the senses. Theoretically we have moved it beyond its boundaries, expanding the
potential for further research. “Many ground-breaking ethnographies are providing us with timely and
ironic reminders that for the most part human beings live their lives independently of the intellectual
schemes dreamed up in academe, and that the domain of knowledge is inseparable from the world in
which people actually live” (Jackson 1996:4). This is integral in my pursuit of the trail, I cannot simply
read about it academic or narrative accounts, both would leave me wanting (Lindsay 1996).

Phenomenology played a serious role in the development of methodological and theoretical
approaches to research in the discipline and it has also had a heavy influence on writing styles. Narrative
ethnography, auto-ethnography and ethnographic poetry all owe elements of their existence to the power
of experience. Reminiscent of Heidegger’s view that an experientially authentic language would make
verbs its grammatical subject, Lila Abu-Lughod used a narrative account of the experience of a young
Bedouin woman to call into question the status and authority of concepts of honor and shame (Jackson
1996:3). If I was going to be able to make sense of the Appalachian Trail, I would need to understand
what it means to follow its path. To follow the path, experiencing its physical and cultural aspects then
presenting that experience in a way that is true to life became central to my research. Phenomenological
theory brought me to understand the importance of experience and representation.

In making preparations for my hike I decided that I would backpack along the trail for two
months. I knew in that amount of time I should be able to cover approximately 600 miles, depending
on trail conditions and my physical ability. Interviewing other hikers was presumed to be one way to
gain greater insight into the experience of the trail. However the trail also presented me with a
particularly interesting conundrum, being that hikers usually follow the trail in a linear progression,
and because I would be following this pattern, the number of hikers I would encounter could fluctuate
greatly. I might encounter many hikers or only a few depending on the pace at which we moved. I set
out with the intentions to conduct several interviews but I was quite aware that my personal
relationship to the trail would impact my experiences. I was also conscious that the only experience I
could ever hope to understand with any semblance of its entirety is my own. This led me to a certainty
that I would have to include my own story in my writing about the trail.

Puzzled as to how to proceed I reflected on ideas of reflexivity. Closely considering how my
own positionality would shade my experiences I decided that I needed to employ a research method
which would allow me to place myself as an active agent within my research. In this frame of mind I
was guided by my advisor toward autoethnography. In the beginning I was uncertain about how this
type of research could be done, and even more puzzled by what it might look like when the research
was finished and it was time to write it up. Looking at the potentials of autoethnography I began to
feel that it could heighten the value of my research by inviting both the participants and later the
readers to participate in the re-creation of the trail experience. I hoped that by using autoethnographic
methods I would be able to represent the lived experience of hiking the Appalachian Trail, using my
own voice to tell the story of women’s experiences with and the significance of the Appalachian Trail.
I was also hopeful not only to be reflexive about my past experiences of the trail, but also about my
position as a researcher and the impact that has on my position as a hiker. Also in the vein of research,
I needed to be able to reflect my approach, uncertainties and moments of insight.

To discuss using autoethnography also means explaining its methods and implications. One of
the most notable differences between autoethnography and more traditional ethnography is the way
that it reads, and intrinsic to that is its construction. Autoethnography reads more like a narrative
account than a scientific explanation. Narrative autoethnography is constructed by layering a personal
narrative, where the life and experience of the ethnographer are infused with the subject, with
traditional analysis, evaluating the life experience in the cultural context (Ellis 2004:45). In writing
this type of research I am the researcher and I write in the first person, I am grouped with my
participants, and I direct your attention as my reader. I invite you into my world and I also invite the
others involved in my research to share their stories in their own voices (ibid.). Of course in seeking to write this way also means that during the course of my research participants are not just respondents, they actually participate in and co-construct my research.

Reflexivity has recently been trumpeted by George Marcus. He and others before him have called, for researchers to be critically reflexive (Marcus 1994, Marcus 1998). Because my own experiences with the trail and with the outdoors in general has impacted my interests, my approach and my interpretation of the new experiences the trail presents to me have to be examined. To be reflexive my research must begin from within my own story and not lose sight of the way that I influence my interpretation. In re-emphasizing my own place in my research as a researcher and a participant, an insider and outsider, both observer and observed, I must analyze my encounters with other hikers (DeLyser 2001:441, Ellis 2004:28, Tedlock 1991:78). Those encounters present me with a wealth of information about life on the trail. Simultaneously hikers when learning that I was conducting research on the trail, seemed to change their interpretation of me as a hiker. Of the hikers that I met, five of them avoided discussing the trail for research purposes and three others refused outright. I am an experienced hiker and a green researcher, and on this trip I was both simultaneously. I could no more be just a hiker than I could be a tree; every passing experience was interpreted somewhat differently. Cultivating the story of my research from my personal experiences allows me to address my own biases. While some people might say that I am putting too many of my own thoughts and writing my own biases into my research, which there is no denying my subjectivity must be included, the inclusion of my own position gives my research greater depth and adds layers of meaning otherwise unattainable, as Carolyn Ellis says, “there is something to gain” (2004:89).

The inclusion of my own participation and the voices of others in this way means being willing to develop data in different ways. One way of doing this is by focusing on the story that evolves as I develop a relationship with the other hikers who are present on the trail, as well as the stories that we bring to the table (Ellis 2004:64). On the trail the stories we bring to the table might be directly about
experiences with the Appalachian Trail or another background story. Just as important as the stories is that they are co-created to become meaningful to us, and my sharing one story might remind you or a participant, of another story, and so generates a sharing. (Ellis 2004:66, 67). This type of interaction reinforces my place as a member of the community. I am not just fishing for information; I am sharing an experience of a place, of a movement, which we can talk about.

The experience of the trail is a key component to my research and I could not look away from it. It is imperative for my ethnographic project that I consider how people interact with the trail, physically, emotionally, mentally, how the trail resonates through their actions. This means not only sharing stories and listening to what they say but also paying attention to what they do. Not only does this project demand that I pay attention to other hikers actions, but I must also be conscious of my own actions. More, it means paying attention to my senses and writing honestly about them, it means taking my body seriously as a source of understanding and experience, not just my thoughts (Ellis 2004, Stoller 1989). In this sense this project is evocative of a phenomenological approach; I will need to evaluate my own presence. I am going to be hiking the Appalachian Trail, each day I will feel different in the morning than I will at night. Depending on the conditions of the trail, the time of day, the weather, what I ate for dinner, how I slept that night, I will have a different physical presence. All these factors that affect my physical body will also affect my perception and experience on the trail.

With this discussion of experience and co-creating stories, one of the additional questions which will surely form as I begin to present my research in a written form likely questions the accuracy of my narrative. The notion that in some way my autoethnographic narrative will be less factual than a more standardized version of ethnography is reminiscent of positivist notions of universality. Most anthropologists today I believe would be fast to pass judgment on the old positivist anthropology for its fallacies. Just as there is no single truth, no singular standard against which to judge cultures, there is no singular way of writing or presenting the experiences of the researcher in the field.
While my account might resemble a narrative more so than an ethnography it will be constructed from data gathered and notes taken in the field. The stories that are constructed in the research process and that are written up after the initial research process is complete might be at the heart of the skeptic. Carolyn Ellis, directs the would be autoethnographer to Bateson’s point that stories are true only in the present (Ellis 2004:116, Bateson and Bateson 1988). My field notes tell a story about what happened to me, my trail journals relate a day to day accounting of life on the trail. However complete these accounts may be they are my accounting of the day’s events. This takes us back to being hyper aware of my own subjectivity, and being explicit in presenting it to you as my reader. It is important to keep in mind that the narrative is my own, though from this narrative, I am able to draw connections between myself and other hikers, between my actual experience on the trail and the experience that literature warned me I would have. Of course the skeptic should also keep in mind that no matter who writes the field notes or how they write up their experiences their notes and observations are just as situated as mine.

No matter how complete notes may be there will always be gaps between the actualities of what happened and what is written. We create the story as we fill in the gaps in written word with memory. The story isn’t there waiting to be found, it is nurtured by the recorded record of and the memory of events (Ellis 2004:117). There is more to the written portion of the trail than just field notes, or journals, mixed in among these are writings of both prose and poetry. The same skeptics that question the narrative format of autoethnography will undoubtedly question if not repudiate the inclusion of poetry. However I believe that the inclusion of and potential analysis of these free writings can provide much insight to how the trail was experienced.

Lived experience is more like poetry than prose in form (Ellis 2004, Richardson 1992). Because a portion of my goal in writing autoethnographically is to convey a portion of my experiences along the Appalachian Trail poetry actually fits in quite nicely. “Poetry is embodied . . . it re-creates embodied speech in its meter, cadence, speed, alliteration, connotation and rhyme” (Ellis 2004:201). If I am able to communicate a particularly difficult climb, an interaction at a shelter, or the edict of the trail effectively
using poetry then it can be an effective tool for communication. Because I am talking in depth about an
experience that is highly embodied it is especially useful to use a form of writing that allows me to
potentially recreate a piece of that experience. To ignore that there are many ways of conveying
experience loses sight of what is actually the most important aspect of writing. That is being able to draw
connections between the research environment, observed and experienced, and the social representations
of the activity and environment.

An additional aspect of a narrative autoethnographic style of writing is that it lends itself to rich
description of the research environment. I cannot describe a day on the trail without giving a description
of what I saw, or perhaps more relevantly, what the trail asked of me. The trail for me is a kind of
dialogue between body and earth. That path can ask much of anyone who sets foot on it. Testing your
footing with rock and root, your endurance with seemingly endless up hills where the horizon line never
comes into view, your patience when the shelter is full and your fortitude as it winds its way up
mountains, only to lace you over the ridge time and again on a bad knee and a fractured foot. These stress
factors and fractures are only the rough patches. The trail is also a place of rejuvenation and rest, the
trailside stream where the feet can cool, or the black raspberries that add sweetness to the fields, the
mulberry tree that drops berries like gum drops, the lookouts where you can see forever, and the silent
places where you see the world as it is.

The Trail while being constructed by my experiences also influenced my experiences; as John
Wylie discovered in his walking; “you compose yourself in what’s around you” (2002:449). While
Whylie was writing of vistas, the accuracy of his statement extends well beyond vistas, into the rocks and
valleys, to the slight stream and the blooming laurels. The trail becomes itself, and it lives in my
perception. I feel it through my boots, I am inspired by its ridges, I am tormented by its rock, and I sense
its tangibility in the songs of birds. I know that the blazes that I will pass are limited, yet I know that it
the trail is endless. I acknowledge that the trail is created everyday for each hiker. I am not trying to
explain the landscape of the trail as if it were permanent, simply to present it as I came to know it through
my hike (Dewsbury et.al 2002). The affect generated and the percep of the trail “are that through which subject and object emerge and become possible” (Dewsbury et al 2002:439, Wylie 2005:236).

I devote a great deal of time, trying, somewhat desperately to present the trail as it was for me on my hike. I want you to experience the trail with me. I cannot talk about life on the trail, or any aspect of it, and truly discuss it, if it is not understood for the way that interacts with and is influenced by the landscape of the trail itself. In my description of the physical attributes of the trail, of shelters, and of how those places evoke both physical sensation and emotion, I recognize that landscape is not just a place, it is a place perceived (Minca 2007; Rose 2002; Tuan 1979). The Appalachian Trail presented in this thesis, was created by the experiences I had following its blazed path. I have attempted to recreate some if its impressions. The specificity of the instance might be somewhat lost in translation, but I hope to have conveyed the essence of the experience. If even a little of the enchantment inspired by the Appalachian Trail can come through my images and descriptions the trail can become more than just a place (Benediktsson 2007).

Not only is it imperative that I be able to vividly evoke the trail itself, but also that I be able to describe the characters on the trail as dynamic as they are. The characters are not reducible to simple statistics of male, female, 25, 34. Nor can those characters be considered obvious. On the trail everyone assumes a different name, generating a new identity, opening up the possibility for a different persona. Life in the world off the trail becomes removed from the experience of the trail. Whether you are homeless or a GIS mapping specialist becomes less relevant, it is more important that the rules of the trail are adhered to. The rules distinctive to the trail, and overall most people find that the expectations here are also different from live off the trail. I am using this method to allow for a style of writing that paints a more complete picture, perhaps one that is not the spitting image for everyone, but one that closely relates to the experiences of many women on the Appalachian Trail.

While I employ my own personal experiences to narrate a story of hiking the Appalachian Trail, I am telling a story of what could be another woman’s hike. I am telling a story about life on the trail,
complete with nuance and overt examples of what takes priority on the trail. By highlighting the multiple experiences of the trail and analyzing the themes I will be able to draw out a narrative that is applicable beyond the white blazes of the trail. I am connecting my experiences to those of other women and contrast the lived experiences of the trail with the ideological constructions that take place off the trail.  

**Methodology**

I first encountered the Appalachian Trail during the summer of 1998, between my junior and senior years of high school on a two week long women only backpacking trip from Tennessee to Georgia. Following graduation in May of 2000 I attended Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. Boone is situated in the Appalachians and I spent much of my time there hiking the trails of the surrounding area; from the Blue Ridge Parkway trails to Linville Gorge. These trips would range from day trips to a weeklong excursion. I grew to become familiar with and adept in the Southern Appalachians during the four and a half years I spent hiking around Boone.

I became interested in writing about the Appalachian Trail as an academic topic after planning to hike the entire trail in the summer of 2006. Another opportunity presented itself and I opted to travel and teach in Nicaragua instead of hiking that summer, but I still wanted to hike the trail. In a geography seminar that fall, I became interested in mobilities, and began to look for ties between mobility and the trail. My desire to hike the trail, the hesitancy espoused by friends and family, and exposure to a new literature combined to bring me to the trail as a scholar. As I was considering doing research on the trail I began paying closer attention to online hiker postings, particularly on a women hiker’s message board.

I was still working on my preliminary research when on New Year’s Day 2008, a young lady, Meredith Emerson was abducted from Blood Mountain while hiking and killed on January 4th by Gary Hilton. This tragic event, led to a flurry of discussions dealing with safety on the Appalachian Trail. One of the posts that emerged contained nine numbered points to safety. The author of the post believed that only by following those nine points could a woman be safe hiking. I conducted an analysis of the post to
discover what the author believed to be the dangers that could be avoided by following her points of safety.

Simultaneously, I began an analysis of women’s hiking gear. The research involved selecting articles such as backpacks, pants, shirts, jackets and evaluating them in color and in style to similar articles manufactured by the same company for men. The primary purpose of the investigation was to access the types of images being suggested to women hikers. I wanted to better understand what was being marketed to women hikers as the way a woman hiker should look. Yet emerging in my evaluation of gear and in online discussions was that the styles marketed at women often did not meet the desires of some women hikers, in color or cut. There was an aesthetic to the style of clothes that met visual requirements while neglecting some women’s desires for large pockets, loose sleeves and relaxed fits.

There was more research than this to be done. There was the research that would carry me over the trail. There was the research that would plan and mark out my journey that I had to continue from a year ago. I began reading the guide books and gear reviews I had looked at the year before. Whiteblaze.com became a key resource as I reviewed information on how other hikers had approached resupply points. I began walking approximately five miles every other day, wearing my hiking boots breaking in both my boots and my feet. I reviewed the spacing of shelters along the trail, and decided to try to move forward approximately ten miles per day, to reach the following shelter. I kept my daily mileage estimate conservative, allowing myself time to break in to life on the trail. To try and meet up with as many hikers as possible I asked members of the online hiking community where might be the best place to start and Harper’s Ferry stood out as a common suggestion and so it became my starting point.

I began dehydrating vegetables to pack along with my meals, and planning out which kinds of foods I would be taking. Reading up on cooking methods, I decided to use the freezer bag cooking method and to rely on dehydrated foods I prepared at home and on Knorr sides which I poured into Ziploc freezer bags. In the weeks leading up to my trip my Mom and I packaged the meals, trail mixes, tuna, snacks, fruit cups, drink mixes, water purifier, bug spray and accessories into eight boxes. Each box was
labeled with a date, and a master sheet linked the dates to the addresses where the boxes would be shipped. The boxes were left open for revision, and my Mom was in charge of shipping the boxes to me as I moved along the trail.

In the days leading up to the start of my trip I finalized my plans to have my partner, Emily, take me to Harper’s Ferry. I was not sure how far I would make it ahead or when I would come back, and though I planned to have my Mom pick me up from Vermont on August first, we made no concrete plans. I arrived at Harper’s Ferry a bundle of nerves. I adopted a trail name and signed the register at the Harper’s Ferry office of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. Mattie Monk, was born by taking two of my nicknames and putting them together. The next six weeks were spent hiking, meeting people, interviewing and experiencing life on the Appalachian Trail.

I met many people on and around the Appalachian Trail. I would end up hiking with the first thru-hiker I met on the trail, although it wouldn’t be for some time after our first meeting. I am forever indebted to her and my hiking family for all the friendship, support, and wisdom they gave me during my time on the trail. In the writing up of my experience, all trail names have been switched to pseudonyms to maintain the integrity and confidentiality of those involved in my research.

My research on the Appalachian Trail involved nearly two months of hiking along the trail from Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia to Salisbury, Connecticut. During this time, from the first of June to the middle of July 2008 I engaged in participant observation by hiking approximately 500 miles of trail, interacting with other hikers and the trail along the way. I was able to conduct interviews with hikers and people who lead their lives near the trail. Though I had hoped to be able to interview a number of women during my hike, I was surprised with the small number of long distance women hikers on the trail. Many of my interviews took place as casual discussions, which moved from topics of gear and distance hiked to opinions about the trail as an entity. I met many, many people hiking the trail as I walked those miles.

In preliminary conversations with other hikers I had people indicate that they were interested in my topic. Some people indicated that they found it is very interesting with a few women saying that it
was time someone thought about it. However not all of the feedback I received was positive. I also had one man on an online message board say that he hoped I wasn’t doing this research for some “pc” reason. In some way he felt threatened by my presence, not a hiker but as a researcher. Though many people I met along the trail were willing to talk with me about the trail, several hikers I met early on were not as eager to have that discussion. Negative responses however were not the norm. As I moved those mountain miles I talked with hikers, trail angels, business owners and mayors. Each conversation took on a life of its own as individuals we met along different parts of the trail. Many of these conversations were written down afterward as they took place while hiking. Some conversations were notated as they were taking place, and still others were recorded using a digital voice recorder. Each of these recorded interactions as well as the countless experiences that could not be recorded formed a living image of an Appalachian Trail.

One of the most amazing parts of my Appalachian Trail experience was becoming a part of what I can only call a trail family. Though at the beginning of my trip I had known none of the people I would come to think of my trail family, they became an essential part of my hike. I had met Earth in passing my first day on the trail. It would be some weeks later before we actually got to know one another. She was hiking with a couple she had met early in her hike, and eventually I was hiking with them as well. Our group formation was a part of my trail experience. They were there through the good days and the bad. Hiking with them I was able to experience a side of the Appalachian that is at once deeply personal and also communal.

I kept a trail journal, which I wrote in each day as time and the trail permitted. Recorded in its pages are tales of triumph and of defeat. There are days of entries where the amazing sights, sounds and smells of the trail take precedent in my reflections. There are other days where reflections on interactions with other hikers and the circumstances surrounding them were the topic discussed. Yet in all of my entries, the trail brings itself out as a place, as a community, as an adversary and as a benefactor of knowledge. I tried every day to write down the most interesting things that had happened or to record the
minutia that had consumed my attention, but there were never enough hours. There were times where I
wrote extensively about the difficulty, discomfort and disillusion I was experiencing, yet even behind
those moments I was finding out more about the trail than I ever knew existed.

The trail dictates a certain type of experience; you walk into the woods along a white blazed path
carrying everything you will use. The basic items consist of a backpack, a hammock, a tarp, a sleeping
bag, food, water bladder, bottles and purifier, a pot, an alcohol stove, denatured alcohol, a lighter/water
proof matches, a pot stand, a cup, a lexan spoon/fork/knife combo, soap, toothpaste, towel, toothbrush,
sunscreen, moleskin, duct tape, ankle wrap, bandages, antibiotic, hair bands, bandana, one extra outfit,
hat, rain jacket, pack cover, a base layer, socks, dry sacks, rope, a bear bag, a knife, notebooks, recorder,
pens, id, money, camera. I carried all of these items and many others. I selected my equipment carefully,
to both meet my needs and to illustrate that this was not my first time on the trail. My gear selection, its
innovations and its deficiencies became a topic of conversation as hikers traded ideas, complimented
creativity and made suggestions. This information and opinion sharing is part of community building and
opened doors for me to get to know the other people hiking that five hundred mile stretch. In totality I
hiked for six weeks on the Appalachian Trail, meeting numerous hikers, of those whose paths I crossed I
got to know fourteen hikers reasonably well, of them three were women. Not all of the hikers I
encountered contributed an interview, but every hiker shaped my trail.

**Implications of My Research**

This research contributes to the literature in cultural geography, anthropology, and women’s
studies by expanding the academic literature dealing with the gender and wilderness spaces. While other
people have investigated leisure constraints and point to fear as a tool for keeping women off the trail,
they neglect the experiences of those who overcome constraints and make it into the woods. Very little
ethnographic work has been done on the Appalachian Trail. The complex and active negotiations taking
place along the Appalachian Trail provides a unique opportunity to investigate tacitly gendered spaces
and activities. In what ways will the trail be (re)imagined by those who are hiking it? Women who hike
the Appalachian Trail are not only literally moving over mountains, they are also moving over mountains of socially gendered expectations. By examining the challenges women face in reclaiming this space and the right to occupy it as they see fit, it is possible to identify strategies for reconstructing other types of space. It is useful here to look at the numerous possibilities for my research, and ask, is this gendered concept of the Appalachian Trail lived out? Does the trail succumb to a generalized discussion of gender and space, or is this an entity that takes on a life of its own becoming something greater than the expectation this discussion might generate?

The Appalachian Trail creates an environment simultaneously removed from society and a part of it. Because of its uniqueness and the commitment it requires, the Trail forms a cultural nexus unique to the trail. The evidence of trail culture is most evident among thru-hikers and comes complete with its own particular language, with many terms being uniquely or distinctively used on the trail (AT Terms 2008). The uniqueness of the trail and those who thru-hike is well documented in many trail guides such as *Backpacker Magazine’s Guide to the Appalachian Trail*, by Jim Chase (1989). On the trail a new set of social rules and expectations apply. Thru-hikers embody these and often view day and weekend hikers as an invasive species on the trail (Chase 1989: xiv).

This paper will begin with a walk through an analysis of a warning about conceptualized danger for women on the trail, in order to establish the way that the trail is considered in regard to the dangers believed to be present. Following that evaluation will be a discussion of the various types of gear available to women hikers, and how that gear does and does not meet the desires and needs of some women hikers. The gear for women is fashionably feminine despite losing its function. This alone has bewildered many women searching for suitable outdoor attire. The discussion postulates why gear made in this fashion is prevalent and problematizes the notion of “its just fashion”. Departing from these two discussions largely removed from the trail, we begin to enter the world of the trail starting from a short history of the trail. Branching out into trail towns and hostels, which are in many ways a part of its original prescription are certainly critical to any journey along the trail. Next we gear with an evaluation
of my backpack, its content and the evolving organization of its necessity and desire. We then follow the
trail to the shelters that offer hikers reprieve from the elements, becoming a nucleus of temporary
communities. Examined here are both the activities that take place at shelters but also the ways that
shelters can become more than the simple wooden structures to inspire and inform your Appalachian
Trail. Leaving the shelters we travel through the landscapes of the trail, utilizing journal entries and
reflection to think about the ways that the landscape of the trail becomes the primary agent of its
experience. The people along the trail however cannot be forgotten and so the voices of other hikers and
trail angels echo true stories of the trail, before I can reveal my conclusion. The practice of the
Appalachian Trail, the hiking of it, generates another kind of trail. That trail exists within constructed
notions of gendered norms while becoming something greater than it is imagined to be.
TALKING DANGER OUTDOORS AND ON THE TRAIL

The chapter evaluates some cultural schema regarding the safety of women hikers on trails through the analysis of one post on an online women hikers’ message board. The post is regarding women’s safety on the Trail. It was added to the message board after the abduction and murder of a young woman who had been hiking alone with her dog on New Year’s Day 2008. To uncover hidden cultural understandings my evaluation will focus on metaphors, causal relationships and keywords in addition to structural features. By analyzing these features I gain an understanding about the construction of the outdoors as a socially gendered space.

Women’s experience with the outdoors and thus with the Appalachian Trail have been constructed and maintained using many tools, cultural construction being one of them. Throughout my literary research a theme emerged. This theme suggested that the outdoors is culturally understood as being a part of the male domain, becoming more masculine the further out we venture. Generations of women have been imagined only existing only within the garden. Many ideas regarding the outdoors and danger constrain women’s experiences. Through the analysis of this message board post I will gain insight about the types of socially constructed myths of space and danger in the outdoors that women must overcome to participate in activities such as hiking.

The discourse evaluated here is a message board posting that amounts to a “manifesto” dealing with women’s safety along the Appalachian Trail. It elicited a series of response posts to the message board. While the board is usually active discussing topics related to hiking the Trail, the “manifesto” was inspired by the abduction on New Year’s day and murder of Meredith Emerson four days later. Meredith had been hiking with her dog near the Appalachian Trail, on Blood Mountain in Georgia when she was abducted. Many posts occurred between the time of her abduction and the announcement of her murder. Most of those posts expressed concern for her safety, wondering if she was a member of the online
community, and trying to disseminate information into the community. The post I have selected was written after Meredith’s murder and in light of the circumstances surrounding her abduction.

The online community from which the ““manifesto”” originated is a women’s group. Membership in this online community excludes men. The age range in this community is broad, covering many generations. While there are people of different ages and backgrounds participating in this forum, it is not possible from the posts to ascertain those differences. The unifying factor is that all of the respondents are women. This is an important factor when considering an analysis of the data. All the respondents know that because of the restricted membership that they are speaking within a community of women. This knowledge most likely allows members to speak more openly than if some individuals were male.

The limited audience allows the post considered here to be constructed more directly than if the audience was mixed with men and women. There are two aspects for which this is particularly true. First, the author does not have to worry about differentiating which concerns apply to women as opposed to men. Secondly, the presumed audience shares a gendered cultural knowledge which the author can draw on to further her points about safety.

Throughout the ““manifesto”” post, the author (Pooka) outlines what she deems important for “newbies” and other women hikers to know and do if they plan to participate in hiking with any degree of safety. Safety is narrowly defined as Pooka addresses it. Responses to the ““manifesto”” included a series of posts from other group members who took issue with the assumptions and points that Pooka made. The numerous responses refuting the points that Pooka made in the post reminded me of the ways I found myself challenged to defend my decision to hike the Trail this summer. The parallel of Pooka’s voice and the voices I encountered and the similarity in the online site responses and those issues pointed out that this post might reflect a larger social ideology concerning women and the outdoors, and thus a fruitful discourse for analysis.

The initial assertions stated in the “manifesto” represent an articulation of the myth of the dangerous outdoors. The idea is that the outdoors is not a safe place for women, and Pooka’s assertions
that women can only be safe in the woods if they follow a certain set of rules echo what Gill Valentine calls, “the social expression of patriarchy” (1992:27). Pooka’s “manifesto” also emphasizes that men perpetuate violence against women and that they are the biggest threat women face, particularly in the outdoors. While many women participate in hiking as a form of recreation “33 out of 35 women interviewed claimed that they would never hike alone because they would feel isolated and vulnerable to attack by a man” (Coble et al. 2003:2). Pooka’s “manifesto” reflects this broad base fear of violence and offers a troubling protocol that women can follow to stay safe while hiking. Pooka’s vehemence, echoed by that of comments directed toward me, indicate there must be something particular to the wild outdoors that saturates it with imminent danger for women. Through the analysis of Pooka’s “manifesto” it is my goal to uncover how Pooka understands this environment.

Once the “manifesto” appeared and responses began to be posted there continued to be other discussions taking place on the site, many of which concerned Meredith Emerson. These included ideas for a memorial at the Southern Ruck (a Southern Appalachian Trail gathering in Spring), plans to attend the Ruck and various other topics specific to the backpacking community. When I was making the decision about how to select which posts I would include in my discourse analysis I first tried to think about what the text could tell me. I realized that the murder constituted an event of high tellability (reason to be discussed and retold) that would have a tremendous impact on the hiking community because crime of this nature doesn’t usually occur along trails. I immediately considered how discussion of this violation of the norm could reveal otherwise tacit understandings women have about the outdoors. Primary, among these is whether it is a space where they feel comfortable and safe, as well as if it is a place where society is comfortable for women to inhabit.

Reading and re-reading the “manifesto” I realized that the author was highlighting some of the same issues that my friends and family confronted me with when I announced my determination to hike the Trail. Because of the similarities between what friends and family warned me about dangers along the Trail and Pooka’s assertions, and because the people advising me are non-hikers it became apparent that a
larger social structure was generating perceptions about safety and danger for women hikers. Since such a close alignment had occurred before my eyes I decided to evaluate Pooka’s “manifesto” in an attempt to uncover underlying schemata positing the dangers for women hikers.

**Data and Transcription Conventions**

The “manifesto” is a post to the message board of an online group. While this post is not being evaluated in terms of its status as computer mediated discourse, it is important to keep in mind several relevant factors specific to online communication. First, message boards allow for back and forth discussion, but the discussions do not take place in real time. The posts are not a two way discussion, because a post may get many responses or not at all. The amount of delay time that passes between an initial post and responses to it might be relatively short or it could be a couple of days. Also when posting to an online group a certain amount of anonymity, in that posters use invented screen names instead of their own. “The dissemination of computer-mediated messages involves distribution to an unseen (and often unknown) audience, while at the same time creating an impression of direct and even "private" exchanges (King 1996)” (Herring in Schiffrin, Tannen and Hamilton 2001:614). In the context of the women hikers group, the audience is known to be female; many of the women post to the board regularly and several have met in person at hiking events. There is an established rapport between the main personalities in the online community. Even so, posting to the message board means that a post reaches the group as a whole and individuals simultaneously.

