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# THRU-HIKING AND WHY PEOPLE DO IT

by

HAYES CROWLEY

Under the Direction of Elizabeth Sanders Lopez, PhD

## ABSTRACT

Thru-hiking is a modern leisure activity that attracts people during transitional states in their lives or is an activity people engage in to force such a transition. This drive for self-change is what motivates people to attempt thru-hikes, a drive which is in turn fed by Romantic discourses of rugged individualism, *communitas*, and the transcendental, transformative powers of nature. The social, economic, and physical risks involved with thru-hiking make it especially attractive in a society that values idiosyncrasy. This thesis draws from ethnographic research conducted over the Summer of 2017 on the Pacific Crest Trail, and from secondary research concerning backpacker narratives, identity performance, liminality, wilderness and society, and Romantic discourses. Based on this study's findings, further research in the fields of Rhetoric and Composition and Communication Studies could be conducted on thru-hiker identity, community, ideology, and how these are presented on social media and blogging platforms.

INDEX WORDS: Thru-hiking, The Pacific Crest Trail, Identity, Narrative, Ethnography, Romanticism, Individualism, Transcendentalism, Wilderness, Risk, Adventure, Performance, Rhetoric, Ideology

THRU-HIKING AND WHY PEOPLE DO IT

by

HAYES CROWLEY

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2018

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2018

THRU-HIKING AND WHY PEOPLE DO IT

by

HAYES CROWLEY

Committee Chair: Elizabeth S. Lopez

Committee: Elizabeth S. Lopez

George Pullman

Ashley J. Holmes

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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**DEDICATION**

To all those Americans, living and dead, who have had the wisdom and vision to designate public lands for democratic use; and to all those who work to protect, promote, and maintain these public lands and the foot-paths through them. You have my sincerest gratitude.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Dr. Lopez, for helping me make this project a reality and assisting me every step of the way; to Dr. Pullman, for engaging my curiosity and love for philosophy; to Dr. Holmes, for encouraging my creativity and giving excellent feedback; and to Dr. Kocela and the Rhetoric/Composition department at GSU for putting up with my colicky requests for course credits, alerting me and helping me apply for professional opportunities, and in setting me up for a brighter future.

And to Team Farts-Per-Million: Thanks for having my back in the Sierra. We'll meet again soon.

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## INTRODUCTION

*I am losing precious days. I am degenerating into a machine for making money. I am learning nothing in this trivial world of men. I must break away and get out into the mountains to learn the news.*

— John Muir qtd. in Young, 1915

Each year, thousands of people take to the Pacific Crest Trail, the Appalachian Trail, and, for a few hardy folk, the Continental Divide Trail, for months at a time in an attempt to hike their entirety within a single hiker season. These three trails, known as the “Triple Crown,” are about 2,650 miles, 2,200 miles, and 3,100 miles long respectively. The definition of a thru-hike is bickered over (is skipping a 20-mile section of trail due to wild fires still considered a thru-hike? Does taking an alternate route ruin a thru-hike? Is a continuous footpath, even if you’re walking along a highway, still considered a thru-hike?) as is the definition of a ‘thru-hiker.’ Both the Pacific Crest Trail association and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, however, define a thru-hike as a hike over the entirety of a trail over the course of a single year—a thru-hiker as someone who is attempting to do this, or already has.

Looking at the numbers for how many thru-hiking attempts have been made in the past few decades shows a radical increase in attempts. The Pacific Crest Trail has had a significant uptick in thru-hike attempts in recent years (a 200% increase from 2013 to 2016), and is rapidly becoming as popular as the Appalachian Trail, which has seen twice as many successful thru-hikes in the past seven years as it did in the 1990s (<http://www.appalachiantrail.org>). Only two people reported successfully hiking the 3,100 mile Continental Divide Trail in 2009—in 2016, 40 people reported a thru-hike (<http://continentaldividetrail.org>). The recent releases of blockbusters such as *Wild* (2015) and *A Walk in the Woods* (2016) may be partially to blame for

the sudden rise of thru-hikers in the past few years, as well as a growing interest in backpacking, better information about long trails, and advances in technology. Whatever the cause, it is apparent that this fringe activity's popularity has soared in recent years.

On a section hike of the Appalachian Trail in 2010, I took some time off trail and tagged along to a Rainbow Gathering in Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest. Upon arriving, I was introduced as someone who had walked all the way to where I was currently standing from Georgia, which wasn't true, but my host wouldn't stop saying it. Not a few people would then look at me wide-eyed and ask me, "why?" One guy, who I suspect didn't have the same sentiments for exercise or wilderness, bluntly asked: "What is wrong with him?"

Whenever I bring up thru-hiking, most people say that they wish that they could do it someday, or that they wish they had done it when they still could, etc. Sometimes people ask me why I like to go on long hikes, and I usually just bring up the common appeals of adventure, self-improvement, and getting-away-from-it-all. It wasn't that the question the guy at the Rainbow Gathering asked was unusual—what caught me off guard was the way he asked it. He really believed I was unwell for walking so far, and it was apparent that the common appeals to adventure would not work on him. I had no ready answer and he must have concluded that I was unhinged, and I wondered if this was true: Why would I leave behind my comfortable existence, my ability to acquire and hold jobs and property, my privileged access to education, central heating and cooling, etc., to go on a months-long walk in the woods? This question never really left me but neither has my love for backpacking. I often wonder if thru-hiking is crazy, if I'm crazy for loving it, or whether everyone else is crazy, and thru-hikers are the only sane ones.

This summer, I asked thru-hikers these questions and many others on a 1,400-mile trek along the Pacific Crest Trail. Concerned that thru-hiking may not actually be wholesome,

worthwhile activity I was sure it was, one that engendered positive self-change that restores health and faith in humanity alike, I asked thru-hikers questions about their perceptions of their own self-change, the thru-hiker community, and whether thru-hiking is crazy, as well as why they think people do it.

This thesis is the culmination of over a year of primary and secondary research, haggling with my University's IRB committee, printing consent forms and interview guides, and dealing with the logistics of conducting ethnographic research on a community of people who walk 25 miles a day through remote areas. I followed the PCT Class of 2017, in the year of 'Fire and Ice', across scorching deserts, miles of slushy snow, through violent streams, and around wildfires as we walked through the most beautiful country I've ever seen. The winter of 2016-17 produced the most snowfall on record in the Sierra Nevada—the record snowpack meant record snow-melt in the spring and summer, and the swollen, violent streams made passage through the Sierra dangerous. Two thru-hikers lost their lives in such streams this year, and the news of their deaths was an emotional blow to the community and a wake-up call for those who went through the Sierra alone. Many hikers decided to skip the Sierra as news of various disasters, much of which was exaggerated through repetition, began to come out. Finding myself with a group and in a bubble of hikers who'd chosen to go through, my research began to evolve and revolve around questions about why some people seem to actively pursue risky adventures.

Each long hike I've been on had its moments of self-discovery, and so the subjects studied in this thesis, the thru-hiking community on the PCT, mirrors my own experience. At the end of this thesis, I come clean with all the biases I may have had as both hiker and researcher. As a participant-observer, however, I had access to the trust of the community and greater insight into their experiences, which yielded rich narratives and observations. These observations of

thru-hiker behavior included informal conversations, as well as my own thoughts and experiences. I've arranged these alongside the narratives, which as presentations-of-self, constitute an act of identity formation (Reissman 19).

### **Key Concepts**

The thru-hiker's journey is as much a mental meandering and exploration of an alternative identity as it is a physical one; a thru-hiker is peripatetic in both the word's nomadic connotation and in an Aristotelian sense (see Cardinal, 2002 and Solnit, 2000 for the metaphor). Thru-hiker narratives are treated here as self-constitutive acts, as a presentation of an ideal self and a further development of the self. The theoretical framework used to analyze the narratives involve several key concepts (refer to Appendix B for a thorough overview of literature):

- Identity Status: A theoretical construct developed by James Marcia that addresses the various stages of ego-identity development;
- *Liminality*: The *liminal* phase in a rite of passage is described by Victor Turner as a disorientating experience in which the neophyte is confronted with utterly unfamiliar social structures, isolation, and sometimes danger. The liminal phase in a rite of passage is typically a humbling, and sometimes humiliating, experience;
- Romanticism and Individualism: The history of long-distance walking as a leisurely, aesthetic exercise was paved by the likes of Wordsworth and other Romantic-era authors and artists. The Romantic traveler equates physical meandering with mental meandering, and exposure to the elements as a spiritually charged experience. The cultural traditions of Individualism, and its appeals to self-reliance, self-discipline, self-etc., may be found in thru-hiker narratives;
- Analyzing Narrative as Identity Performance: This is the social constructionist

view of identity that posits social interaction as a sort of performance, and narration as "impression management." This lens may unveil what identities and discourses are being privileged in the thru-hiker community, as well as thru-hiker's identity status.

## **Research Questions**

The reasons why people thru-hike, and what exigencies long trails such as the PCT may be meeting, is the general question this study hopes to answer. To narrow the focus, and hopefully shine a brighter light and make some contribution to the rather scant literature on the topic, I've decided to focus on three questions: From engaging in participant-observer, ethnographic research and studying thru-hiker narratives,

- What can be discovered about thru-hiker identity and how this identity is constructed in their narratives?
- What can be learned about the nature of the thru-hiker community?
- Can the ideological DNA in thru-hiker narratives be extracted and traced, and which discourse(s) do they pay homage to?

While these three questions may appear to be unrelated, they are all tied up in the thru-hikers' presentation of self, as identity is inextricably linked to expressions about the community to which one belongs and the ideology it espouses. It is with great hope that I may be able to answer these questions not only for myself, but for anyone else who might be confused as to why people engage in this activity and curious as to what they have to say for themselves.

## **Rationale**

The elephant in the room, the question waiting patiently behind the eyes of every reader, must of course be "who cares?"

It terms of identity studies, there is a dearth of research on thru-hiking culture.

Ethnographic research has been conducted on this sub-culture on the Appalachian Trail from several perspectives, including the ecological literacies, knowledge construction, and identity formation of the thru-hiker subculture (Rush, Siudzinski, Fondren), and though many authors (see the above ethnographies, as well as Ptasznik) who've studied the subculture have applied Victor Turner's rite-of-passage theory ("Liminality and Communitas," 1969), no author has as of yet applied identity theories developed by psychologists and social scientists such as James Marcia (1966, 1980) and Erikson (1968, 1980) to thru-hiker narratives in the literature.

Thru-hiker narratives have not yet been analyzed using a performative lens. By analyzing narratives as a performance of an idealized self (Reissman, Shaffer, Goffman, Elsrud, Noy), the thru-hiker's performed identity and the ideology behind it may be teased from their narrative. However, as a favorite professor of mine once told me, just because no one else has ever done it before, doesn't mean that it should be done. Serendipitously, there are other reasons besides the dearth in research and my desire to conduct the study. There is clear evidence that the numbers for thru-hiking attempts are rising, and quickly. Whenever a social phenomenon such as this takes place, it is in the general interest of anyone who reads sociological and psychological studies. The artifacts for study, the thru-hiker narratives, are exceptional in that they contain the voices of the very actors in this phenomenon. Finally, this study works to isolate and trace the ideological DNA of thru-hiker narratives, which would be of interest to anyone curious about the ideological history of this modern trend.

## METHODS

My research process involved three steps. First, for the preliminary stage, I had to write my proposal and, since I was conducting human research, get it approved by my University's Institutional Review Board. Secondly, I conducted a series of interviews and observations while hiking on the Pacific Crest Trail. Finally, I coded these interviews and observations, arranged them by category, and analyzed my results.

The preliminary stage involved lots of reading and writing, during which I arranged a proposal consisting of a purpose statement, a review of literature, and a methodology section. The purpose statement needed to outline the topic in general, pose a research question, and offer a rationale for conducting the study. The topic I chose was the identity narratives of thru-hikers, to which I posed the question, "What can be learned from studying narratives of identity in the thru-hiking community on the PCT?" My personal relationship with long-distance backpacking was the reason I chose this topic.

The rationale I offered was concerned mainly with research gaps in the study of thru-hiking communities (see Rush, Fondren, Ptaszniak, and Siuzdinski for examples of multi-disciplinary research on the topic). After my proposal was approved by members of my academic department, I then had to have it approved by my University's IRB. This approval would not come until nearly a month after beginning my hike, however, I only conducted practice interviews during this time, none of which are presented in the final thesis.

The methodology I developed was ethnographic in nature; I consulted various handbooks on conducting and proposing qualitative research (see Broad, Creswell, Nickerson and Sheridan, Locke et al.), conducting interviews (Henniken, Hawisher and Selfe), ethnographic research (Emerson et al., Fetterman, Jorgensen, Van Mannen), narrative inquiry (Clandinin), and drew



methods used by writers who used ethnographic methods in their research on the thru-hiking community on the Appalachian Trail (Rush, Fondren, Ptasznik, Siuzdinski). For data analysis, validity, and reflexivity, I drew from methods developed by the previously mentioned scholars as well as other writers (such as Davis, Elsrud, Wolcott).

The methodology I developed before carrying out this study was based on qualitative research methods to inductively address questions of thru-hiker identity, community, and ideology. Qualitative research is characterized by data collection from multiple sources in the field, face to face interaction with research participants, an inductive approach to data analysis, the researcher as the primary research tool, an emergent design, reporting from multiple perspectives, and a fidelity to the message that research participants want to express to the world (Creswell 185-6). The study was designed to be conducted in the field through participant-observation with thru-hikers, and the data was to be drawn from multiple sources including interviews, observations, trail logs, and online blogs and forums. The transformation of the data was affected through in-process memos, comments, and asides in the field notes, which were divided into three sections (thin observations, analysis, and interpretation), and through constant comparative analysis inductive interpretations of more global issues were made. I chose this emergent design because it allows for flexibility, which is essential for exploratory research.

This study is distinguished from textual-qualitative research as it uses data "drawn from things people do, say, and write in... the world of lived experience," and its "primary focus are the relationships and interactions among people, not published texts," and so may therefore be called "empirical-qualitative" research (Broad 199). More specifically, this study is an ethnography. Literally 'a portrait of people', an ethnography is "both a research design and a research product," and is used to investigate the lives of individuals, and their customs, beliefs,

and behaviors within the groups they belong (Rush 44). Researchers who employ this design join the communities they intend to investigate as participant observers with the hopes of developing rapport with key individuals in the community who can best answer the researcher's questions. Ethnographers tend to rely on interview and observation as their primary data collection tools, and ethnographies are often written in a narrative format (Rush 44). While ethnographies, in the typical, anthropological sense, are often cumulative records of a study conducted over a long period of time, focused ethnographies "are conducted over shorter periods of time and tend to involve only two or three specific aspects of a culture," (Siudzinski 37). I further developed the ethnographic methods of interview and observation by studying the focused ethnographies conducted on the Appalachian Trail (Rush, Fondren, Siudzinski) and on European backpacking culture (Noy, Elsrud, Shaffer, and Reissman).

The primary method of data collection I used was in-depth interviews, which are a "one-to-one method of data collection that involves an interviewer and an interviewee discussing specific topics in depth...In-depth interviews may be described as a conversation with purpose," (Henniken et al. 109). The "purpose" of these interviews was to gain insight on thru-hiker identity status and the relationship between composition practices and identity development. Further, these interviews focus on gaining said insight from the perspective of the interviewee, as it is the insider's perspective, and not the researcher's, that is the true focus. Interviews are more productive if they are treated more as conversations than formal interviews (Hawisher and Selfe), and so I allow the interviews to wander. Participants were recruited by face-to-face interaction, and as I had developed the rapport that is special among members of the thru-hiker community (much more on this later), most of the interviews I conducted elicited deep, personal narratives that were invaluable to the completion of this study.

Observations and interviews were collected and organized so that they can be easily read and analyzed in a process called data transformation (Wolcott, 1994, and Davies, 1999), which was useful in maintaining distance between thin description, analysis, and interpretation of data. I arranged the data according to theoretical concept, drew inferences, made speculations on what the data might mean and then connected these to a theoretical framework to make interpretations and build theory.

By "bringing evidence to bear from several sources that enriches the evidence," I hoped to guard against potential errors in analysis as well as illuminate various themes in my study (Creswell, 211; Siudzinski, 57). As both a thru-hiker and a researcher, it was sometimes difficult to separate these roles in a way conducive to empirical research. By presenting this study as a narrative, a sort of "confessional tale," I fully disclose my preconceptions, goals, and position within the community (Van Maanen 1988).

"Reflexivity" broadly means "a turning back on one's self," and can be used both during data collection (by fully disclosing intentions and position to the community) and data analysis (by reflecting on how the researcher's position may affect the analysis of the data) stages; in this study, I asked participants twice to interview me using my interview guide, so that I may reflect more deeply on my methods (Rush 67). In regard to interpretation and theory-building, I followed Elsrud's (2001) ethical caution that "no matter how much academic knowledge is extracted from...[interviewees'] testimonies, their experiences are as valid and real to them as the construction is to the researcher," (Elsrud 599). As often as possible, I gave precedence to the narratives, and only used secondary literature to bolster inductive evidence I gathered from the narratives.

The literature I reviewed for the study assisted in data analysis and consisted of several

theoretical lenses. I reviewed identity theorists (Erikson, Marcia, Hinds) to develop a theoretical backdrop that focuses on identity status and ego-identity development in relation to wilderness experiences. I also drew from Victor Turner's theories of "liminality" and "communitas," and reviewed what has been written by the Appalachian Trail researchers I've already mentioned. I reviewed literature on Romanticism and Individualism in American thought (Cardinal, Stob, Solnit) as well as romantic/individualist perceptions about the concept of wilderness (Nash and Miller, Oelschlager). I also reviewed literature on analyzing narrative as a performance of identity (Reissman, Noy, Elsrud, Shaffer, Goffman).

The interview questions I designed in my proposal morphed considerably and developed into their final form (see Appendix A) nearly two months after I began my hike. These questions were listed categorically, and in the final form, I pared them down into three categories: perceptions of self-change, attitudes towards the thru-hiking community, and declarations of why they and other people thru-hike long trails. The questions were colloquially asked, and how they were asked, and in what order, varied with each hiker. The consent form evolved along with the whims of the IRB, who required it to be written in very simple English. After many attempts to adjust the language in my consent form, I finally got it down to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade level, and by arguing (based on statistics found on [halfwayanywhere.com](http://halfwayanywhere.com)) that <2% of thru-hikers never went to high school, and that most had education beyond the high school level, my consent form was finally approved, and my interviews could begin in earnest.

After receiving IRB approval for my study, I hitched into the town of Lone Pine and printed about a dozen consent forms from a considerate hotel manager's office and began recording interviews on my cell phone. All of my interviews were conducted in towns or pack-stations along the Sierra Nevada range, and I held my final interviews in a hostel in South Lake

Tahoe. I initially planned on interviewing hikers on-trail, however, I soon found out that the hikers were typically too concerned with hiking, eating, and sleeping to sit for a thirty-minute interview. Being a hiker myself, this was my feeling as well, and so all my interviews were conducted in towns and at the Kennedy Meadows North pack station. After losing nearly a dozen interviews when my phone and I fell into a stream, I hurriedly printed out more consent forms in Mammoth Lakes, CA, and was able to record interviews with a total of 13 hikers, 14 if counting a “self-interview,” which, in the interest of reflexivity, I asked my hiking partner to administer to me—a process that was inspired by Rush (2000), who did the same in her ethnographic study on the Appalachian Trail.

I took over a hundred observations of thru-hiker behavior, records of informal conversations I had or overheard, and several observations of my own thoughts and behavior, as well. I tried to separate surface-level observations from analyses, though these often bled together into in-process memos, which later proved useful. I often thought about my study as I walked along, and sometimes I would stop and write these thoughts down—this peripatetic composition method produced fuller thoughts about my study, and so the study evolved with each passing mile.

When I returned home, I wondered how to reconcile the study I proposed with the study I conducted. Having been away for over a hundred days, I had mostly forgotten what I had originally set out to do; however, I was grateful to find that many of the key features of my proposal, the methods/methodology, the literature review, and even the all-important research questions (though altered), were reconcilable with what I brought back from it. However, there are several key differences.

While I had originally intended on studying the composition practices of thru-hikers

alongside everything else, I began to abandon this as hikers, one after the other, said they didn't keep journals. I had expanded this topic in my thesis to include blogs, as well, however, after reading the blogs I realized that they were very similar to the narratives I collected, though more polished. Realizing that studying thru-hiker blogs as artifacts would be superfluous, I decided to focus on the narratives, instead.

Second, I decided to abandon the cookie-cutter approach I had developed to analyzing the narratives in terms of Marcia's theory of identity status and refrained from making any declaration of a "generalizable identity status for thru-hikers," as I had originally proposed to do. As I interviewed the hikers, and in my informal conversations with them, it occurred to me that thru-hikers did not, in terms of background and narrative, form a homogenous group, but rather consisted of individuals from diverse walks of life. Along with Sørensen, who interviewed backpackers in Thailand, I believe that "the variation and fractionation make it all but impossible to subsume all the above-mentioned individuals [...] under one uniform category, for it would be so broad as to be devoid of significance," (848). Though there is a common thru-hiker demographic (white, middle- to upper-class, educated) and many of them were in transitional phases of their lives, there is just too much diversity within the sub-culture to make generalizable statements concerning something as narrow as their Marcian identity status. If I were to do this, I would have needed to isolate a specific population within the sub-culture. As such, the heterogeneity of thru-hiker background and demographic, and my failure to isolate a specific kind of thru-hiker, has led me to abandon any aspirations I may have had as a social scientist. This study, while empirical, is not scientific; however, since everyone I interviewed claimed to be thru-hikers, and reacted to that label, I use this label as an umbrella term for this otherwise heterogeneous group. I've also taken some liberty by drawing from studies done on the

Appalachian Trail thru-hiking community, and from a narrative by one hiker who discussed her first thru-hike on the Appalachian Trail, to inform this study. By doing so I am making an implicit claim that the AT and PCT thru-hiking communities are identical. Though there are differences in gear, hiking and camping routines, and levels of experience between hikers on the AT and the PCT, the trip, a long walk through remote areas, is the same and engenders the same kind of community. As such, it's not necessary for the purposes of this study to delineate between thru-hikers on the AT and thru-hikers on the PCT. This study operates under a universal definition of 'thru-hiker' as those who claim to be thru-hikers or who otherwise respond to that label.

Finally, since the incredibly vague final question I asked in my proposal, "what larger issues might the answers to these questions speak to?" foreshadows rambling rants against society, I decided instead to focus on tracing the ideological DNA in thru-hiker narratives to reveal thru-hiking's *raison d'être*. As my study evolved, I began asking thru-hikers questions such as "why did you decide to hike the PCT? Why do people hike the PCT? If there was an entity threatening to remove the PCT, what would be your strongest argument for its existence?" and "Is hiking the PCT crazy?" I received some interesting, impassioned answers that clearly bear the marks of ideologies traceable through history and literature, and in the conclusion to this thesis I produce something of an answer to why thru-hiking exists.

After the rather lengthy and meditative process of transcribing all 14 interviews and 100+ observations, I began to arrange, and re-arrange, my data into categories. I coded these with three tags (cat1, cat2, cat3) that refer to the three questions posed by this study. Questions from each of these categories sometimes yielded responses that belong in another, and so some items are tagged with multiple categories.

Category 1 corresponds with my first question and concerns identity. Narratives coded as cat1 were responses to questions such as, “Why did you decide to hike the PCT? Have you learned anything from the trail? Is there a difference between the person you are now and the person you were before you started hiking? Has the trail changed you in any way?” etc. Observations coded as cat1 typically involved observations of thru-hiker’s attempts to change themselves during their hike (e.g., downloading ‘100 free classics’ on Kindle to read during their hike, quitting smoking, establishing disciplined routines so that they can ‘crush miles’), reflections of what hikers say they’ve learned from the PCT (e.g., demonstrations of patience, humility, discipline, decision-making skills, independence/inter-dependence, etc.), and informal conversations regarding personal transformation.

Cat2 corresponds with the second question of this study and focuses on the thru-hiker community and its social dynamics. Questions from the interviews that fell within this category included: “Is there a thru-hiker community, and if so, how would you describe it? Are social interactions different out here?” and “Do women play a different role in thru-hiking groups than men?” The observations coded as Cat2 typically involved the formation of hiker groups, the presence or absence of hierarchies or social differentiation (e.g., issues of gender, race, and class, as well as hierarchal differentiation between thru-hikers based on notions of authenticity), and of the dynamics of the PCT’s information networks.

Finally, Cat3 corresponds with question three of my thesis and focuses on presentations and interpretations of authenticity and the courtship of risk. Interviews coded as Cat3 were often responses to questions such as, “Why did you decide to do a long hike on the PCT? Why did you decide to go through the Sierra this year? Why do people do this? Is hiking the PCT crazy?” etc. Observations coded as Cat3 revolved around demonstrations of ideology, claims to authenticity,



the active courtship of risk, of interactions between thru-hikers and townsfolk, and of informal conversations about authenticity, risk, adventure, nature, etc.

For each category and data set, I've drawn from secondary literature for interpretation. The literature is nested within their appropriate category in the 'Results' section of this document to maintain narrative flow, however, a comprehensive review of key texts can be found in the literature review (Appendix B).

While conducting the research and writing up this report, I've decided to side with Elsrud's (2001) ethical caution, stipulating that "no matter how much academic knowledge is extracted from...[interviewees'] testimonies, their experiences are as valid and real to them as the construction is to the researcher," (599). The members of the thru-hiking community, and their narratives, should be taken at face value; they mean what they say. My goal here is not to undermine the interviewees' narratives, or to make ethical judgements of their character, but to discover what can be learned about the thru-hiker *ethos* by putting their narratives into conversation with my own observations and relevant literature. Because of this, I've developed my theoretical arguments from the ground up; the narratives and my observations haven't been squeezed to fit any theoretical framework. Rather, the inverse is true; the empirical evidence supports my theoretical argument. As such, the literature review is in the Appendix, and the results are structured so that narratives and observations are presented first, and secondary literature and interpretations, second.

## **RESULTS**

Hiker names have been redacted or changed to protect their identity.