The breakdown of the transcription outside of the main points is done by point and line and signified by (p._l._). The points were labeled by Pooka herself. Since the context is necessary to understanding the individual points I chose not to represent the lines as separate entities in Pooka’s 9 numbered points to safety.
Once, We were young and foolish too. – a newbie must read

(1)-Regarding the young woman who was "experienced" and "level headed" and yet who fell for the
(2)-oldest rail Scam there is . . . a backpack means the person is a hiker, right? And a hiker is part of the
(3)-large hiking community, right? And the hiking community is safe, right?
(4)- No, because anyone can carry a backpack and not everyone who claims to be a hiker is part of the
(5)- community and not everyone in the hiking community is a person of sterling reputation. The
(6)- percentages in the micro-community are the same as in the population at large. There will be good
(7)- people and there will be bad people. There will be generous people and there will be moochers.
(8)- There will be honest people and there will be thieves. There will be happy, positive people and
(9)- there will be negative people trying to make everyone as miserable as they are. There will be
(10)- trusting people and there will be people ready to pounce on them.
(11)-AND WE MUST LEARN TO TRUST OUR GUT FEELINGS. Something Meredith either didn't do
(12)-or had not honed.
(13)-I am sick over this. And I need to preach to the choir and the newbies who haven't yet honed their
(14)-'stranger' skills. be alert

(p.1 l.1) 1- Have a plan for those 'gut' feeling times. I use a wedding band and a tall tale about an ex-
(p.1 l.2) Marine
(p.1 l.3) you’ll believe it. I practiced in front of a mirror so I wouldn't laugh or appear to be lying. –
(p.2 l.1) 2- TRUST your gut. And if you don't have a 'gut feeling' then Do Not Allow Yourself To Be In
(p.2 l.2) Company Of Any Other Hiker(s) Whom You Do Not Know. Translation: Do Not Go Solo
(p.2 l.3) Period. I don't care how "experienced" and "level headed" your roommate says you are . . . unless
(p.2 l.4) you're carrying a loaded pistol, don't wade into the crocodile pit. And WE KNOW you will not
(p.2 l.5) carrying a gun on the Trail. So stay out of the crocodile pits. And no arguments about this. You
(p.2 l.6) how dangerous going solo can be?
(p.3 l.1) 3- Hike with at least one other person. See above. Hopefully both of you aren't trusting blondes.
(p.3 l.2) little levity in the gravity of the situation)
(p.4 l.1)4- There is nothing wrong with you or your skills if you decide not to hike alone. Let your parents
(p.4 l.5) think the idea was theirs, it'll make them feel like they're doing a good job of parenting. No
(p.4 l.6) they're 84 years old and never hiked more than 50' on the AT. It's a "parent" thing. Enjoy it while
(p.4 l.7) you can.
(p.5 l.1) 5- All the Karate and HapKiDo in the world cannot protect you from someone who hits you from
(p.5 l.2)behind. In other words, none of this phony "ladies first" chivalry on the trail, especially if you
don't
(p.5 l.3)really know the other hiker(s).
(p.6 l.1) 6- Having a pet with you is not sufficient protection unless it's a trained guard dog. Both of my
dogs
(p.6 l.2) are 'tummy driven' and would run after food and forget to protect me in a similar situation.

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7- It's NOT the Trail that is dangerous. It's the two-legged snakes who prowl the Trail who are the danger. And there's no way for anyone to deny them access to the Trail because we don't know who they are just by looking at them. That’s why YOU must have a contingency plan, even if it means you give up your plans to hike, get back in your car, and drive to Helen to walk around for exercise.

8- TAKE THE SAFEST ROUTE FOR YOUR JOURNEY. Be Trail Smart. LEARN from this and other Trail Oriented Websites. It's one thing to die in your sleep while on the Trail. It's totally another to be murdered on the Trail. The one person died while doing something she loved. The other did not use basic Trail instincts and is not going to be around to learn from her mistake.

9- Newbies -- even though the fears from Meredith's murder will subside with time that does not mean that hikers on the Trail are any safer than they were on New Year's Day. There will still be predators out there -- rogue black bears, panthers, coyotes, bobcats, wolves, snakes, and the worst kind of predator - two-legged snakes. You MUST be observant and you must always have a contingency plan ready when you observe that "something just isn't right."

(13)- NO ONE will fault you for giving up your hike because you had a gut feeling you should get back in your car and drive home. But we will wonder about "why" if we hear that you had to be carried off the Trail in a body bag.

(14) - I am still upset over this Part of me is wondering if I should have been on Blood instead of Springer on NYE and NYD. Just false guilt know. But next year, I'll be on Blood Mountain and not on Springer. Anyone want to be there with me?

To understand the type of transcription I have done with these posts, it is important to remember that since they are from an online message board I did not have the pleasure of deciphering pauses, false starts or intonation. There were no audible linguistic cues for me to pick up on or to give me additional context for interpretation. Out or all the keyboard options than can be employed to indicate features of spoken language Pooka employs only Caps, single quote, and double quote. The majority of my re-transcription involved breaking apart the discourse into smaller pieces and evaluating those pieces in relationship to the whole. This enables me to see what those sub-units have to say about the cultural framework for understanding the outdoors and women’s experience.

In evaluating the “manifesto” it is important to define the strategies that the author employed to communicate the message to the readers. For the “manifesto” to work readers must find its advice to be credible. Pooka uses a variety of methods to persuasively present her ideas to the readers, including
metaphors, causal statements and evaluations to emphasize her points of safety. While the usage of these linguistic features emphasize her ideas and pressure the reader to take her message seriously that alone is not enough. In order to convince the reader to take a message seriously, authors must establish their authority on the subject. Authority can be established and maintained in discourse is through, “lexical or language choice, intonation and (physical) voice quality, variations in fluency, phonology, or syntax, shifts in pronouns, deictics, or evidentuals” (Keane in Duranti 2001-269). While not all of the features listed above were available to Pooka in the online medium, she utilizes several strategies to establish her authority, and since it is authority which gives her the ability to construct this “manifesto” the methods she uses to establish it will be evaluated first.

**Clues to Meaning - Authority in the Title**

The first linguistic feature to clue in the reader that an authority is speaking is the title, “Once we were young, and foolish, too. - a newbie must read”. The title itself holds a great deal of information to be unpacked. To make the title evaluation clear it is best that the evaluation take place for each piece of this statement. “Once we were” is a past tense statement. These three words tell the reader that at another point the author and her cohort had been something that they no longer are and that they have some history of experience. This further implies that they have experienced the state about to be discussed. Following this first feature we find “Young and foolish”.

Reading the first two features together the reader instantly knows that the author no longer considers herself to be young or foolish. Also the reader can infer that the author associates youth with foolishness and because the author is no longer young she is no longer foolish. By placing herself opposite of young and foolish, as old and wise, in the title the author is directing youthful (however that might be defined) readers that this post is intended for them. The addition of “too” in the title indicates that the author has experienced youth and foolishness and is therefore connected to the youthful reader. If the usage of the word “foolish” alienated any of the youthful readers “too” could soften the accusation by admitting her former participation in the “you and foolish” cohort. Since the author presents herself
rhetorically as no longer either young or foolish, but as an experienced and wise person in the title implies
that the author is qualified to direct the reader how to overcome the foolishness of youth.

Pooka follows her primary assertion that she was once young and foolish but now is experienced
and wise by making explicit the intended recipient of her forthcoming message. “A newbie”, the term
“newbie” implies an initiate to an endeavor, one with a lack of experience; the recipient is new to
something with a limited understanding of how that thing works. The term “newbie” can be used as a
derogatory by virtue of the implication of a lack of valued knowledge. Characterizing the audience as
“newbie” places the author in direct opposition to the intended recipient because the author has already
established that she is no longer you nor foolish, and has experience. The inferred experience establishes
that the author knows what she is talking about and also represents the vast discrepancy between the
author and “newbies” who have no experience.

Because the author has established her authority in the title she is able to assert that newbies “must
read” her post. By saying that it is a “newbie must read “Pooka is alerting the reader that her post
contains something very important for newbies to know. This statement pressures the reader into reading
the document. If you happen to be a “newbie” the usage of “must” implies that reading it is not optional.
This last feature of the title is at once a command statement and also a causal relationship because “must”
also implies that if the action “read” isn’t followed through then there will be consequences. Because the
post was inspired by the murder of a young woman hiker the implied consequence is a fate similar to
Meredith’s. READ MY POST OR DIE!

The culmination of the title of the post reads not only as a literal command but when the subtext is
read also as an internally logical reasoning as to why it must be read and why it would be youthfully
foolish for a “newbie” not to read it. The implication is that the author is willing to enlighten the
unknowledgeable reader about how to avoid the trappings of foolish youth and a bad experience on the
Trail, and that without reading the post the inexperienced hiker will be missing vital information.
Experience is often an evaluative factor when deciding whether or not to take someone seriously.
Experience can qualify someone as being able to talk about a subject authoritatively, because they have dealt with it firsthand. Through the title the author has established her authority to talk about the upcoming subject and has alerted the reader that it is important to read the post.

While the author announced her qualifications in the title it would not be enough to carry her through the entire “manifesto”. In order to solidify her authority and attempt to convince her readers, Pooka uses a variety of strategies, including visual clues, writing techniques, and the use of metaphors. In order to better understand how this “manifesto” is constructed and how it reflects Pooka’s schema of women’s safety and the outdoors it is important to evaluate each of these factors independently as well together.

Visible Clues

Pooka begins the instructional portion of her “newbie must read” (title) by using numbers to delineate her points. Numbering the points numbers indicate authoritative instruction, that there is an order underlying these are the ways to be safe and survive “newbie”-hood. Numbering her points also give the post the feel of a written document as opposed to many of the posts on an online message board that hosts discussions which read more like conversational contributions than written texts. The numbers give the “manifesto” the appearance of having a definitive direction, rather than a series of unconnected thoughts. The numbering positions the information as having a set structure. The illusion of this structure inclines the reader to follow along as if each point leads directly to the next. The status of the “manifesto” as an instructional document derives more authoritative by couching the points in the form of directives or commands such as, “Have a plan” (pt 1 line 1).

Along with the numeration of her points Pooka uses capitalization to indicate importance. The capitalization of words indicates emphasis of the word as well as the importance of the subsequent information. The capitalization of YOU (pt 7 line 3) for instance addresses the reader forcefully, prompting the reader to pay close attention to what is about to be said. Whenever a word is read in all caps it becomes the most visible portion of the sentence. Capitalization is the online equivalent of
SHOUTING. It is used to express emotion, urgency, and importance. Often in online communication complete capitalization of a word or a sentence it often considered yelling. Yelling as a form of communication is intense and usually not welcomed unless you’re trying to communicate across long distances. Yelling shows an intensity of emotion ranging from anger or as a warning to command the other person’s attention. The selective yelling in this “manifesto” highlights the intense emotion and directness of Pooka’s communication. Aside from the indication of emotion capitalization implies that the message is very serious which contributes to its evaluation as an authority structuring agent. In a sense it forces the reader to evaluate what is being said and also implies a directive, as a shouted command.

As an example of the way capitalization plays a role in setting up authority one can evaluate its usage in command statements. “AND WE MUST LEARN TO TRUST OUR GUT FEELINGS” (line 11). Here, capitalization not only highlights the importance of this assertion, but also emphasizes its status as a command. When she asserts women hikers must learn to do something she is giving a command. By making the command in all caps she is not only directing the action but insisting upon it. The loudness of the intonation reflects or indicates that it is not optional. The same inflection can be read from “TAKE THE SAFEST ROUTE FOR YOUR JOURNEY” (pt. 8 line 1) a fully capitalized syntactic command.

The selective capitalization of individual words is equally if not more important when making a point. Instead of showing intonation throughout the entire sentence the singular capitalized word highlights a point on which the other information is dependent. An example of this would be found in point 7 where Pooka states, “It’s NOT the Trail that is dangerous”. Here the capitalization of “NOT” directly tells the reader something about the Trail and its dangers. It establishes the Trail as a safe place providing that some other element is absent. Here Pooka is demonstrating her knowledge and setting up the Trail for what she believes it is by saying what it is “NOT”. For readers who have assumed that natural elements such as terrain or fauna would pose the biggest threat, she informs them that they are
definitively wrong. By exhibiting that she possesses knowledge counter to the assumptions of other hikers she is influencing the reader to take her seriously. In point 8 where she directs the reader to “LEARN” she is adding emphasis to the command more so than reflecting superior knowledge. The additional emphasis pushes the point on the reader.

Another strategy employed by Pooka to add emphasis and heighten the reader’s awareness of her points is the use of unmotivated quotation marks. These quotations will be called scare quotes for the purpose of this analysis. Adding scare quotes around words both emphasize the word being used but also creates an aura around the word. In some instances Pooka’s use of scare quotes reflect a sarcastic evaluation of the original use of the term. For instance the use of scare quotes around “experienced” and “level headed” (line 1) are meant not only to accentuate these evaluative words, but also to indicate that Pooka doesn’t really believe that Meredith was either of those things although she was considered such by many individuals.

The inflection of sarcasm again positions Pooka as having superior knowledge. Pooka also uses scare quotes around “ladies first” (pt. 5 line 2) again to add emphasis and also sarcasm. This time the sarcasm is more clearly defined in the context of the sentence, “None of this phony ‘ladies first’ chivalry” (pt. 5 line 2). By proceeding “ladies first” with phony reinforcing the putative and following up with the subject she indicates that she does not believe that the assumption of chivalry is a legitimate consideration when determining safety while hiking. Furthermore she is indicating the potential danger of ladies literally going first in a situation where they don’t know other hikers, demanding that hikers not allow themselves to have their backs to others.

Another way Pooka asserts authority is by offering an evaluation of Meredith. Pooka uses quotation marks around evaluative words and sets up a statement of “regarding the young woman who was “‘experienced’” and “‘level headed’ ” (l. 1) which points out that though Meredith might have been considered experienced and level headed by herself and others, she was not as experienced and level headed as Pooka. Regardless of Meredith’s experience, Pooka is placing herself above Meredith and
makes it clear by saying that she “fell for the oldest rail Scam” (line 2), the most obvious ploy. In this instance “old” functions as an evaluative term, suggesting that an experienced hiker would have known about and avoided a similar situation. Just being able to identify that Pooka knew the scam and Meredith fell for it is supposed to illustrate that Pooka’s is a more experience hiker and as such should be taken seriously. Because other hikers regarded Meredith as experienced, this evaluation also serves to warn other hikers who might think they are experienced to listen to Pooka because she might know something they don’t.

Syntactic and Rhetorical Cues

The invocation of fear by suggesting that if the reader does not follow her points of safety they will end up in a “body bag” (l. 17) Pooka is using fear to add authority to her points. The use of fear, and the way that Pooka brings fear into the equation is by creating a causal relationship. The causal relationship in this instance is that if you do not follow then you could end up in a body bag, but if her points are followed you will not. While this could be read as a warning statement it also motivates the reader through fear to listen to and obey Pooka. Another example of a causal relationship is found in point 8 where Pooka states that if a hiker did not learn from Pooka and “did not use basic Trail instincts and [that hiker] is not going to be around”. The implication is the same here, follow Pooka’s advise of suffer the consequences. Pooka uses these causal relationships to drive home her points about safety. Her entire “manifesto” could be considered as articulating a causal relationship: Because Pooka believes that Meredith did not follow Pooka’s points to safety, and was murdered the implication of the “manifesto” is that if a hiker doesn’t follow all of Pooka’s advise that hiker could meet the same fate.

Pooka also uses rhetorical questions to emphasize causal relationships. The example here comes from point 2. “You see how dangerous going solo can be?” (pt 2 lines 5, 6) reinforces Pooka’s point that you should not go alone unless you have great instincts and trust them. The use of “you” in point 2 adds “rhetorical effectiveness” (Hyman 2004:174). The question points out to the reader that if she goes solo
hiking and is not prepared for it she could meet the same end as Meredith. Aside from illustrating causal relationships Pooka’s rhetorical questions serve to highlight her authority.

Pooka opens the “manifesto” by asking a series of short rhetorical questions and follows each question with, “right?”. The positioning of “right” after the initial question directs the reader to respond positively to her statement. The rhetorical question series Pooka opens with is, “a backpack means the person is a hiker, right? And a hiker is a part of the large hiking community, right? And the hiking community is safe, right?” (lines 2 and 3). These questions set up the reader to evaluate the hiking community. Since the reader is compelled by the repeated answer “right” to agree with Pooka, it allows Pooka to establish herself as an authority. Once she has coerced the reader into agreement, she proceeds to answer the questions in her own terms. Pooka opens the next sentence with “No” and then offers an explanation. This is a sneaky move, because she has rhetorically pressured readers to respond positively to her questions, and then once they have done it she tells them that they are wrong. This further pushes the reader to take seriously what she has to say because she pointed out their thinking was off, even if she instigated the wayward thought.

Pooka further situates herself as an authority by literally placing herself as a leader in the hiking community. She uses the adage, “preaching to the choir” (l. 13) which ideologically puts her out front as the most informed on the subject, as well as a member of the hiking community. By projecting herself as the most knowledgeable member of the hiking community she assuming a position of authority from which she can direct the behaviors of others via her guidance on safety. By preaching to the choir Pooka is telling the reader that even the experienced hikers need to hear her points. Aside from “preaching” (l. 13) to “the choir” (l. 13) she is also “preaching” (l. 13) to “the newbies” (l. 13). If the experienced hikers need to hear her points then inexperienced hikers have even greater need to listen to what she has to say. This sets up her message as a kind of outreach, through which she is evangelizing her beliefs on Trail safety.
From her pulpit Pooka issues a number of her points as command statements. Command statements are assumed to originate from someone with authority, which Pooka has establishes and reinforces throughout the “manifesto”. Phrasing something in the form of a command emphasizes the need to take that action. This is because a command statement leaves no room for discussion. The course of action presented within command statements is required as there is no other way to satisfy the command. The use of these statements directs and pressures the reader to submit to Pooka’s points of view.

Command statements coupled with selective capitalization add emphasis to the importance of the directive. “WE MUST LEARN TO TRUST OUR GUT FEELINGS” (line 11) – Pooka is shouting this at the reader, this is so important, pay attention to this, if you don’t get anything else out of this take this part. Among the many command statements being used in combination with “must” are “WE MUST LEARN TO TRUST OUR GUT FEELINGS” (line 11), “YOU must have a contingency plan” (pt 7 line 3) and “you must always have a contingency plan” (pt 9 line 4). Other examples of command statements are “Do Not Go Solo Hiking. Period.” (pt 2), “And no arguments about this” (pt 2), “stay out of the crocodile pits” (pt 2), “none of this phony ‘ladies first’ chivalry” (pt 5). Each of these examples uses directive language to communicate what one should or should not do when hiking.

The use of “Period.” (pt 2) serves to both end the statement and to establish that there can be no further discussion. With the initial cap followed by punctuation grants sentence status to a word. Even though a period follows the original statement, Pooka writes out period followed by the symbolic. The third period in the original statement.

The implications of period followed by a period indicate that there is no other option for the reader. Not only is there no room to refute what Pooka is saying, but any other option has been cut off by Pooka’s ending the conversation. Pooka’s triple period creates a forceful and demanding end to the conversation and total compliance with her original assertion.
Pronominal Cues

Throughout the paper Pooka makes use of the “indefinite you” (Hyman 2004:164) to address readers. The indefinite you is automatically addressing reader but by the nature of the post there is not a specific person or group of persons represented by you. It at once addresses the reader, or anyone belonging to the online group. There is no way to tie down this you to any particular person. However as mentioned when analyzing the rhetorical questions above Hyman (2004) points out, “what you lose in formal precision you gain in rhetorical effectiveness” (274).

The invocation of you as directed at the reader pulls the reader into the text and makes it impossible for the reader to disregard the rest of the statement. This direction causes the points prefaced by you to be less like instructions and more like commands. For example “You MUST” in point 9 makes clear that this is a directive. Yet it implicates more than just the reader. The topic here is safety on the Trail as it affects women, and so the understood you is not only a woman hiker reading the message but all women hikers.

Pooka makes a lexical shift in the writing of her “newbie must read” (title). This shift is a switch from the usage of “I” indicating herself to “we” indicating her and a number of others. When making personal statements the “I” form is understandable as in line 13 or in point 1. She is voicing something which she is experiencing (line1) and a strategy that she uses when confronted with danger (pt 1). This seems to be the most logical way to approach a conversation/or post in which one person is expressing personal feelings and beliefs.

However Pooka switches to WE in point 2 when she says “And WE KNOW you will not be carrying a gun on the Trail”. This we also assumes an indefinite identity. She could mean herself and the reader, she could mean the women hiker’s community, she could mean herself and society at large but the specific meaning is undefined. By positioning herself within a larger group and implying that she and the group share knowledge she pressures the reader to accept what she is saying. This is accomplished by the added voices of the we group. The reader is coerced to believe that the author and her peers are in
agreement on a particular issue or else they would not be voicing the same sentiments. Thus by adding in the “we” voice Pooka is bolstering her own authority.

Also if the reader injects herself into the we and becomes a part of the group Pooka succeeds in making the reader evaluate herself. This is true of the “WE KNOW” in point 2 as well as assertion in line 11, “AND WE MUST LEARN TO TRUST OUR GUT FEELINGS”. Here Pooka is emphasizing to the reader that she as well as the reader and other women hikers all need to learn the same lessons. This unspecified we can apply to many different sets of people; most generally it could be applied to everyone who reads the post. One thing that can be said for certain about this we group is that each member has “gut feelings” and Pooka perceives an inability of each member to “trust” those instincts. By including herself in this statement Pooka is perhaps again hoping to bridge the gap she is creating between her omniscient self and her young and foolish reader. Yet her inclusion of herself in this group does not negate her authority because it is she and not the reader who knows what we must do.

Pooka borrows the authoritative we voice whenever she wants to appear as though her points cannot be refuted. By generating an undefined group Pooka is giving the reader room to position herself as a member and then question herself. She invokes an even larger group than the we in line 13 with “NO ONE”, reassuring the reader that no person, hiker or non-hiker will criticize her if she gives up her hike in the name of safety. After playing the pronoun game she invites “anyone” to go hiking with her on Blood Mountain in memory of Meredith. This open invitation removes her from the group as a whole and allows her to become a host another role with the authority to invite. Of course the invitation comes with strings attached; surely she expects that anyone who is going hiking with her will be following the 9 points to safety.

Metaphors and Coloring the “Manifesto”

According to Naomi Quinn features such as keywords, metaphors and reasoning are governed by cultural schema and “are largely out of control” (2005: 44). Or as D’Andrade puts it, the model selects the metaphor rather than the metaphor structuring the model (2005:95). This means that a metaphor will
be selected because it is compatible with and communicates to a speaker’s cultural schema, or is a best fit to communicate the main idea. The use of the metaphor illustrates what the author is trying to say in such a way that it can be readily understood, creating a point of clarity.

Through the evaluation of metaphors it is possible to draw out a framework for a cultural schema. (Quinn 2005:45). Analyzing metaphors can be tricky: Quinn points out three issues to be taken up with metaphors. Metaphors might be intended for something other than the “target domain”, the exact meaning might be unclear and the use of the metaphor might not have been intentional (Quinn 2005:56). Thus evaluating metaphors can be very useful in determining underlying meanings but only if some degree of caution is used.

Keeping in mind Quinn’s theory on metaphors expressing cultural schema we can evaluate the metaphors used to describe the dangers along the Trail and discern how Pooka comprehends them. The association of animal behaviors and characteristics implicates the Trail as bringing out the base animal qualities in people. The only positive quality Pooka mentions is instinct which she refers to as “gut feelings” (l. 11). If we follow the logic that women fear male violence, and therefore the “predators” are males imbued with animal qualities, then the overarching suggestion here is that it is natural for men to prey on women, especially when unconstrained by civilization.

Like metaphors, the way an author employs reasoning can also illustrate cultural expectations and schema. The reasoning portion of a text is the explanation, in essence it’s the why statement. Quinn states that there are three main components to reasoning, first the statement of a proposition to be proven, why it should be believed and the reassertion of the proposition (2005:63). The act of reasoning is really just trying to convince someone else or perhaps yourself that what is being said is correct. There are many ways to exemplify reasoning and the way it functions. Pooka frequently uses the path to reasoning via causal relationships. Causal relationships are set up so that if one thing then the other, or to follow Quinn’s examples, if x; y, x if not y, once x not y, so on and so forth (2005:65). Being able to draw upon casual relationships to understand reasoning creates another avenue of analysis. The causal relationship
draws out the so what of the explanation. The consequence portion of the relationship acts as the motivating factor for agreement or behavioral compliance.

Furthermore in preparing to evaluate the “manifesto” I realized that I would be using metaphors and causal relationships to both claim a discovery of a cultural schema and also as proof. The metaphors I sought to examine to show that a cultural schema was being employed were the same metaphors that would serve as evidence of the cultural schema. According to Roy D’Andrade the same fact can be both a stimulus for uncovering cultural schema and to verify the existence of that schema. However this type of verification requires the elimination of other hypotheses (2005:88). His assertion of the double function of “facts” means that if the evidence points in one direction over another, then that is the path to be taken, if no other explanation works.

The way D’Andrade sets up his theory is reminiscent of a detective drama; you collect the evidence and then weed through it to determine a best fit scenario. D’Andrade also says that the best opportunity to make evaluations on things such as this is in naturally occurring discourse (2005:89) or in interviews where the respondents are asked about something which illustrated the model they are working with instead of questioning the model itself (2005:90). The women hiker’s posts and especially the “manifesto” exemplify both an unsolicited occurring discourse and also a corpus which illustrates the schema of women and wilderness without calling it directly into question.

While realizing that the individual pieces could fit together to paint a picture of a cultural framework I felt that something would be missing if I didn’t also look at the way those pieces were functioning together to convey meanings. In considering how might be able to analyze what whole pieces of discourse were working towards I found Jane H. Hill’s work to be helpful. Hill’s discussion of the evaluative aspects of discourse illustrates the way evaluation is essential to framing the narrative, communicating meaning as well as giving the story its tell-ability. An evaluative feature is “any material not syntactically required in a narrative clause, such as adverbs and adjectives, relative clauses, conditional clauses, and the like” (Hill 2005:176). With this in mind the terms already set for
investigation can be further examined as evaluations, meaning thrown in not only to emphasize cultural knowledge but also to add emphasis to the story as a whole.

In addition the analysis of evaluation allows us to look toward the details of the story and examine how they are being presented for additional meaning. Some example of details available for evaluation are where someone was, a description of that individual or of a subject, a statement of a relationship to that subject, repetition of clauses and metaphors. (Hill 2005:176-178). The evaluative statements which give the story its tell-ability also legitimate the authority of the speaker to tell the story. The way that evaluation was employed in the “manifesto” will illustrate not what did happen but also what could happen while answering the question of why one should believe that it had or could happen.

Pooka employs a series of metaphors to add emphasis to her points on safety and danger along the Trail. In evaluating her usage of these metaphors her perspective on risk and the Trail becomes clear. This could perhaps be extended to say that they illustrate her perspective on the outdoors in general when women are participating in outdoor activities away from towns. The first metaphor to be evaluated references both the Trail and its danger as Pooka sees it. Pooka describes the Trail as a “crocodile pit” if the hiker does not trust her “gut” instincts. To break this metaphor down most simply, the “crocodile” represents the risk and the “pit” represents the Trail. “Pit” implies that the trail is easy to fall into and difficult to exit and that the danger is confined within it. Without the element of the “crocodile” present the pit poses less threat. Reading further into “crocodile” the implication is that the danger of the Trail is embodied in a living animal. Secondly “crocodile” implies that the dangerous animal is a predator lying in waiting for a meal together they construct the image of being inextricably confined with a dangerous animal. This is a women hikers message board and when we consider who perpetrates violence against women it is usually men, thus the “crocodile” can be understood as a representation of men. Because the women hikers community is assumed to share this implicit assumption Pooka does not need to explicitly state that crocodiles are men (Quinn 2005:65).
Together as a metaphor (of the “crocodile pit” (pt. 2)) these two terms illustrate that the danger while present is confined to the pit. The “crocodiles” though ready to attack are not actively hunting outside of the pit, suggesting that if you are not on the Trail then this particular predator will not be able to bother you. Conversely if you decide to hike the trail and you decide to go alone and you do not “trust your gut” then you are providing an opportunity for the “crocodile”. According to Pooka if you go alone and you don’t trust your instincts you need a “loaded pistol”. The image of hungry crocodiles snapping their jaws and waiting for an unassuming person to get too close is used to exaggerate danger and generate anxiety about safety on the Trail. Pooka is presenting the trail as a dangerous place only because of the danger being present in the form of dangerous men.

The next metaphor is that of the “trusting blondes” (pt 3 line 1). This metaphor appears after “hopefully you both aren’t” and Pooka’s advise that you take a friend. Since in this instance trusting could put one in danger, it becomes a negative attribute by default. The reference to blondes in this statement hinges on a cultural joke about blonde women being less than intelligent, or the dumb blonde joke. When these two words form this particular metaphor hints that any woman who would be trusting, or assume that someone meant them no harm would be dumb. Usually the trust required by the “manifesto” is not located in the brains “trust your gut” is one of Pooka’s most frequently repeated commands. If Pooka was refereeing to trusting oneself then I believe it again would be a positive attribute and she would applaud it. As trust is contradicted in this case one can assume that “trusting” has become negative because it is being applied to other people which Pooka considers to be dumb as a blonde. This metaphor unpacks with relative ease and follows Pooka’s assumptive logic that Meredith was naïve and trusting of her killer. The point that trusting/assuming someone you do not know is non-threatening is furthered by Pooka’s use of rhetorical questions and the above metaphor invoking people are dangerous animals.

Another interesting and telling metaphor is the “two-legged snake” (pt 7 line 1 and pt 9 line 4) example. The two legged snake is possibly one of the most direct ways Pooka address the perception of
dangerous males on the trial. The “two-legged snake” (pt 7 line 1 and pt 9 line 4) invokes the image of a phallus with legs. The use of this symbolism so closely aligned with the phallus, and the phallus with danger directly implicates men as the “predators” of the trail. Furthermore in point 7 Pooka makes the statement, “It’s NOT the Trail that is dangerous” directly before invoking the image of the two-legged snake. Following the assertion that it’s the “two-legged snakes” (pt 7 line 1) that are dangerous she suggests that the town of Helen is a safe place to go walk around. Helen is being used both literally and as a metaphor. This suggests that Pooka views Helen and towns like it are being posited as safe places. Oddly enough Helen is also a woman’s name, further articulating that men are dangerous and women are safe.

Read all together the assertions of safety and danger in point 7 illustrate that Pooka believes towns to be safer than the trail. This is a curious suggestion since dangerous men are the threat and there are more people in the town than on the trail. Perhaps she feels that the people of Helen would protect her or that if something bad did happen in the town that someone would be there to help. The following reading might prove more profitable in determining why Pooka feels that the trail is a dangerous place while towns are safe. The pairing of “two-legged snakes” (pt 7 line 1) (danger) with the trail and its opposite no snakes (safety) in Helen helps to exemplify that something in the nature of the trail makes women more prone to violence. The implication is that the trail is a wilderness space, in wilderness spaces the wilds are not the danger; rather it is the people who, when in the wilderness, are unrestrained by the trappings of civilization that present the danger. Following this logic, the people who in town might provide protection could become the assailants in the wilderness. To further exemplify this Pooka commands, “none of this phony ‘ladies first’ chivalry on the trail” (pt 5), chivalry or allowing ladies to go first is often considered polite in towns, but could be viewed as a form of aggression on the trail.

Continuing to support the assertion that people become less polite and more likely to be dangerous on the trail Pooka uses terms typically associated with animals to describe dangerous men and their behaviors along the trail. “Pounce” (line 10) used in the opening of the “manifesto” to illustrate the way
that people will attack the naïve invokes the image of an animal surprising and capturing its prey.

“Prowl” (pt 7 line 1) is used to describe the behavior of the “two-legged snakes” (pt 7 line 1). Just as an ocelot might pounce upon its prey a jaguar might prowl the jungle hunting its prey. Both of these terms are usually animal behaviors. Using these terms indicates that people (men) become more predator-like when in the wilderness. The dangerous individuals are referred to not as people but as non-human animals. Individuals assume animal identities such as “crocodiles” (pt 2) and as “two-legged snakes” (pts 7 and 9). The only protection from these animals is “a loaded gun” or “gut feelings” (instinct). Guns are of course carried into the wilderness usually to hunt wild animals and are non-natural; instinct however is natural and is also associated with animals. It is instinct and not a loaded gun which Pooka implies is the only way to protect yourself on the trail.

The use of animal terms to describe people, behavior, safety and danger further implicates that Pooka associates the trail with danger because of its natural spaces. Towns on the other hand represent order and civilization which in Pooka’s opinion repress animal behaviors and therefore are good places for women to be safe. Conversely the Trail is in a natural space without a civilized order to repress animal behaviors and instead leads to a fuller expression of animalistic nature. Clearly there is something about the space of the trail itself which has influenced Pooka in her association of it with danger.

Based on her word choice and use of metaphors I believe it is the naturalness of the space, the lack of edifice that makes the trail dangerous. Pooka understands this space to be different than other more normative spaces to encounter women in recreational activities. Helen is a town, unnatural and constructed and therefore a natural place to see women out and about. The trail however, is not viewed as a feminine space, when one first thinks of a hiker the primary image is that of a man with a backpack. Women are marked unnatural in this context and in order for a hiker to be understood as female it is necessary to specify that she is a woman hiker. The woman hiker is in the wrong place and she is participating in a masculine activity. Women who are hiking are not following their socially prescribed
gender role, and as such are seen to invite the threat of violations of place and activity (Mathews 2005:108).

Crimes occur everywhere and are more prominent in cities and towns than along the Trail. One only needs to think of the examples of crime broadcast over the air waves and printed in newspapers to realize that cities do not equate with safety. Furthermore the heightening of fear along the Trail is misleading because in actuality most violence against women occurs in the home (Domosh and Seager 2001:100).

Key words play a huge role in communicating the points in the “manifesto”. One example of a keyword which communicates Pooka’s message that women need to read and understand what she is saying is “Translation” in point 2 (line 2). This word emphasizes that the reader is not intelligent enough to interpret what Pooka is saying. She wants to make sure that women are aware that they should not go hiking alone, even if they are considered “‘experienced’ and ‘level headed’” (pt 2 line 3). She is going to break it down to be sure there is no misunderstanding. Just in case there is any miscommunication she wants to make sure that she has broken it down to the simplest terms and that her readers understand just how simple her advice actually is. “Protect” (pts 5, 6) is another key word which indicates that there is a danger present and that a hiker needs to be ever mindful of how to circumvent anger. The danger of course is the “predator” (pts 6, 9); this key word gives the danger a form and a course of action. It preys on people who go solo hiking without protection. These keywords come together to deliver the message in its simplest form.

Naturally occurring speech events like this “manifesto” and the conversations that follow it are “ideal” for evaluation (D’Andrade 2005:89). If the cultural schema of women in the outdoors is to be understood it is perhaps best done by analyzing documents such as this we an individual is speaking their mind and trying to influence the behaviors of others based on their own beliefs.

This “manifesto” mirrors the concerns I am confronting via friends and family. Thus it is safe to say that Pooka’s schema of the outdoors as dangerous for a woman alone is a reflection of society as a
whole. Like Pooka those concerned for my safety are skeptical about the men on the Trail. Very few people have mentioned to me any of the natural dangers found on the trail such as terrain or weather. Everyone is concerned with the human element and like Pooka seem to assert, “its NOT the trail that’s dangerous” (pt 7). The repetition of trusting one’s instincts and not hiking alone indicates that these two things are integral to Pooka’s perception of a safe negotiation of the Trail. This repetition contributes to the coherence of her “manifesto” (Tannen 1987). The constant assertion that the trail itself is okay and that the men on the trail are the threat emphasizes the necessity of the “manifesto”. It is as though Pooka is constantly saying, this is why you should listen to me, are you listening, you should be listening, I’m serious, follow my rules.

Pooka recognizes the generalized fear of male violence and is acknowledging that the negotiation of this fear is something that most women share as a part of their lived experience. It is important to note that “these fears women have are not the result of assaults they experience but of dominant cultural mythologies of where a woman's place should be when she is alone” (Chasteen 1994:326). Effectively Pooka is promoting the gendering of space and the generalized anxiety or fear factor for women who participate in outdoor activities. If the natural setting of the trail is what brings out the predatory instincts and this translates to men being more likely to attack women then the Trail itself is only safe for men. This logic exemplifies that the Trail is such a masculine environment women cannot be there unless they take a certain number of precautions.

Reading the “manifesto” to analyze a cultural schema of the how the world works when regarding women and hiking several interesting points are made. First the initial assertion the Pooka’s “manifesto” echoed a fear of violence, and a fear of violent men seems to be legitimated by Pooka’s continual referencing of predators and the need to have protection and a plan. Throughout the “manifesto” Pooka postulates that the trail is dangerous for women when they are alone. Her insistence that women not hike alone unless they have protection reiterates that their being unarmed and alone makes them venerable on the Trail. Perhaps women who hike on a regular basis have found ways to overcome the gendered fears
espoused by Pooka. Or perhaps through experience they have discovered, as I have that the reality of the trail is not the dangerous place which it is imagined. There were many responses to this manifesto which disagreed with Pooka’s assertions that there is something intrinsically dangerous about the trail.
The Appalachian Trail was first proposed by Benton MacKaye in his article “An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning” which appeared in 1921 in the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*. He envisioned a trail that could become part of the solution to some of the problems of the time. The wrongs that MacKaye was searching to right bear a striking resemblance to our present situation. High prices and high unemployment are discussed by media across the nation. Perhaps the most astounding resemblance to our present time is MacKaye’s assertion that “living has been considerably complicated of late in various ways - by war, by questions of personal liberty, and by "menaces" of one kind or another” (1921:325).

At the time the majority of recreational outdoor space in America was located in the national parks of the west while the majority of the people were in the east which made it difficult for the average person to enjoy them (MacKaye 1921). Luckily, in the midst of the populated east were the Appalachian Mountains, which connected the north and south, within these mountains several National Forests, had already been established. MacKaye using the image of a giant highlights what his Appalachian Trail might evoke.

Let us assume the existence of a giant standing high on the skyline along these mountain ridges, his head just scraping the floating clouds. What would he see from this skyline as he strode along its length from north to south?

Starting out from Mt. Washington, the highest point in the northeast, his horizon takes in one of the original happy hunting grounds of America - the "Northwoods," a country of pointed firs extending from the lakes and rivers of northern Maine to those of the Adirondacks. Stepping across the Green Mountains and the Berkshires to the Catskills, he gets his first view of the crowded east - a chain of smoky bee-hive cities extending from Boston to Washington and containing a third of the population of the Appalachian drained area. Bridging the Delaware Water Gap and the Susquehanna on the picturesque Alleghany folds across Pennsylania he notes more smoky columns - the big plants between Scranton and Pittsburgh that get out the basic stuff of modern industry - iron and coal. In relieving contrast he steps across the Potomac near Harpers Ferry and pushes through into the wooded wilderness of the southern Appalachians where he finds preserved much of the primal aspects of the days of Daniel Boone. Here he finds, over on the Monongahela side the black coal of bituminous and the white coal of water power.

He proceeds along the great divide of the upper Ohio and sees flowing to waste, sometimes in terrifying floods, waters capable of generating untold hydro-electric energy and of bringing navigation to many a lower stream. He looks over the Natural Bridge and out across the battlefields around Appomattox. He finds himself finally in the midst of the great Carolina hardwood belt.
Resting now on the top of Mt. Mitchell, highest point east of the Rockies, he counts up on his big long fingers the opportunities which yet await development along the skyline he has passed. First he notes the opportunities for recreation. Throughout the Southern Appalachians, throughout the Northwoods, and even through the Alleghenies that wind their way among the smoky industrial towns of Pennsylvania, he recollects vast areas of secluded forests, pastoral lands, and water courses, which, with proper facilities and protection, could be made to serve as the breath of a real life for the toilers in the bee-hive cities along the Atlantic seaboard and elsewhere. Second, he notes the possibilities for health and recuperation. The oxygen in the mountain air along the Appalachian skyline is a natural resource (and a national resource) that radiates to the heavens its enormous health-giving powers with only a fraction of a percent utilized for human rehabilitation. Here is a resource that could save thousands of lives. The sufferers of tuberculosis, anemia and insanity go through the whole strata of human society. Most of them are helpless, even those economically well off. They occur in the cities and right in the skyline belt. For the farmers, and especially the wives of farmers, are by no means escaping the grinding-down process of our modern life. (MacKay 1921:3-4)

In the Appalachian Trail MacKaye saw the potential for new possibilities for employment, from agriculture and forestry, to bring people out of the cities and back into the open. By bringing laborers out of the cities and into the mountains for recreation he believe they would be imbued with health and restored mentally and physically from their hard won lives in the city. He also realized the limitations of this actually coming to pass unless there was a revamping of agricultural and forestry systems. More importantly, he insisted were the benefits that people would receive by spending their two weeks of vacation time working along the mountain tops. MacKaye’s plan for the Appalachian Trail and thus its benefits required that part of the population be willing to create it during in their time off from their regular jobs. He proposed that many people coming to the trail would find that they preferred to work in the open instead of in factories.

Indeed the project of the Appalachian Trail was imagined as a one “in housing and community architecture”, to create “a series of recreational outdoor communities throughout the Appalachian chain of mountains…connected by a walking trail” (MacKay 1921:6). This trail, participation in its creation and in working along it in years to come was going to begin to ease the burden of capitalism on the populous. The vision of the trail as MacKaye laid it out was a utopian project. In order to ensure that the dreams of this project could be attained MacKaye called for four features of the trail in his project.
The first of these concerns the trail itself. It should be well built and run from the highest peak in the north to the highest peak in the south, divided into sections, each section should be cared for by a group of local people, right of ways should be obtained to cross private property, a usable section should be completed each season and immediately opened for use, it should be regularly maintained, and could also benefit local fire departments in fighting forest fires by allowing for easy access and watch towers. (MacKaye 1921:7)

The second feature of the trail prescribed by MacKaye is Shelter camps which are places for people to gather and rest when working on and enjoying the trail. These were to be common places open and available to all who found their way to the trail. According to MacKaye’s vision, each should be located conveniently with “a comfortable days walk between each”, made for sleeping and meals, under strict regulation, the blazing and construction should be done by volunteers because “volunteer ‘work’ is really ‘play’” and without profit to keep away the “profiteer” (MacKaye 1921:7). He realized that if the trail were to open itself up to usage fees and if profit could be gained from its construction and maintenance then it would become an extension of the profit driven system.

Thirdly were community groups that would grow from shelter camps, they would be located on or near the trail, people here would live in private homes for use without profit, all on one piece of land as “a self owning community and not a real-estate venture”, communities should be limited in size, and the location of the camps should be a main part of regional planning and architecture, each camp would be used for a non-industrial activity and might be used for specific activities like studying, recreation, or recuperation (MacKaye 1921:8).

The fourth and final feature envisioned by MacKaye was the food and farm camp which would be located in adjoining valleys and would provide the food and possibly the lumber for outdoor living and could provide the opportunity for permanent employment communities. (MacKaye 1921:8). The overall ideal of MacKaye’s trail was for it to be a retreat from the industrial world with all of its antagonisms. The trail would be a place that contained a dramatic appeal to the “primal instincts of a fighting heroism,
of volunteer service and of work in a common cause” expanding the ideas of scouting to adults (MacKaye 1921:9). MacKaye’s ending philosophy is that “care of the country side…is vital in any real protection of ‘home’ and ‘country’” (1921:9).

The Appalachian Trail as originally proposed bares resemblance to the trail we have today. However only two of the four features promoted my MacKaye have been brought to bear in a sense true to form. It was not that his ideas were out of line with American reformist thought rather the timing was off, by the time of the proposal the tides had turned and the idealism of MacKaye’s plan was cast off. Society had moved into a position more dependent upon industry, a new and powerful middle class had formed because of it, and the urge to throw off industrialism for a natural utopia no longer had the same appeal. In fact the idea of the trail now appealed to those who had built their lives and fortunes off of the metropolitan and industrialism that he had imagined the trail as combating (Foresta 1987). MacKaye had enlisted the help of friends and associates with similar visions in beginning the trail, including a woman, Alice Thatcher Post (Foresta 1987).

The Appalachian Trail Conference was established in 1925 and has been instrumental in creating and protecting the Appalachian Trail that exists today. When it was established it was meant to act as a government agency liaison, to promote trail construction and to coordinate local groups. Among its members was Arthur Perkins who would later recruit Myron Avery (Foresta 1987:79). Avery like other trail enthusiasts was educated, successful, young; professional whose vocation and trail activities were quite different from the average factory worker (Foresta 1987). The various groups who worked on the trail ranged from male in the case of the Blue Eagle Climbing Club in Reading, PA to both men and women as in the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club, some were open to all and others were exclusively community leaders, but all were similar in that their members were professionals (Foresta 1987). The laborers whom MacKaye had imagined the trail as a resource were largely excluded from the creation of the trail. For these people the trail provided a recreational connection with nature, one that allowed them to wax poetic about the world. The people who were ultimately responsible for constructing the trail were
not those industry laborers or blue collar workers suffering from unemployment. While the trail was used to relieve stresses of the working world, it was not the answer to the labor problem, those working on the trail were in secure positions and financially able to make the volunteer efforts.

The trail became instead became a preserve of the natural environment where those trapped indoors in their professional endeavors could safely escape the modern moment for a while. For people walking and working on the trail it brought a sense of balance, allowing them all the comforts of the city and the rewards of being in the wilderness. Many people sought the outdoors for physical, mental and spiritual rewards that accompany a communion with nature.

An enlarged middle class equipped with automobiles, expendable incomes and more time off for leisure were searching for outdoor recreation. Reconnecting with nature was championed by writers like John Muir and Annie Dillard. People began to focus more on public lands and the acquisition of additional recreation areas. It took sixteen years from MacKaye’s proposal to complete the Appalachian Trail. In that time its intended function as a tool for reform had vanished and it became solely a recreation space for the new middle class. Before beginning my thesis research, after nine years hiking on the Appalachian Trail, I was still unaware of this aspect of the trail’s history. Wondering where it had come from or why it was built always took a back seat to its presence. Though its original meaning has faded from view the trail itself remains a place of vivid imagination and as a social artifact.

The Trail Today

Though much of the construction of the trail was done by volunteers as MacKaye had prescribed, the Civilian Conservation Corps was also employed by land managers to work on unfinished sections of the trail in the 1930s (Foresta 1987). In some way the trail had helped to create temporary jobs meeting some of MacKaye’s original ideas about the trail as a place of employment and volunteerism. The trail while maintained by many volunteers has become a place of recreation for the majority of its users. Instead being a place of temporary work camps for people to attend during their time off it is a place where people work at following its ridge lines. It may not be the tool he imagined for social reform.
Many of the people who are hiking it are still economically secure but there are a few features that the trail still has in common with the original vision.

What features does the current trail share in common with MacKaye’s original vision? For starters the trail does connect Maine to Georgia, albeit it is Mt. Kathadin in Maine and Springer Mtn. in Georgia not Mt. Washington and Mt. Mitchell. The trail just as MacKaye suggested is divided into many sections, with each section being cared for by one club or another. The trail currently consists of 2,175 miles linking 14 states maintained by over 30 local organizations, is within a day’s drive for 2/3 of the U.S. population and is enjoyed by an estimated 4 million people each year (AT 2009). These organizations function largely on the virtue of volunteers. The construction and maintenance is the responsibility of the volunteers in those clubs. It seems that the notion of MacKaye’s that labor volunteerism is fun and unlike wage labor keeps trail enthusiasts working on the trail even today.

Shelters are for the most part spaced a comfortable day’s walk apart. Each is constructed at the very minimum to provide shelter from the elements. Newer shelters often include built in bunks or raised platforms for sleeping. Most that I have seen have a picnic table or a bench available for cooking and consuming food. These shelters are volunteer built and free of charge to anyone who is on the trail. Around the shelters are usually areas for hikers to set up tent camps if the shelter happens to be full. Hikers generally come together at the shelters sharing the space and the facilities without regard to social position. While the shelters might not be permanent camps, they are for a moment almost utopic, bringing together people who might otherwise never meet.

There may not be the idealist communities growing up around shelters, but the trail does connect a series of Appalachian communities which rely on the trail as part of their persona. Duncannon, PA is a perfect example of a town that incorporates the trail into its personality. The murals in town represent hikers and life on the trail, the Doyle Hotel caters to hikers, and postings for trail angels abound inside the hotel. The Doyle was my favorite port of call during my adventure on the trail.
Palmerton, PA has an excellent rapport with hikers, allowing hikers to spend the night for free in the basement of town hall, complete with bunks and showers. Palmerton even goes so far as to give out little care packages to hikers as they sign in to spend the night with various accessories like toothbrushes, floss and toilet paper. While I was in town a fellow hiker was stopped on the street and given five dollars and told to get a coffee, and a group I was hiking with was chased down by a local trail angel who offered to give us a ride to the trail head the following morning.

Many towns have an outfitter, and businesses that benefit from hikers who cross their way. Various aspects of local cultures are evident as one moves north along the trail. Businesses such as the hotels, restaurants and outfitters providing services to and benefiting from hikers are about as close as the modern trail comes to the fourth feature of MacKaye’s that calls for food camps. There are permanent occupations provided by these businesses and communities that to some degree rely on these businesses, creating a community which are to some degree dependent on and sculpted by the Appalachian Trail.
LANDSCAPES OF THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

The following song was found written in a shelter log. It is written to the tune of home on the range, but deals with the trail’s landscape. This one appeared in the journal after a few days of rocky trail that was not clearly marked. The blazing was present, but many times it was on rocks, which meant you couldn’t see it unless you were standing over it. Many hikers had come into Delaware Water Gap with stories of how they had been temporarily lost on the trail.

Oh, give me a road
Where the Appalachian Trail goes
Where the deer and the black bear play
Where the hills aren’t too steep
They’re not hard on your feet
And the rocks have all been cleared away
Home, home on the trail
Where the thru-hikers prevail
We follow this path
Though we all need a bath
We stay on our trek without fail
Oh, give me a blaze
To help me get through this maze
And to keep me from going astray
Make it white as a star
So I can see from afar
Not tan, or yellow, or grey.

Hikers, Gear, Shelters, Hostels and Trail Angels are all a part of the Appalachian Trail. All these features are integral to my trail experience. Understanding the Appalachian Trail, cannot be removed from experiencing it. The trail, the idea of the trail draws hikers to it. But once we’re there the trail becomes the greatest character in our journey, taking on a life all its own. The inclines, descents, flora, fauna, rivers, rocks, sounds, shadows and light all combine to give the trail life. It is so much a character that I hesitate in my writing to simply say it. It is not an inanimate entity, it has an irrevocable energy. The trail emerges as an ever changing accomplice. In this unmistakable life the trail deserves to be more than an it. I identified with the trail, on a personal level, not as simply a trail but as a person, that personhood I will call she. I have chosen to call her, in the feminine because at various points throughout
my hike I felt as though I was identifying some part of myself in the landscape around me. Almost as if some feature of the trail was a reflection of some otherwise invisible aspect of me. At other times the trail was shifty and demanding, crotchety even, like a sneaky old woman. Sometimes she was comforting and nurturing as mothers are imagined to be. Still in other instances she was highlighted by subtlety and filled with the sensual as a lover might be. Then again some days she was a bitch. In all of her personifications she represented a feminine character in my mind. For all of her ways, I cannot call her anything other than a female pronoun.

She cannot be separated from the landscape through which she passes. She is the textures of the world around her; those contours are her, part and parcel. From her landscape many lines can be written, even sitting in the same spot all day, there are many different lives to be seen. For the hiker she is active, ever changing, pushing you ahead and pushing you down. The rocks which seemed so ancient, bursting with stories and inspiring by morning can change entirely by afternoon. I learned that I would at times seek reprieve from the very thing that had inspired me.

My relationship to her was interactive. Yes, I was walking over and within her, but she was engulfing me. She responded to my steps and carried me forward or reminded me to be more careful in my walking. I tripped a million times over her roots if I tripped once. She was reminding me to pick my feet up and to stay conscious of my movements. Follow me now through a few days of life on the trail for further examples of the ways that she lives and influences my life.

**Finding Myself on the Trail**

My first steps on the trail would carry me into Maryland, my sixth trail state, and yet they were almost like my first ever footprints on the trail. Crossing the bridge all alone, standing in the middle of the Potomac, between West Virginia and Maryland I felt strange watching the water rushing under the simple rusting steel of that structure. The sensation I had was almost as though I was standing on myself, solid, rusting, spanning two places but occupying neither. Watching time as it passes, shaky but firm changing over change.
Nearing the shelter on that first day walking along her, I saw a single grey tree in this forest of millions. It was growing out of a patch of bright green ferns, marked with a single white blaze. Though there were many others like it on this hillside, it was singularly outstanding. Its difference clearly marked by her blaze, its individuality accentuated by the exuberance of the ferns. Watching for a moment I could not help but feel again like I was looking at myself.

Packed up and weighed down, floating freely is my soul, beyond constraint transcending pain, leaving behind reality of the everyday assuming a new mundane, becoming one with myself again. There is something to be said of simplicity, the kind where you get up when you’re ready, because it’s light, you eat because you’re hungry, you rest when you’re tired and the only time is taken by the singing birds and raining sun, the light rises and the fogs lift unveiling a kaleidoscope of textures. Stretching up through the moment, encircled by moss cobbled stones, laurels blooming dusting the mountain side with summer’s snow, along with last year’s fallen leaves.

Laurel snow and the cobble stone tunnel.
Climbing some of these hills, I wonder what the hell am I doing, why would I hurt myself, why can’t I breathe, and will my heart beat out of my neck, then I reach the top and I understand it.

Though I am weighed down, I am uplifted by the trail itself; but its contours and curves, though I am outside by daily world I am more in-touch with myself, I am more aware of my physical body. I feel every stone under foot, I feel my heart rate elevate and my chest swell with each breath. I am becoming a part of the trail by being there, but the trail is altering me, she is changing the way I move. Her body influences the rhythm of my breath; hers are sensual features that beg my attention. When I give her the attention she deserves, I begin to find myself already present in the landscape. Rather I begin to find reflections of myself, I begin to read me into the things I am doing and the places I am passing. I notice my strength and my weaknesses in the world around me. In seeing myself there along her lines I begin to feel as if I am coming home, though I have been here already in this most familiar territory.

**Seeing the Trail as Adversary**

The Appalachian Trail can be a place of wonder. No doubt she can push and pull any hiker that has set foot on her. For all of her amazing qualities, for every little thing that can inspire me, she can also become my greatest adversary. She alone can make me want to abandon her on the spot, never looking back. It is an impossible task for me. She is a part of my life, rooted in my past and growing into my future, but sometimes I still want to leave her. The inclines that eventually lead to sweet satisfaction can also lead me to a sense of endless desperation. Carrying my pack ever up another mountain I become Prometheus perpetually heaving a boulder up a mountainside, never being allowed to reach the top. She can be the wicked witch, her features becoming a disguised minion of flying monkeys to push you off the path. Of all the adversary characteristics she has, for me the rocks were the worst.

My first encounter with those rocks on the trail was an experience sweet with joy. The flat lands of Louisiana have nothing like it, and for me, just seeing them poking out from the ground was a homecoming. Even the soreness of breaking in and adapting to the specific demands of the trail was not enough to dissuade me from my happiness. After a while though, those rocks became the source of my
greatest agony. They became more plentiful they began to bruise my feet and compound old wounds. Some days their multitude of shapes and sizes were awe inspiring, on other days they were raw and painful, inspiring wishes of wide fields of freshly plowed earth. They can enhance the beauty of the landscape, they can make me feel a sense of timelessness, and they can hold me up when I need a rest and carry me out over a ravine. They can also cause me to need rest as they abuse my body; they can make me want to jump into the ravine, in search of cold water down below to soak in.

6/3 Up a hill and rock hopping along the ridge, in exposed sun, I feel like a screwdriver is jammed into my knee every time I step down off one ledge for another. The rocks are continuous, each at a different height, forcing me to step up and down with every progression. It seems as though I am walking along the back of a thousand stegosauruses.

These particular rocks were making me crazy, not because they were too big or foreboding, but because of their number and their differences. I could not stand continuously stepping up and down and up and down. This continual motion was threatening to take me off the trail. The solidity of them made the impact of stepping onto them all the worse. Whereas the smaller rocks had reached up to catch the toe of my shoes, whenever I quit paying attention to them, these rocks made no attempt to be so tricky as to trip me. Instead they were very plain about my obligations to pay them their dues.
6/22 Beginning the descent the rain poured over me. The further down into Wind Gap I go, the slicker and rockier it gets. I am reminded to go slow and I do, but, with each step, I can envision my ankle and then my knee wrenching around and out of place. I slip down the trail as much as walk but I to keep my footing. When I reached the bottom of Wind Gap, I follow the trail to the overpass, taking shelter from the downpour, thinking of alternatives, I don’t want to play rocks in the rain.

The rocks being as they were could not help but to be slick in the rain. The way they would shine up from the trail was like little eyes waiting and watching in anticipation for my downfall. Either I was going to tumble downward or I would fail to follow her path. Either way the rocks and the rain had done enough to give me pause. The pressure to continue on as a hiker and to play it safe as a researcher was weighing on me. The hiker in me wanted to stay out of the rain but also to continue on the trail to see what she might yield in the rain. The researcher in me said, “if you bust your leg, its game over and there goes your thesis”. In the end I decided not to follow her that day. I thought it better to sit out that section than to risk her pongee pit of sudden death. On other days I find the rock formations and even the rocks in the trail to be one of my favorite parts of the trail. Primarily because they remind me of the mile of trail I call home in the Southern Appalachians of Tennessee, North Carolina and Georgia.

The inclines that I mentioned previously could be vengeful for the flat ground you had covered that day. Some days it would be nice just to call it quits. You are on your way up the hill and it never seems to end. Your legs burn, your lungs ache, you heart would like to take a vacation and is threatening to pump out of your neck. There is something in the experience of that burning, of feeling your body so
thoroughly that is incommunicable. I can try and explain that acid build up in my legs and what it feels like a half hour into a steady climb but I would never be able to actually take you into that moment.

These steps and their amazing difficulty are part of what makes the trail an adversary. Surly there are moments at the top when the feeling of having arrived, of having made it is euphoric but these moments are out of reach when I am within the climb. I am only conscious of the ground below me, before me and the world immediately around me. Though in truth at times even the world at hand and under foot vanishes. My legs seem to disappear, my arms swing without my suggestion, my feet move me over the mountain, but I am unaware of it. I am aware of my breath, or lack thereof, any pain I am feeling or the racing of my blood through my veins. Sometimes, even this I am unaware of as I stare into the blurred lines of the ground, the trees or the horizon.

6/15 This hill unlike that one has some switch backs but stretches ever onward into the green clouds, alluding to the displaced horizon line. As I neared the top, my steps began to seem more directly up like stairs, like climbing on loose and crumbling soil, the illusion of being always almost there. One step up a half step up, then the ground shifts beneath me and back I go.

The weather which is like her mood can bring on elation on a cool day, irritation on a rainy day and misery on hot and humid days. There is little that can be done to keep from feeling the wrath of her moods. A rainy day temperament had driven me off of the rocks already but the wrath of a hot and humid day was enough to make me loose all sense of myself.