## Category 1: Identity

### Category 1.1: Identity—Who They Are and Why They Hike

Hikers were verbose when I asked them about why they decided to hike the PCT, what they have learned from the PCT, and whether they were different persons on the PCT than they were back in their normal life. Nearly every thru-hiker was between something<sup>1</sup>.

Several hikers cited some sort of dissatisfaction with their life as the impetus for their hike. When asked why she decided to do a long hike on the PCT, Hungry G, in line with Elsrud's work in "Time Creation..." (1998), had said she wanted to take back the time that society (friends, family, work, etc.) had taken from her:

I wanted to get away from where I lived before, get out of everything—get away from cell service reception, get away from my friends, my family, my university... everything. Because I was so stressed out before and had so much to do and so many people wanted to meet me and... I just wanted to get away. (Hungry G, PI, 2017)

Flame, whose thru-hike on the Appalachian Trail was a transformative, significant moment in her life, said that she had come from a

really dark place... I felt very pressured to go to school, do the whole, school/work thing... But when I went and did the AT, it completely opened me up. It put me out of my comfort zone in multiple different ways, socially, mentally, physically, everything... Um, so, being put in that situation and knowing that I put myself there, and knowing I was doing something I wanted to do, it really gave me perspective on where I came from.

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<sup>1</sup> The life situations of thru-hikers on the PCT mirror those that Robert Moor describes in *On Trails*: "Many of the people I talked to [on the Appalachian Trail] were between jobs, between schools, or between marriages. I met soldiers returning from war and people recovering from a death in the family. Certain stock phrases were repeated. "I needed some time to clear my head" they said, or "I knew this might be my last chance," (8).

(Flame, PI, 2017)

Ranger Stabby “wasn’t super happy” about her healthcare job before deciding to hike the PCT, and Big Bird, who was a photojournalist, had “personally hit a wall with realizing my balance with my career and work life and social life and relationships... [was] really out of wack,” and that his rationale for going on a thru-hike was to “get away from that plan-oriented “you gotta do this and this and this,” way of thinking (Ranger Stabby, PI, 2017, and Big Bird, PI, 2017). Both Chill and Benny said that before hiking the PCT they weren’t “doing shit,” and held loathsome jobs in the service industry. It was apparent that, for most, the PCT, as Trail Angel Mary<sup>2</sup> put it, signified “the end of one era and the beginning of another,” (Observation 38). However, many hikers are uncertain of what they will be doing next (Ob. 12); when asked if she had any plans for post-trail life, Hungry G said “nothing, no plans.” Ranger Stabby said she had “loose plans” of moving to “Denver, Orgeon, Washington... you know, those places everyone who likes the outdoors wants to go.” Flame is keeping her options open, while So-Full said he was going to “Juno, Alaska, and play it from there,” (Personal Interviews, 2017).

Thru-hiking has been described as a rite of passage by scholars of the Appalachian Trail thru-hiking community (Fondren, Ptasznik, Rush, Siudzinski), and while ‘backpackers’ are not thru-hikers, there are many similarities between the two when compared to literature on backpackers in Europe and Southeast Asia (see Noy, 2004a and 2004b, Elsrud, 1998 and 2001, and Shaffer). Backpacker narratives of self-change indicate that many backpackers view their journey as transformative/formative, or potentially so (Noy). Backpackers also report motivations for taking time back from society (Elsrud 1998). Both ideas coincide with Victor

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<sup>2</sup> A trail angel is a member of the thru-hiking community who routinely assists hikers by caching water, offering shuttles to and from trailheads, hosting hikers, etc. See Appendix B for a list of trail argot.

Turner's theories about rites of passage, in which people take part in a rite outside of the structure of daily life in society, signaling a transition from one stage in life to another (Turner 1969).

Victor Turner's theory of liminality accounts for the "in-betweenness" of thru-hiker identity. Turner's seminal work "Liminality and Communitas" (1969) greatly expands theories on rites of passage as they were originally set forth by Arnold van Gennep in the early 20th century. Turner draws from years of ethnographic experience and scholarly work in anthropology to develop his theory of *liminality*, a term that denotes the in-between, unfamiliar, and disorienting state that occurs in the middle of many rites of passages in pre-industrial societies (*separation* is the first stage and *reincorporation* the last). Researchers of the AT community often apply Turner's theories to liken thru-hiking as a modern liminal rite of passage: Ptaznsnik uses Turner's theory to support her argument that thru-hiking is a secular pilgrimage in the American Transcendentalist tradition; Suizdinksi also likens a thru-hike to a "shared pilgrimage," (166); and Fondren calls the thru-hike the "liminal stage of a pilgrimage," (15). Places, too, can have aspects of liminality: "Liminal places can be specific thresholds; they can also be more extended areas, like "borderlands" or, arguably, whole countries, placed in important in-between positions between larger civilizations," (Thomassen 16). Liminal places along the AT also serve as ritual milestones, e.g., Neel's Gap is the first contact with civilization (and first opportunity to bail out) after beginning a thru-hike on the AT. The halfway point at Harper's Ferry, and the termini, Springer and Katahdin mountains, are also important milestones and thresholds in the thru-hiking experience. The entire Appalachian Trail could arguably be considered a liminal place, as it plays host to the liminal experience.

The PCT also has its liminal places. Lake Morena, the first chance to bail out, is the Neel's Gap of the PCT (Ob. 1). Tehachapi, the ostensible end of the desert section of the PCT

(according to Guthook<sup>3</sup>), has a small airport that allows hikers to camp for several days. Hikers who reach Kennedy Meadows, which signifies the beginning of the elysian Sierra and the end of the desert, are greeted with cheers and a standing ovation by hikers sitting outside the general store. Because of the record-breaking snowfall, the passage through the Sierra was the topic of incredible hype and unreliable talk that made every trip into and out of the Sierra feel like crisscrossing between the familiar and the portentous. The towns of Lone Pine, Bishop, Vermillion Valley Resort, Mammoth Lakes, and South Lake were resupply nodes along the Sierra that also played host for much fear-mongering and the formation and destruction of hiker groups (Ob. 13). Liminal places, as well as geographic milestones such as Mt. Whitney, were on the lips of every hiker long before they reached them, though every town along the trail is essentially a liminal place as it is a contact between one reality and another. Each visit to town requires the thru-hiker to make the decision to keep hiking as each presents an opportunity for hikers to get off trail, check into a motel, take a long, hot shower and book a flight back home. Every town is a destination and a departure, while the trail itself is the only continuous thing about a thru-hike (Ob. 13). Crossing back and forth across the town-threshold is perhaps the most stressful thing about a thru-hike, and some hikers, like Baxter-Nature, decided to thru-hike the PCT without placing foot in any “planes, trains, or automobiles... not to make it more difficult, but just to avoid the banal trivia of urban encounters to muddle my quest,” (Baxter-Nature).

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<sup>3</sup> “Guthook” is a smart-phone application that nearly every thru-hiker used to navigate the trail. Essentially, it overlays a red line representing the trail, comment-enabled information about the trail (including water sources, good camp sites, places to hitch hike into town and information about the town itself), and the user’s GPS location over topographic maps that can be downloaded from the USGS. It essentially makes thru-hiking fool-proof and has been cited by a particularly venerated Trail Angel as one of the main reasons there has been an explosion of thru-hike attempts in recent years (Ob 44).

The final phase of a liminal rite of passage is re-integration back into the neophyte's society. Most of the hikers I interviewed had never gone on a thru-hike, however, Flame, whose transformation in perspective on the Appalachian Trail was a success, described to me her experience of re-integration:

I had issues when I came back from the AT for a little bit, but it wasn't nearly as bad as it was as it was before. It was as bad as I expected, but it wasn't like... I just wanted to be back on-trail. I didn't go back to my parents' where I started, I lived with my sister, so I didn't go back to that spot, to that place.... I helped my sister with her house, helped her set it up, so I was busy, keeping my mind off things... just keeping busy.

“Keeping busy” involves having a position, a role to play. Once the neophyte has returned from their rite of passage, which, according to Turner, is essentially a trial that prepares the neophyte for a new duty or station in life, successful re-integration is only possible if there is something to integrate with. Because many hikers cited some dissatisfaction with their previous lives as the catalyst for their thru-hike, going back to that previous life would signify failure. Since many thru-hikers break away from their previous lives without setting up something for when they return, they are like someone who have blown out one lamp before lighting another, and often struggle finding direction after their hike. There is no pipeline, no traditional institution, that guides thru-hikers in their re-integration; for these reasons, the phenomenon of “post-trail depression” is well-known in the thru-hiking community and is often spoken about on-trail and online. For example, there is a private Facebook group, with one hundred and twenty thru-hikers registered, which serves as a space for people to converse about their problems with re-integration, problems that others may not appreciate or understand.

The PCT is a liminal experience for many. For people who've thru-hiked before, the PCT

may not be such a radical break from the ordinary, however, it nonetheless signifies the beginning of a “new era.” For every thru-hiker, their hike signifies this transition from one state of being to another and serves as a catalyst for personal transformation. The decision to do a thru-hike stems from some dissatisfaction with life as it was; their career was unfulfilling, their time was no longer their own, they were in a “dark place,” or they wanted to escape internalized social pressures. By stepping out of their lives as they were, thru-hikers have made the decision to live more deliberately. In the field of Tourism Studies, “much backpacker tourism belongs to transitional periods of a lifecycle,” a claim that could “lead to the conclusion that the transitional situation has caused the travel,” however, it may also be true that “travel wishes had made the person quit the job, caused the breakup, or the like,” (Sørensen 852). Viewed in this light, thru-hikes on America’s long trails could be “described as self-imposed transitional periods, and for many, self-imposed rites of passage,” (Sørensen 852).

### **Category 1.2: Identity—What They’ve Learned**

When asked what they have learned from the PCT, or what the PCT has taught them, thru-hikers offered further rationales for why they decided to hike the PCT, and voiced expressions about how the trail has changed them. While responses varied, most praised the self-reliance and perspective learned on-trail, while some others reflected a newfound humility.

Benny had learned “...not to trust what everyone else says. Because everyone’s experience is so different.” She further said that “you choose how far you go. You decide what’s too much or too little. And I think having something [...] that gives you such a profound autonomy over yourself is something that is not available outside of the trail,” (Benny, PI, 2017). This emphasis on self-reliance is echoed, in different iterations of a similar theme, in many of the other hikers’ interviews. Ranger Stabby claimed that along with “patience,” she’s learned

a delayed sense of gratification out here, like you want something so bad but it's such, such a slow process to get there...it's six, seven days to get there, you have to work so hard every day and every day's a struggle and you finally get there and you're there... [for such a short amount of time], and you leave and do it all over again... (Ranger Stabby, PI, 2017).

Another hiker told me about her own lesson of self-reliance. Flame, who was nursing an infection in her toe at Kennedy Meadows North, and had been there for several days, replied enthusiastically that she was learning

patience. I'm learning patience right now...I'm trying so hard to be patient. Umm, and... Decision-making. Like, out here I'm learning how to decide whether I'm going to cross this river right now or wait until the morning, is it too dangerous now, you know. Um, and acceptance. I'm learning acceptance. Just accepting what's happening as it comes... Like, you have to make a decision but you also have to accept that you made that. To me, that's what I've learned. (Flame, PI, 2017).

Hungry G also replied that the trail has made her "more patient," and Trail Name learned self-discipline and "confidence," and that he now "has the confidence that I can do things in regular life," (Hungry G, PI, 2017, and Trail Name, PI, 2017). So-Full learned "a new respect for the physical part of things, of my own body and sustenance...you got to take care of your body and your mind," and WD-40 learned that he must "take care of my feet," which he said before a significant pause to allow the figurative implications of this to sink in (So-Full, PI, 2017 and WD-40, PI, 2017). Emotional baggage, and how to handle it, was the subject of one of River Wind's many digressions:

The trail is all about baggage. Like, how much baggage can you carry. And the trail will



teach you how to get rid of that baggage. And you have no choice! If you want to stay on-trail you got to get rid of it. And so you start leaving fucking shit on the trail. You find out you have to carry only what you need in life, and you realize what is baggage and what is not. Metaphorically speaking, emotionally speaking, and also physically what you're carrying. If you're carrying 20-30 pounds at the beginning of the day, it's going to weigh 120 lbs. at the end. So, and then, along the trail you think about your life, you think about the past, you think about the future, and you think about what's real. And then you think about what's right now, what you really need, and what you really don't need. That's what the trail teaches you is: purity in life. (River Wind, PI, 2017)

Self-care, delayed gratification, confidence, and patience are all iterations of self-reliance, the performance of which is one of the most observable behaviors on the PCT. The mantra, "Hike Your Own Hike," often abbreviated as HYOH, is thrown around as justification for just about any behavior, and as the herd progressed out of the more social desert section, broke apart at the foot of the Sierra and dispersed themselves all over Northern California, more and more hikers began hiking alone (Ob. 110). Self-reliance became more necessary as the hike went on.