7/2 My pack is heavy after resupply. I have 6 days of food, it’s always feast or famine. The weight of the food and 3 liters of water is oppressive. I can feel it pulling me into the earth with every step. We begin our day in a forest under growth of blueberry bushes. The trail though lacking ups and downs is uneven and littered with small rocks making the ups loose and the downs rough. The inclines are minimal, but pointless, we go up to turn around and come back down. I feel like vomiting, I am sweating buckets, but I feel cold, I am dizzy, but I keep going. It’s a short day: only seven miles or so.

The foul mood in the weather and my fully loaded pack made the day drag on forever. I was not a happy hiker on this day. Nor was I a very pleasant hiker in the middle of the previous days climb. Her moods affect my moods, a nice cool day is relaxing even refreshing, but a hot or rainy day is aggravating and stressful if the conditions are already uncomfortable. Even with a fin trail like the one mentioned
above, the sheer heat of the day made me feel quite uncomfortable, almost as if I were little more than a walking tub of guts. It is not a pleasant analogy but nothing about that day was pleasant.

Conversely to the weather and to the inclines she is shift enough to also remind hikers to look where they are going. She has gotten me with this one on more than one occasion, but maybe the best example, aside from the stones reaching up and pulling down the fronts of my shoes is when my friend Earth was taken out by the trail. We were walking along a snowshoe trail, which apparently needed a little cleaning up when Earth was reminded to pay attention to where she was going and to keep the going slow. The first knock out was a tree leaning over the trail just at head height. She charged right into it, after that incident I warned her, much to her chagrin I’m sure, about every tree leaning over the trail that I saw. These little reminders that the trail sends out to us hikers, keep us on our toes when it comes to paying attention, because we quickly discover that we can end up on our butts should we forget. I myself was not paying attention walking down a hillside; the trail leading downward had eaten into the ground, forming somewhat of a ravine. I was taking my usual strides when I put my foot on a bit of exposed rock. That one shiny I didn’t see sent me tumbling pack and all. Eight feet down the trail I stood up and regained my confidence to continue on. I did not miss another rock in the trail for the rest of the day.

At times she can both hurt you and inspire you simultaneously. The inspiration in these moments might come from a curiosity about what lies ahead or being overwhelmed with a sudden opening allowing you a vista over where you had been earlier that day. I had both of those experiences on my first day out. I knew that it would take me a few weeks to break into the trail and I had anticipated some hardship, despite feeling wounded something about the lure of the trail and that first day following her up through new territory brought me beyond my discomfort and rewarded me with an incredible view of the river I had crossed a little before.

6/1 My first real climb took me I up through sets of switchbacks, curving me from one side of the hill to the other in my steady progression upward. Back and forth I went higher and higher until my heart beat echoed in my knees. Strained as this first ascent was the beauty and the mystery of this new section pulled me forward. I was enthralled with the possibility of what might appear next. When I felt as though I had found the top of the hill, I noticed a side trail and took it to Weaverton Cliffs, those rocky
outcroppings push out from the forest and open up to the sky. In their vacancy green mountain tops, a canvas of rolling hills speckled with trees and the perfect view of the Potomac rippling broadly over rocks is revealed in the panorama of where I had been.

**Inspiration on the Trail**

The trail for all her rewarding hardships is also an inspiration. The feelings I get, the rush of energy, the adrenaline, the euphoria of climbing rocks and mountains is nearly enough to bring me back to her despite to harm I sometimes do to myself in the process. To love hiking the trail is reminiscent of having a love hate relationship. You want it pushes you away. Like any relationship, the trail offers benefits beyond the euphoria of having made it to the top, climbed the rocks or made twenty two miles in half a day. In her subtler moments she offers inspiration, the impetus to keep going, to come back and an astounding satisfaction with being where you are. One such moment happened for me after a bit of pre-dawn hiking.

6/10 …from a low lying path and takes me up, up, and away; delivering me, tired and sweaty to the top of Center Point Knob. I arrived at the top of the knob just as dawn was beginning to unveil a new day. There above the world around me I was able to watch the sun break the veiled horizon. Those first rays of light came trickling through the silhouettes of trees between me and the sky.

When the dawn broke through those trees I felt as if a new day had arrived. What began as a day of 19 miles across fields to get to the next shelter became a day of adventure in a new place. Instead of dreading the fields as I had been all morning I began to anticipate what they might look like, what was growing in them and how the AT found her way through them. The sunrise had wiped the climb up from the shelter in the dark from my mind. I was starting my day fresh, and that feeling of wonder held down the mountain and into the fields where I watched the sun rise ever higher as I made my way north toward Boiling Springs.

I trudge on, up, up, up, up, the hill that never ends, one long switch back becomes another, the horizon line always directly overhead, to the left a drop off leads into the valley, to the right a wall of mountain and the trail directly below. At one point there is a bench of stone on the trail I stop and take a picture there, it is an amazing view, I wish for a wide angle lens to catch the depth, to somehow translate the magnitude of what I am seeing, here at the “top” of the mountain, though it was not in fact a top at all.
The elusive horizon line was oppressive, not being able to tell where the trail would begin to level out was almost as bad as having that level moment always out of reach. On this day however, the trail was so precariously placed. It was not a dangerous section, not like the Knife’s Edge; rather it seemed an anomaly to have a path etched into the side of a mountain. I had walked many similar sections of trail and would walk many more, what really caught my attention was the way that the mountain nearly vanished to my left, leaving me with the tops of trees and a view of what ever laid below; not the bottom of the mountain, nor the previous switchback, just down to a slanted floor of leaves. To my right I was shoulder to shoulder with the edge of the mountain, her path was cut almost as deep as I am tall, placing me nearly at eye level with everything happening on the forest floor. Seeing the leaves and insects crawling through them was in inspiring in itself, but what was more interesting to me at the time was how I was occupying two spaces, above the valley, and the hillside but also below the earth and the mountain. That impossible feeling of being there was enough to sustain me to the top.

A Sense of Adventure

There is something in the risky aspects of the trail; something in the form of not knowing what is ahead, or how you might get there that can lead you on. When I reach a new rock formation that strains my imagination to figure out how it took its form, I feel this sense of energy take me over, and propel me over the unusual formations. Some rocks are not a part of the trail and yet I feel compelled to go over and play on them. I think their composition inspires in me something childlike and curious. These moments of wonder feel like adventure.

Following the trail up a rocky wall that she climbs, she leads me up over granite boulders until I find myself standing atop a ledge, a ridge called the Knife’s Edge. Appropriately named as it forms a narrow edge with a staggering drop off either side; accompanying the drop are the nearly unmentionable serrated crags to lose your feet, hands, arms, legs, or trekking poles in. Once I make it off the edge I feel a sense of sadness that it has passed.

7/2 I marvel at the mini rock mountain behind me that I will eventually climb up, it’s like a movie set, something from my own dreams, beautiful and strong, elegant and simple, fascinating and plain. Rocks like these remind me of the potential of the window: it could be anything – a nightmare or a dream.
6/21 I climb the winter trail, up bare orange rocks, it reminds me of Nevada, not PA. the devastation is total; scrub trees and dry grasses, and some w/ small purple flowers are all that stand out against the rusted naked hillside, stark beauty against the blue sky. And it is beautiful and a change of scenery. Very different compared to the hills of the past weeks. The ground is roughly level, and an old road leads us most of the way across the top. There are some boulders but mostly it’s a welcome reprieve from the rocks. Crossing little gap we go almost vertically up.

These scenes from a few days walking are the brief illustrations of the types of terrain that inspire in me a sense of adventure. For me these are some of the finest moments on the trail, despite difficulty. These moments present some of the greatest possibilities of the trail, to intimately experience unique places. Instances like these with their awkward and unusual nature bring me back to the trail time after time for their beauty and their uniqueness. For me it is not about conquering these places rather it is about be there, seeing, feeling and letting them become part of my world. These places that bring on a sense of adventure often also bring out a sense of the mystical.

The trail is more than just a walking path that inspires you to dream of days ahead or to reminisce in fond memories of afternoons spent on the sofa. There is something hard to describe in the way that she entices me. I know that there will be hard climbs and beautiful vistas, and I know that there is an incredible world of stunning minutia, but this perhaps is not the real pull. The pull of the trail is the feeling that comes from pushing yourself to physical boundaries, and from communing with the world away from street signs and park benches. Yet there is something more that brings me back to the trail, days or weeks at a time. It is in the little magic of the moment, it is magically real. The interactions of the streams with the birds, trees and myself; it’s in the conversations that seem to be taking place if you just stop to listen. The physical features of the trail take on lives of their own. The wildlife of the trail enters into a discourse, or highlights the harmony between physical and living worlds.

6/5 If the trail was pretty in Maryland, five days later Pennsylvania is stunning. The path that would lead me to Quarry Gap Shelter is green and gentle yet steep and rocky. The streams here surpass those of Maryland. Each seems to have its own personality, its own relationship with the world at its edges. They trickle, burble, gurgle, and sing. They tell stories from her heart and the birds reply with their own tales of
trails long gone. There is always another mountain forever reaching up and curving down, and I am following the dragons back.

The magic is also in the singular beauty of the daily, in some cases it is the beautiful laurels blooming; in others it is the way that the moss covers a stone. This feeling exists for me in the perfect imperfection of each flower or each stone. It is the magnificent amount of difference that is all around me. The intricacy of nature, the viewing and being next to something so much older than myself, the world around me, the path in the ground, the old rocks, even the young laurels, resonate with permanence, even if the moment is only temporary. I am reminded both of my grandeur and my insignificance, standing here in the middle of the forest.

A laurel blooming and budding.

The natural wonders of the trail exist in the minute details of the world around me, but they do not exist in the details alone. Some of the most fascinating aspects of the trail are impressive rock formations or unusual tree shapes. Whenever things like this are encountered there is little that I can do to contain my sense of wonder. They are inspiring despite there being similar types of trees or piles of rocks all around them because they are pronounced in their uniqueness.
I was busy enjoying the early morning fog, and the way the trail slants just so, with moss at its banks, tunneling through piles of beautiful blooming laurels. Each bloom is budding with its own details. The tiny dots of green at their centers, ringed by a polygon of pink, with white boning extending out to their opening edges are reminiscent of the finest fireworks I’ve ever seen.

Many hills and many miles into July seventh, I came to Route 20 and the magnificent Dover Oak. This tree is legendary in stature, the very thing dreams are made of, stretching up and out, transcending time and space. Standing beside it I could feel how small and fleeting I am. Beside this oak that I could get lost inside I am amazed by how much time had passed for this tree. How long has it been standing here reaching ever outward? No matter how long I could stand still, I would never grow as large. No matter what medical marvels are generated nor how healthy I become could my lifetime equal half of this one. I feel myself lost to time beside of this time keeper.

The contours of her echo an unsuspecting beauty to me. The way that these millions of footsteps have bent her further into the earth etching her sides higher, turn her from footpath to a meandering maze of possibility surrounded by forest, laurel and stone. She works her way through trees leading me on, into lands both strange and familiar. Her garments change from laurel and stone scattered in forests to forests of stone scattered with laurels. Her voice shifts an orchestra of singing birds highlighted by running springs to hot windswept whispers of trees before entering alien lands. These foreign worlds are also a part of the magic that beings me faithfully back to her. She can take me to the furthest point in my world and in that corner the familiar becomes extra planetary, in awe of the secrets outside my door I return.
On June 9th she led me to an alien world full of large rocks and strange scraggily trees, the breeze itself transformed into the miniature calls of small aliens or perhaps a lost legion of demons. Their screams are all around me, buzzing shrieking and rattling. The noise in itself is confusion, I can’t tell if a rattle snake is underfoot or if the next onslaught of aliens are launching themselves through the trees.

The alien rocks of the flying fortress.

These miniature legions dive bomb me as I wander my way up and over the rocks and roots of their fortress. Accompanying these tiny beings there are iridescent black beetles that run away the very instant you lay eyes on them. They look like a rainbow set on onyx disguised as insects. Not only the beetles but also the sense that it was perpetually raining beads down from the blue sky, through what seemed to be an ever evaporating sea of green. In the setting sun, in this strange forest of stone these winged aliens remind me of faeries.

In reality the scene above was my trip along the trail near Alec Kennedy Shelter. Locusts were really the little aliens, it was their breeding year. Apparently they only appear ever seven years, or so I was told by Gracious Goodness. I had seen cicadas on trees at home, but I had never seen anything quite
as unusual as the swarm of locusts I walked through. The locusts were everywhere; zinging across the trail, their screeching was so loud I could hardly hear myself think. This was the first day of this hike where I had encountered large groups of rocks to cross over, so the landscape was very different from what I was used to. The raining beads were actually the droppings of gypsy moth caterpillars which had eaten away most of the canopy above. Perhaps none of this is very fantastic once it is laid out and explained but to be there in that moment was truly something extraordinary.

6/10 After crossing many beautiful fields beneath a rising sun, trailing my way thru tall grasses, following that closely carved path left by every hiker that came before me, soaking my feet in the morning dew I reached Boiling Springs, at a pond on the trail I walk past an old man by the river. He looked up from his fishing bucket, long enough to say, “it’s going to storm this afternoon” and that was all. His presence reminded me of an old sooth sayer, fishing there along the pond, just waiting for someone to come by and lend their ear a moment.

I found interesting characters like this man all throughout my experiences with the trial. Their presence always seems somehow special even though they are on the side of the trail occupied with some usual activity. It is as if the presence of non-hikers along the trail, living their sedentary lives, seems staged to me as I go about passing through.

7/3 West Mountain to Grey Moore Friary Leaving the shelter, searching for a yellow blaze trail that would avoid leading me up bear mountain just to send me down again, I saw a doe. She was standing in some blueberry bushes, munching away. She seemed as if she hardly took note of me.

Our encounter was as if we were just some other animal, a moving fixture that she had seen a hundred times before. Until this moment I had seen more deer than I could count, yet I was still amazed
to be standing so close to her and to have her disregard me entirely. The spotted fawns that I saw from Harper’s Ferry to Salisbury were some of the most memorable animals I saw along the trail. On July 2nd I saw a doe and her fawn eating blueberries, the fawn saw me and bounded over some bushes but they also stayed where they were enjoying summers feast. On July 8th a fawn jumped right out into the trail, not twenty feet ahead of me, and it stood there pondering my existence or my intentions for a solid minute and a half before leaping away. The fawns were so numerous along my hike, yet I have rarely seen one off the trail.

To be so close to nature, to see other living things up close and personal in a natural setting and for the most part being disregarded as a threatening presence is astounding to me. I saw so many chipmunks during my hike that they became almost as common as leaves, though their animated mannerisms made them too comical to be dismissed entirely. The most amazing of the animal encounters I had along the trail was on June 25th. I was rounding a turn in the trail just after a rain, when I saw a black bear probably forty feet away from me standing on its hind legs with its back pressed against a tree and one front foot holding itself up. It was having an afternoon back scratch, and it continued to scratch its back against the tree with me standing there fumbling for my camera. When Queen and Pauper caught up to Earth and I there was some commotion and it took off. I was awestruck. I had worked as a bear keeper at Grandfather Mountain during my undergrad, but seeing this outside of captivity made the experience so real. In total I saw five bears during my hike; this one would be as close as I ever came to occupying the same space at the same time.

**Communication on the Trail**

6/25 leaving a shelter after a short rest stop, Earth and I aim 5.3 miles ahead to the next shelter, but when we finally get there, we discover its 0.4 miles straight down a smooth rock face. That totals 0.8 miles of wasted vertical steps. After careful deliberation we decided to leave a note for Queen and Pauper that we had gone on further.

It was secured in a Ziploc and held down by a rock atop the rock which held the blue blaze that directed hikers to the shelter. Hopefully someone who is going down to the shelter will deliver the
message. This system of message passing among hikers is what I call the hiker express. Sooner or later some hiker shows up passing off and passing along information meant for you or for someone you might meet.

Left: The note held out over the trail down. Right: The note as left for hikers to find.

Ours was the fifth note I had come across that was left attached to the landscape in some way. Literally embedding communication in the physical attributes of the trail. Three of these notes were attached to signs marking springs or shelters. Informing coming hikers of the water situation at the spring or of a decision to stay at or skip a shelter. Two notes that were hung off of water pumps warned that the water needed to be treated as it had tested positive for coli form bacteria. These notes were typed and laminated and meant as a more permanent fixture, to warn all coming hikers, not just people in your group, or arriving within a few days time. I had seen other notes left on the trail itself, written with sticks. These notes are perhaps even less permanent as one clumsy hiker might undo the arrow or kick the initials into scattered fire wood. The most interesting aspect of this type of note leaving is that the trail herself passes on the message for you. Hikers for the most part recognize that these little bits of paper left in the forest might be of value for them, or perhaps someone that they will meet along the way will need the message. Passing along information like this is just one way that conscientious hikers help one another along and participate in an interwoven community of people who would otherwise be strangers.
SHELTER ON THE TRAIL

June 1st, my first day on the trail and I just need to get to the shelter. It was hard enough walking out onto the rusty bridge at Harper’s Ferry, watching the car roll out of sight, a piece of me in the passenger seat. I crossed the bridge, going north, noting how its aged form was something similar to my soul, ragged but proud. I followed along the old C&O Canal tow path, walking along to Potomac until the white blazes of the trail turned away from the river, taking me left up and over the first hills of my latest adventure. I paused for a moment at the first big overlook I would cross, looking back over the valley and the Potomac I felt a renewed sense of purpose. I was looking for the stories of the Appalachian Trail, told by the winding path herself. I was at the beginning, at the crest of my climb, beginning again, looking back like I had so many times before, over a haze, under a mist of greens and grays. It was growing later, checking my watch compulsively I knew I must move on. The shelter was not too much further ahead, but the sun grew lower, and the grey stretched further. I knew I had to get to the shelter before night fall.

On that initial climb I wondered what the Appalachian Trail would mean to me in the end. I had a strange sense of anxiety; unlike anything I had experiences previously. How awkward I felt, traversing the wide path up the hillside, seeing the trees and missing the forest, being excited to be on the trail and yet apprehensive, though I wasn’t sure why. It was during this first climb that I realized that I was worried, not about the rocks or the roots, or the ever dimming light, but about what I would find when I arrived at the shelter. The trail was fine, the walking was perfect, but I was carrying extra weight in my pack. This time I was well read. This time I was aware of antecedent leisure constraints: those things that are supposed to keep me from even thinking of taking a trail, fear and backpacking, and the boogey man that so many seemed to believe in. I didn’t mean to carry these things, in fact I had never packed them before, but this time I was caught up in issues I assumed were for academics. Advice from the written pages of media, blog posts, and leisure studies jumped up at me as the shadows elongated, the words of
my friends and family echoed in my ear, and I could not balance out that which I knew better than with reality. I began to look at my watch more frantically, timing myself, how many steps per minute, how quickly I can move looking down at stones and roots is measured not in distance but in minutes. The wind brushes through the leaves which shake like gloved fingers beneath the grey sky. More anxious by the minute I begin to look for the blue blazes marking the side trail that will eventually lead me to the shelter. It is not far off the trail, all I have to do is find those blue blazes. Will they come soon enough, or have I overestimated my abilities? When they do come what will I find this Ed Garvey shelter to be? I doubt myself on this first night, doubt my purpose, and doubt that I should be doing this. Yet, when the blazes do appear I race them to the shelter. I see it in the distance, huddled in a clearing of the trees, meeting the skyline as a silhouette disguised by branches.

![Ed Garvey Shelter, 06-01-08](image)

What did it look like, that first impression of it? It was taller than I had expected, two stories, its walls laid logs, and with stairs more like a ladder against the exterior of its back wall, leading up to a tiny balcony, nearly to its tin roof. The side facing the approach trail looked awkward, the top of the wall
protruding out over the bottom, sloping backward as the right leg of a V. The slanting wall and the angle of the roof made it look like a quadrilateral from a dusty geometry textbook. Despite its odd shape the sight of it was exhilarating. I had made it, before sundown, without being soaked by rain, and I was going to take my pack off for the rest of the night. I had taken it off twice before to relieve myself and to enjoy my first look back over the Potomac. Each time I picked it up it seemed relentlessly heavier than it had the day before. Its real weight was compounded by a gain of 800’ in elevation, and a host of emotions pushing me forward and pulling me home. Thinking of dropping that weight for the duration of the day was motivation enough to get where I was going, regardless of how it appeared. Though its shape was funny, this shelter was abundantly more appealing than some I had passed other nights in.

Relieved to have found my home for the evening, yet apprehensions about the night ahead raced through my mind, I passed by the walls of the shelter, curious who or what might be inside. Stepping onto the large porch in front and looking into the shelter I could see that I was not the first second or third to lay down my pack. There was a man already stretched out, right up against the wall of the shelter, snoring faintly. Surveying the area in front of the shelter a fire ring beside the porch appeared well maintained a heavy grill over it, with benches flanking it. The porch itself held a picnic table butted up to the opening of the shelter and a bench spanning the front edge, separating the porch from the forest at large. As I unbuckled my pack, and slipped the weight of the day off onto that bench, I looked up, and noticed above the opening, a sign marking the Ed Garvey shelter hung just below a large Plexiglas window in four panels. A window taking up the whole upper side of the shelter, how novel! To let in the light of day, to see out while being explicitly inside of a shelter, seemed one of the best shelter innovations. Without the weight of my pack pulling back on me I stood there looking up at the window and the reflection of the sky and trees. I carried my pack over to the picnic table and stepped inside the shelter. The upstairs floor was not connected to wall with the window, instead there was almost three feet between the window and the floor, allowing the light to come down and sound and air to circulate.
I abandoned the shelter to find a private place for a moment’s relief. When I returned I found that the man who had been sleeping was stirring about the shelter and the other hikers whose bags I’d noticed had returned. There was one girl and two guys in the group. They were out for a week on the trail. They had been away from the shelter when I had arrived. There was also a group of three guys who were counselors at an outdoor recreation camp and were out for some time on the trail before the kids arrived. They had claimed the upstairs room, so that they could talk and team-build without bothering us hikers. It is always an interesting experience in shelters, how to start conversations. We began with introductions: “where are you from?” and “how far are you hiking?” At this point the guy, who had been stirring about the shelter, gets up and puts his boots on, introducing himself, “Traveler, it’s nice to meet you Mattie”, “I’m going down to the water, does anyone need me to carry some up?” The water was located on a blue blaze trail from the shelter, downhill from the shelter and so I took him up on his offer. I unloaded my two liter platypus emptied what was left in it into my cooking pot and my Nalgene, and handed it over. The other hikers said they were going to go down later, but one of the weekenders did offer up a Nalgene to be filled at the stream. The man put all of bottles into a plastic bag, the kind you take your groceries home in, and headed off down the hill.

While he was gone I took stock of his gear, glancing over the well worn pack, huge skillet, the old bag, and wondered where he had come from and how long he had been out on the trail. Something about his gear seemed especially worn, beyond what I usually see on hikers, as if not one item had been recently purchased. Taking off my hiking shoes and slipping into my Chaco sandals I picked out my spot in the shelter. Laying my mat out I picked a spot near the middle of the shelter, about one person’s width between me and guy who had just left with my platypus. His gear was spread haphazardly, spreading out from the wall into the shelter floor. Hooking my shoes together I hang them off the pegs in the back wall above my mat. Making sure they would stay on the hook I grab my food bag and my stove from inside my pack, setting up the day’s dinner. Rifling through my bag, I decide on pasta primavera and tuna for my trailside gourmet. As I situate my stove on the picnic table to begin making dinner the man with the
water returns, distributes the containers for which we all thank him, and joins me at the picnic table, mixing up what seems to be runny dough of some sort.

As he stirs the nearly waffle consistency blob, he and I begin a conversation, telling each other about our experience on the trail; exchanging trail names, where we started from, how far we came today, what we saw along the way, terrain, weather, where we might go tomorrow. We began comparing our cooking gear. He seemed impressed with my homemade soda can stove and tuna can burner. “where’d you get that?” he asked, “well I got curious and made it” I answered. He then pointed up to a shelf on the wall, and to a can of denatured alcohol, “that’s for anybody who might need it.” Mean while the group of guys had built a fire in the fire ring and begun cooking their own dinner, Traveler folded a bit of aluminum foil into a square and asked the guys if he could borrow a little space on the grill. “Yeah, of course”, and they slid their things off to one side, on the foil he poured some of the blob, which I had learned was a trailside cornbread mix he found in a hiker box. He cooked his cornbread on his homemade griddle as another man came hiking up like his boots were on fire. He was glad to be there, taking his pack off he tossed it onto the porch bench and introduced himself as Toad. He began unloading grocery bags from his pack, “So what did y’all think of Harper’s Ferry?” Traveler responded, “It’s a nice looking place, but it sure isn’t much of a trail town” “Yeah, I went to the outfitter but their food selection was awful, and the Trail Conservancy office didn’t make up for the lack of supplies either.” “I just grabbed some snacks from this little store and got out of there as fast as I could” “I didn’t even take the time to put it away, just shoved it in my pack bag and all”. He poured out the contents of his grocery bags, ramen and crackers going everywhere. For a moment the shelter looked like a Quick Stop but he quickly organized himself, picked out his dinner and put the rest away. The shelter was large enough to accommodate the momentary food sprawl without encroaching on anyone’s gear, but it was very amusing to have the floor look like a junk food blizzard. Even though I was beginning my hike from Harper’s Ferry I could tell that the town wouldn’t be very friendly to hikers on a tight budget. Harper’s Ferry was very well groomed, and expensive. The hikers they wanted to have around were the ones who could
afford the fancy freeze-dried meals. It might be considered a midway point between the Southern and Northern terminuses, even though the true midway point is several days’ hike north, but the lack of hiker wants and high prices seemed sure to drive out the hikers I spoke with. After all by the time they get there most thru-hikers have been walking for three unemployed months. Toad began cooking just as my water was boiling, I opened the Ziploc containing a package worth of pasta primavera and poured in the water, sealing it quickly and wrapping it up in my bandana. He and Traveler both thought it was neat that I was using freezer bag cooking, I explained that it was less mess and I didn’t have to waste water to clean my pot after meals, perfect for a minimal effort approach. Even if I did have to put the food in the bags to start with, and then throw the bag away in the next town, this method reduced my work load on the trail.

Meanwhile the bread Traveler was cooking had come off the grill and he shared a piece with me and the group of guys who were cooking around the ring. It wasn’t bad. I gave him a sports drink mix, since he had inquired about what I was added to my Nalgene. Traveler, Toad and I sat around the picnic table talking about the trail, what brought us this far and our hopes for the days to come. As the day grew darker still, I finished my dinner, forcing myself to eat the portion allotted for today. Pulling out my sleeping bag, hanging my back on a peg, suspending my food bag from the ceiling along a cord with a stick hanging beneath a can to fool mice, I readied myself for the night ahead, placing my flashlight and pocketknife on the floor by my mat. I was so tired, but I pulled out my write-in-the-rain notebook and began to record the adventures of the first day. Scribbling down the day’s events, marking the pages of my guidebook, I reflected on the bed I slept in the night before and drew on the dusty planks that were under me now. The shelter was clean except for the dust and bits of the trail that made it onto its platform. As I was getting ready for sleep, Toad came in and set up his half mat between mine and Traveler’s. Another group of hikers set up on the other side of me filling the shelter.

The space inside the shelter is limited and it can get crowded depending on how many hikers are passing by and what the weather is like. Despite being in close quarters everyone has enough room in the shelter, each set of gear taking up its own space without any interference from other gear. Hanging on
wall pegs, the way every kid gets a cubby in kindergarten. Food dangles heavily on cords, between floor
and ceiling, keeping breakfast for ourselves by holding mice at bay. We share the cords that protect our
food from mice by holding it above the shelter floor, asking, “Do you mind if I hang my food over
yours?” the answer is “no” unless it looks like the stick tied at the end of the line might break. In many
shelters whether or not food can be hung in the shelter is an issue in itself. Often people prefer to hang it
in bear bags outside of and away from the shelter. Then where the food is kept becomes a matter of
respecting the shelter as a communal space. Usually this is done without much discussion, it is just
understood that the shelter is unanimously with or without food for the night. Occasionally, as I
witnessed twice, it causes conflict, someone will want to keep their food in the shelter instead of hanging
it outside and another hiker will insist that it go outside. In one instance the hiker wishing to keep his
food inside the shelter actually left the shelter and stayed in his tent instead.

On this particular evening, sleeping pads and bags were laid out approximately equidistance apart,
though no lines were drawn designating who had which side of the shelter we all observed a given
distance between ourselves and others. Moving over and making extra space when need be is just one
way to accommodate fellow hikers in shelters. Within the shelter the regulating of space is first come
first serve. Being able to hang your pack on a peg or having a place to sleep is determined by the order in
which hikers arrive. Having the best place to sleep is based on claiming it once you get there. If you
arrive at a shelter late, or after it is already full, you can count on having to put up the tent, string the
hammock or walk the miles to another shelter. It isn’t expected that anyone will give up their shelter
space just so you can have one, which is particularly disappointing after a 20 mile day, but that
occasionally happens. I had that experience one day at Rausch Gap shelter, when the speedy hikers had
passed Earth and I during the day and taken all the shelter space, though any other day you would have
found them preferring to be in hammocks. However, on that particular day the forecast had a high
probability of rain in the evening, so we all wanted shelter space to keep ourselves and our gear dry.
Shelters situated along the Appalachian Trail have their own set of understood rules. It is not my attempt to define and explain these rules, yet they are visible in interactions with other hikers. In the shelter you make your best effort to make sure that everyone is provided equal access to the facilities. The community of long distance hikers is for the most part very respectful of the trail and other hikers. AT shelters as spaces are generally respected as common places. For the most part shelters are taken care of by those who stay in them. Meaning that typically we do not leave trash lying around because it is disrespectful to the shelter, to the land and to other hikers, but this does not mean that every hiker out there follows the rule. While most hikers follow a “leave no trace” ethic, not everyone hiking the trail has that policy. There were days when I seemed to be following a trail of cigarette butts as much as a trail of blazes, still other days when I would stop to pick up trash I saw along the way. I’d pocket trash from shelters and carry it into the next town. Other hikers would figure out who had been making a mess and would make a note, indicating the suspect, in trail journals or as a display, (as shown in the following photograph) so that other hikers would be aware of this person’s behavior. The display below was found in a fire pit at Peter’s Mountain Shelter, and was burned later that evening.

This display illustrates one example of the public shaming that sometimes takes place along the trail. With any luck these demonstrations will pressure the offender, who has usually moved on, by providing other hikers with the opportunity to make comments about the display to the offender. Perhaps making an example of one naughty hiker serves to remind the rest of the community what the rules are. Any hiker that views a demonstration like this can interpret it as a message that they themselves should not litter, lest they too be made an example of.

On top of generally respecting the shelter by not leaving behind trash, generally it is understood that people will make use of the privy or at the very least avoid eliminating waste in the immediate vicinity of the shelter. For one that can get very stinky and for another you really don’t want to walk through, set your pack in, or in some other unpleasant way encounter what is left of a Cliff bar. It is a nicety not to have to concern yourself with potentially viewing another hiker in a compromising position.
It is fairly easy to walk off away from the shelter, to find a place for relieving oneself, though there are lots of eyes at many of the shelters. Mostly people will be respectful, do almost anything to avoid looking into the general direction in which you walked.

One hiker placed some litter in the fire pit and posted it as belonging to a certain litter bug.

**Spaces and Privacy**

Another interesting point about shelters is the sharing of space and privacy. While the shelters are located along a wilderness trail and in the uninhabited woods, there is an unbelievably lack of privacy associated with trail shelters. Maybe it isn’t as crowded as some other locations but usually people congregate at one area, at the end of the day this area, is usually a shelter. Imagine needing to change clothes in a three sided room full of people you don’t know. Could be a little awkward if not handled appropriately, one simple solution is oddly enough, just to announce that you are going to be changing clothes and ask others to avert their eyes. Usually everyone will respect a little privacy, because they might also like a little privacy. Privacy is one thing that no one really has. For being in the “wilderness”,

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there seem to be people everywhere you turn. Because it is in such short supply, perhaps we give it more willingly than in other situations. Turning your back, averting your eyes, not walking behind the shelter at the same time as another person, accounting for shelter members before you set out on a personal journey, and knocking on the door to the privy are all understood ways of giving each other the private moments we need.

In addition to respecting people’s visual privacy, around the shelters there is a taboo against the usage of cell phones within earshot of shelter. No one sits in the shelter and places a phone call, providing they can get out from under the shelter, weather and health permitting. A large majority of calls being made were dialed after exiting the shelter, and were held off to the side, and voiced in a way that put them out of ear shot. The way that cell phones are being used on the trail keeps the conversation taking place private. Not only are you not being bothered by someone else’s talk, you are also being kept out of their business. This doesn’t mean that you never see someone on a cell phone; rather it means that no one is in your ear on their cell phone. I did use my cell phone occasionally on the trial. Mostly I used it to text message my location a status report to people who were concerned about me. When I would make a call, it was always made off to the side, behind or away from the shelter. I saw two other hikers using their cell phones at a shelter; both used low voices and held their conversations as privately as possible. I saw another cell phone call being made from an overlook. This is less bothersome to me, more amusing really. I activated a new cell phone sitting on a rock ledge on top of a mountain, I thought the ability to do that in the middle of the “wilderness” was hilarious. Hikers are generally respectful about their phone usage. Many understand that a cell phone takes away from the natural aspects, from the quiet and from the trail itself. It is too bad that people in coffee shops, classrooms, parks, museums and movie theaters are not more conscious that their cell phone usage is annoying and distracting for other people. It seems that on the trail the emphasis on cell phone etiquette is heightened. Where as in these other places, people feel inclined to yammer away whenever the mood strikes them.
An amazing aspect of privacy, security and personal space on the trail, is that you can put your pack down, with almost everything you have in it, walk away to go get water, hang a bear bag, use the bathroom, take a bath, go to the post office, get dinner, change clothes, and when you come back it, nor any of its contents will have walked away. In contrast, I would never trust my backpack, or a school bag for any length of time on LSU’s campus. I lock my bike every day I ride to school. All office and lab doors are locked tightly whenever there isn’t someone in them to ensure that nothing is walking away or being damaged. Yet, on and surrounding the trail, it seems that people are far less interested in taking what you have in your pack. I don’t want to speculate that hikers take the moral high ground more frequently than other people, though I might, instead it is impractical to grab something from another person in the community that you are going to have to haul through the woods. Sure maybe your pack is fancy, but if someone picks up your pack they are probably leaving theirs, or everything in yours or they are not a hiker. Guide books commonly warn hikers not to leave things unattended and to keep all valuables on your person, lest they should go missing, but the reality is that there are many times when you need to put down your pack. I and two ladies I hiked with all had rather nice digital camera’s velcroed to the outside of our packs. That is where my camera lived unless it was raining or I was taking pictures with it. It slept there as my pack hung from the walls, and it rested there with my pack against the rocks, and it was always there the next time I reached for it. While I had no problems, I do not mean to suggest that this is always the case; other hikers might have a different experience with leaving valuables unattended.

**Shelters Themselves**

Shelters along the Appalachian Trail vary greatly in both their size and their quality of construction. The newer shelters and those with regular maintenance by trail clubs are in far better shape than those older shelters without maintenance. Some clubs are more active in their maintenance than others. There are divided ideologies about what shelters should be like. Quarry Gap Shelter, has someone who checks on it almost daily, the shelter even has hanging baskets. Some people find this to be
“un-trail like” because it is too clean and homey. Conversely the Bake Oven Knob shelter had no such caretaker, and provides the feeling of a basic shelter and little else. This would be more up the alley of those people on the trail who have a “rough it” philosophy.

Originally shelters began as basic structures to protect hikers from the elements during their hike, providing hikers with little more than a small area protected from the rain, wind or snow. They were as basic as they come, not tall enough to stand in with room enough for only a couple of hikers and a rather basic construction.

Take the example of the Peter’s Mountain Shelters. The shelters are located approximately 50yards apart. The photo is of the new shelter which was built as a replacement to the original Earl Schaffer shelter. It’s a two level shelter, well crafted, well maintained, with a covered picnic table, a small porch on the side and in front, food bag hangers and a raised sleeping platform. The one on the right however was built by Earl Schafer himself during the early 1960s. The original structure built by Schafer had no floor, could maybe sleep four hikers, and it not even as tall as I am. The shelter remains very basic though a floor was added during a series of improvements. The original shelter invokes a more rugged trail, with fewer creature comforts. It is the tiniest shelter I have ever seen along the AT. Sitting inside this shelter you can see through the log walls. There is no picnic table in front of this shelter, though there are some stones and an old log that might do nicely. Because this shelter speaks to the history of the Appalachian Trail it was disassembled in August of 2008and stored to be included in an
Appalachian Trail Museum. The types of structures a hiker might stay in overnight along the Trail range in form from the earliest shelters to the most recent. Tenting and staying in some of these smaller shelters echo the trail’s humble beginnings, and also stir memories of the rough wilderness that so many people assume the Appalachian Trail to be. Staying in any of these shelters reminds you of where you are, but each has its own voice. The new Peter’s Mountain Shelter, along with Quarry Gap, Ed Garvey and other newer shelters in some way seem almost regal. The old Peter’s Mountain shelter and others like it aren’t exactly regal, but perhaps they are historic. With the newer shelters calling out to a grand pursuit, sheltering you with sturdy walls what is left for the smaller shelters but to remind you of simplistic nobility? The new shelters feel as large and as strong as the mountain itself; while the smaller ones bespeak perseverance as do the hikers sleeping below their roofs.

When you decide to stay in a shelter overnight you and your fellow hikers might not be the only creatures calling that shelter home for the night. In the summer of 2008 I experienced several evenings sharing space with others. One particularly memorable evening was shared with a nest of mosquito hawks swarming in the back corner of the shelter. They clouded the shelter as a dense grey fog; I was hesitant to put my feet back near the site of their ritual. As darkness came they left the shelter, and despite my fears bothered me very little. In the morning they returned as I was trying to pack away my gear and still seemed to care for me very little. Another evening I chose a bottom bunk to sleep on in Birch Run Shelter because of a couple bats that had made the beams for the shelter ceiling their home. Bats mean bat business, and the top bunks were speckled with it. After spending a very peaceful night in the Quarry Gap Shelter, a hiker who had stayed in the other side of the shelter caught up with me to show me a photo, in which there is a three foot black snake climbing the walls of the shelter where I had rested so well. Even though some of the shelters might be greatly improved, without holes in the roof or walls, with floors and bunks, they are no more removed from nature than the older shelters. With only three walls in each there is plenty of room for nature to enter. The biggest difference I believe is in the things they can inspire a hiker to feel. Shelters however are meaningful beyond their structure. Perhaps just as
their walls give hikers a reprieve from the elements, the shelters themselves form important epicenters for life on the trail.

**Shelters and Hikers**

The most common place that I encountered other hikers on the trail was at shelters. I might encounter them in the evening or during a mid-day break. It was here in the spaces around the shelters that conversations were started and that I began to get to know other hikers. Outside of trail towns the shelters were the places where information was exchanged. The shelters create a space for people to come together. It isn’t just a space for people to come together, it is a space where people happen upon each other while pursuing their own paths.

We reach shelters for many reasons. Not everyone chooses them for the social scene. Some hikers, me included, chose to stay in shelters because it is easier to lay out a sleeping pad than find a spot and set up a tent. It is also much easier to get going in the morning, eat breakfast, grab the bear bag, pack up and head out, without having to worry about packing or drying a tent. Shelters are protection from the elements, and even the morning dew is an element that many hikers don’t want to deal with. It soaks your clothes and leaves your tent or tarp wet which means you just have to find an opportunity to dry them later. Without drying them you hike in wet clothes and your tent mildews. Even under the shelters, clothes hung up to dry the night before may be damper in the morning than when you took them off. For this reason I call the clothes lines, the hiker’s prayer flag.

Secondly most shelters have a reliable water source and a privy in the vicinity. These two factors together can be an incredible convenience for some hikers. Sometimes this notion backfires as the shelter and thus the privy were both built up hill from the water source. The seepage from the privy of course contaminates the water supply, but at least there are usually signs warning hikers to make sure and treat their water. Otherwise water, a restroom, and a place to sleep without having to unpack, together make shelters an excellent option for most hikers. Adding ease of planning to great features, shelters are denoted by mileage in guide books and marked with symbols on maps. It is easier to gage how far the
next day’s attractions are from a mileage point or a specific location on a map, than by guessing where you are or estimating which contour line you called home for the night. Many people would probably go stealth, camp out of sight of other people and the trail, more frequently if it was not a disturbance to the natural area, and it was as easy as staying in the shelter. Yet, there is a point I am overlooking in this assumption about the reasons many hikers prefer to stay in shelters.

Shelters aside from being places where hikers come together to spend the night are also information centers. Encountering other hikers, coming from the opposite direction, or who are local to the area can open up a wealth of knowledge about the place. People familiar with what lies ahead are especially helpful, the information about tomorrow’s terrain is useful in planning the day. If I found out that first thing in the morning was a big climb, I would plan to take my first break after reaching the top. Conversely if I knew that I would hit a rough patch midday I would push harder to get that out of the way before the temperatures peaked. I would rest during the hottest part of the afternoon. Other hikers and trail angels pass off information about the water sources ahead. If there is one thing you never want to be without, it’s enough water. Finding a dry spring where I had expected cool water with the platypus running low, my first instinct is to tear out the map and calculate my position. “how far to water?” My biggest fear is that the answer will be “back the way you came”, but by reading logs or listening to other hikers I didn’t have that experience this time. Whereas on other section hikes I had been more presumptuous about water sources, not asked and found an occasional spring to be dry.

You can find out if there have been any problems happening on the trail, or in campgrounds between hikers and locals. Words of wisdom, you don’t want to miss, “Yeah, I wouldn’t stop at that campground some hikers last week got their stuff ran over by some angry locals”. Conversely news of trail angels spreads quickly, cheeseburgers, hot dogs, cold drinks, ice cream, coolers with snacks, or rides moves down the trail by word of mouth. Larger events such as a major feed, an event where massive amounts of food are provided, might have a sign or two tied up in the forest, but all the lesser, scratch
that, smaller events are carried on backs alone. I could learn rather quickly about other hikers around the trail by listening to conversations that would spring up about people, places and events.

Anyone who is just out for a night can also give weather updates, something that every hiker is at least reluctantly interested in. Just like I would plan my day around challenges I would listen eagerly to the weather reports. The month of June raged in the Mid 90s, humid with muggy nights, heating Pennsylvania more than I would have liked. With the heat come fatigue, thirst, headaches, but more importantly the chance of severe thunderstorms. When I knew that a day was going to be especially long and hot, I would get up earlier and move faster, that I could get as close to where I was going before the air was scalding. The same was true for when I heard reports of storms on the way, I would move as quickly as possible to secure a space in the shelter and hopefully not be left out in the rain.

Hikers bring with them news of other hikers, where they are, who they are with, where they are going. Many times I was asked, “do you know Oak and Elder? Have you seen them lately?” Or, “Did you hear about Flytrap breaking his leg?” “Yeah, he walked five miles to the Tiorati Circle before Sidestep convinced him to go get an x-ray” It is in this way that we keep up with each other. For a while after my first few days on the trail, and after feeling a little uncomfortable at having Traveler show up 7 miles from where he said he would be going, I was concerned with keeping up with his location. It’s not that I presumed he wished me or any other hiker ill. I just wasn’t particularly interested in being a part of his hike. After waking up that first morning to him offering everyone a pull of vodka, or a little relaxant, and falling asleep to much the same I was fairly certain that I would like to keep our encounters to a minimum. I even went so far as to bounce myself forward a little way, by taking a shuttle ahead, after my stay at the Free State Hiker Hostel. The night I spent at the hostel, a huge group of hikers came in. All of them were avoiding Traveler and a couple other hikers, who were in the process of getting trashed at the Ensign Cowell Shelter. There are different types of hikers. Some hikers like to party, on and off the trail and for the most part that is alright so long as they do not bother any other hikers. It is after all their hike, and they should hike it the way they see fit. Some hikers find it offensive when those party hikers take
over the shelter space, making it a party pad. Their offense is with good reason, often it’s loud, messy and people who are trashed can be obnoxious. Together these two elements create an uncomfortable shelter environment and a bad night’s rest. Shelters are for everyone, so I cannot make an argument that the party hikers should not be allowed to use them, however if I had been one of the hikers that felt they had to turn around to avoid the night ahead I would have been livid. Shelters are designed for the rest and benefit of thru-hikers, all hikers should keep this in mind and be respectful of everyone else’s needs.

Shelters are communal spaces, and as such are places where the community of hikers gathers. We gather there for rest and recuperation, for shelter, and perhaps even on our solo treks for the community. To have other people to talk to at the end of the day, that we might share some bit of our trail experience with others. Maybe someone saw a bear or a rattlesnake next to the trail, maybe someone found some blueberries or trail magic, maybe someone slipped down some rocks. Whatever the experience we share them and look for commonality and difference. The trail in the day to day demands brings hikers together. We talk about what we have seen and also what parts of our equipment may or may not be working properly. We seek advice from other hikers, but without the shelters we would rarely see each other sitting still.

Sitting around the picnic tables outside shelters I had some of the most helpful conversations early on. One night in particular while sitting around at Birch Run Shelter I was cooking dinner and watching the thru-hikers come in and claim their spaces in and around the shelter. As I was finishing up my dinner and mixing Propel into my Nalgene getting ready to take it over to my bunk, I started talking with two thru-hikers in their 20s. After these six days on the trail, I knew that I needed to lighten my load. We started talking about gear and manufacturers. I was debating things that I could possibly skimp on or trade out for a lighter model. I had been having some trouble with my sleeping bag, it was big and bulky, but more importantly it was hot. Rated to 32 degrees, in the summer, it made every night a chapter from Dante’s Inferno. I’d come climbing out of the bag sweating profusely, never even having zipped it up.
No sooner would I come out of the bag than my naked feet would become a buffet for all the little bloodsuckers droning over me. From my feet they’d find their way under the cuffs of my hiking pants. Soon enough frenzied by the easy meal the mosquito demons would stab their little probosci into my legs and back, undaunted by the fabrics. Empathetic to my dilemma of being eaten alive or roasting slowly, Tin Can suggested I swap out my bag for a Lafuma. He reasoned with me that while it would cost a little money, in general their prices are good, their bags are compact, as well as durable, and of course that almost anything is better than being eaten alive. I did eventually end up making a purchase based on this advice, as many hikers are influenced by the words of their comrades. Thus, discussions and advice traded around shelter picnic tables inform decisions, big and small with important material consequences for the hiker.
Shelter Logs

Aside from the information provided by people who are actually present on the trail, shelters hold another honey pot of information. Held at every shelter is a text more valuable than I had imagined. It is the shelter log. The first time I pulled down a shelter log to write a little note I casually glanced at the entries that came before mine. I cannot say that I was abundantly impressed with the other entries. The entries ranged from observations, to notations of a break taken at the shelter and resident rattle snakes that live in the fire pit. There are opinions listed in these logs, as one hiker wrote about the Peter’s Mountain Shelter, “We stayed in the non-smoking non-littering shelter next door. Too bad more of the shelters aren’t like that; it might keep the scum bags out of the woods”. Many entries speak directly to the area surrounding the shelter itself.

I can still remember looking at the picture drawn at Peter’s Mountain Shelter. Peter’s Mountain is one of the new shelters, the shelter while being very nice had one down side. The water source was way, way down the side of Peter’s Mountain. There were steps and lots of them, painstakingly placed by the trail maintainers and volunteers. While the addition of the steps was a fabulous way to make the water more accessible, the fact remained that the water was down, down, down, and then to be carried back up, up, up. People knew something must be up, with such a nice shelter, very few complete luxuries present themselves. Though this shelter was as near perfect as I could ask for. I was pulling at my boots and slipping my socks off when I opened up the shelter log.

There, just a couple pages back from where my entry would be was a very well drawn picture. Clearly portrayed, with the ink seeming to rise up from the page, was a depiction of the stairs that would lead hikers to water stretching almost endlessly from top to bottom. I examined the illustration the hundreds of steps that led down to the water source. Contemplating taking one more step down, only to step back up the same path, without any real distance gained was torturous. As I debated on whether or not I had enough water to fend off the journey, I thought it was nice that the artist had given the woman hiker at the bottom a smiling face and a hand raised signaling success. Feeling an overwhelming sense of
despair I thought about what a punk I was for not wanting to walk to the water. Seeing other hikers come up from the water source more fatigued than they went down, I was sure that I didn’t want to make the trip. I was so tired, my knee was killing me and the last thing I could think of doing was walking down those stairs. As it turns out I never did have to go down all those stairs, I was able to remain the little voice in the drawing, calling out from the shelter, “I’m thirsty”, exemplifying the amazing kindness that can be found along the Appalachian Trail.

The Peter’s Mountain Shelter log drawing.
Shelter log entries are wonderful sources of information about the local area, from warning hikers about local flora and fauna to prescribing a cure incase an unlucky hiker encounters some unfortunate plants.

This entry was found in the Pavilion Shelter in Port Clinton, PA

It warns hikers of the poison ivy that is growing all around the water source. It also gives a solution to a chance encounter with the irritating leaves. Jewelweed is also growing around the water
source and happens to be a natural remedy for bug bites and poison ivy. The author has even listed the prescribed method for enlisting the assistance of jewelweed. This is a little piece of information that a hiker can carry forever, it’s free and if recalled, will be useful for many more miles of insects and itching plants. Perhaps more importantly, though less immediate, noted in the log book is that the upcoming water is not safe to drink. Palmerton, an area of trail to be crossed in the coming days, is a Superfund site due to the town’s history with zinc smelting. The environmental devastation in and around Palmerton is relentless, the slopes of the mountain surrounding the town are bare except for stale rock and dirt. This is the first warning of this type that I came across in a shelter. The warning is that it could be 19 miles between water sources, as the two safe springs located in the middle are reported to be dry. The spring that might be running is Metalica spring, it however is contaminated from the wastelands of the Superfund site, and not available for water. The guide book asks for southbound hikers to confirm or deny the reports that Delps and Stema springs are dry, though none have responded on this page. Even though the log is written in and the entry is finished, in a sense it is not. The logs themselves can prove to be an ongoing dialogue between many hikers, the last readers and authors are the ones who know the latest story. Demonstrated in this entry is a thankfulness for our stay in the Pavilion. It thanks the church for allowing us to stay, the people who clean up our mess and the people of Port Clinton for their hospitality when dealing with a stinky bunch of hikers. Gratitude is often seen variously expressed in the logs of places that have a caretaker, a trail angel or are near a trail town. Still other entries are passing a message, or a philosophy such as this paragraph for wanderers I transcribed on June fifth from the Quarry Gap Shelter log.

Paragraph for Wanderers

Some people do not have to search for they find their niche early in life and rest there, seemingly contented and resigned.

At times I envy them! But usually I do not understand them and seldom do they understand me. I am one of the searchers. There are, I believe, millions of us, we are not unhappy, but neither are we completely content. We continue to explore life hoping to understand. We like to walk along the beach- we are drawn to the ocean, take in its mystery and unspeakable beauty. We hike forests, mountains, deserts, hidden rivers and lovely cities as well. Our sadness is as
much a part of our lives as our laughter. To share our sadness w/ the ones we love is perhaps as great a joy as we know, unless it is to share our laughter!

We searchers are ambitious only for life itself and for anything beautiful that it can provide. Most of all we want to love and be loved, to live in a relationship that will not impede our wanderings and/or prevent our search. We do not want to prove ourselves to others or compete for love.

This passage is for wanderers, dreamers & lovers, who dare to ask of life everything which is good and beautiful!

This paragraph for wanderers speaks to hikers as people in a search for some greater meaning or experience. I was just starting out on this section of the trail, yet this log entry, spoke to me. While it has been left in a shelter log on the Appalachian Trail, it applies both to those whom have taken up the trail as part of their wandering, and those whom are wandering and exploring life anywhere. It says something about the essence of a wanderer. That there is no end to that journey, the journey itself is the satisfaction and experiencing as much of life as possible is the reward. Many people I believe find themselves on the trail because they are wanderers. They are seeking life and the experience of slowing down their lives and taking in the world around them as they walk from Georgia to Maine.

People find themselves on the trail because it is a journey from one place to another. Many hikers find themselves attempting to cover all 2,000 miles while many more enjoy the trail in smaller sections. It is a long meandering path from south to north, north to south that takes approximately six months to complete. The trail has the power to change a person. She can reveal thing about yourself that you did not know were possible. There are restorative and destructive properties. There is no easy way to hike the trail. It requires you to put one foot in front of the other. As fast as you can walk it is still slower than the average pace of life. For me hiking the trail in long sections provides an opportunity for me to reflect on my life, my family, my relationships, my aspirations, my dependence on the world around me, technology, education, my dreams. Each time I leave the trail I feel stronger and centered on the things that really matter when I slow down and give them the energy they deserve. My wandering the trail centers me, while allowing me to become part of something greater than myself. I enter all my travels one way, and always come out another.
Left: Pine Knob Shelter and the shelter log mailbox on the inside wall. 6-2-08.

Shelters provide refuge for hikers up and down the trail. At their most basic they are configured with three walls, a raised floor and a roof to guard against wind and rain. Though the shelters share a basic configuration and serve a similar purpose they are each quite unique.

I had anticipated that any given shelter might be very much like any other shelter. I had not considered the individual characteristics each shelter would possess. Rather I had not considered that I would become intensely aware of the differences that make each shelter a character along the trail. Pine Knob Shelter, shown above, was home for my second night on the trail. It was a one story shelter with a raised floor, and a tin roof with a low ceiling. It appeared to be much older than the two story Ed Garvey where I spent the night before. The exterior and the interior of the shelter revealed a log cabin structure with the chinking between the logs visible as a distinguishing characteristic. Cabin-esque as it might be this shelter took me to my great uncle’s log house just down the hill from my own, in that memory it felt familiar, like somewhere I had come from already. Though I was in a strange place, the mountains, the trail was familiar and though I had never hiked here before I couldn’t help but feeling a little nostalgic.
Compared to Ed Garvey, the shelter was older and visibly smaller. There were already two five people there, one of them being Toad who had passed me a few miles back. He had filled up with water and was about to make his way up to Annapolis rocks to spend the night as I walked over to the shelter and slumped off my pack. I leaned the days load against the wall of the shelter and propped my walking staff over it. I ran my hand over the rough exterior of the shelter, making my way over to the opening so that I could sit back and take my shoes off. The grey painted wooden floor was level with the opening itself and I slid back on the sandy floor and inhaled the hazy odor of the season’s hikers. Unlacing my shoes I feel a little cramped looking at the amount of space in the shelter and the four hikers that would be left to share the shelter with me. The night before I had shared Ed Garvey, which sleeps fourteen hikers, with half that number and tonight we would be at capacity in a shelter in which I could not even stand up. Sitting up and taking in the lowness of the ceiling and the excellent construction of the shelter, I found that there was a mail box on the inside of the shelter. This seemed most curious and so I asked the other hikers there if they had noticed it. One of them answered, “yes that’s where the shelter log is”. It was a great idea really, to use a mailbox as a way to keep the shelter log protected from the elements or animals and inside. We all introduce ourselves and sit around the picnic table in front of the shelter, telling stories and speculating on how many holes the chipmunks have to their borrows, hoping that they have one more than Tortoise can find.

By the time that dusk begins to roll around I am exhausted, small talk with dinner, and talking with Wolf about her experience with the trail so far has used up my last little bit of energy. Gimping over to the shelter to put hang my food bag from a string outside the shelter and hook my pack against the wall, I lay out my mat and unfurl my sleeping bag. In the middle of the shelter floor I make my camp, between the other four hikers, cover myself with my sleeping bag and try to write out the day’s events. Laying on the floor looking up at the logs in the ceiling, resting my knee on my bag of clothes and listening to the forest begin to settle in I feel rest falling over me. The other hikers are also settling in, Wolf is writing and her son Tortoise is playing some hand held video game. After a few minutes she insists that he turn it
off that we might all get some rest. I am glad for the stillness inside the shelter. After so much movement, to be quiet inside some walls and under something is a comfort. Just as I am watching the last of the day begin to fade away, I hear what would be the primary disturbance in my night begin. One of the guys is a snorer, and a loud snorer at that. The heat of the day and the grit on the shelter floor combine with the echoes of bad breathing to create a generalized discomfort. Nothing specifically is wrong, aside from my knee stinging me, it’s just between the sweat and the sand I am ill at ease.

Darkness sets in over our little shelter and I find my rest, slipping restlessly off into a desperate sleep. Sometime in the dark of the night I am awakened by something falling onto the roof of the shelter. Confused and disoriented I sit up and peer out. Seeing nothing I resign myself to looking through the shadows of the shelter. In the dark forms of those sleeping around me, there seems to be some comfort, everyone to their space, all in the shelter, on the AT in Maryland. I give up on inventorying shadows and lie back down on my mat, half in half out of my sleeping bag. As I drifted back to sleep I wondered at the unusual sleeping arrangement. Each of us sharing a temporary home with people we had never seen before and would likely never see again, and yet it all works out. I wake up next to last, stretching and sitting up against the hard floor, I find myself sore and stiff after yesterday’s 19 miles. Squatting awkwardly in the shelter I gather my things packing my sleeping bag and strapping my mat onto my pack in a haze of sleepiness. I packed up quick squatting under the roof, roughly dropped out of the shelter onto the uneven rocks lining its entrance, sharply reminding myself that my knee was tender.

I arrived at Quarry Gap Shelter in the afternoon, after a short day’s walking. I was amazed at how lovely the shelter looked. It had the chinking of Pine Knob but was somehow more elegant than her. Perhaps it was the gravel area out in front of the shelter, the stone fire pit out center, or the rooster plaque on the end that said “welcome”, then I realized that it was the hanging flower baskets on the ends of the shelter that gave the shelter that extra appeal. The design was different too, instead of being one shelter, Quarry Gap was two small square-ish shelters connected by a large porch with an open area between them that housed a picnic table, the common area of the shelter.
I dropped my pack on the picnic table and walked from one shelter to the other debating which side I might like to sleep in. Ultimately I decided to sleep on the right side, simply because it was the direction I would be going in the morning.

The shelter area was nice because it was all covered by the roof and sat with its back to an incline, which gave it the feeling of being snug. It was impeccably tidy, the floors were clean, there were board games, cards and magazines which like the shelter log had a specific resting place on the wall of the shelter and were put away. The whole place seemed fresh. Noticing the cleanliness of the shelter and the large rocks supporting the posts in front, how amazing it was that the time had been taken to find four rocks such as those, and to place them. The homey, well kept, organized energy of the shelter makes it feel more comforting than Pine Knob.

I went to fill up my water and realized that the little stream right out in front of the shelter, the one that was so well groomed it looked like a garden fixture, was actually going to be my water source for the evening. Every aspect of the shelter was well planned and worked at. The shelter even had a bear box, a large steel box with a latch to fool bears from your food, a short ways from the shelter. It was the first I
had seen since Harper’s Ferry, unusual in Maryland which is not particularly known for its bears. It was an article of convenience, much like the shelter itself. Its presence went beyond what was necessary and extended into the realm of comfort, making the trail a little easier for a night. Even the privy (outhouse) had been shaped into a pleasant bathroom; it had a sliding window, air freshener, toilet paper and a book about outhouses. I have often encountered public restrooms that were less tidy.