Patience, which arguably lies somewhere between self-reliance and perspective, was epitomized by hikers waiting around for their injuries to heal. Being patient with your own body and its limitations is perhaps one of the most difficult things about a thru-hike (Ob. 28). There was Flame, who sat around at Kennedy Meadows North for four days and would likely sit there another four; Splinter, who sat under the bridge at Scissors Crossing for three days nursing her feet; Wurm, who stayed in the very small town of Mt. Laguna for three weeks with an injured ankle, and T-Bone, who sat at Lake Morena for two days icing shin splints. Hitch-hiking, while not a demonstration of self-reliance at all, is however the most common test of patience, as it

sometimes happens that, as hikers wait by the side of the road with growling stomachs, no one may pick them up for hours.

Perspective was cited as another lesson thru-hikers learned. Cedar, as we spoke outside a community center in Sierra City, told me that the trail “teaches people that to struggle is normal; to quote *The Princess Bride*, ‘Life is pain, your highness.’ Life is mostly hard stuff, and then you get good things that make it all worth it,” (Cedar, PI, 2017). Perspective via struggle is perhaps what allows JC-2 to say that he learned how to “be OK with any situation,” or Hungry G to appreciate “simple things” like “water, food, silence,” or Ranger Stabby to appreciate “little things... like, today, we went a couple hours without any water and we couldn’t find it anywhere, and when we found it was the best.” JC-1’s newfound perspective was “that it doesn’t matter where you find happiness, like, you could be in the desert and there’s nothing there, but you’re happier there than you were a month ago when you were with your family, you know what I mean?” (JC-1, PI, 2017). Thru-hikers ubiquitously displayed zest and sometimes obsession over “little things” such as hot water, shelter, fresh food and air conditioning, and a lot of talk on-trail revolves around food, showers, beds, etc.

Perspective is not just acquired through physical and mental struggle but through long periods of uninterrupted thought and contemplation. So-Full said that “you got a lot of time to see what your mind does...how your mind works...you kind of learn what your desires are and what you really think about, and you kind of see what your demons are, and what you think about too much,” and that on-trail he’s “having bigger conversations with myself,” (So-Full, PI, 2017). River Wind’s “baggage” metaphor corroborates this claim that the trail allows ample time for peripatetic self-examination. WD-40 agrees:

The big factor on the trail is just the sheer amount of time you have... In your daily life,

even if you're an introspective person and you have time to sit down and think about shit you don't ever really go through it point by point... when you're walking for 12 hours a day. I mean, I've taken it frame by frame for every little thing in my life. So, I think, I have the opportunity to be much more deliberate about how I think about myself and what I really do. (WD-40, PI, 2017)

Roger Cardinal wrote that for the Romantic traveler, “physical meandering is the accompaniment of mental meandering,” (139). Robert Moor regards thru-hiking as an “earthy, stripped down, American form of walking meditation. The chief virtue of the [long-distance] trail's confining structure is that it frees the mind up for more contemplative pursuits [...] Some days, after many miles, I would slip into a state of near-perfect mental clarity,” (15; 16). In “Exploring the Psychological Rewards of a Wilderness Experience,” Hinds interviews women on a backpacking trip in the Scottish Highlands; several spoke about the “clarity of thought” they experienced during their hikes, saying such things as “you get a much clearer view of things,” and “you've got a lot of time to think about things [...] and you haven't the hustle and bustle of busyness which can affect how you think,” (Hinds 195). Solnit describes in her *Wanderlust* the peripatetic habits of such thinkers as Rousseau, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Emerson and Thoreau, whose cognitive processes required physical ambulation for several hours each day. Thoreau wrote in “On Walking” that “I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits unless I spend four hours a day at least — and it is commonly more than that — sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields absolutely free from all worldly engagements,” (Thoreau 631).

D-40's statement that the trail provides an opportunity “to be much more deliberate about how I think about myself and what I really do,” indicates that much of his contemplation is concerned with who he is and who he wants to become. JC-1 wonders whether the “whole

tradition of trail names<sup>4</sup>... [is] supposed to help you with that transition into, 'I could be whoever what I want to be, no-one knows me here, they don't know where I come from,' is this a way for a person to transition to be who they've always wanted to be?" (JC-1, PI, 2017). This trying on of an aspirational identity must be one of the motivations for hiking a long trail. When Benny said that she learned "perspective" of her own "autonomy," she meant that she learned that she could make decisions, think for herself, and be whoever she wanted to be by acting however she wanted to act. One of Hind's backpackers also felt more "authentic" in the backcountry: "Without prescriptive forces impinging upon her, she felt free enough to express herself genuinely and be 'completely relaxed' and 'be exactly who I am.' Social pressure to behave in particular ways were realized as inauthentic," (196).

Many of the things thru-hikers said that they learned were about themselves; they learned how to be self-reliant and found that they could be self-reliant; they learned perspective in life and of themselves and found that they could live more deliberately. However, they also learned humility, and discovered that though they could become more self-reliant and broaden their perspective on their thru-hike, they learned, too, about being humbled. Following Turner's framework, liminal experiences such as the PCT often require participants to "meditate on... [their] unworthiness," and involve a "profound immersion in humility," (1969; 365). Liminality is associated with wilderness, death, and being in the womb by the societies Turner studied, and some rites of passage require a prolonged period of seclusion. Liminal subjects must "obey their instructors implicitly, [and] accept arbitrary punishments without complaint," (Turner 359).

The trail itself, and the nature of thru-hiking, did most of the humbling. When I asked JC-2 what he learned from the PCT, he replied:

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<sup>4</sup> Pseudonyms thru-hikers adopt, or are given, that typically mirror some unique characteristic, something they did, or, somewhat lamely, some article of clothing or gear that stands out.

I learned I have a lot of weakness, you know what I mean? Sometimes, I don't know, it's funny, I feel strong, but the next day after you feel so weak, everything goes so wrong... I don't know, I feel like the trail told me, "you're not that good, you're an OK guy, but you've got a lot to learn, a lot to know, you don't know enough, you're not strong enough..." that's what I feel... and it's not unconfidence, I have confidence in myself, I know myself, but, it's just like, you have a lot to learn. (JC-2, PI, 2017)

Thru-hiking involves a lot of trial and error, a lot of mistakes. Big Bird said that he's learned more about his "mental and physical boundaries" on the PCT, and that he knows when "to stop," speaking in reference not only to hiking, but to the Sisyphean pursuit of his career that he had left behind (Big Bird, PI, 2017). To learn physical and mental limitations can be humbling as well as humiliating.

As we were in a tough situation, hikers in my Sierra group, myself included, would sometimes crack. When a hiker in our group fell and hurt his ankle, several of us were far ahead; one hiker rushed to catch up to us, and in frustration threw his ice axe in our general direction called us a "bunch of fucking elitists," (Ob. 81). Another hiker in our group, upset because we were pushing him to get going so early each morning, wordlessly hurled his bear canister ten yards away; the day before, he had argued against going over a snow bridge and held us up for hours (Ob. 83). I lost my cool on top of Mather Pass as the previous evening's frustrations compounded with the dangerous, frightening climb up the pass, in which one member of our group, who did not follow the rest of us, got disoriented and nearly fell down the rocky, icy slope. I vented my anger to a group member and silently lagged behind for the rest of the day (Ob. 83).

Many thru-hikers claim that the trail, as JC-1 put it, "restores faith in humanity... you

meet so many acts of random kindness, and you're like, there are so many acts of kindness coming my way just when I need it, you know?" (JC-1, PI, 2017). Hungry G, who had only been camping once before striking out on the PCT, said that "so many times, other people saved my ass. I didn't know people could be so nice before I got on this trail," (Hungry G, PI, 2017). Being alone for long amounts of time caused many hikers to value social interactions more than they normally would. WD-4, who is "someone who spends a lot of time alone, just normally" said that "being on the trail and being *starkly alone*, I mean not even by choice like being alone in a city or something," taught him to appreciate other people's company and conversation (WD-40, PI, 2017).

Thru-hikers throughout the course of their journey learn to be more self-reliant and develop an appreciative and humble perspective. These lessons come from humbling experiences on-trail that serve as touchstones in their narratives about who they are, why they hike, and what they've learned on-trail so far. Because they've gone on-trail to kickstart some personal transformation and try on an aspirational identity, this identity must be self-reliant, appreciative and humble, as the experiences thru-hikers narrate are often about trials that demanded the performance of these attributes. After hikers told me about their experiences on-trail, I then asked them to reflect on any self-change these experiences may have generated.

### **Category 1.3: Identity—How They've Changed**

When asked if there was any difference between their selves on-trail and off trail, some hikers replied that they couldn't be sure, since they were still in the trail environment, and others, such as Chill and JC-1, claimed that they were the same person as before. However, several hikers replied that they have changed since beginning the trail.

A couple hikers were certain about the transformative power of a thru-hike. For example,

Benny said “I can’t imagine the people that would say that it [thru-hiking the PCT] wasn’t... transformative in a way,” (Benny, PI, 2017). Flame, who had hiked the Appalachian Trail before doing the PCT, claimed that thru-hiking “re-wires the way you think,”—when I asked her how so, she replied that “I think more clearly. I feel like I’m more clear, more aware of what I’m feeling.” Flame further claimed that thru-hiking had completely “opened” her up, and that before she was “a completely different person,” (Flame, PI, 2017).

Big Bird was more specific: When I asked him if there was any difference between Big Bird and the self he left back at home, he replied that before the trip he was full of anxiety, stress, I was kind of impatient, and selfish, I think, back in my real life... Out here, Big Bird is a little more relaxed, a little more in the flow... I feel like I’m myself, like, my thought process or the things I would dwell on are different... you feel more often than not like yourself out here, you are very real out here. (Big Bird, PI, 2017)

Ranger Stabby said something similar: “I’d say Ranger Stabby is like a truer version of [redacted name], I feel like, a lot more comfortable being out here, like sometimes I feel social anxiety back home but I don’t really feel that out here,” (Ranger Stabby, PI, 2017). So-Full also felt that he was more authentic on-trail: “I think I’m more myself on-trail. I think many other people might feel like that...I feel... not afraid to act on what I feel is right or express myself... I guess I just feel more comfortable, a lot of times it’s just like, ‘ah, shit’ in regular life, but out here I just feel well, you know,” (So-Full, PI, 2017). River Wind, in his metaphor about losing “baggage,” was implying that he was discarding his worries about the past and the future, and later claimed that “the present is the only thing that’s real; everything else is in your mind,” (River Wind, PI, 2017).

Perhaps the most compelling observation about identity performance on the Pacific Crest

Trail was made by JC-1, who asked whether trail names were “a way for a person to transition to be who they’ve always wanted to be?” (JC-1, PI, 2017). Robert Moor in *On-trails* wrote that, during his own AT thru-hike, some thru-hikers adopted trail names “in an attempt to shape new, aspirational identities for themselves. A tense silver-haired woman renamed herself Serenity, while a timid young man call himself Joe Kickass; sure enough, over time, she seemed to grow incrementally calmer, and he more audacious,” (Moor 13). Contrary to Moor and JC-1’s observations, most trail names are given, and not voluntarily chosen (though they must be accepted). Nonsensical, playful trail names such as Ranger Stabby, Big Bird, Hungry G, WD-40, etc., are more common than names such as “Serenity” or “Joe Kickass,” as thru-hikers typically accept whatever name gets thrown at them. Which is why there was such a variety of nonsensical names on the PCT; people were looking for a change, a new ID, and so when names were not forthcoming, any name would do. Many seemed jealous of others who had trail names, and so once a new name was finally proposed, it was graciously accepted. The rite of “naming” is “significant, because trail names are about ‘breaking down barriers and becoming a community and a family... transition. Transformation of the self,’ and taking on a new identity is simply part of the transformative process for many long-distance hikers,” (Thru-hiker qtd. in Fondren 74). Calling someone by their trail name further reinforces this alternate identity (Fondren 74).

People thru-hike because they want to kickstart a new life—thru-hikers are seeking an aspirational self. By narrating their personal story, thru-hikers further construct their identity, their utterances serving as iterations of its presence. In their narratives, thru-hikers claim to have learned the things that their aspirational self would know and acknowledge that their thru-hike was what taught them these things. By doing so, thru-hikers are actively building (or re-building) their identity with each word, narrating a personal journey that is itself a continuation of that



journey.

## **Category 2: Community**

### **Category 2.1: Community—Thru-hiker Community as *Communitas*?**

Victor Turner's rite of passage theory characterizes the community of neophytes using a Latin noun, *communitas*, which denotes an unstructured, egalitarian community in which common social hierarchies are suspended so that the community may share a common experience, such as a collective rite of passage. *Communitas* is both a community and an experience of community; its characteristics include an egalitarianism, strong camaraderie, and a disregard for personal appearance (370). Turner was interested in the ways societies organized themselves and wrote that, in rites of passage, Neophytes develop "intense comradeship and egalitarianism," wherein "secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenized," (359). Because liminal situations are eagerly anticipated and sometimes feared, *communitas* develops out of necessity. While Turner's work focuses on pre-industrial societies, he writes that "it becomes clear that the collective dimensions, *communitas* and structure, are to be found at all stages and levels of culture and society," (370). The deconstruction of social hierarchies prevalent in any given society makes *communitas* a humbling experience, one that shifts social perspectives in a way Turner thought beneficial to the society (372). The experience of liminality and *communitas* has the power to shape thoughts and redirect a person's perception of their relationship with society and nature (Turner 373). When I asked thru-hikers on the PCT if there was a hiker community, and if they could describe it, most claimed that it was egalitarian, and described traits markedly similar to the characteristics of *communitas* as described by Turner. In my own observations, I noticed that behind this veneer of egalitarianism, patriarchal dynamics were replicated by certain members of the community, and that certain hierarchies specific to the

PCT began to develop as the weeks went on.

Many hikers cited that the “camaraderie” of the PCT was one of the best things about their experience, and several said that it was one of the reasons they decided to hike in the first place. Big Bird, whose “friendships and relationships [...] were changing” before he decided to hike the PCT, had said that his favorite day on the PCT was when he volunteered to help a hiker who’d fallen and injured himself in the Sierra to bail out over Bishop pass. The other hikers in his group waited on him to return, which he said was “such a solid experience, like, I had friends who waited for me an entire day while I got [redacted] out who was also such a close friend, and it was good to say goodbye to him and have some closure, and make sure he got out safe and sound,” (Big Bird, PI, 2017). Ranger Stabby said that her “second [most favorite thing about the PCT] thing would be have to be the people, I’ve seen a lot of great people and people I feel like I’ve known forever,” and that she’d grown even more excited about the PCT after she’d “read stuff online, blogs online with pictures of people sitting on porches drinking beer like this,” (Ranger Stabby, PI, 2017). Speaking of her decision to hike the AT a few years before, Flame said that she’d “wanted to experience the camaraderie” of thru-trails (Flame, PI, 2017). When I asked River Wind why he was hiking the PCT, he said, among many other things, that he had “no family. I’m all alone. I’m looking for new family... you guys,” (River Wind, PI, 2017).

The hiker community, according to most, is friendly and egalitarian, wherein social interaction tends to be more authentic than in the “real world.” Big Bird said that the community is

really open, it is a community, it welcomes you, if you want... One of the more unique things is that everyone has a different background, and I think one of the craziest things is that difference between age and career, but what’s great is that that stuff doesn’t really

matter, it doesn't matter at all, it's just added information like you connect with them on a real level. (Big Bird, PI, 2017)

The same emphasis on the authenticity of interpersonal relationships was echoed by Trail Name, who said that he felt “like people are less guarded out here,” and So-Full, who said that “most people are a lot more open and happy to see each other,” and that “it's a real open community,” (Trail Name, PI, 2017 and So-Full, PI, 2017). While interviewing him in a hostel with a mixed crowd, JC-1 said that “there's a lot of people in this room right now, there's a lot of small talk, meaningless conversation,” but that in the thru-hiking community “you make friends here, you make actual connections,” (JC-1, PI, 2017). Ranger Stabby echoed these sentiments when she said that “I think a lot of people are their truer versions of themselves out here, there's a lot of kindness out here, you just feel comfortable with each other out here, people are helping each other out [...] we have this mutual respect,” (Ranger Stabby, PI, 2017).

The PCT brings together people from all walks of life and unites them in a common goal. The prevailing sentiment was that thru-hikers comprise one big, happy family, and that there is evidence, if you look for it, of an egalitarian society on the PCT. Unconditional friendships between young and old, male and female, and members of different cultures and ethnicities formed on the PCT that may not have under other circumstances. However egalitarian the community seems, there is also evidence, if one looks for it, of subtle hierarchies.

#### Category 2.2: Community—Gender, race, and class hierarchies

Somewhere in the desert I stumbled across “Walden,” a water cache near a road with a picnic table, a cooler with some fresh fruit, and a little free library full of “books you don't need in a place you can't find.” There were cardboard, life-sized cutouts of Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, with quotes from *Walden* (“I went to the woods to live deliberately...”) and

*Leaves of Grass* (“I bequeath myself to the dirt...”). “Walden” was the project of Trail Angel Mary, a philosophy Ph.D and former University professor, who I met as she filled up the cache one morning. We discussed thru-hiker communitas, how thru-hikers form groups, who is included and excluded, etc. She said one of the benefits of maintaining a water cache over the years was being able to observe thru-hikers from the outside, like a “moving panorama,” and glean insights that perhaps I, immersed in that environment, couldn’t (Ob. 37, 38). She told me that she noticed that non-white hikers were nearly always alone<sup>5</sup>, and that groups of male thru-hikers tended to coalesce around a single female, following her around in a way that was (perhaps unintentionally) creepy. This conversation prompted me to begin asking thru-hikers about gender roles on-trail, an uncomfortable topic that nonetheless drew interesting responses.

Some hikers denied any difference in social interaction based on gender; Big Bird, Flame, and Ranger Stabby all replied in the negative when I asked them whether there was any difference in roles, though Stabby said that males always led the group when they crossed streams, but that was only due to their greater size and strength. JC-1 and So-Full said that it was good to have women around because they thought differently about things and were good for “energy.” Benny, before responding to my question of whether or not gender roles are performed on-trail, began with the caveat that “the trail does not see that, meaning the trail does not see that you have... boobs. [...] The trail doesn’t gender you. The trail doesn’t say, “you can’t do this because you’re a woman,” the trail just says... “Do whatever you want I don’t give a shit I’m a trail,” (Benny, PI, 2017). But as for the people on the trail,

socially I think women play the role of trying to make everything work, trying to pick up

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<sup>5</sup> Trail Angel Mary’s observations of a homogenously white herd of hikers with one or two lone non-whites is accurate, but racial tensions were never overt; one thru-hiker commented that he felt that he was treated as a “thru-hiker first, and a black man second,” by the other thru-hikers (Ob. 61a).

the dynamics of like... that's something inherently that women do a lot, I think, just like, "oh, I'm going to make things more comfortable, so I can tell that if I take a backseat, if I don't speak up right now, if I just go along with what the group wants," instead of like "I don't want to do this, I don't feel comfortable." I think ultimately they just want to preserve group dynamics.....We're sick of acting like we're not women out here (Cedar: "Yes! Yes!"), like, and it shouldn't be weird that we chose to thru-hike (Cedar: "yeah!"). Like, that's such a huge element of thru-hiking, like, wow you thru-hiked *and* you're a woman... I think male privilege, it's like, you don't think about it. Like, you're not in general as judged for choosing to do something. (Benny, PI, 2017)

Cedar, who was present during the interview, agreed with Benny and said

there's Scout and Frodo [trail angels] ... and Scout was like, "so you think the trail is about you and about nature, but it's not. It's really about people." (Sounds of approval from Benny) The trail doesn't care whether you're a man or a woman, but, you would never see a man on-trail alone, and go... wow, you're doing this alone? You're going solo? But if you see a woman, it's like, *mind explosion!* (Benny: "oh my god...") Like, you're alone out here? Whether or not you're in the Sierra, it doesn't matter... it's just like, this this this, 500 worries you've never had before because you're not a woman.... I don't want it to be amazing that I thru-hiked *and* I'm a woman, I want it to be amazing that I thru-hiked, not that I'm a woman. Like, because, it's fucking hard whatever gender you are! (Cedar, PI, 2017)

If Cedar and Benny's statement that women are more often "judged for choosing" to do a thru-hike (especially a solo thru-hike) and are disproportionately praised or blamed for their decision to thru-hike and their decisions while thru-hiking (for e.g., going alone through the

Sierra), then it could be argued that patriarchal tendencies lurk behind the egalitarianism of the thru-hiking community. In my own observations, I noticed that some male hikers would “make fun” of female hikers for taking a break, taking a safer route across a stream or mountain pass, or engaging in nominally “feminine” behavior for which male hikers, whenever they would do the same, are praised for being intelligent, cautious, etc. (Ob. 56a). Gendering was also taking place in the giving of trail names—along with Fondren, I noticed that

compared to males, female hikers were more likely to have the word “little” as part of their trail names, such as Little One, Little Feet [...] Male hikers, on the other hand, tended to have trail names like Big Pan and Mr. Pink. Other women had trail names that reflected their spirituality or youth, like Graceful, Spirit, and Sweet Sixteen, whereas male names reflected power, strength, or speed, as in Hatchet Jack, Turbo, Hustler, and Chainsaw. (Fondren 111)

I also noticed a few other male hikers engaging in sexist banter, e.g., when one hiker was asked about the attractiveness of females on-trail, he said that there weren’t many “trail babes,” and another said that “everything tastes good on-trail,” effectively comparing women to food (Ob. 56).

This behavior was unusual, however, and most women I talked to, including Flame, Ranger Stabby, and Hungry G, claimed that there was little to no differentiation between gender roles. During a thru-hike on the PCT, which involves both prolonged solitude and social immersion, gender roles and sexuality can become problematic (for e.g., when a male hiker follows a female hiker around) and are often resisted out of necessity. In hostels and campsites, close-quartered “sleeping arrangements [...] often require hikers to resist gendering out of necessity,” (Fondren 119). While sometimes the PCT can seem like a moving party, safety and

group cohesion, especially in the Sierra, were the highest priorities. And while members outside of the thru-hiking community may look at a female thru-hiker with awe or derision, thru-hikers themselves become quickly accustomed to seeing women as dirty as themselves doing as many or more miles than they do: “It doesn’t matter, like you can be a tiny little girl and still do this, you know... it’s more in the will, and in the spirit,” (So Full, PI, 2017). And while there may be a different set of social norms for certain parts of the PCT, and within certain groups, gender differentiation is typically absent. In contrast, some gender-bending goes on, as some heterosexual men painted their fingernails and other hiked in kilts, while nearly all the women stopped shaving.

WD-40, when asked whether gender roles existed on the PCT, corroborated Trail Angel Mary’s observation of multiple males competing for the attention of a single female:

Oh yeah. It’s undeniable. This is going to be kind of controversial. Groups of seven guys and one girl that are entirely arranged around the girl. It’s the entire social structure...the entire orientation is based around the girl... I was around several groups like this in the Sierra, and all the actions, all the movements, the way they set up tents, the way they organized themselves was all oriented towards... I don’t want to say impressing, but almost catering to the one girl in the group, as a general rule. And that’s just a dynamic I’ve seen with the larger groups. Have you ever met Dirty Avocado? She’s one of my favorite hikers, badass solo hiker... but it’s the large group dynamic I find the most interesting, especially when the conditions are tough, the way the entire social group is so conscious all the time of the needs and the proclivities of the female...I think there’s a tendency to avoid certain aspects of that particular dynamic, it’s just an awkward topic, socially, you know. You want to try and claim everything’s perfectly egalitarian all the

time and it's just, not. (WD-40, PI, 2017)

It is true that most thru-hikers do claim their community is egalitarian, and it is true that it isn't, but it is for different reasons than those typically present in an American city. While there may be some "catering" to the female in large groups as observed by WD-40, and subtle, predatory sexual behavior as seen by Trail Angel Mary, none of the female hikers I interviewed said that gendering was an issue within the thru-hiking community, though the world around it tends to judge women for thru-hiking more severely.

While all of us were dirty and smelled, the PCT was still not a classless society; some of us couldn't go out to restaurants or hotel rooms, even when they were split among four hikers. Some had gear from Walmart while others sported Montbell or "Pattagucci," and a few, like River Wind, clearly had no money at all. When I asked him about the thru-hiking community, he said that "most of them are kind of stand-offish, they really don't want to talk to you because they're going on the trail," however, he was able to survive and keep hiking thanks to various trail angels who've helped him out along the way (River Wind, PI, 2017). While not all-inclusive, the PCT community nonetheless consisted of people from a broad range of socioeconomic background, and each year there are several who rely on hiker boxes and the kindness of strangers to help them on their way.

More pronounced hierarchies do exist, though they are not based on race, class, or gender. What they are based on is athletic prowess, accumulated stories of risk and adventure, and the purity of a person's thru-hike. Upon greeting one another, hikers often ask, "where did you camp last night," or "where are you going tonight?" (Ob. 51). This seemingly innocuous greeting is a performance; on stage, the hikers are being friendly, but off stage, they are establishing the stronger hiker. Depending on whether the hiker is one of Fondren's "chest-



thumpers,” thru-hiking “purists” for whom the trail is an athletic race, or one of Fondren’s “dreamers,” for whom the trail is anything but, this interaction may or may not be considered political work (see Fondren, Chapter 5).. Chill, who was far from being a purist, paraphrased something JC-1 had told him earlier that week:

“You got the thru-hiker that’s like this, right? He’s looking straight ahead. And then you got the hiker that’s fucking just... looking. Like, looking around.” And that just, like... Some people in my crew, I’m like, why didn’t you just take a fucking picture of this, you know? And it’s like the people behind me, “don’t take a picture of this just because you see me taking a picture of this, like just fucking look around, man!” (Chill, PI, 2017)

Chill also exposes the binary between notions of authenticity in relation to some hikers decision to skip the dangerous Sierra section and hike it at a later time: “It’s really fucking weird right now with the flippers and skippers coming down you know, like, [I] still haven’t had one conversation with a person coming down southbound that I don’t know you know? And there’s all this weird animosity, like, they feel bad about it but I’m like, I don’t fucking care!” (Chill, PI, 2017).

Authenticity is established differently by the purists, who are fond of establishing hierarchy by talking about the long road-walks they did to avoid hitch-hiking around forest fires, and other such unpleasant things they did to maintain a consecutive footpath from Mexico to Canada. Risk is also fondly talked of by both kinds of hiker, though one is more concerned with narrating how he or she managed the risk, mapped the terra incognita, and surmounted some impossible difficulty while the other is more concerned about imparting an impression that he or she appreciated the sublime, poetic beauty of the natural environment, had gained some unique perspective, or underwent some powerful transformation. Both, however, are just two sides of

the same Romantic coin.