As evening rolled around, and lunch turned to dinner, I set up my mat and sleeping bag in the shelter on the right of the picnic table, turning the left over to Flying House of Steve and Nectar Woods, who had arrived earlier. After I had discovered that the posts out in front were not close enough to string my hammock I passed the afternoon playing checkers with Nectar. The whole atmosphere of the shelter reminded me of a home rather than a place on the side of the trail. Even though I would only be there for a fleeting moment, for a single night on the trail I was tired and ready for some sleep, as no one else had shown up I would be sleeping alone on my side of the shelter. I was very happy; it would be the first night that I didn’t have to contend with someone’s snoring. Inside the shelter I felt very cozy. The space was neither too big nor too small, the extended roof and small opening kept it nice and dark inside, perfect for sleeping. I fell asleep that night and slept like a baby made of stone all night. The next day Steve caught up with me to reveal I had slept with a black snake in my shelter, which I thought was funny. The tidiest shelter on the trail, inhabited by a snake with taste.

Birch Run Shelter appeared to be a newer shelter; it was also in the log cabin style but without the obvious chinking between the logs. This shelter was located in a grassy clearing right on the trail whereas the Pine Knob Shelter was just a patch leaves and dirt on a blue blazed side trail. A covered porch and a picnic table pulled me in for lunch. The heat of the day and the urge to rest my knee after the day before kept me there for the evening. After snacking for lunch I took my pack and stepped up off the porch and into the shelter. Inside there were eight wooden bunks built of plywood and 2x4s, atop a smooth wooden floor. The floor space could probably have slept an addition six people if it needed. Looking around the
shelter I noticed lots of little presents littering the top bunks. Noting that the bottom bunks were present-less I decided I would be sleeping down below.

Birch run shelter at lunch with an 11yr old thru-hiker out in front. Morning from inside.6-6-08.

Spreading my mat across the bottom bunk on house left I marveled that I would not have to climb up off the floor in the morning, or crouch down to it to go to sleep tonight. Stretching out for a rest, I was the only person there but lounging on my mat I noticed a small head poking out from a crack in the center rafter. I had been thinking that mice were leaving the hikers presents, but as it turned out it was bats. The shelter was occupied by at least two bats, which seemed to be as restless during the day as I had been trying to go to sleep last night. The shelter, like other open buildings in summer was hot. No wonder the bats seemed uncomfortable in their slumber. On a positive note the flies that were swarming the porch at lunch seem to have some boundaries and avoid actually coming in. Perhaps it is because there is no food for them in here, or maybe the bats have something to do with it. Whatever the reason I am glad for their absence. The air inside the shelter is open even if the walls are sweating. It smells like a lumber yard on a hot day, like the inside of my old horse barn but without the horses.

I leave my things on my mat and take my hammock, my notebook, and A Separate Reality down to the stream where I strung my hammock between two trees and enjoyed an afternoon in the shade listening to cool waters flow. As evening approached four weekend hikers showed up and had claimed the four bunks in the back of the shelter. I decided to walk back up to the shelter just to say,” hey, I’m
Mattie, this is my stuff here”. The shelter itself seemed to become a club house for these twenty one and twenty two year old guys. It wasn’t that they were rude; they just weren’t long distance hikers. It was nearly dark when thru-hikers began filtering in off the trail, and it was then that the shelter began to feel like the place it was before they arrived. The thru-hikers and I swapped stories while the weekenders were cooking on a large fire they had built in a fire ring off to the side of the shelter. As we told our tales and compared gear the shelter began to fill with an aura of comfort. In our stories, in our talk about the days behind we brought the trail home. We filled the space with common experience as the moonlight wove its way through the canopy of leaves around the clearing. Birch Run Shelter came to have a distinct life of its own in the evening through the presence of hikers. Yes, it still had its textures of wood and grit, its raised platform and covered porch, its scents and sounds but in truth that evening it existed for me as a separate entity because of the others filling the spaces. It went from a space defined by its openess, by its physical presence to one defined by the lives drawn into it.

In the morning opening my eyes I saw through the opening a place only half real, filled with the mist of morning, the first warm drops of sun resonating through the green of leaves and stuff sacks, yellows of bandanas, highlighting the blues of shirts and the dark of shadows. A kaleidoscope of morning, perfectly foggy, something from a mystical film. There was something in the way that light found its way to the shelter, something in the way that it accentuated the lives we had strung up to dry that gave the shelter a new life. The light was not just a presence in the shelter; it was changing the nature of the shelter itself. It poured over the wood work like we were on the edge of something, the beginning of a great journey or in the middle of an epic, it felt like a turning point, as if some action were just ahead. What had been a plain clearing the day before, was now a place of intrigue, what had been a sweating shelter was now an oasis, blessed by a prayer flag of drying cloth. Characterized metaphysically, by the light and the air of morning this shelter had three interwoven lives in between 2:00pm and 7:00am.

By night fall there is some order in the shelters and on the trail, but on first arriving, as I did at Alec Kennedy Shelter revealed the way that packs explode and shelter space can be overtaken with gear.
This shelter had bunks, but they were small in their construction so Earth, Queen, Pauper and I all opted to sleep on our mats on the floor. The area around this shelter was so overtaken with caterpillars that Earth and I decided to eat under the roof to avoid their droppings adding nitrogen to our dinners. The caterpillars ate all day and all night, I feel asleep and woke up to the constant raining of their waste. To me this structure was a rough shelter from that rain ordered by the chaos of bags unpacked and sleep that could not come soon enough. I was asleep by dusk and up at four in the morning to begin my walk across the open fields of Pennsylvania.

I arrived at Brink Road Shelter tired, walking up to the shelter I couldn’t help but be a little disappointed that the shelter wasn’t a little bit larger, or perhaps a little bit newer. It wasn’t that it wasn’t a fine shelter, just the way I was feeling that day I had wanted just a little more comfort. The shelter was old, the chinking was coming undone and much to my chagrin there happened to be a swarm of mosquitoes taking up residence in the back corner of the shelter. This shelter seemed very nearly ready to be reclaimed by the forest that surrounded it. I appreciated its rustic appeal. The roughness of its walls, the dirt on its floors, the camping on the inside feeling that the shelter evoked were all aspects that I truly appreciated, but would have liked more on other days.
The floor was barely raised off the ground; it was filthy and slanted oddly in different directions. The shelter log warned that someone had left something unsavory in a corner and warned other users that it was best not to look. I was not going to go against good advice and stretched my mat out in the opposite corner. The shelter was cramped; just room enough for the four of us, with our mats being closer together than ever before. Luckily we had come from the Mohican Outdoor Center and had showers the previous evening. This shelter reminded me of just how dirty and close to the ground this experience really is. Its energy was something older and settled. It felt content to just sit there, falling into disrepair, taking in hikers and insects indiscriminately. This shelter brought me back to the idea of hiking as a way to reconnect with the raw world around me. It was earthy. There was no escaping the humble aura of the shelter. It was grounding for me. Each bit of grit on my mat, on my bag, the mosquitoes hovering at my feet, the light streaming through the cracks in the walls all spoke to me of the trail.
That is the biggest point about these shelters. It isn’t just that they are structures along the trail. They are that, but they are also individuals capable of evoking emotion, imploring the hiker to feel another aspect of the trail. To inhabit it differently. To note the way that light filters through the walls, to become a presence in and around the shelter. The feeling of the walls, the floors and the sleeping surfaces all touch the hiker soothing or tormenting. The animals that take up residence there each play their part in the idiosyncratic nature of the shelter. Some shelters have plenty of places to hang your gear to keep the mice at bay, others require hikers to double up on hooks, and some allow you to have your own space and other require you to nearly sleep on top of each other.

Each shelter has its own personality; many times that personality evolves as it did at Birch Run Shelter. Being just a physical place full of textures to a place characterized by the presence of hikers and in the morning a separate place created by the world outside. It is important to recognize the ways that the physical element, the human element and the environment surrounding the shelters influence the way that they are perceived, the way that they take on their agency. The shelters and their transformations are similar to the ways that the trail itself begins to take on various lives for the hiker. It is one thing, its footing is a particular way, but the human presence and the way that we shape and construct that trail, both personally and to other hikers alters the way that it is experienced, yet the trail and our experience of it is altered by the environments around it, in its visual aesthetic and its physical presence.
THE THINGS I CARRIED

Every morning, I would reorganize my pack, toss some trail mix into a cargo pocket and hoist the days load onto my back. Swinging that bag around I’d hold my breath, catching the straps against my shoulders and its weight against my hips, I would exhale and bring the hip belt around cinching every ounce around me. It is always heavier or lighter depending on what the trail asks I carry, what was asked of me yesterday, where I am going today and how I slept the night before. Regardless of the literal weight one question plagued my mind both months before I found my way back to the trail and even as I made my way home again. What do I have in this pack, in this glorified bag? The simple answer to that question was always, what I need, but that has so many definitions. I became obsessed with what things I could leave behind, what was I bound to haul all my days in the woods.
My Life Inside My Pack

Orange Dry Sack
- 2 Pair hiking socks
- 1 Pair silk liner socks
- 2 Sports bra
- 2 Pair North Face Convertible Pants
- 1 Nike sports tee shirt
- 1 Hind Felicitank tank top
- 1 Under Armor long sleeve tee

Red and Grey Bag – (jacket pocket)
- 1 Campmor rain jacket folded in

Dark Blue Dry Sack
- 1 Lafuma 45 degree sleeping bag

Bright Green Dry Sack

Dark Green Bag (Hammock pocket)
- 1 Traveler’s Hammock and hardware

Light Blue Dry Sack
- 1 Kelty Noah’s Tarp 9’x9’
- Hardware- 5 Lines, 4 Hooks, 2 Stakes

Pharmacy Ziploc –
- 9 Benadryl
- 24 Advil
- 4 Pepto Bismol tablets
- 14 Glucosamine
- 7 daily Vitamins

First Aid / Hygiene Ziploc -
- 2 Squares Mole Foam
- 2 Squares Mole Skin
- 2 Packs antibiotic ointment
- 4 Alcohol wipes
- 8 Regular Band-Aids
- ¼ Roll of toilet paper
- 1 Tin of floss
- 1 Travel size tube toothpaste
- 1 small bottle Gold Bond
- 1 Ace Bandage, 2 knee braces

Shower Ziploc -
- 1 3oz Dr. Bronners Peppermint Soap
- 1 Quick Dry Cloth 1’x1

Informational / Inspirational Ziploc-
- Guidebook pages
- Trail Maps for Section
- Receipts
- Letters from Home
- Picture of Emily and I
- Piece of scented soap
- Water Proof Matches

Technology Ziploc-
- Cell phone
- Cell phone Charger
- Voice Recorder
- 4GB Jump Drive
- Extra Batteries

Hood of Pack-
- 48 Water Purification Tabs
- Rain Cover
- Cooking Pot-
- V8 stove, coke can stove, lighter

Front Zippered Pockets-
- All Ziplocs
- 50’ nylon cord
- 1 Emergency blanket
- 1 Bandana

Front Pouch-
- Map/pages for the day
- Write-in-the-Rain notebook
- 2 pens
- 1 32oz Nalgene Bottle

Hip pockets-
- 1 Pocketknife
- 1 compass / whistle / thermometer

Attached to bag-
- 1 Petzel Headlamp
- 1 Thermarest Sleeping Pad
- 1 Nikon Cool Pix digital camera
- 1 skeleton pirate = pirato

Side Pocket-
- 1 toothbrush

Internal pocket-
- 2ltr Platypus Hydration System
  (bladder and hose)
Part of my planning for the trail was to make it easy on myself, organizing my life and my gear into pockets and pouches, first figuring out what to get and then where to put it. For my own good, everything had a designated place, I suffer vast amounts of anxiety whenever I know that I have something and yet I cannot place my hand on it. If all things didn’t have a designated section I was likely to lose my mind and several days time digging through my pack, having to touch and make sure that some item has not magically vanished. If I can’t see it or touch it, it is almost as if the item has ceased to exist. I knew that I would need to find some items without rooting through others so I devised a color coordinated system to keep track of things. Along with organizing my gear by color I also packed it the same way every day. What went where in my pack was based on use and on weight. Things I did not use often during the course of the day went to the bottom of the pack while frequently used items, such as snacks, went right at the top.

In selecting my clothing for the trail I had some specific needs I wanted to address. I wanted clothes that would be versatile, comfortable and dry quickly soaked in sweat or rain. I also wanted clothes that I would be comfortable wearing, that matched my self image. I am not comfortable in tight fitting, or slim line cuts, nor do I feel comfortable in ¾ length sleeves. Most of all I wanted to be as practical as possible, carrying as few pieces as I could reasonably allow my self, for this reason each item had to serve the greatest number of purposes. I chose a pair of North Face convertible pants; they are pants and shorts in addition to being able to roll up the legs, made of a light weight and quick drying material. The shorts make sense because it is summer and certain to be hot and rainy, while the pants are convenient to keep off mosquitoes, dew, briars, and poisonous plants. With the option of wearing the pants in three different ways, quick drying material, and usable pockets these pants met my desire for versatility.

For shirts I chose to have both a tank top and a tee shirt, both from quick drying material. The light blue tank top became my staple shirt on the trail. I did wear the tee shirt on a regular basis, but I wore the tank top even more.
The clothes of the trail, after being worn on the trail and washed at home. The two pairs of shoes from the trail, I started in the ones on the right and returned by the left.

Both shirts were light-weight and quick drying, and each exhibited the ability to dry quickly after a soaking, still the tank top was more comfortable because it had greater breathability. The choice for wearing the tank top most frequently was that in the evenings it was much easier just to put the tee shirt on over the tank top than vice versa. It was also less material to dry when it did rain, and because there was less material in contact with my armpits, it also smelled more pleasant after a few days of walking.
Socks and shoes were interesting to choose. I wanted shoes that were big enough, wide enough, and with enough padding to take me down the trail. In the end, I was rid of my Vasque hikers in Port Clinton, PA because their padding had compressed on the Pennsylvania rocks beyond belief. They ended up being too narrow for my ever swelling feet, binding more and more as the days went on. Queen, a lady hiking in my group, also sent home her Vasque boots in the same place. Scouring the outfitter we found a pair Keen’s with a wider toe box and greater support in the sole provided the best fit out of all the shoes in stock. While they would not have been my first choice, I made the purchase out of necessity. Sometimes on the trial, it isn’t about finding the very best of anything, or the most stylish, it is about what is available. In Port Clinton, at a Cabella’s I purchased a long sleeve Under Armor shirt because that brand is known for reliably being quick to dry and for comfortably regulating body temperature. Because the nights were cool but not cold and I just needed a little extra warmth, I selected not one for cold weather, just a long sleeve to add in an extra layer. As stands to reason the further north I went the cooler it got and soon I was looking for an additional option to my regular tee shirt and tank top combination. With the changing of the weather I reluctantly made the purchase of the shirt and added weight to the pack that I was obsessed with making lighter. Of course along with making my pack lighter I was equally concerned with the amount of space that my clothes would take up in my pack. I had a dry sack that I could compress by rolling the top down and squishing all of the air out, but it was important to maintain as small a volume as possible. I was careful in my selection of clothes to ensure that they were very compressible. In comparing the clothing I saw on the trail, most hikers were wearing clothes made from breathable quick dry materials.

My rain jacket never faltered in my pack, though oddly enough I only ever wore it as a rain jacket once, and only then for maybe an hour. Despite its seemingly apparent function, the truth of the matter is that the jacket was breathable enough only for a sauna. While it did its job of keeping the rain off of me, I was absolutely soaked in sweat after about fifteen minutes of walking in the rain. Here I was Pennsylvania, yet, oddly enough, in that jacket I was reminded perfectly of a Louisiana
afternoon in July. Despite it being too impermeable to wear while hiking in the rain I did wear it occasionally, a few times when I trying to keep warm while resting at the shelter and it even served as a blanket while I was between sleeping bags.

My rain jacket/pillow/knee support.

Truth be told, the thing that this jacket did for me is less obvious when it is unstuffed. Each and every night I would lay my head on the mesh side of the pocket it was all folded into and use its softness as a pillow. It was a strange thing I thought, to carry around a jacket just for a pillow, still there I was every night resting my head on some semblance of softness in the shelter or hanging in my hammock swaying between the trees.

Then of course I had issues with my first choice of sleeping bag. After some rather uncomfortable nights I broke down and began seriously seeking advice on how I might be able to find a better bag. My original bag was a 32 degree Everest mummy bag, very similar to this one. The Fahrenheit degree rating of 32 simply means that the bag was approved to keep a user warm in temperatures down to freezing. Being that the evenings were substantially warmer than that, I was having some difficulty staying inside the bag. Aside from being overbearing in such warm weather it
was a hulk and bulked up the space in my pack, compressing everything below and beside it into the corners. If my pack was any smaller it would have sprung out the top like a jack-in-the-box every time I unbuckled the straps and opened the Osprey. I imagine there were other alternatives, but at one point, in Duncannon, PA I had enough of hauling that bag around sweating for it all day and all night. After a little deliberation and a close eye at the extended forecast, I threw it in the empty box left over after my mail drop along with other things and sent it home.

My second sleeping bag.

I didn’t have another bag yet, I figured I probably wouldn’t need one at least for a while; after all I had been sleeping out from under my bag nearly every night. I opted to layer my shirts and leave the legs rolled down on my pants, when it got chilly I would pull on the rain jacket and use my stuff sack full of clothes as a pillow. This of course seemed a little silly; I mean everyone has a sleeping bag right? At first I was okay without a sleeping bag, I found I did not miss having it, much the same way I hadn’t missed my Chaco sandals, flashlight or sunglasses that I sent home from the Free State Hiker Hostel. Was it a little uncomfortable without that extra padding, certainly. However, my pack was also two pounds lighter. Of course in the Northern hemisphere the further north one goes, the colder one might expect the temperature to get. After a while, and not a very long while I might add the nights grew chillier and the dew more precipitous. Pretty soon I was borrowing a silk bag liner from Earth. After waking up thoroughly chilled in the middle of the night at Peter’s Mountain shelter and
with my clothes laundered in the morning mist after Rausch Gap, I was ready to break down and buy a new bag. Lucky for me Port Clinton, then next trail town had an outfitter. This is the place that helped prove to me function plays a more important role than fashion, and practice what I preach. To me, puke green and yellow is a really unattractive combination, and for the love of the trail, I certainly didn’t want to be pulling that hideousness out of my pack at the end of the day.

The reality was that it was supposed to drop pretty low over the next couple of nights, and that was the only bag that was rated high enough for summer use. They had some other men’s bags but those were extra long. With sleeping bags you want to keep warm, and the last thing I wanted was cold feet. Supposedly LaFuma had also designed this bag for women, by putting extra loft in through the chest and hips with a little extra insulation by the feet. Knowing I was going to need a way to stay warm I opted to go ahead and make the purchase of a new bag. Though it was not the color I would have liked to have had it would serve its function keeping me pleasantly warm without roasting me or turning me out as mosquito bait.

For a backpack I had chosen an Osprey Aura 50, it is specially designed for a woman’s frame, to not bind the breasts, with cut shoulder straps cut at an angle, and with a hip-belt cut to curve around the frame. Personally it beat the zippers off the cheap Kelty I’d been using for years. My experience with a product designed for a woman had not failed, and so I was inclined to try this latest bit of womanized gear despite its atrocious color scheme. The temperature was falling after all. It was June 16th, less than a week after the Ever-rest bag was sent home, and LaFuma had been recommended to me earlier on as another sleeping option. The choice was clear; I would try this hideous sleeping bag.

Strung up in the following illustration is my 9’x9’ Kelty Noah’s Tarp, beneath it is my Travel hammock with a mosquito net, and from the hammock’s line hangs my food bag. Beneath the tarp, propped against an adjoining tree are my pack with the rain cover on it and also the pack of my friend Earth. Her tent is seen in the forefront as is her clothes line which various pieces of our clothing hang from.
My Hammock strung in the trees near Earth’s tent.

The differences in our sheltering methods seem obvious enough, she is using a tent and I a hammock, she sleeps on the ground and I sleep suspended, I could roll to an uncomfortable awakening but she is resting on the ground. The differences however do not stop there, my primary piece of this set up, the hammock and the cords cost me about thirty bucks, in total my cost for housing was about a third of hers. It shows on the trail, anyone with an eye can tell that my system is piece work, and that hers is a professional job. Other hammock hangers were using the Hennessey Hammocks, a very light weight and compact hammock system.

Every time my hammock was strung, someone asked me if I hadn’t heard of the Hennessy Hammock, to which I would reply, “yeah, they are really cool, but this one here is really all I need, great for sleeping and prefect for napping”. Other hikers seemed a little confused by my hammock choice. Pauper and Raggedy Andy both wondered at my Traveler’s hammock. Pauper was stunned that I could sleep in a hammock without falling out and furthermore that I could maneuver my sleeping pad, change clothes and reach the zipper on the bug net down below my toes without a series of
suspended barrel rolls. Raggedy Andy did not understand why I bought a “cheap hammock” instead of the more expensive Hennessey. I explained that I thought it was rather pricey and I had not been sure how I would sleep in a hammock where the entry was a slit along the midline of the fabric under my legs. Some hikers wondered why I had not sprung for the better-known hammock but none-the-less accepted my gear choice. While no one needs to accept the gear another hiker carries, it is nice to have other hikers acknowledge that you have made a functional if interesting selection. Their acceptance helps win trail credit with the hikers around you and prevents you from becoming a story about, “this one hiker” who seemed to know very little about backpacking. Sitting at Birch Run Shelter, Raggedy Andy was discussing how a man he saw earlier in his trip was hauling around this incredibly heavy cook set, fumbling around with his stove and being completely unprepared. Tin can threw in that people should really know more about what they are doing before they set on out the trail.

Gear becomes very personal, an outward extension of yourself. Backpacks, clothes and trekking poles point this out most clearly. Clothes are put directly on and packs are cinched around the frame of the body, poles are carried in the hands and each piece of visible gear becomes an illustrative tool. In general clothes, shoes, and accessories are an extension or expression of the self. On the trail, this is highlighted by the stripping away of extra possessions until one is left with an accumulation that is nearly sub-minimal. Without this array of possessions the few remaining items gain emblematic status. Gear on the trail gets noticed and the things we carry are social signifiers. The above example illustrates that hikers make assumptions about other hikers by evaluating their gear. Using the lightest and newest gear, as Turkey, Boot Strap, Tin Can and others, is one way for a hiker to illustrate that they are current on all the latest hiking happenings. To some extent hikers who have this gear, as well as those who effectively innovate their gear are real hikers. Somehow having the right piece of gear authenticates a hiker as being legitimate on the trail even though hiking is about moving over mountains. This being the case there is a certain amount of credibility that can be earned by having the latest or homemade gear that works properly, a pack that isn’t overloaded with extras and familiarity
with your gear. Aside from being able to talk the talk, these signal that a hiker isn’t completely green. If however you are unfamiliar with how to use your gear, or seem uncertain about backpacking then hikers might assume that you are green to the trail, to backpacking, or to your gear. Earth said that when she first met me she thought I was a little green with my gear. This was true. I had not hiked with all these specific pieces before. The first days were an immersion learning experience, but after a week I knew how my gear worked together, after a month I knew it inside out. She went on to add that she had been pretty green herself when she started out. It is just part of the journey. The idiosyncrasies of each piece of gear will come out. The things in the pack almost manage to take on a life of their own. Things like to be handled or put up in a certain way and come down another way.

My kitchen serves as one example of the experience of getting to know the personalities of my gear. My soda can stove holds more alcohol than my V-8 stove. However it also takes longer to boil water using the soda can stove, because the opening in the can is lower and the flame area is much larger. With the V-8 the stove top is higher and the flames from the burner are more concentrated. As with the stoves, so too did the alcohol have personality. Some days I could just barely lend the flame to the vapors and whoosh the burner was on. Other days I would nearly put my hand in the stove before the fire would catch up. On any event the sudden whoosh of it always difficult to reprogram my mind that it was not the sound of danger, just something that happened whenever I lit my stove. If the weather was cool or breezy the stoves preferred to be lit closely, if it was warm or calm just pull the flame across the vapors. Some days when I had added extra fuel for extra water the can stove would vibrate in its modified salmon can burner, the first time I heard it I was extremely confused what could be making that noise. It was always very funny, sometimes other hikers wouldn’t know where it was coming from and they would look at my pot puzzled, as if I might have been roasting live lizards.

Of all the gear I carry, trekking poles demand an increased coordination that is not required of the stove. They become a direct outward extension of the body reaching for the ground. Held in each hand with wrist straps attaching them to the wrist, they are an art form at least. The straps only
make it harder to drop them, but actually using them is another issue. I was familiar with their shape from years of skiing and having poles, but I was not accustomed to moving these extended arms in any sort of cadence. They required me to hold my hands at a different level, to swing my arms with my steps, and also to watch for roots and rocks with my eyes feet and hands. During the first days I didn’t know that I would ever master them. Between trying to step lightly and intentionally between the rocks and roots I was forever forgetting to lift my poles high enough that they would not snag on the surface of the trail. I spent as much time tripping over my poles as I ever had tripping over rocks.

Before I left the trail, the two poles I had picked up to assist me with my knees were working like a pair of hands, in perfect rhythm with my stride, taking the weight off my knee and brushing spiders aside. Stabilizing me over rocky patches and down hills, pushing me up when it seemed there was no other way I would make it. Carrying me over the trail to find the three sided structure I would call home for the night, a place that marked a starting point, a goal, and a rest.

On the trail the truth about gear is that you do as much planning as possible before you head out into the woods, but items are added and subtracted from the pack depending on the needs that arise. Some things that were packed might not ever serve their original purpose, but are useful in other ways. Even things that work perfectly can have more than one use. I consider myself a comfortable minimalist. I carry just enough to keep me comfortable and prepared for things that may be ahead. If there is something in my pack that goes unused I send it home, as was the case with my sunglasses, an extra bandana, a flashlight, etc. Also if it turns out that an item is more burdensome than I deem it to be worth it gets ousted, as with my Chaco Sandals. As the sandals were one of the heaver items in my pack, I could not justify carrying them around for a couple hours of use. Their impractical nature and my desire to go barefoot guaranteed they were going home in the first box home. My first sleeping bag furthers example, it was too heavy, bulky and hot so out it went; however later as a need arose another sleeping bag was selected that better suited my desires for a light, compact, cooler bag.
Food Stuff

I made my stoves from aluminum cans and a burner from a tuna can, because it didn’t seem reasonable to purchase a pricier heavier stove just so I could heat my water faster. One stove was made from two V8 cans and the other was made from a 12oz can, I opted for two, so that I could be prepared if one was crushed, at an ounce a piece I could afford the weight. These were light and the whole set up fit neatly into my pot with a small sack so that it didn’t rattle around. Instead of having to wonder about where to purchase a specific fuel type for other stoves, my aluminum can stove allowed me to use denatured alcohol which is cheap and available almost anywhere. Though I was certain that most trail towns would carry a variety of fuels I had never hiked the Appalachian Trail north of Virginia and was not keen on taking extra risks. My stoves were cheap, aside from demonstrating my creativity and knowledge about trail cooking presented an image of me as a make do hiker.

After all hot water is hot water even if it takes an extra minute. One of the friends I met on the trail sent me a pot after I returned home, with a note inside saying, “Mattie, thought you might want to be geared like a thru-hiker instead of a section hiker. I was always a little embarrassed when dinner time rolled around and you pulled out that heavy ass pot”. Queen and Pauper used a MSR Pocket Rocket stove, which is a small compact stove that sits atop a fuel canister. As far as stoves go this one was pretty small and very popular on the trail. Earth also used an alcohol stove, though someone who makes stoves for sell had made hers. She also had a large wind screen, something which I did not have aside from my burner. In addition, she had a cozy to put her pot in after she had finished cooking to keep her food warm. I had no such animal and did all of my cooking by pouring boiling water into Ziploc bags with dehydrated veggies and rice, or a Lipton Side so that I wouldn’t have to wash my pot. Traveler on the other hand used an older Whisper Light stove, which is a larger burner and a slightly larger fuel container connected by a hose. He could burn almost anything for fuel, but his stove when first ignited breathed dragon like flames across the table, which he would shield others from with his
pot lid. Between the five of us mentioned here there is great variability just in our decisions on how to cook.

Left: My Kitchen Dr. Pepper and V-8 alcohol stoves and a Bic lighter wrapped in a stuff sack, inside my cook pot. Right: My Kitchen in use.

The foods I carried on the trail.

I utilized the freezer bag cooking method during my time on the trail. What this means is that I utilize my pot for boiling water and little else. I picked this method so that I could use as little water as possible, as little fuel and as little effort at the dinner table. Basically this method meant emptying the contents of each Knorr Side into a Ziploc freezer bag, adding any extras, sealing it, writing its contents and directions on the outside, rolling it up and stuffing it into my pack. When making my dinner selection, I would find the bag that suited me best that day, boil the water called for, and when it was
boiling, poured it into the rolled down mouth of the open Ziploc. Once the water was poured in I would give it a quick stir with my spork, seal it up and wrap it in a bandana, and wait ten minutes. In these ten minutes, I would turn my pot over to drip dry, toss my bear bag line and set up my resting place for the night. When my ten minutes were over I’d open the package and escort the tuna from pouch to bag, stir and eat. After dinner, I would put the tuna pouch inside the Ziploc, press the air out of the nearly empty bag, seal it up, throw it into my trash Ziploc, rinse off my spoon and call it dinner.

Breakfast was typically done the same way, except in the oatmeal pouches themselves. Just pour the hot water into an oatmeal pack, stir it up and wait about three minutes. As a water only pot, it saves me the additional fuel I would use to simmer foods. It saved me the water I would otherwise need to wash out bits of tuna and stuck on residue from instant foods. I also have the luxury of cooking something, only eating part of it, sealing the bag up and taking the leftovers with me to the shelter, or saving them for the morning. I am particularly fond of being able to carry my left over with me, some days I would cook dinner at lunch and save some for dinner. My method also makes it easy for me to share my food with other hikers. Earth almost used the same method. Her foods were packaged in Ziplocs as well, but she mainly cooked in her pot, though she would sometimes cook in the freezer bag. Some hikers said that takes longer for noodles and rice to become tender if they are not over a heat source. I noted this to be true, but I did not find that there was much difference in the time it took my meals to be ready from others. All in all my method for preparing foods took more prep-work at home, selecting meals, repackaging them, and sorting them for shipments; while affording me greater ease on the trail.