### **Category 3: Ideology**

The thru-hiker has, by the very act of thru-hiking, temporarily dropped out of the struggle for status and power as it has been established in the capitalist society surrounding the trail. However, capital doesn't always come in material form, or as certifiable diplomas or certifications. What thru-hikers are after is a sort of narrative capital, which affords them the ability to situate themselves as authentic adventurers within a Romantic paradigm. In this section, I address questions such as “why did you decide to hike through the Sierra,” “is there something you strongly believe in, and do you have any life goals or dreams,” “why do people thru-hike,” what’s your argument in defense of the PCT,” and “is hiking the PCT crazy?”

#### Category 3.1: Ideology—The Active Courtship of Risk in the Sierra

Nearly all the thru-hikers I interviewed opted to go through the Sierra this year, despite the incredible anxiety built up within and around the community due to this year’s record snowfall and dangerous stream crossings. When the spring melt began, horror stories hatched like mosquitoes and buzzed in our ears. One blogger for the Pacific Crest Trail Association (PCTA) presaged:

I see wet, cold, and tired PCT hikers surrounded by a sea of deep, wet, cold, energy-sucking snow fields all divided-up by an endless series of raging torrents of typically tiny High Sierra creeks surging like rivers, each supercharged by Spring’s mighty flows. The trails will be flowing like creeks, when we get down to them. And they will lead to the mighty rivers draining the Sierra, which will be downright scary, once this massive snow pack begins to melt in earnest. (Brestin, <https://www.pcta.org/discover-the-trail/trail-conditions-and-closures/tags/snow-conditions/>)

One well known story involved a PCT hiker, 'Wet Foot', who was swept downstream Return Creek in Yosemite National Park. He quickly took off his 60-pound backpack, which he had unbuckled to prevent from dragging him under the current and swam to the other side. His pack, however, was swept away and over a high waterfall. Hiking alone, Wet Foot now had no navigation tools, food, or dry clothing. He began to trace his footsteps back through the snow but was unable to determine his location. Night came with freezing temperatures, and so to stave off hypothermia, he set his watch's alarm to go off every twenty minutes, so that he could periodically do jumping jacks until he was warm again. In the morning, he followed tracks in the snow until he heard a truck's warning signal as it reversed somewhere off in the distance. Swimming across the raging Tuolumne, he met up with the operators clearing the snow-bound SR 120 and was fed, clothed, and brought to safety.

Others weren't as lucky. Strawberry and Tree were swept downstream the South King's Fork river and killed just a week after my group and I passed through. Other stories of hikers turning around at impassable streams, running out of food, sliding down ice-chutes and sustaining various injuries were circulated on Facebook and at gathering places in towns. Hikers in Kennedy Meadows South, the portal to the Sierra, and in Lone Pine and Bishop, which are the first two towns accessible after entering the Sierra, were hotbeds for rumor and hearsay. In these towns, many people deliberated "flipping" north to Truckee, Ashland, Chester, Ashland, etc. Many did, and their decision split the thru-hiking community in two; those who decided to go through and those who decided to skip the Sierra until the snow melted. WD-40 said

I don't feel a strong community this year, and part of that is environmental, people just flipped north and there's straight up fewer hikers on the trail. I move pretty fast and I pass quite a few people every day, but I know for a fact that there were no more than 25

people on the entire section from Mammoth to Sonora, like, that's insane... That's 120 miles. (WD-40, PI, 2017)

Stories about danger in the Sierra, like a game of telephone, circulated and began to lose context. These morphed into the 'Sierra-Hysteria' that caused so many to skip/flip north to Truckee, Ashland, etc. These exaggerated, post-secondary accounts stem from stories that were comparatively vanilla. There were even rumors that the PCT was going to be closed through the Sierra (Ob. 99).

When we reached Tuolumne meadows, the end of the 'High Sierra,' the opposite began to happen. People began downplaying dangers, when in fact the streams were more dangerous and numerous than any of us expected. My group and I never heard about Wide Creek, the crossing of which may have been one of the dumbest things any of us had ever done. After the passes of the High Sierra, people were glissading down the "easy" passes in the North Sierra and injuring themselves. One hiker nearly fell to his death off Sonora Pass, the final pass in the North Sierra, after he lost control during a glissade and tumbled over a ledge.

With all these unreliable stories of danger circulating around the Sierra, I asked some of my interviewees why they decided to hike through anyway. Most described their intention to stick to the trail, a frustration with the hype, and a desire to experience the sublime beauty of the Sierra, which was amplified by the high snow year and the solitude it promised.

WD-40 told me that he "didn't believe people said it was impossible or impassable. I mean, every time I read something like that on some online forum it turned out to be false... But if I don't go through, I would spend the rest of my life being like 'god, why didn't I go through,' and wondering what it was like," (WD-40, PI, 2017). Chill was also skeptical, saying that "I've never been the one to like listen to what other people say and take what they had, like... 'We

tried this river crossing and it was too dangerous it was deadly,' like, no, I'm going to go see it for myself...you gotta see it for yourself and you can't believe a single fucking word anyone has to say," (Chill, PI, 2017). JC-1, also, said that "I just wanted to see it with my own eyes before I decided to flip," (JC-1, PI, 2017).

So-Full acknowledged that "there was a lot of talk, a lot of fear, a lot of hype and all that," but that going through the Sierra was "actually an honor... in a high snow year, you know, especially in like 2017 is going to be like one of those years like 2011, like, 'oh, you did it in 2011,' it would be like that for 2017," (So-Full, PI, 2017). So-Full described his journey through the Sierra as "hardcore... the real deal," while Cedar describes hers as "monumental":

My dad he's a letter carrier, he's a, both my parents work for the postal service [...] He's been talking about all these people who walk every day for a living, and, he kept using the word "monumental" [...] And not like over-using it how I use the word "amazing" or "incredible," he's like, "I really think what you guys are doing this year is just... *monumental.*" [...] And we kind of swung by Muir Trail ranch [and] we hung out with the proprietor, and he's like, "how did you find the Sierra this year?" And we're like, "you know what, it's really fucking hard, it's really fucking hard, but [...] it's been so worth it." And he was like, "you know what... People have gotten so used to the easy access. We've had a drought for five years, and the Sierra has been drivable, and bike-able, and boat-able," and he was like, "this year. This is the Sierra. *This* (Cedar gesture around her, pauses for dramatic effect), *this is the Sierra*, and people just got used to the easy access." And to hear that was like, "holy shit, [Benny: 'yeah that's, like, giving me chills actually,'] like, this is what it's supposed to be like, and we just fucking did it." And then I thought of my dad, saying what we're doing, "this year is monumental," [...]

And, like, I didn't ask for this. I have no interest in being a mountaineer [...] if this is how the Sierra's supposed to be, and we got lucky enough to experience it [Benny: 'yeah, we got lucky']. Fuck yeah, *fuck yeah*. And that is monumental. (Cedar, PI, 2017)

The hike through the Sierra was adventurous for Chill, as well, who said that his favorite part of the PCT was "going up Glen Pass, because it was actually mountaineering, you know," (Chill, PI, 2017). The Sierra was Flame's favorite part of the trail because "they were the most challenging, the most rewarding, the most beautiful [...] the most different hiking I've ever done before [...] the most raw place, you know what I mean?" (Flame, PI, 2017).

The intensity of this praise for the beauty, challenge, and otherness of the Sierra by thru-hikers who went through was proportional to the admonitions and warnings of those who decided not to. There was a lack of reliable information from both sides; nobody knew for sure what the conditions were like because they changed daily. Those who went through first had gone before the first serious snow melt, and later posted stories and images on social media urging people to ignore the "fear-mongering" and to go through the Sierra. When the snow really started melting, and people began falling and being swept down swollen streams, bailing out over obscure passes, and telling stories of miles of slushy snowfields and running out of food, hikers and non-hikers alike began to broadcast their warnings. One trail angel was nice enough to pick us up after we came out of the Sierra from Kearsage Pass but refused to take us back after we had re-supplied, telling us that he wasn't a "murderer." In Bishop and Lone Pine, hikers were stuck in limbo for days at the Hostel California, trying to make up their minds.

Those who did go through took great pleasure in talking about how they overcame the challenges of the Sierra. Even in Northern California, hikers were still shaming folks who didn't go through, saying that they felt "sorry" for them (Ob. 103). Even as far north as Belden, Quincy,

and Chester, people were still talking about stream crossings and passes in the Sierras, and teasing people who flipped or skipped up north; one hiker wrote in a trail log, “Flippers, you’re going the wrong way!” while another told me that flipper’s eyes seemed “full of guilt and shame,” (Ob. 111). To paraphrase another thru-hiker, it seems that the PCT is the only place on earth that you could hike over a thousand miles, yet still be considered a failure.

Thru-hikers’ emphasis on the authenticity of the Sierra adventure positions the storyteller as a sort of mythical hero who overcomes unprecedented challenges. The decision itself to go through, this decision to pursue risk and adventure, separates the authentic thru-hiker from the skippers and flippers. The “strong character” of the thru-hiker is strikingly similar to the identity that backpackers in Elsrud’s “Risk Creation in Traveling: Backpack Adventure Narration,” (2001) construct in their narratives. Elsrud interviewed backpackers and budget travelers in Thailand and analyzed the manifestations of risk and danger in their narratives and found that these manifestations were constructed by the backpackers to develop a narrative arc that aligns with Western “hero” mythologies, in which yarns of danger, injury or illness serve as social capital for the teller.

Backpackers use such stories to separate themselves, the “real” adventurers, from their “bad cousins,” the tourists. By traveling to foreign lands in search of the unfamiliar, backpackers actively court risk in pursuit of an adventurer identity based on “strong character.” Elsrud argues that backpackers perform an “adventure identity” whose “demonstrative acts generating such character are called risk and/or adventure narratives,” (Elsrud 603), and that narratives with the aim to establish this authentic adventurer identity involve “health risks, illnesses, eating habits, and other bodily threats and practices,” (Elsrud 609). Many of Elsrud’s interviewees also believe their adventures will work favorably for them when applying for jobs or when making new

friends, saying that they will make them seem like an “exciting person” or “self-reliant,” “powerful” and “strong,” (Elsrud 613).

Sørensen, in his conclusion to “Backpacker Ethnography,” writes that long term budget travelers “often position themselves as representatives of a better mode of tourism, thereby sustaining a distinction between a backpacker ‘us’ and a tourist ‘other,’” in much the same way thru-hikers who went through the Sierra differentiate between themselves and those who didn’t (858). While nearly all the thru-hikers who went through the Sierra were modest about their accomplishment and respectful of others’ choices, they nonetheless relished telling stories of “sketchy” stream crossings and harrowing passes. This tendency to narrate risk and adventure indicates an intention to construct an identity of an authentic adventurer, an aspirational identity that is tied up with the very motivation to attempt a thru-hike in the first place.

### Category 3.2: Ideology—Thru-Hikers as Authentic Adventurers

No hiker explicitly claimed that they were motivated even partially by prospects of social capital, although So-Full, when I asked him why people go on thru-hikes, told me that he has “a childhood friend who says, ‘everything I do is for the ‘gram,’ you know, like Instagram, to post pictures and stuff like that. So, to me, that is a big reason why people are out here,” (So-Full, PI, 2017). Besides So-Full, the only time thru-hikers mentioned social capital as a potential factor in their decision to hike was during conversations about my research, however, there was a clear indication in my interviewees’ narratives that implied that ‘authenticity’ and even American-ness were motivational factors.

When I asked Benny why people hike the PCT and how it might benefit them, she surprised me with a passionate assertion of the relationship between wilderness, individualism, and what it means to be “American”:



America was built on these kinds of wildernesses. You're going through wilderness that you realize pioneers, people, women, children, and freaking *wagons* came through.

Wilderness is at the heart of this country. There's this element the trail encompasses that is so inherently what it means to grow up as a US citizen that to not protect it would be wholly un-American [...] You begin to respect the massive place this is, that I was lucky enough to be born in. To not protect what is wild, what is inherently beautiful, what is just, *sacred* about this country is so stupid, so irresponsible. And we go through all these small towns that are unincorporated, and I think: What kind of town has that kind of ego to not be incorporated? I respect that about those places [laughter]. I *love* that. (Benny, PI, 2017).

This "sacred," American wilderness implies that to Benny there is a relationship between adventure, risk, and what it means to be American. Her appreciation of maverick unincorporated towns in the mountains signifies her appreciation of their rugged individualism, implying that the countryside and towns along the trail are the "real America" that Chill believes the PCT offers the traveler: "You can be out of the country and come see America and go on a fucking tour and see all the national parks or whatever, but you're not going to see the *real* America," (Chill, PI, 2017). The emphasis on the authenticity of the PCT experience involves not just the authenticity of risk and adventure (e.g., through the Sierra) or of the wilderness, but of the culture of the community on the trail and those around it as being authentically American, as well.