**Extras on My Back**

There are always exceptions to the bare minimum philosophies. In my own packing list you’ll find my mascot pirato, and letters from home. These are not absolutely necessary to hike the trail but for me they each played a critical role in my hike. Pirato was given to me as a gift before I started my trip, and while I was not sure that he would become a part of my packing list that was the suggestion
with which he came. Pirato and I began our Appalachian Trail adventure together when I packed up my Baton Rouge life, clipped him on the rearview mirror and headed north. He was photographed more than I was from Baton Rouge to Atlanta, to Asheville, to Boone, to Carthage, back to Boone and to the trail. He appeared in pictures with me and with my friends and of places I visited along the way, a sort of marker that yes, this was the way from which I came. In these photos pirato began to mark my journey in much the same way that white blazes mark the Appalachian Trail, to someone who is unaware the blazes are just decorations on trees, and pirato would not symbolize the adventure in progress. My friends would take and play with him, projecting their ideas of what a miniature skeletal pirate might have to say. In a way he took on the voices of my friends. More than their voices he was a way for me to channel other voices and to create humor on the trail. I would hang him in funny places on my bag, from the shelter, from my bear bag, anything for a little variation.

When I arrived at her house the day before we left, to deliver me to the trail some 376 miles from home, my partner, Emily gave me a necklace. It is a four-leaf clover that had been handpicked, pressed between two rectangles of glass and sealed with silver. This was to be my lucky charm for the five hundred miles of white blazes I would pass journeying along the Appalachian Trail. I put it on and was never a moment without it, I am wearing it still. I held onto it when I felt overwhelmed and drew some power from the strength, truth, love and faith it symbolized. She had once told me while I was experiencing a period of doubt, “This is what you were made for, you were meant to walk this trail”. The clover wasn’t just a symbol of luck, it was a symbol of her faith in me and that restored the faith in myself. I knew that she had been right in telling me that, the trails and the mountains are a part of me, but this little token of her meant the world to me.

While I was walking I received several letters from home. Both from my mother and from my partner. I kept these in my pack and carried them for inspiration along with a picture that Emily had sent me and a bit of scented soap.
Pirato on the way to the Doyle and inside the shelter log mailbox at Pine Knob Shelter.

The picture was from years before, in 2001, when the two of us had first met. The picture and the soap took me home in different ways. With the picture I could almost go back to that moment in time and with the soap, I could imagine what it would be like to be surrounded again in the comfort of my Carolina life, from which I was removed by life in Louisiana and life on the trail. The words I received as letters reached me and painted pictures of the worlds I had left behind. My Mother’s words encouraged me and asked me for news of life on the trail. My partner, told me of dreams, praised and encouraged me, and reminded me of possible futures. Her words pushed me forward and pulled me home simultaneously. Again linking me to the possibilities of my future and the foundations of my past, reminding me of myself, of home and of a calling.

The heaviest and the lightest of my load, inspiring me forward, carrying me over the tough sections, and luring me, calling me back to places I couldn’t stay and a life too long in waiting. Words with the powers of alchemy. A picture a memory made present. A scent to bring me back to myself to draw me home. Inhaling that slow sweet scent was being embraced by the greatest possibilities. My most personal possessions, close at hand, close to heart and kept only for me and the trees. What would they say if they ever saw her name? Only Earth knew why I could open a zip-loc beneath my nose and seem euphoric, somewhere other than in the shelter or trail, removed from the struggles of the day. All these secret charms bring a smile that carries me forward and backward in time. Together these treasures from home became a source of strength and inspiration.
Other hikers also carry extra things, for comfort, for humor, and for strength. Toad, when I first met him was carrying an iPod and a single speaker. I did not know this the evening we first met, but the next day walking along the trail searching for Dalhgreen’s Backpacker Campground to have lunch and a quick shower I heard the greatest sound. It was Bob Marley, I was ecstatic my first thought was trail magic, maybe an ice cream surprise, cold soda or hotdogs. Turning a corner and pushing through some limbs blocking off a small clearing, I found Toad sitting at a picnic table taking his boots off and jamming’ out to Bob Marley. I went over and told him I had been expecting trail magic, but that his speaker was magic enough for me. We began talking about how music was one of the things that we missed out on the trail. He’d had an iPod with him but never really used it much because it would have to be recharged and the ear buds bothered him. Since he had left from Georgia he had missed listening to music and so he found a speaker, just one, and justified carrying it because he needed to have music. It is a comfort from home, but more so it was a part of his life that he was separated from by the dynamics of the trail.

Later I encountered Toad again, this time with a grabber. I am not sure what exactly it is called, but it reminds me of an arm extension, the kind people use to pick up trash or pinecones. I was curious where he had found that and what he was doing with it he explained that by having that if he dropped something out of a bunk or left something slightly out of arms reach at shelters or in the tent, he could just use the little grabber instead of having to get all the way up to fetch it. He also said he really enjoyed the reactions of other hikers whenever he would take it off his pack and reach for something. If their reactions were anything like mine then they were thoroughly amused. Mention carried around a plastic double sided battle ax. He had found it somewhere and just decided to take it with him. He thought it would be great to play with at the shelters.

“Hike Your Own Hike” is a statement that is incredibly important to the trail. Trail guides and books about gear selection all emphasize that it is important to “hike your own hike” (HYOH). A quick Google books search returned 21 results (HYOH 2009) for books mentioning HYOH. Most
basically it means to hike the trail on your own terms; take the trails that call to you, white blaze following only the trail itself, blue blaze take side trails, yellow blaze following the roads or hitchhike, hike fast or slow, be ultra light weight or carry a heavier pack weight, stop frequently in towns or push ever further up the trail. The concept means to make your experience your own. Pilgrim for example was a strict purist, meaning that he would hike past every white blaze on the trail, without taking any shortcuts, but when I asked him about the way other people hiked, his response was, “hike your own hike, its an individual journey”.

Hiking your own hike is not restricted to the way that you move along the trail. The concept is especially useful when selecting, evaluating and using gear. There are a given number of necessities that any one hiker might have, but the way that those needs are met can be as individual as the hiker. It is important for hikers to have the gear that best suits them. There is not any one packing list. Hike your own hike means to use your own system for taking care of yourself. Hikers, myself included make judgment calls based on equipment, hiking styles, and mannerisms but at the end of the day, each of us approach the trail based on personal preference, this is what hike your own hike champions. One evening in particular a couple hikers pulled out a mosquito net that they had carried from Springer Mountain in Georgia all the way to New York and only used a few times. That method of packing worked for them and greatly benefited them at shelters such as Bake Oven Knob where the mosquitoes were terrible. I spent the night hiding and swatting while they rested comfortably in their net.
HOSTELS AND TRAIL TOWNS

The trail experience extends well beyond the white blazes that mark the path. There are many places off the trail which play vital roles in sustaining the trail and those who hike it. Without these places and the services they provide the Appalachian Trail would become a very different footpath. Grocery stores, post offices, libraries, and restaurants are among them and are critical to meeting the needs of long distance hikers. While these features of trail towns are important, just as important for bringing hikers into town are the hostels and hotels scattered along the trail. While the grocer might bring a hiker into town the hostels and the hotels are keys for getting them to stay. When hikers come into towns and decide to stay the night they typically spend some money in those towns, buying groceries, restaurant meals, ice cream, beer, utilizing shuttles, replacing equipment and any other number of services not usually available at the shelters. It is a mutually beneficial relationship between the towns and the hikers. It is good for trail towns to have hikers come in and spend money; it is good for hikers to have access to all the services mentioned above. The services are important for meeting needs, but the hostels and the hotels are equally important to life on the trail, for myself and for the number of hikers I met and relaxed with from Maryland to Connecticut.

Hostels and Hotels provide hikers with the chance to come in from the trail for the night. The pleasures found within them are often some of the simplest imaginable. To sleep in a bed as opposed to on the floors of shelters, tents or hammocks. To take a hot shower, maybe a bath, to do laundry, to let clothes dry out, to turn the lights off and on, to use flushing toilets and telephones. There is an element of rest and recovery that comes from hostels. From having all of the accessories that US hikers are largely accustomed to having in their daily lives off the trail. Just as the trail inspires and renews, it also drains, and these stops along the trail are places where we can find strength and tend to our wounds. They are places where hikers can take their packs off, set their boots out to air, clean themselves and their clothes and let their bodies rest without working for the remainder of the
afternoon, the night and maybe the next as well. If the price is right then a hiker might decide to stay two nights enabling them to have a full day of rest, out of the heat or rain.

For all the conveniences found in hostels many hikers make it a point to visit them when they get a chance. Hostels thus provide an opportunity for hikers to meet one another or rejoin hikers who had lost pace with them. Shelters on the trail are usually only utilized one night at a time, because of this set up hikers along the trail form a continuously moving line. If you fall behind or get ahead of people who are moving further along each day, unless the stop to rest then the chances are you will not see them again. Because hikers often stay more than one night at hostels it is possible to catch up with hikers who otherwise would have been long gone. In so far as hostels serve as meeting places they offer up a gathering of hikers who share stories and spread information about the trail and other hikers.

It’s June 3rd and my third day out on the trail. My knee is shooting arrows up through my leg, and the weather feels like it might be going to turn to rain. I can’t see myself walking too much further or being thrilled about walking in the rain. That would just add irritation to discomfort. Knowing that hostels are a great place to meet people I consult my guide book and discover that there is a hostel called the Free State Hiker Hostel. I decided to go and give my knee a little rest there. As I get to the road a couple passes me on their way to the Free State, as hostels are first come first serve I figure I had better hurry up to get in line. I gimp down the road to the Free State, up the hill following a sign to the back of the house I find a door marked with a sign that says “hikers come on in; call…..and we’ll be with you”. What I found inside far surpassed my expectations for a trailside hostel.

Inside to the left is a shelf stocked with cookies and chips and a fridge full of drinks and ice cream sandwiches. All of which operates on the honor system, meaning you write down what you eat and pay later. Not only do they have a bathroom with a tub, but they have a game room, complete with an air hockey table and some great bunks in a huge room to the right. Debbie, the lady of the hostel came up and greeted the hikers who were there.
The Free State Hiker Hostel’s kitchen, game room and bunk room.

She was very kind and pointed out the number to a restaurant that delivered. The two other hikers and I decided to place an order so we called and feasted on what was possibly the worst Mexican food I have ever eaten. The couple left to continue on the trail and I settled in for the night, taking advantage of the free internet to post some blogs. I stayed up pretty late writing and resting. I met Ken, Debbie’s husband, and a thru-hiker, we talked about my project. I was inquiring about demographics and he says maybe 1 out of every 8 guests is a woman, many are with other people but many are also alone. As an illustration to the point I was the only hiker staying in the hostel that night. I woke the following morning feeling well rested, needing to run into town and find myself a new knee brace because I had forgotten mine in Emily's car. My knee was very stiff but once I managed to get moving around a little I decided to call the number for a shuttle posted on the hiker board. The number would lead me to trail angel Gracious Goodness. She operated a shuttle service for hikers and was also one who was a member of my online women hikers group. When Gracious Goodness and I returned after having dinner with her family, there were several other hikers there. Among them were Earth, Queen and Pauper who would also become essential to this experience with the Appalachian Trail. There were other hikers there as well, that I had never met before. They were all seeking refuge from the Ensign Cowell Shelter where Traveler was partying with another hiker. No one wanted to contend with the celebration and so opted to back track to the hostel. Avoiding conditions on the trail were
often among the reasons for choosing to stay in a hostel. The day before I was hurting and wanting to rest, today I didn’t want to walk in the rain and had spent the day with trail angel Gracious Goodness.

On June 7th I left Birch Run Shelter in a haze of a surreal morning fog but I reached Ironmasters Mansion in the clear heat of early afternoon. After a long downhill with my knee killing me I made it to Pine Grove Furnace State Park’s general store. When I walked up Raggedy Andy and Pilgrim were sitting under the porch of the store around a table, packs resting on benches, shoes and socks airing out in the sun, wearing crocs or sporting bear feet. Raggedy Andy was finishing the half gallon challenge. The challenge tempts hikers to eat a half gallon of ice cream in one sitting. The reward is a little wooden spoon and being able to sign your name successful in the store’s log. This is listed as a must try in my guide book. Not having the stomach for it I settle on a smaller serving and a cheeseburger and talk with Raggedy Andy and Pilgrim about their plans. As we were all planning on staying at the hostel we had to figure out how to pass the time until the hostel opened a few hours later. We all drop our packs off in the hiker day room at the hostel and all walk down to one of the ponds for a swim. I remember the feeling of that cold, cold water on my skin, washing away all my sweat, wading slowly into that dark abyss of refreshment, stretching my body out across the water, weightless for the first time in, supported instead of supporting, beginning to swim, the catch in my knee, the knife pain, arms compensating for legs, one that is too tired even to swim. We swam until it was time for the hostel to open. We returned to find Queen, Pauper, Earth, and a couple of other hikers waiting in the shade of a tree, sitting on a giant checker board. We all sat together in the shade and chatted for a bit, about the trail, the day’s hike, what was happening down at the general store, ice cream, what was available to eat, where there is a phone, and the ticks that keep appearing from the grass.

By the time we are getting into the swing of conversation and helping one hiker use his cell phone, the hostel finally opens up. We get our rooms, and start thinking about showers while a troop girl scouts staying there cook dinner. Once they have finished eating they offer up all the left over
tacos to us hikers. The kitchen was stocked with supplies for hikers to use in preparing dinner, but we were all thankful for the delicious generosity of the hikers.

![Iron Master’s Mansion secret room, stairs and a bunk room open during the day.]

We go on the house’s tour of the secret room that was used for the underground railroad, and try to imagine what it might have been like to live under the floor boards for weeks or months and speculate on the reasons we might not have made it. Tin Can, Queen, Earth and I try to get the internet working, but with no luck, and after some discussion about how internet should not be advertised if it does not work everyone turns in except for Earth and I. I’m not sure why we weren’t tired, perhaps it was good conversation, but we were also waiting on a dryer that works about as well as the internet to return our clothes to us. While we were waiting we passed the time telling jokes and talking about where we came from, how we ended up on the trail and what we do when we are not hiking. The next day the some of the hikers staying there volunteered to cook banana pancakes. Roll up, Papa Bear and Pauper took over the kitchen and made enough pancakes to feed all the hikers. Earth, Tin Can, his dad and I catch a shuttle to Gettysburg to see some local history and to do a little shopping. The other hikers either head out or spend the day resting around the hostel. My stay at Ironmasters provided me the opportunity to get to know eight hikers whom I had only met in passing on the trail. Tin Can was leaving the trail and he agreed to mail some things home for me whenever he found a post office. The trip to Gettysburg and the time spent in conversation at Ironmasters also helped me forge a relationship.
with three of those hikers Queen, Pauper and Earth. The only other women I had met so far on the trail were Queen and Earth. After our stay at Iron Master’s we would find ourselves hiking together, staying in the same shelters and sharing our experiences. Pauper, Queen and Earth would become my trail family for the summer and Earth would remain my friend after the trail.

On June 11th Earth and I followed the trail out onto a street in Duncannon, Pennsylvania then five blocks later we are at The Doyle. The Doyle is a hotel in Duncannon, the building was an old Anheuser Bush hotel, but the Doyle is famous on the trail as a must see, must stay place. It is known for its hospitality, it’s in house restaurant and bar, its personality and the assortment of people that come through its doors. The couple who run the place are as welcoming as they can be, when I walked in I was told to drop my pack and handed a glass of cold water. They asked what my trail name was and called me by it. They made sure that I was aware of the beer on tap, and the full menu. The Doyle has this atmosphere that just draws you in; something about it makes it so much more than just bathrooms and showers. I checked in and as I received my key I gained access to my first totally private space in almost two weeks. When I finally take my things from the foyer up to my room after having Jolly Scott ale from the Appalachian Trail Brewery as my welcome to the Doyle beer, I reveled in the solitude of my own room. Few moments have been sweeter than those stolen away in my room. I had no desire to leave that room of my own but I had to head over to the post office for a package. I carried my resupply package back to the Doyle to restock my bag. To my dismay discover enough food for a week! I had moved further up the trail than I had anticipated in planning and in four days, had received two weeks worth of food. I knew instantly some of it would have to go into the hiker box. I’m trying to drop my pack weight I’ve already sent home my flash light, Chacos, sunglasses, fleece, a book, my old phone, cuddle duds pants, t-shirt, used maps, used pages and now I am sending away my anti-monkey butt powder, my sleeping bag, it’s too hot and 2lbs 7ozs, underwear, a pair of socks, 1 full memory card for the camera. I’m not sure what my current pack weight will be but rest assured it’s lighter. Then back down stairs for lunch, a lunch cooked on a grill, not in a Ziploc. A bacon
cheeseburger all the way and cheese fries! Yummy! Food is such a priority, hikers all look forward to eating in towns and we all eat anything we can get our hands on so long as it isn’t instant. After reorganizing my pack, I take some time out for a little quiet reflection in a hotel room that doesn’t look revised since the hotel belonged to Anheuser Bush in the early 1900s. I wonder what the hotel might have looked like back when it was new, and who might have been staying in my room a hundred years ago. I think the visible history in the architecture and the style of building might be part of what makes the Doyle so appealing. It’s a dive, but at the same time it is fascinating and full of life.

Some hikers go so far as to hike six packs onto the trail. Occasionally, trail angels leave beer for hikers at trail heads, and it is rumored that some will even hike it out to the shelter. At any rate, drinking in general removes social barriers and facilitates conversation, which contributes to getting to know the other hikers in the hotel, even if you had never met them before. Speaking of those hikers that hike beer onto the trail I met Skink and Trout, two infamous partiers. They bought, Queen, Pauper Earth and I a round and joined us for some conversation. Once that was finished some additional beverages were purchased to take up on the wrap around balcony. Whenever Earth and I climbed out onto the balcony we found Skink and Trout sitting at a picnic table telling stories and talking about girls with hairy legs, I didn’t reveal that I had legs like a wildebeest, and instead just listened to their conversation. They talked about how there aren’t really any women on the trail. Trout began to get a little too friendly putting his arm around me and sliding closer, I told him he needed to back off, but he didn’t, and he tried to put his arm around me again leaning over as though he intended to whisper something to me. I pushed him away, but he was persistent and leaned in again so I punched him in the gut. He got the message that time, moved a normal space from me and apologized for his behavior. I was feeling tired and shortly after this incident decided that it was time for me to head off to bed.

I got up a reasonably early, mostly packed and ready to go and I opened my door to signal that I was awake. I heard Earth get up thru the walls, she went and talked to Queen and Pauper to see if they would take a zero mileage day and stay at the Doyle. She still wasn’t feeling very well and went
back to bed. I muddled around, brushed my teeth, saw Queen and Pauper were also up, said I was going to go for breakfast over at Goodies restaurant, and if they were going to go over. We all went over together, and as we were deciding what to order noticed two strange things on their menu, shoofly pie and scrapple. After making several guesses ranging from a dilapidated pie with a fly swat mark, apple scraps, something so rank flies weren’t interested, or something so sweet they’d be all over it, we asked. Our waitress told us that scrapple is some part of the pig, but she isn’t sure what part, she says it eaten with syrup, and that folks say it is sweet. The waitress says she doesn’t know what is in shoofly pie. I had two huge blueberry pancakes, they were so big I could only eat half, but Queen and tramp finished them off for me. After finishing off our breakfasts we sit and try to figure out how to take on the next part of the trail, wondering what the next few days are going to bring us. Deciding to move the planning stages back to the porch at the Doyle we grab a cup of coffee for Earth.

I needed to work on my writing and having a whole day off seemed like a perfect opportunity. I was concerned about the lack of women along the trail and so I consulted with my advisor over the phone. I was frustrated that I had not met other women to talk to, and worried that my research might be in jeopardy. Her advice was for me to keep at it and to write it out. The Doyle becomes a place for organizing and preparing my next steps along the trail. After several hours of planning both the types of days I would like to have over the next week and how to continue with my research I have done all I can do and go back to Goodies for a late lunch. Turns out molasses seems to be a key ingredient in shoofly pie. it’s thick and gooey like molasses mixed with flour, not especially good, if I were a fly I’d avoid it like the plague for fear that I would stick to it’s surface. For dessert Earth Queen and Pauper and I went for ice cream. I had chocolate with peanut butter bits and malt powder on top. It was a sin in a dish and incredibly delicious. I had used some of my time at the Doyle to write letters home and so I now needed to go back to the post office to mail them.

The Doyle for me was a space of rest, and the most memorable stop of my journey. I stopped there because it was legendary and every hiker I had met along the way said they were going to be
stopping there. I had heard so many tales about it that I simply could not pass it up. Queen, Pauper and Earth were also stopping there because the Doyle has a reputation and because Duncannon was known as an excellent trail town. It had all the necessary amenities, a grocer, a post office, a place to stay, famous blueberry pancakes and was also known by people near the trail for its hospitality. The Doyle in the end served as much more than just a place to stay. It was a hub for networking with other hikers. It was the first place I met Turkey, Gobbler, Nature, Equation, Skink and Trout. I had seen some of these people previously but I had not actually had the opportunity to sit and talk with them. I would see many of these people later on the trail but the opportunity to actually meet them in a relaxed environment made it easier to socialize with them at the shelters.

The Doyle was also a place of planning as it is for many hikers who stay there. Planning is one aspect of hiking that is never complete; every step taken becomes the chance to alter a plan in some way. Truly planning, organizing and repacking takes place in shelters and at afternoon rest stops. The difference is that in hostels it’s possible to make plans while being still. Something is to be said for being still, not having to worry about hurrying along, or finishing up before it gets dark. Perhaps it is because the immediacy of knowing that whatever plan you can come up with will affect your very next step is removed from the situation itself. Perhaps it is being able to refresh yourself with a shower and clean clothes; to lay out everything in your pack and reorganize in the comfort of an indoor space.

June 20th was the first day that I found wild blueberries on the trail. It was completely accidental, I stepped off the trail to get a picture and found myself standing on a rock in a thick low growing blueberry patch. I picked as many of those berries as I could, nearly gorging myself on the sun warmed sweetness. When I had nearly had my fill it seemed like a good idea to take a Ziploc along for Queen and Pauper in case they missed them. We would have a blueberry feast in Palmerton if we ever got there. The book “highly recommended” following the train tracks once we crossed the river, so we walked the tracks for a mile then cut up onto Main St., Palmerton. The Borough Hall had previously been a jail house, but at the present moment the town had opened up the basement as a free
hostel for hikers. Checking in requires a photo id, trail name, emergency contact. Once you are registered you are given the tour, shower through the gym, ladies room, downstairs, bunks, and “side” door. After the tour it only took a few moments to call our bunks.

I went to Rite Aid while Earth and Queen waited for the jail house towels to dry in the laundry mat across the street, Pauper went to the grocery. In route to the laundry mat Pauper was chased down by a man who revealed himself as the Palmerton trail angel. He said that he could tell Pauper was a hiker and offered to give him and any other hikers a ride back to the trail in the morning. I had just got back to the laundry mat when the trail angel and Pauper walked in. He had wanted to meet the hikers who were in town for the night and also to let us know that if we saw anyone else to let them know that he would be at the jail in the morning to shuttle hikers. After chatting with the trail angel it was back to the jail house for naps and showers. Queen guards the door for me, it’s an open shower and several kids were playing ball in the gym. The shower is fantastic, like a hot pressure washer, knocked the dirt right off. It feels so good to be clean. Queen and I go to the library to check e-mail and update everyone on our trip. After a nap we gather up our dirty laundry and the towels we used and head over to the laundry mat to wash them. The towels are provided on a different sort of honor system, if you use it, wash it, so we make sure to get that taken care of, something the hikers before us had not done. At the “one ten tavern”, I had a pizza with chicken, wing sauce, scallions, and tortillas. It was ok, but the chocolate peanut butter cake we split for dessert was better, not to mention the fresh raspberries and strawberries Earth had bought for everyone.

Palmerton was by far the best trail town I have walked through. The whole town was very friendly and welcoming. Even the waitress did not even flinch at the several days’ worth of funk seeping off of us. For the town itself to open up its borough hall as a free place for hikers to stay is a sure sign of welcome. Not only was it a free place to stay but at the check in they provided each hiker with a little care bag. The care bags had items such as travel size tooth paste, toilet paper, floss, and a post card and other basic items that you might be in need of on the trail. People would stop their cars
to let you cross the street; the hospitality in this town was surreal. Pauper was even stopped by a man, given five dollars and told to buy himself a cup of coffee. The local trail angel actually chased Pauper down making sure that he was aware that we could have a ride to the trail the following morning. That same trail angel told us that he was putting water out for hikers at a road crossing because all the water in the area was contaminated.

Palmerton in all its greatness was much needed to take on the day ahead. Palmerton itself is located within an ecological nightmare. The zinc smelting plants operating in years past had left the surrounding mountainside a wasteland and the water undrinkable for twenty miles of trail. For someone who is walking the trail under a mostly undisturbed canopy of greens with flora and fauna abounding, the day’s walk out of Palmerton is emotionally difficult. It makes hikers come to terms with the massive amounts of environmental degradation that are taking place. The hillsides have become a Superfund Site, but even with the efforts being made to restore the land it feels more like walking through the desolate hills of southern Nevada than a mountainside in Pennsylvania.
FOOD, WATER AND SHARING

Hikers are often known for their stomachs; no, not necessarily for the outwardly visible size of their stomach, rather for how much they can and must consume, to support their load-bearing travel. Hikers become something of a forager, while not necessarily living off the trail; they must carry enough supplies to make it to the next town over. Food is always on the mind. I carried snacks in my hip pockets and packed a separate bag just for snacks, to keep them easily accessible at the top of my pack. While a great degree of effort goes into planning or considering what you’ll eat during your hike and how you will acquire it, eventually at some point someone else is going to have something that looks better than the cheddar broccoli rice you’ve been eating for a month. Luckily there are lots of options available, aside from stores, depending on the hikers that you share your journey with. Hikers tend to be willing to share their snacks, swapping out items or just giving away snacks that they no longer want to eat or have replaced with something they had rather eat. The open ended system of sharing is one form of reciprocity found all along the Appalachian Trail.

In my hike, the very first night Traveler offered the shelter residents and I some of his cornbread that he had made. The second night I offered Coyote some hot chocolate and oatmeal, in exchange she gave me dehydrated fruit. After sharing my bunk with a black snake at Quarry Gap Shelter, I was caught up to by the previous night’s shelter mates hiking with them a ways, till we stopped about midway up a hill for a snack break. They began snacking on some sort of candy, I was in luck, they offered me some and as it turns out I was handed individually wrapped dark chocolates. At the Port Clinton pavilion Nature offered up a host of granola bars that his family had been sending him. What he did not want to carry and did not give away he left in a hiker box there at the Pavilion.

Hikers in general carry only the things that they want to eat, even consistently or the things that find practical to carry with them, never-the-less planning can be off and appetites can change. I contributed several 7.06oz. pouches of tuna to Queen and Pauper’s kitchen in exchange for smaller packages of tuna. Tuna is tuna, but even at my hungriest it was hard for me to eat that much tuna on
top of a full package of Knorr Sides. I was carrying around food that I had to make myself eat. The most important aspect of that last statement is that I was carrying it around. I was able to lose four ounces for each pouch we swapped. In my original planning, I had planned for the hunger that I knew would come, trying to keep my protein intake extra high, but I neglected to think about how hot and tired I would be, or that those extra ounces of tuna could weight my pack down considerably. I was able to drop 20oz. from my pack at one time by switching with them.

An excellent way for me to lose some of my unwanted extra food, aside from giving it to hikers immediately around me, was to drop it off in a hiker box. Hiker boxes are usually just large boxes found in places frequented by hikers, in towns this usually means places we sleep or places we shop. Usually these boxes are cardboard, and are much like a mystery grab bag. There is no way to know what you will find in any specific hiker box. Hikers leave all kinds of things behind; everything from gear, food, to little extras. Anything that the hiker doesn’t want or no longer finds useful can be tossed into the box. Back at the Doyle in Duncannon, Pennsylvania, I had found lots of food stuffs in the hiker box. It was standing at there shuffling through the box when it occurred to me that I could dump my excess food into these boxes. Why was I dumping extra foods? The trail offered up a little surprise, I received a resupply package in Duncannon, the shipping schedule had gone astray because of my accelerated pace, and within a week I had received two weeks’ worth of food. Back to the hiker box, this one had Ziploc foods just like mine in the box, not just the Mountain House freeze dried stuff. I went through all of my food goods and left behind all the Knorr Sides meals I didn’t care to eat, some extra tuna, two bags of beer eats which are like Chex mix, one bag of peanut butter. I left instructions written on each of the Ziploc cook-ables, so that the next person would know what was up with the food in the bags. I grabbed a power aid mix from the box, but otherwise left it unharmed. I did however also to a box of books on the floor, beside the hiker box, by the stairs on the second floor edged on either side by motel rooms.
At the Church of the Mountain Hostel, Algae left behind some shoes that he had blown out, amazingly enough another hiker the next morning picked them up. Nature dropped off a pair of insoles. After Bear brought my attention to a small empty powder bottle, I grabbed it out of the hiker box and filled it with the powder I’d been carrying. Then I tossed the rest of the powder into the box. No reason to carry more than I need. Besides someone else might appreciate it. I also cut off a section of mole skin from a roll that was in the hiker box/drawers, enough to have six squares the size of my palm. I was using mole skin regularly to keep my feet comfy and fend off blisters by providing extra padding and a surface to collect the friction. This hiker box in particular is well stocked, fuel, an old stove, tampons, a new toothbrush, toilet paper though this time it is unusually low on food stuffs.

Hiker boxes are usually unattended, mostly unsupervised except for being inside an establishment. Usually these boxes are pretty evident to hikers, being marked and placed in a way which almost guarantees that they will be seen. Hikers are free to go to the box and rifle around until they find something useful to them. Take what you need and leave the rest. Leave some of yours too. Hiker boxes work because businesses are willing to have them and because people have the idea that if you can’t use it someone else probably can. Instead of hording up rice or cliff bars, just toss them into the box. Sure the trail itself might dictate that one not carry much more than necessary, but the hiker box reminds me of a temporary suspension of greed. It creates an open ended system of sharing. Indirectly one hiker benefits and benefits from another hiker. The hiker who drops something into the box may never see the person, who takes it out. Conversely something can be dropped into the box and then almost immediately be claimed by someone else. In general, the gift is left for no one in particular, yet it is there waiting on whom ever wants to claim it. Utilizing the hiker box is akin to giving gifts, not knowing what other hikers want, but being able to pick the gift that you want most.

For my food resupply, rather than relying on what might be available in towns, I planned out a menu and went to Sam’s Club to buy as many things in bulk as possible. I had then packaged all my foods together into 7 boxes to be mailed to me at designated locations along the trail. This meant that I
had seven boxes with six 7.06oz. pouches of tuna coming at me every time I went to the post office. Incidentally I knew that I had a surplus. My mistake in planning was lucky for others, who were able to use the products I had over stocked and also for myself because I was able to trade for more desirable goods. Not to mention the same assortment of Knorr sides, trail mixes, instant breakfast, oatmeal, snack mix, fruit cups, powdered milk, pain killers, vitamins, water purifier, virtually everything was arriving in regular intervals, with unfailing consistency. I was hopeful that I would be able to trade something out, or give away any extra foods that I had.

Water is something that every hiker needs, this time it was also my first example of the sharing that takes place on the trail. At first I didn’t really think of it as sharing. I was glad to have Traveler go down to the water source and bring water back up for everyone, but I didn’t consider it much more than an act of kindness. It is a very kind thing to do, but it is also a way of sharing the responsibility, or burden of fetching water. Because he was willing to do it, I didn’t have to. Later that evening after reorganizing his pack Toad offered to bring up water for others when he went to fetch some for himself. There were numerous times when hikers would offer to get water for each other. Not every hiker made the offer but many did. It is in some way a pay it forward mentality; meaning, you do a good turn for someone and you will have a good return. This notion is related to ideas of karma.

Each morning Earth would offer up her left over water to any hikers at the shelter. If they accepted they could fill their bottles or platys if they declined she would pour out the remainder of the water off to the side of the shelter. Earth had taken up the habit each evening of filling up a three liter soft Nalgene to have plenty of water for the evening and enough to refill whatever she might have drank in the morning. It was a good habit to be in. I however was not in such a habit and often benefited from her generosity.
Trail magic is generally known as “unexpected but welcome help or food” (Trail Terms 2/9/09, Whiteblaze terms 4/23/08). Unexpected help is the denatured alcohol that was left behind at Ed Garvey, it’s being taken to Dunkin Donuts when you just wanted a shuttle, it’s finding that someone had already brought water up to the shelter. Trail magic is any unexpected extra that makes your day better. The people responsible for trail magic are other hikers, passersby and trail angels. Trail angels are the people who offer assistance to other hikers without expecting anything but gratitude in return. They are consistently doing little things to make the trail better for hikers.

The phenomenon of trail angels is baffling. It is almost dumbfounding, the ways that people chose to go out of their way to assist those who are hiking the trail. Being a trail angel creates a special connection to the trail. For hikers being a trail angel gives them a way to meet with and assist other hikers. For non-hikers being a trail angel allows them to become a part of the Trail, by becoming a part of the trail for the hikers who encounter them or their generosity. Hikers love to tell stories about the trail and to hear stories about them and the places we cross along the way. They meet us and are able to participate in the world of the trail through our stories and our presence. If you don’t believe that the presence of another hiker shares a story, then you haven’t sat next to someone fresh off the trail, because that presence will just about knock you over. I met four trail angels that had a tremendous impact on my hike. The first was Gracious Goodness; I met her at the Free State Hiker Hostel. She must be one of the best trail angels ever. The following is my account of what happened the first day that we met, during our second encounter and how our relationship came into being.

Day four: I woke up at the Free State Hiker Hostel in Smithsburg, MD, and no it is not free or operated by the state. I needed to run into town and find myself a new knee brace since like an idiot I had forgotten mine in Em's car on day one. I woke up, got to moving around a little and decided to call the number for the shuttle posted on the hiker board. I called, and a lady named Gracious answered the phone, she had intended to go hiking that day but since it was raining she decided to refrain, lucky me, thank you rain. She says she’ll be over in a bit and I proceed to get ready for the trip into town. A little while later I hear the door open, someone walk up the stairs and say, Mattie? I said, I'm in here, and in popped this lady like a little ray of sun shine. We checked out the hostel and set out on our way, we got to talking and realized that we are both members of the same online women hiker’s group.
Pretty cool, I mean really what are the odds? So we talked about the group for a while checked out the locally owned pharmacy but between a lack of selection and pricing I decided I needed to venture over to the Rite Aid. While were there we talked about gear and braces and our set ups and everything from a to z and by the time the brace was bought we were going to have lunch with her daughter. After lunch we went back to her place and I checked out her hammock system and her Speer tarp and we discussed and debated the benefits and costs of different pieces of gear and hiking styles, and discussed possible routes and methods for the next part of my journey over a cup of coffee. In short, I met a trail angel. In reality, I was adopted by one. She was amazing, totally took me in for the day, even ran me back to the hostel so I could mail some stuff home. I can't say exactly how wonderful the day was, but what I thought would be a ride into town turned out to be one of the best trail experiences I've had off of the trail. She says she might hike with me sometime in Pennsylvania. I hope that she does. Good conversation and good company are always welcome. We make arrangements for her husband to take me up the trail a bit so that I can stay on schedule.

Day nine: Gracious Goodness is going to come out today; we probably won’t do any hiking. She is a real trail angel, she has been communicating with the women hikers group, to see where the girls I’m supposed to meet up with are. As it turned out Pooka (the same from the manifesto) is off the trail due to “injury”, Roses has this decided to hike Shenandoah, Happy and the Girl’s Tour broke apart, and only one of them is still hiking. Some were behind me by days, others by weeks. Gracious Goodness has been a big help. Although she isn’t a long distance backpacker she is very involved in the trail community.

Gracious Goodness at Dodie’s.

Gracious Goodness came over we talked about doing laundry in the sink and hanging it out to dry. She tried to call Happiness (another woman hiker) but with no luck, so we leave the hostel and head to 30 to get some lunch. We eat at a place called Dodie’s, where I ate the largest most delicious bacon, cheese, slaw, chili, onion, mushroom, lettuce, tomato, onion ring burger I’d ever tasted. After lunch we head over to Gander Mountain so I can get some supplies, like a new headlamp, we walk around comparing clothes and hammocks, I make a selection for a lamp, a Petzel 5 function head light complete with a red bulb for night politeness, then we go back to Dodies for ice-cream. After our dessert is finished she took me back to Ironmasters to pick up a cell phone that was delivered. She agreed to run me forward a little so I can stay on schedule, hopefully catch Queen, Pauper and Earth. It took us forever to find the road; we have to get to it the back way, down what seems like an endless gravel road. I started to get worried, there were so many rocks, it’s 94 degrees, four thirty and I have to go 3 miles by dark. We finally found the spot where the trail crosses the road and after taking a moment to examine the locusts that are all around we rather hastily say goodbye.
Trail angels are amazing. Think about the audacity of the story you just read. I called a woman for a business transaction, for a personalized cab ride into town from the Free State Hiker Hostel and ended up going to her house, eating dinner with her family, setting up her hammock, and getting a ride gratis to the trail head the following day. Not only did all of this happen, but she also came to visit me five days later at Ironmasters Mansion, picked me up, bought me lunch, took me to Gander Mountain, took me for ice cream, and then spent part of the afternoon searching for the trail head with me. Why would she do all this for a stranger? Because I was hiking, because I was a young woman on the trail, because we both were hammock hangers, because we are members of the same online group--maybe all these contributed to her kindness. Gracious Goodness had no obligation to help me in anyway. How many other times in my life has someone begun a business transaction with me and then become my ally? Not once. If it had, how many of those people would I have trusted to take me to their house and to drive me into unknown territory? Probably not many, but her character and her aims were truthful. Trail Angels like Gracious transcend expectations, whether it is because they want to meet people who are hiking the trail or because they themselves understand what a little kindness can do.

Though we were never able to hike together, she was a part of my Appalachian Trail. It certainly would have been a very different path without her assistance in moving ahead, acquiring gear and encouragement. I talked with her about gear, family, and backpacking. She said that while she does a lot of day trips backpacking, while she is okay with hiking by herself, she is not much into backpacking alone. She was very curious about my project and how the trail is right now. I am amazed at her concern, her kindness and her generosity. She, like so many other Trail Angels, seems to be really genuine. We talked about the safety manifesto, the language Pooka had used, and the context in which it was written. Gracious Goodness said that it sounded like Pooka just wanted everyone to be safe and so in that aspect it was good. I asked her about some of the contradictions in the manifesto, and she just kind of laughed and said that it also seemed to have been done hastily.
Gracious Goodness says that if she is hiking and someone catches up to her and starts talking her ear off then she tries to lose them, because she likes hiking for the solitude. Gracious Goodness was one of many trail angels I met during my hike.

Compassion, I met in Duncannon, Pennsylvania. She gave Papa Bear and I some advice on how to short cut the trail by walking through town, which she says was the original route of the trail. Almost every hiker stops at The Doyle, but for some reason the trail was rerouted onto a different street so now hikers that are following the trail miss the Doyle, Goodies restaurant, the post office, and the ice cream shop. According to her that seems silly, the town loves the business from the hikers and hikers seem to love the town. She advises us in to walk down Main Street in the morning until we hit the bridge where we would pick the trail up again. She also lets us know that when we get to the gravel lot before the shelter that we can follow the old fire tower trail and cut off a little bit of the AT the laces up and over some rocks. According to her, it cuts out about half the distance. She hiked that section last fall with some other hikers; she took them up and over the white blaze on the way to the shelter and brought them back by the road. She says that this is when local knowledge is really valuable. She says there are a few purists left but that most people are willing to take a little detour. According to TA Mary, other hikers said that the white blaze went over the rocks because the snow would blow off the trail in the winter, but back along the road the snow is going to be deep.

Compassion estimates that she picks up a couple hundred people a year between rides to the bus station, airport, outfitter, hospital, Wal-Mart, rides to the grocery. She says that this June is still early in the season, not as many people are coming through. Each year hikers start coming through earlier and earlier, and while the season isn’t heavy at the moment business has been steady since May. She also said that she has seen more women hiking this year than any other year. She usually doesn’t see too many couples, but she has noticed more relationships on the trail this year. Many of those relationships are trail couples, meaning that the relationship formed on the trail. One couple told her
that if they could survive the trail together they would get married, because they knew if they could put up with each other out here then they would survive.

I was telling her that most people I knew thought it was very dangerous for me to come out and hike the trail by myself. “People don’t realize the extent to which you are around other people,” she muses. “You always have people around you, it’s not like you’re alone.” Some people hike the trail because they want to be alone but she doesn’t understand how anyone could do that. “There’s a lot of things I can’t figure out how you hikers do it, like hiking in the rain,” that would be a serious issue. “It grates my last nerve” I said. Above the steady hum of the bar, we postulate the positive side of trail life. “It’s hard to find somebody you walk at the same pace with, but it’s nice to have people around for when you get to the shelter” I said. Compassion completes my sentence, “to the shelter exactly”, “to talk to and hang out, to grumble if need be, whatever” “It’s almost like a revolving door, no matter how fast you’re going someone is always going faster and someone is always going slower” I said. “What I like about being a trail angel is constantly getting to meet new people, it’s like I get to travel in my own mess, because I’m not actually getting on the road and going somewhere but I’m meeting people from all over, so it just enriches me that way, rather than traveling. I’m meeting people from different areas” “Even though I’m not getting to see that area I am still getting to see people from those areas.”

She takes a picture of me, and explains that she tries to take pictures of all the hikers she sees, because she has a photo album, with pictures of all the hikers she has met. She would like to update all her album to show all of the pictures, but she tells me that she is pretty far behind. and she started a web page to upload photos to, it’s on AOL. Compassion says that locals always want to know how she can stand to be around us, but “I has a terrible nose so it doesn’t bother me, I can stand to be around y’all”. “Does anyone ever give you trouble, I have a pretty good sense about which hikers to avoid. I’m not sure how I developed that sense. Last year there was a hiker hanging around and I’d seen him earlier in the day, he was hinting around at a cheaper place to stay, I occasionally let hikers stay in my
house, but not this guy and that turned out to be a good decision”. “I had a bad sense about another hiker, and it turned out that he was a pathological liar, he had been causing some sort of troubles on the trail, he was taking other hiker’s names, and telling other hiker’s stories, and it was just a big pack of lies”. “He’d hinted around about a place to stay and I had said no.”

“The AT is not just a trail, it’s a social experience,” Compassion assures me, as she recalls telling some of the earlier hikers to slow down and wait for some other hikers. The trail is more than just a walking path, it is a place to meet other people from all walks of life. To share in the experience of the trail from our multiple backgrounds is what the trail is all about.

Day Sixteen Meeting the 501 Trail Angel.

I’ve decided not to hike today because of a great decline going into Port Clinton. A lady is coming at 7 to pick up Queen and Pauper’s, Earth’s, Turkey and Gobbler’s bags so they can slack pack and I am going to try to hitch with her. Everyone is ready, I agree to load Earth’s stuff, by 7:20 everyone was anxious to get started on the 24+ miles. The lady does show up with a gallon of sweetened/creamed coffee and a stack of cups. We load up and I asked her for a ride. She says she has to go home, wake up her husband, and take him to court but if I wanted to tag along that’d be fine. So I say ok. We all go our ways, god speed friends. Storms are coming in this afternoon. I climb in and off we go. Her name is Angel and she is very friendly. We get to her house which is three minutes away and we get out, she introduces me to her dogs Izashas she’s been raising for 8 years, then she takes me inside, introduces me to her Great Dane pup, shows me a momma dog and her babies, sits me down on the couch, turns on the TV and disappears for a while. When she reemerges she has a drink, and later a plate of scrambled eggs and cheese, with 2 pieces of butter toast. To be taken into someone’s home that you don’t know and have them offer you incredible hospitality because you are a hiker is an amazing experience. This is trail magic, these are trail angels. Given her house is a mess, smells like dog pee, has plywood floors with cigarette butts stomped out on it, dusty decor, and she fork-feeds the dogs every other bite, but still I am a stranger, her hostel room is closed but she has brought me in and fed me and talks to me about the trail and about home. They even dropped me at Dunkin’ Donuts while they went to collect a settlement and told me all about the settlement, about school, her husband was nice, talkative. They rode me to the “Ye Old Backpacker” in Port Clinton and were willing to take me to Cabela’s but I said I thought I could find a sleeping bag there. She and her husband left me standing inside the outfitter, wishing me well on my way.

On day twenty I met a man in Palmerton, Pennsylvania and he and his wife were the trail angels of Palmerton. Palmerton is a Superfund site. The mountains are bare rock layered by dust and the water is undrinkable. Hikers need water and lots of it. On average I was drinking nearly four liters a day but still felt there was a desert inside waiting for rain. This fellow would take water out to trail heads along roads, in gallon jugs and smaller bottles and leave them just inside the trees. At Palmerton
this was especially interesting, because according to Rock someone was coming around and collecting the water that people were putting out for hikers. There must be a special place in hell for someone who would steal water in the middle of summer. Rock was willing to pick up several of us hikers from the Palmerton town Hall where we had spent the night and to take us back to the trail head outside of town. We were all very grateful not to have to walk the miles back along the railroad tracks. Rock was a hiker, and did do quite a bit of hiking, but his generosity toward hikers, in offering rides and setting out water was phenomenal. Why would someone go out of their way to exhibit these acts of kindness?

![Image of hikers at Wild Cat Shelter]

Left to Right, Earth, Queen, Pauper, Patches and the Wild Cat Trail Angel at Wild Cat Shelter.

This is how I met the Wild Cat Shelter Trail Angel. Here we were sitting at Wild Cat shelter after a long day, settling in for dinner and the evening, when here comes another hiker walking fast through the woods. We were all a little curious about him because he didn’t seem to have a pack or any gear, yet here he came up to the shelter with his little school type back pack. He just starts talking to us and I’m wondering if he might be one of those ultra light hikers because of his limited gear. Then I wonder how close everyone is going to sleep tonight in the shelter to make room for him if he wants it. The moment I start debating this, he introduces himself as the Wild Cat Shelter Angel, and
regrettably informs us that because of the weather and other factors he is the only one here tonight, so there will not be any cheeseburgers or potato chips. As the possibility of cheeseburgers made a little dent into my spirits, he opened his pack and announced that he had beer; along with non-alcoholic beverages. We were all shocked, amazed and grateful. The five of us there, each had a beer and talked with the fellow for a while. He said that he would hang around long enough to pack out our bottles and any other trash we might have. This final gesture was perhaps the most appreciated because we don’t want to add any extra weight to our packs, especially empty glass bottles, and any opportunity to drop off trash from dinner is an unexpected treat.

One of the most amazing accounts of trail angels on the trail was the Mayor of Unionville, New York. The day Earth and I found our way into Unionville, Queen and Pauper had already made it in ahead of us. We went by the park where the guide book said we could sleep, but there was no one there. Deciding that we were hungry we ask a lady for directions to the general store. She points us up the hill, and we follow her lead until we find ourselves standing in a deli staring at pints of Ben and Jerry’s. After making a selection to split, we approach the counter to pay, and this odd man standing there starts asking us, “So are ya’ll hikers?” “Yep, that’s us” we say. “Well are you planning at staying at the pavilion tonight or have you seen the mayor’s?” he wants to know. “Well we haven’t seen the mayor’s but we heard that we can do laundry there, do you know where it is?” we inquire. “Yep, I do, and I tell you what I’ll give you a ride on up to his place, I just dropped off a couple not too long ago” “Was it Queen and Pauper?” Earth wants to know. “I think that might have been their names” he says. We go outside and gather our packs as he brings the truck around. Tossing everything inside we accept a ride to the Mayor’s place, he has a nice house, which we are led into via an external cellar door that goes into the basement. I was wondering what the inside would be like, we open a door to the main rooms in the basement and find bunk beds a desk, Queen, Pauper, and Dove. Pilgrim is upstairs taking a shower, while his and Dove’s clothes are washing. They each have one of the complimentary robes provided by the Mayor so that hikers can wash all of their clothes. The bunk
beds were built in the basement after the previous year’s heat wave, when the hikers who would bathe, and refreshed would have to sleep in their tents in the yard, sweating again before they got into bed.

The Mayor decided in the heat of that summer to bring the hikers in the house. I asked him what made him decide to take care of hikers to start with, and his response was that, “When my wife was still alive, she was very sick and hadn’t been out in a while, I would see these hikers walking through town, dirty and smelly, some of them looked so down trodden, and others just like they needed a rest”. “I would come home and tell my wife stories about the hikers I would see in towns, and she would say to me, “can you imagine if we were travelling and broke down somewhere that we didn’t know anyone, after days on the road, how much it would mean to us to have someone offer us a bath and a meal, just so we could clean up and rest a bit”, after she passed I began bringing hikers to my house”. “I couldn’t do it while she was living but, she was on to something, so I started asking hikers to come over for dinner, to do laundry and take a shower”. Bill the guy who brought us up informed us that there were only two rules in the Mayor’s house, after the first two beers each additional beer costs a quarter and any word over three syllables costs a quarter. It’s all on the honor system and the money goes into the same jar. I think this is pretty funny. Still by the end of the night, I had to put a quarter in the jar, when asked what I studied, instead of saying people, place and culture I said anthropology. The mayor jokingly said, “That rule’s there so Bill here won’t feel left out”.

The mayor was not alone at his house, to help him in fixing the dinner he prepared for everybody, there was a man in his eighties named Mike and Bill. They cooked dinner while we watched a movie, showered, washed laundry, napped and chatted. Then they called us all to the outside table, where the feast had been prepared. Soup, crackers, salad, garlic bread, bean salad, and beer. It looked like a little piece of heaven, right there on the Mayor’s patio, candles and all. It was one of the most incredible trail experiences I’ve ever had. We all sat around that table watching darkness fall over us after the meal was done. We enjoyed the cool refreshment and watched the fireflies dot the yard. Earth pulled around a fire pit and stoked up a little fire for everyone to enjoy.
The Mayor over the course of the evening said that hikers were interesting people, and that the way they come together to help one another, amazed him, but that we were all crazy bastards for wanting to live like that. Together we enjoyed many laughs and swapped stories, about what we did in the other world, and about Pilgrim’s plan to walk around the world in an effort to raise awareness about the need for safe water in Africa.

The nigh was perfect. The next morning we awoke to the Mike calling down that breakfast was ready. I rolled out of bed and stumbled up stairs, finding myself a set up of hot coffee, eggs, bacon, the whole works, and even juice. After stuffing myself with food, I went and made my pack travel ready for a ride from the Mayor to the trail head. On his way to the Mayor’s office he carted his hikers to the trail head, so we could all start our day together.
The astounding hospitality that I encountered on the trail is just one aspect of what makes life there so different than life off the trail. People might think you are a nut for hiking all the time but they are willing to go out of their way to make sure that trip is amazing. As Compassion says, being around hikers can enrich your life. Meeting people from different walks of life with a multiplicity of experiences is just one way to self enrichment. Connecting with hikers and with the trail through them allows one to participate in a world of possibility that might be otherwise out of reach. Some trail angels such as Gracious Goodness, Compassion and the Mayor of Unionville assist mostly with helping hikers off the trail. Their connection to the AT takes place because the trail lends them its hikers. Or pushes us out of the woods onto their metaphorical doorstep. They are able to experience the town side of the trail, and hear the stories recounted by hikers.

The Wild Cat Trail Angel and the Palmerton Trail Angel participate in the trail itself. Palmerton is actively assisting hikers while they are on the trail by dropping water off along the path, hiking sections of the trail himself, and chatting with other hikers about the state of water sources in the area. The Wild Cat Angel is also actually out there on the trail, bringing a bag full of trail magic to weary hikers at the end of a long days hike. He comes out to the shelter, walking the trail and also seeing hikers at the end of a day, while they are setting up their homes for the evening. The connections to the trail for these two Angels are more direct in the aspect of recognizing the immediate experience of the trail itself.

Both sets of angels are connected to the hikers and to the trail despite their differing approaches. Because one set of angels operates along the white blazes of the trail herself, it is tempting to romanticize their experiences as being more true to nature. This would be short sighted because it denies that the trail towns, hostels and restaurants are just as integral to the Appalachian Trail today as the blazes themselves. The Appalachian Trail is not reducible to the rocks and trees, it is a path over rocks and through the trees, but the life lines that make hiking it possible are the towns and people along the way.
CONCLUSION

In the introduction of this thesis, I presented a body of literature which postulates reasons why the Appalachian Trail is a place few women are encouraged to go alone. Ideas about wilderness spaces, long distance travel, gender norms about appropriate activities, instructive tools of bedtime stories, leisure constraints, and popular conceptions of danger combined to present a distorted snapshot of the Appalachian Trail. The Trail, conceived in this way, was alienated from its experiential physical and cultural landscapes. My search for the Appalachian Trail is an attempt to bring together the trail as it is ideologically envisioned and as a lived experience.

The trail hypothesized in the “Manifesto” was to be a dangerous space for me as a young woman. I was to be wary of others as they were portrayed to be the malevolent forces along the trail. Listed in the “Manifesto’s” points are all of the things I should and should not do to remain safe on the trail. I violated those points many times during my hike, yet I returned unscathed by human hands. The arduous physical landscape of the trail exacted a certain degree of misery inside my knee and popping through my foot. Informing my readers of these discomforts, I hope not to establish my own heroism but rather to illustrate that injury is perhaps the danger that deserves the most caution. My goal was to locate and link danger directly to embodied experience, as it is likely to be experienced by the majority of hikers.

The early visions of the trail held by Benton MacKaye have been variously met, missed and exceeded by the trail today. While the trail is not the utopian socialist community he imagined, in many ways I believe he would be pleased to see the trail today. Today’s Appalachian Trail is not reducible to a path through the woods. Though it is a space for recreation, it has a social world all its own. I set out to discover an Appalachian Trail that was missing in ideologically charged representations. When I reached the trailhead and took those first steps onto the path I would call home for the next two months I was not certain what my experience would be as I moved north. Yet I knew that I could not understand the Appalachian Trail without moving over it.
If I were to have attempted my research by staying at one or two shelters, or in a trail town I would have missed the bigger picture of the Appalachian Trail experience. I would have missed the power of the trail itself. The landscape at times reminded me of myself, opposed my travel, inspired me forward and instigated dreams of home. The trail is at once a path you walk on and a path you walk with. Engrained in the landscape itself is the community as evidenced by messages left to the trail for delivery, trail magic, and the foot worn path.

I found a trail filled with hikers who were willing and eager to share their space and their knowledge. The trail I encountered was not isolated and it was not so far removed from the world around it. Counter to ideologies of isolation, I learned that a hiker is not in fact alone, isolated in miles of wilderness, instead she is surrounded by people, who are always about to become a part of your Appalachian Trail. Every evening hikers can be found at shelters. These three-sided figures are hubs of the community. It is there that hikers can share their day’s tales, read up on those ahead, check for news, discuss gear, and rest their feet. Every so often the trial will lead a hiker into a trail town. In towns as at shelters there is the sharing of the experiences of the trail, and a gathering of interactions that solidify the community. Sharing personal experiences with the trail is one way the community is built. There is also the sharing of knowledge, of goods, of food, and of water among hikers.

Many of the interactions I experienced this past summer were contingent upon my being recognized as a hiker who was following the Appalachian Trail for the summer. Without taking the trail to task I would not have been able to really understand the generous nature of trail angels or appreciate the magic of water left at a road crossing. The kindness of trail angels is astounding; their willingness to help a stranger to offer assistance without expecting a reward is a rarity off the trail.

Following the trail, I found a place that is, to some extent, a paradox. It is a footpath set to white blazes, it covers the same ground day in and day out. Yet I never crossed the same path twice. Each day was a forward motion, so that my location was always changing. I became recognizable as a member of a community. There were hikers that I came to know well during my hike, but many more
passed me by with barely a hello and still, many more I never met. The world of the trail is in constant motion. Moving over mountains, sharing the joy and the burden of that movement is critical in unifying the hiking community. On the trail we become familiar with faces, personalities, and names. We come to know those hiking at our pace as we become familiar with the trail. The experience of the trail is inseparable from the people encountered on and around it.

The Appalachian Trail is not a point in the forest, it is not one trail town, and it cannot be regulated to any one set of coordinates. I have brought the trail out here not as a clearly delineated path of dates and miles, but rather as a series of places, people and events that shaped my experience. It is my hope that in situating this presentation in my own voice, I am able to give a more accurate description of life on the trail. As the story of the trail is being told from my point of view I want to remind readers that this account is not the end all and be all of Appalachian Trail experiences. Just as the rain makes otherwise beautiful rocks foreboding many elements combined to create my Appalachian Trail distinctive. My previous experiences with hiking and with the Appalachian Trail informed my hike and my motivations for research. These prior experiences altered my approach and my perceptions. Though I wish for my readers to recognize my biases and the other possible trails, my greatest hope is that by sharing various aspects of my trail experience, my thesis will allow readers to acknowledge multiplicities of possibility for women to have their own relationships with the Appalachian Trail. The trail may not always be experienced in the way I experienced it but the experiences I had highlight a trail not of danger but of possibility.

The trail itself has a physical landscape that can uplift or trod asunder body and spirit. There is a cultural landscape of diverse community. Together the physical and interpersonal aspects of the trail combine to create the path that we experience. The way that we perceive the landscapes we pass through and create, is the most essential part of the experience of the trail. The Appalachian Trail lives in the stories and journals written by hikers, but it cannot be known from a distance. To know the trail is to let it become a part of you. This is the story of doing, of practicing the hike along the
Appalachian Trail--presented to you here as the counter to ideologies of fear and gendered impossibility. I hope that in my telling of life on the trail, you might see the various ways that the experience of the trail fleshes out the literature and begs for the story of a lived Appalachian Trail. It is imperative that we situate our knowledge, that we put it in place, that we might better evaluate the way that ideology is embodied and cast off in practice.
CODA

Written in these pages is a truncated version of my experiences along the Appalachian Trail in the summer of 2008. I struggled, trying for the words and the ways that would translate embodied practice, and experience. I reached into the page trying to find a way to hand over my experience, to make tangible something which even I can no longer reach. It is my hope that a piece of my experience can seep through these pages to bring to life the shadows of the Appalachian Trail. Trying to give voice to the daily experience of life on the trail has become my Appalachian Trial. There is neither time nor room to give proper attention to all the people, places and events that shaped my hike, rather than do the disservice of mentioning them in passing I have withheld them entirely. My original endeavor of researching the trail, and of researching experience has been drawn into conclusion for these pages. Yet neither or those goals are truly met. I found myself foot to rock on a trail that cannot be so easily surmised. I grow ever more curious how best to give meaning to my words and life to the trail.

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VITA

Jessica Susan Matthews is a native of Carthage, North Carolina. She completed her undergraduate education at Appalachian State University, receiving a Bachelors of Arts with a double major in anthropology and interdisciplinary studies with a concentration in women’s studies. She moved to Louisiana to work in the recovery effort after hurricanes Katrina and Rita. While working she began to attend Louisiana State University where she would pursue a master’s in anthropology and would later change focus to geography. She has spent much of her life in the outdoors, hiking, camping, fishing, backpacking, white water rafting and horse back riding. These interests have led her to a curiosity about the relationships between women and the outdoors.