The PCT is a 'real' American experience as it is a 'real' adventure. Hungry G, when asked "why do people hike the PCT if there is so much suffering involved," replied that people do it

because it's so amazing at the same time [...] as Scout and Frodo would say: "It's the

epic adventure of your life.” It’s a lot about the people we meet on the trail, and a lot about ourselves, what we learn about ourselves, and it’s also interesting to see myself in new situations. I kind of like the feeling of being scared, I kind of like the feeling of being in a little bit of danger... It wakes me up. It makes me feel alive. I need it. [Hungry G, PI, 2017)

The desire to go on a risk-filled epic adventure through the “real” America, during which participants will learn about themselves and change in positive ways, echoes Noy’s findings in “This Trip Really Changed Me,” (Noy, 2004a). In his essay, Noy conducts narrative analysis through a social-constructivist lens to explore the construction of identity in Israeli backpacker’s narratives. Noy interviews forty backpackers and discovers a similarity in their narratives, namely that many focus on the “formative or transformative” moments of their trip and the uniqueness or authenticity of their experiences (79). Noy picks apart the backpacker’s narratives, which he calls narratives of a “constructed authenticity,” which are “consumed and employed as a recourse for the telling of a valid and “real” narrative of identity,” (80). Authenticity, to Noy, is a souvenir which is brought back and used as narrative capital to situate the adventurer as an interesting, strong, and experienced Westerner in his or her Israeli community.

The Romantic genre is discussed regarding its bearing on the nature of backpacker narratives. In Romantic literature, the hero’s inner struggles and changes during some journey are discussed, during which the hero becomes “creative, divine, or at least legendary and heroic,” (Green qtd. in Noy, 93). Noy argues that the backpacker is either on such a heroic journey, or on a religious (though he or she may be secular) pilgrimage, and that in both instances, “events are imbued with profound meaning and significance, following which the individual is changed,” (94). Noy concludes that there is a normative, collective expectation on the part of backpackers

that their trip will lead to unique experiences and a profound formation/transformation of the self, and that, overall, the experience will be beneficial to the individual, not only psychologically, but capially in the form of social capital, with some interviewees claiming, just as they did for Elsrud, that they'll include their PCT adventure on their CVs in their next job search.

The themes of self-change Noy teased from his interviewees are present in the narratives I collected, as well. However, the perception that thru-hiking is merely an attempt to accrue narrative capital or, as So-Full put it, that it is all “about the ‘gram,” demeans the very real exigence that calls people to thru-hike. The stated reasons as for why people thru-hike vary from person to person, with some, such as Flame, citing an Eriksonian identity crisis as their exigence, while others cite less acute circumstances. The common element between more and less acute exigencies for thru-hiking is that for most, their hike represents the “end of an era and the beginning of another.”

As they are in-between their past and future selves, thru-hikers could be said to be in a Marcian state of identity moratorium. Drawing on Erikson’s theories of ego-identity development and the universal grasping for identity synthesis, Marcia (1966) defines four stages of identity development: identity foreclosure, identity diffusion, identity moratorium and identity achievement. An identity moratorium is the state of identity crisis and is characterized by high exploration of identities with vague commitments to each. The moratorium subject is characterized by an “active struggle to make commitments,” while attempting to make a compromise between their parent's wishes, society's demands, and their own capabilities. “His [*sic*, etc.] sometimes bewildered appearance stems from his vital concern and internal preoccupation with what occasionally appear to him to be unresolvable questions,” (Marcia

1966, 551-2). Moratorium subjects "report experiencing more anxiety than do students in any other status [...] The world for them is not, currently, a highly predictable place; they are vitally engaged in a struggle to make it so," (Marcia 1973, 352). While the moratorium subject's issues have been described as "adolescent," these issues plague adults as well—e.g., the term "provisional adulthood" has been coined by Gail Sheehy to refer to the "postmodern" trend for people to remain in this state well into adulthood (Sheehy 43, 10).

Thru-hikers don't comprise a homogenous group, and it would be difficult to argue that recently retired thru-hikers are undergoing an identity crisis rather than just doing something they'd always wanted to do, however, in Eriksonian theory there is a non-linear continuum between identity confusion and achievement that may even be recursive for some (Erikson 1968). A state of 'liminality' and a state of identity moratorium, while discipline-specific terms, may be mutually informing in the case of the thru-hiker: The exigence for thru-hiking is some dissatisfaction or anxiety caused by the struggle to synthesize the demands of society with the thru-hiker's own desires and capabilities/ the act of thru-hiking is a liminal passage between the person a thru-hiker was to the person a thru-hiker wants to be. The act of adopting a trail name and performing as an authentic adventurer corresponds with the moratorium subject who is concerned with actively pursuing commitments, wearing roles like names that define who they are. The scope of commitment a thru-hike involves, which requires complete character immersion for five or six months, may arguably be commensurable with the level of dissatisfaction, anxiety, or confusion the hiker felt before the hike<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> A commensurability with the duration of a walk and the strength of its exigency is cited in Solnit, who writes of an Inuit custom that "offers an angry person release by walking the emotion out of his or her system in a straight line across the landscape; the point at which the anger is conquered is marked with a stick, bearing witness to the strength or length of the rage," (Lucy Lippard qtd. in Solnit footer, 6-8).

This role is reinforced through its telling. In her 2004 essay, "Performing Backpacking: Constructing Authenticity every step of the way," Shaffer uses a dramaturgical lens (*a la* Erving Goffman) to analyze backpacking narratives in Europe to argue that "the performance of backpacking is a contemporary liminoid<sup>7</sup> rite of passage where the performer creates the self as some version of this mythical "traveler" using particular scripts, costumes, and props," (140). Shaffer underlines the ways in which the "performer constructs the performance" and "balances between the "ideal" expectation and the "real" experience of backpacking to create a personal, possibly postmodern, and arguably "authentic" rite of passage," (140). Authenticity, to Shaffer, "is a social construction, constructed by "appropriate" performances of the phenomenon sanctioned by the participants of the backpacking subculture," (142). Shaffer treats the controversial subject of "authenticity" as something that is constructed by performative practices, which maintain "the effect of authenticity by continuously citing the norms of authenticity," (149). Norms of authenticity in the thru-hiking universe vary between purists and non-purists, as the former require a continuous footpath from terminus to terminus to claim authenticity as a thru-hiker, while the latter require the thru-hiker to HYOH ('Hike Your Own Hike') and privilege adventurous narratives over declarations of purity.

In "Performing Identity: Touristic Narratives of Self-Change" (2004b), Noy more thoroughly applies the performative lens to address "the specific ways tourists construct identity

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<sup>7</sup> Shaffer, in her treatment of European backpacking culture, uses the term "liminoid," to describe the backpacking experience of long-term budget travelers. "Liminoid" is a term Turner coined later on (1974) to differentiate between the "liminal" rites of passage in pre-industrial societies that are more entwined with that society's traditions and the "liminoid" experiences in modern society that represent a "playful" break from social order. Further, liminal experiences have more exigence and involve a personal crisis, while attending a rock concert could be a liminoid experience, etc. Shaffer's use of this term implies that she views backpacking as a recreational break from society—in contrast, Ptasznik, Fondren, and Siudzinski all choose to use the term "liminal" to describe the thru-hiking experience.

through the performance of travel-narratives," (116). Noy writes that in the instance of a narrative performance, the teller "presents who the narrator is at the time of narration...Who we are reflects who we have become, that is, who we are becoming while story-telling our identity," and that "the personal in personal narrative implies a performative struggle for agency rather than the expressive act of a pre-existing, autonomous, fixed, united, or stable self," (116). Noy suggests that analyzing narrative as performance "engulfs a radically constructionist notion, suggesting that personal narrative performance is a site in which social meaning—including that of the narrator's identity—is fervently negotiated and constructed," (167). In other words, narrators require an audience for whom to perform to, and during the act of narration construct their preferred identity and enact that construction in the process of telling the story of their transformation. This social-constructionist lens<sup>8</sup> Noy applies to backpacking narratives may also be applied to thru-hiker narratives, which may then be viewed as performances of identities that hail a Romantic ideology.

### **Category 3.3: Thru-hikers and Romanticism**

Upon asking her whether hiking the PCT was crazy or not, Hungry G said, "yeah, it is. Because it's a shit load of money. And sometimes I feel bad that I take so much time and don't help my friends don't help my family and just be, selfish?... and have this half-year gap in my CV, and just do what I want to do?" Hungry G's concerns contradict the very reasons why she chose to hike in the first place—to take back the time her friends, family, and work has demanded from her for years. Other hikers, such as Trail Name, were transparent about this

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<sup>8</sup> I am deliberately conflating 'performative lens' and 'social-constructivist lens.' As institutions are socially constructed through the iteration of their practices, they are performed just as identities are. Thinking of a performance of identity as an iteration of an institution or genre, such as Romanticism, is necessary for understanding identity as a performance of an institution or genre.

conflict between personal and social definitions of sanity: “Yes, well, I don’t know, I think it’s crazy that there’s people who think that the only way to get through life is to get a job, get a wife, get kids, and retire; it’s a very formulated way to go through life and it’s kind of what society expects of you,” (Trail Name, PI, 2017). Or JC-1, who put it succinctly: “That really depends on your definition of crazy. It’s just “crazy for whom,” you know? It may sound crazy but when you’re in it it’s not,” (JC-1, PI, 2017). JC-2, whose demeanor was more monkish than the others, was the only who believed that thru-hiking “isn’t crazy at all.” Other hikers, such as Flame, River Wind, Ranger Stabby, and So Full, replied that hiking the PCT was crazy, but did so in a way that performed the identity they have grown accustomed to wearing—the risk-courting, “crazy” adventurer—a part of whose appeal lies in his or her idiosyncratic decisions of dubious sanity. After all, it’s not the habit of an authentic adventurer to do sane things. Where did this archetype of the authentic adventurer come from, and how did it evolve into the thru-hiker image?

Roger Cardinal in his *Romantic Travel* documents the simultaneous rise of the artistic genre of Romanticism and various modes of traveling for leisure (by horse and cart, by ship, on foot, etc.) Cardinal writes that if one "accepts that the artistic output of Romanticism was governed by an urge to transcend the familiar and the commonplace, then its practice of journeying into unknown territories may be said to have functioned as a fundamental trope for aesthetic and psychic exploration," (135). Cardinal focuses not on the rich encounters with foreign peoples and cities but on the Romantic traveler's relationship with the natural world, and surveys such authors as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Stevenson. In the section he dedicates to foot-travel, he writes that the "solitary, taciturn" long-distance foot-traveler conforms to "one stereotype of the Romantic temperament," and that though both Wordsworth and Coleridge

prided themselves in some rather athletic treks that lasted weeks, the typical Romantic traveler "prefers not to sprint through his elective spaces, but to linger, to gaze, to daydream. Physical meandering is the accompaniment of mental meandering," (139). Cardinal writes that the Romantic traveler "equates solitariness and physical exposure with states of spiritual intensity," and that "today's solo mountaineers [...] almost unfailingly invoke the cliché of spiritual illumination through arduous effort," (139). Cardinal writes that the "voice" of the Romantic traveler is "committed, impassioned, evocative and lyrical," and juxtaposes this with the voice of the Enlightenment travel writer, whose voice is "disinterested, sober, analytical, and philosophical," (136). With the growth of popular tourism at the latter half of the 19th century, Romantic travelers, whose Romantic sensation depended not only on the intensity of the travel experience but its uniqueness and authenticity, had to "re-assess their ideology" as the "repeatability of the literary pilgrimage would soon make such sensations appear secondhand and lackluster," (148). Remote destinations off the beaten track in so-called wilderness became more authentic in the eyes of the Romantic traveler.

"Wilderness," Nash writes in *Wilderness and the American Mind*, is a "state of mind. The problem is not what wilderness is but what men *think* it is," (5). Before the flowering of Romanticism, Europeans and colonists in what is now the United States discoursed about wild lands with fear and disgust. "Mountains [...] were regarded as] warts, pimples, blisters, and other ugly deformities on the earth's surface," and were given such telling names as 'The Devil's Arse,'" (45). In this era, "nothing was more abhorrent to the European mind than the prospect of a "pathless" or "tangled" wilderness [...] Dante famously described the feeling of finding oneself in a 'wild, harsh and impenetrable' forest without a path as 'scarcely less bitter than death,'" (Moor 29). Hiking, as a leisure activity, is relatively young—the verb "to hike" is less than 200



years old, and had more in common with the word “schlep” than it’s modern connotation, while its gerund, “hiking,” wasn’t used until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Moor 204). The rise of deism in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries in England and the concept of the ‘sublime’ in nature created favorable conditions for wilderness, and later, primitivists such as Rosseau “pointed toward the beneficial psychological rewards” inherent in encounters with wilderness (Hinds 189). With the rise of Romanticism in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, “wild country lost much of its repulsiveness. It was not that wildness was any less solitary, mysterious, and chaotic, but rather in the new intellectual context these qualities were coveted,” (Nash 44).

The appreciation for wilderness was born in urban environments during the Romantic era. Wilderness, and the positive qualities we attribute to it today, is a social construct that can be attributed to the rise of the urban middle class. “Romanticism” is a mercurial term that is perhaps best defined by the emotionally charged artists of that era. For example, Lord Byron’s “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage” marries emotional and physical landscapes, and juxtaposes the “torture” of human cities with an indifferent, liberating nature:

I live not in myself, but I become  
 Portion of that around me; and to me,  
 High mountains are a feeling, but the hum  
 Of human cities torture: I can see  
 Nothing to loathe in nature, save to be  
 A link reluctant in a fleshly chain,  
 Class’d among creatures, when the soul can flee,  
 And with the sky, the peak, the heaving plain  
 Of ocean, or the stars, mingle, and not in vain.

(Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto 3, stanza 72)

Romanticism, in general, “implies an enthusiasm for the strange, remote, solitary, and mysterious,” and the “solitude and total freedom of the wilderness created a perfect setting for either melancholy or exultation,” (Nash 47). Primitivism, the idea that “man’s happiness and well-being decreased in direct proportion to his degree of civilization,” worked in conjunction with Romanticism to bring about an aesthetic appreciation of wilderness not just on the European continent but also in the New World, where the first Americans to appreciate and write about wild country “relied heavily on this [Romantic] tradition and vocabulary to articulate their ideas,” (Nash 47; 50). Emerson, Thoreau, and, later, John Muir further developed this vocabulary and established ties between Romanticism and terms of individual autonomy such as self-reliance, self-development, self-realization, which make up the central tenets of Individualism. Individualistic discourse “juxtaposes individuals to powerful institutions and social forces that stand in their way,” and that “heroism emerges at the point where “the good individual” struggles against “institutional forces” in order to achieve “moral redemption,” (Stob 26). Wilderness became the site for the struggle between the self and “institutional forces.”

During the Second Industrial Revolution, the United States evolved from an “agrarian nation into an industrial society,” during which the development of an industrial complex, the concentration of people in urban centers, and “a greater degree of heterogeneity in the social structure than previously existed [...led to] extensive changes in the fabric of cultural life,” (Nash, Gerald D., ix; 3). The industrialization of the United States “created a multitude of problems,” among which were “difficulties” with housing, health, sanitation, alcoholism, prostitution, exploitative labor practices in American cities and unsustainable mining and forestry practices in the country (Nash, Gerald D., 31). In the middle of this transition during the

Progressive Era rose Theodore Roosevelt, who tripled federal forest reserves soon after entering office and went on to establish the National Forest Service. Roosevelt signed into law five national parks, 150 national forests, 51 bird reserves and is estimated to have placed over 230,000,000 acres of land under federal protection (Nash, Gerald D., 63). He appointed Gifford Pinchot as head of the USFS; Pinchot, in turn, hired Benton MacKaye, then a young forester, who helped Pinchot place the White Mountains of New Hampshire under federal protection after he published a study on the impact of forest cover on stream flow. Later, this study would justify the purchase of many more forests for federal protection in the years that followed.

MacKaye is best known as the progenitor of the Appalachian Trail, however, his intentions in proposing “An Appalachian Trail” were not preservationist in sentiment, even though the public facing proposal was presented under a waxy surface of Romantic, preservationist sentiment. The AT was originally designed to address what MacKaye called the “problem of living” in an unchecked capitalist society, and to organize a “barbarian invasion [...as] a counter movement to the Metropolitan invasion," (MacKaye qtd. in Moor, 231). In his proposal that was originally published in the *Journal of American Architecture* (1921), and then later publicized by such newspapers as the *New York Times* (1923) by various hiking clubs along the East coast, MacKaye calls for volunteers from the “smoky bee hive cities” to come build a community along the Appalachian “skyline,” which would offer relief to anyone suffering under the “grinding down process of modern life,” (MacKaye 1921; 1923).

MacKaye, a radical socialist, had previously offered his services as a regional planner to the fledgling Soviet government in 1919; in his proposal, he outlines a socialist society along the Appalachian ridge, where “cooperation replaces competition, trust replaces suspicion,” which would take in unemployed and exploited workers into sustainable, communal work camps.

MacKaye's Romantic, preservationist language was meant to appeal to the burgeoning middle class and their representatives, without whom MacKaye would never get the project up and going. The Appalachian Trail was rhetorically and journalistically constructed, and "was a major achievement in recreational politics," though the recreational trail it became was not what it was intended to be (Kates 113; see also Sutter and Minter). The significance of MacKaye's story is that the world's first thru-hiking community was born on a trail that was constructed by appealing to Romantic, preservationist, and primitivistic sentiments about the restorative power, transformative quality, and aesthetic beauty of wilderness.

The word 'adventure' is defined in Webster's as "a) an undertaking usually involving danger and unknown risks, b) an exciting or remarkable experience, c) an enterprise involving financial risk," and comes from Latin words that mean 'to arrive' and 'about to happen.' All three of these definitions apply to thru-hiking. Romanticism pits the individual against society, which is bent on demanding sacrifices, whether physical, mental, or moral in nature, from the individual whose autonomy is too dear. The authentic thru-hiker, whether he or she is a purist or not, is interested in taking back from society their autonomy, and is authentic in so far as he or she appeals to the norms of authenticity in the Romantic paradigm, the tenets of which include the idiosyncratic rebellion against social norms, including the accumulation of capital; hierarchies of race, gender, and class; and maintaining a public-facing, inauthentic image (and the lack of dirt stains and body odor this requires).

Thru-hiking, an Authentic Romantic Adventure, is a modern institution that has origins in the Aristocratic Grand Tour of Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, but which has been gradually democratized and made available to the middle classes. As "it

has become increasingly difficult to sustain the image that [long term budget] traveling and tourism are separate and different undertakings,” thru-hiking is ultimately a form of tourism (Sørensen 858). The greatest appeal of thru-hiking is that it is an extreme form of tourism, one that is off the beaten path; but, if one subscribes to historic recurrence, it may be said that thru-hiking is going the way of Venice. Robert Moor wrote that during his hike, “some thru-hikers had begun to complain that super trails like the AT had lost the lonely, wild quality that originally made them alluring,” (251). There seems to be a desire now for longer, farther removed trails such as the CDT (3,300 miles), the International Appalachian Trail (extends from Alabama to Newfoundland), or the American Discovery Trail (6,800 miles), signaling that once “wild” trails like the AT and PCT have lost some of their Romantic appeal.

Smartphone applications such as Guthook, which by making thru-hiking fool-proof, is threatening its Romantic element of “journeying into unknown territory.” The proliferation of information online has also mapped much of the terra incognita of America’s long trails and people’s experiences on them. This begs the question whether thru-hiking will continue to be able to answer the exigency of those who wish to experience a ‘true’ adventure. One author, Ptasznik (2015), remarks on the expectation of transformation many take with them on their thru-hike, how this expectation is often stoked by representations in the media, and how many thru-hikers must deal with the “disappointment” they’ll often feel during their journey (75).

This ‘disappointment’ stems from unmet expectations of solitude, risk, excitement, and all the unknown elements that constitute an authentic adventure. 2017 was a special year; the Sierra was stark. It was dangerous. There were many unknown elements. The admonitions and warnings about the Sierra served as manifestations of oppressive social forces, the enemies of autonomy. We could make legitimate claims to insanity; we could be heroes. Upon reintegration,

we could position ourselves as truly idiosyncratic, rugged individualists in a society that values such traits, a society in which idiosyncrasy is no longer idiosyncratic. The PCT and other long trails attract more and more who feel this exigency, this need to be idiosyncratic, from a society that demands it. In an otherwise fully explored and documented world, these trails meet an exigence that no other institution can. For now.

## DISCUSSION

The modern experience of place and reality is as a series of interconnected nodes, bus stations, terminals, classrooms, offices, and digital spaces that create a sense of discontinuity between people, places, and each other. There is a correlation between this disconnect of the lack of "fellow feeling--a sense of deep, mutual understanding...that requires us to recognize that the minds of other people have a "reality equal to our own," (Max Scheler qtd. in Moor, 292). We are more connected, technologically speaking, than ever before, but paradoxically these technological advances have also isolated us from each other and ourselves. The thru-hiking community, wherein mutual awe and trust quickly develops out of the consistently shared experience, and the thru-hiking identity, which requires nearly all of a subject's time and energy for months, are remarkably different from the mediated realities and social networks we typically inhabit, and the diffuse, rhetorical identities we perform with on a daily basis. No wonder thru-hikers unanimously claim that they feel more "authentic" while on-trail, feel as part of a big "trail family," and that the trail restores their "faith in humanity."

With these "rapid changes in technology, culture, education, politics, trade, and transportation," people are now faced with what American psychologist Barry Schwartz calls the paradox of choice, an overwhelming array of options regarding lifestyles, religions/ideologies, and professions, (Moor 298). A 5,000 year old list of occupations from ancient Mesopotamia

revealed a set of 120 different professions; today, there are anywhere from 20,000 to 40,000 occupations in the United States, and "our selection of religious and philosophical traditions is scarcely less varied," making each one of us a kind of "existential pathfinder," (Moor 298). WD-40, when I asked him whether he had any strong beliefs, replied that he had "no guiding principle,"—asking him whether he was on the PCT looking for one, he replied, "I think anyone who goes out to hike 2,000 miles is looking for it. I would say on an existential level I'm relatively desperate for something to really latch onto. I'm envious of people who say they have that certainty of something they can build around, you know?" (WD-40, PI, 2017). Pushing further in our conversation, we struck something profound:

I think there's a general dissatisfaction... I hate to say anything that's so cliché like "modern life" or all this other shit but like. I mean, to go out and rough it for five months at a time, you're looking for something that's hard in life, you're looking for something a little more stark and a little more wild, I think a lot of people feel that normal life is a little bit too domesticated, and for a specific part of the population it becomes something unbearable. [...] I think, um, not to get too meta, but you look at the books and the movies and all of that is popular with young people in their 20's at this point, and it's kind of obvious that everyone is searching for some kind of community and meaning, it's like, the *thing* of this generation, because we don't fucking have it. There's no unifying principle in this generation, you know? (WD-40, PI, 2017).

The draw of the trail is that it is itself a guiding principle, a thin ribbon through the wilderness, conducting hikers towards an aspirational self. There's a simple promise there, in that so long as the hiker focuses on the daily goal of walking as far as possible, that they'll eventually reach the terminus and become "thru-hikers." The trail, a vital path, requires the

perseverance of thousands of feet each year to iterate itself, and is made in the walking of it, as the thru-hiker is made in the walking of it. The physical act of hiking from terminus to terminus mirrors the ego-identity development that thru-hikers undergo on their liminal passage from self to self, an identity that is developed by its performance and narrations. A thru-hiker is motivated by and committed to the feeling of “identity affirmation,” the tight-knit social bonds they make, and the professional, social, and financial risks many make to complete their hike (see Kyle, 2004).

The aspirational self thru-hikers are hiking and talking towards is a perceived authentic self, the very perception of which indicates a Romantic worldview that pits the authentic, autonomous individual against a homogenizing society. Thru-hikers, like Byron’s Childe Harold, find “peace in the pathless woods [...] society, where no man intrudes,” and some seem eager to meet risks in their adventure that would further raise them above and beyond others within the Romantic paradigm. Over 200 miles of the Sierra in 2017 were pathless, as many miles of trail was buried under snow, and the mantra for the year was “no trail, no problem.” However, the footsteps of those who went before, as well as GPS and smartphone applications, guided thru-hikers, most of whom had little to no mountaineering experience, over the stark terrain. The dubious authenticity of the experience was nonetheless proclaimed by every thru-hiker who went through the Sierra, who did so in a way that indicates the experience would forever after be a ‘monument’ in their life story that clearly marks the boundary between their past and present selves.

Through self-narrative, people construct their identity. A successful thru-hike contains elements of romance, risk, and rugged individualism that are prized under a Western paradigm. As thru-hiking culture becomes more visible (through films such as *Wild* or *A Walk in the*



*Woods*, as well as social media and blogs) and easier (better gear, navigation technologies, and information), more people, young and old alike, will flock to America's long trails each year to meet their aspirational selves. And as communities become more mediated, identities more diffuse, and the paradox of choice continues to confuse, more and more will come to long trails for their egalitarian, tight-knit community of shared experience and mutual awe. Thru-hiking, and the rhetoric of its practitioners, are reflexive attempts to simultaneously preserve a supposedly authentic self against the "grinding down process of modern life," and to maintain the idiosyncratic ethos of the authentic individual in a society that demands it.

#### Recommendations for Further Research

As Rhetoric and Composition scholars often focus on studying community identity and their relationship to place, the thru-hiking community has rich opportunities for further research in this field. While this study was more ethnographic in nature with a strong emphasis on primary sources and narrative, there is an abundance of thru-hiker blogs and social media accounts that could be analyzed with a similar (or different) theoretical approach. Thru-hikers presentation-of-self online could be compared to further develop understanding about identity formation and presentation, community, thru-hiker ideology, and what implications the rising popularity of this activity might have with respect to more global issues of identity and community. Further research, in the field of Communication Studies as well as Rhetoric and Composition, could be conducted on thru-hiking communities with a focus on how information moves along long trails such as the PCT, as well as online, between thru-hikers and from thru-hikers to the "real world."

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Interview Guide

#### Section 1: Introduction

- What is your morning ritual? Evening ritual?
- What is your favorite luxury item?
- Do you intend on finishing the entire PCT this year?
- What was your favorite part of the PCT so far?
- What is something you are excited about on the trail? What is something you are worried about? Why?

#### Section 2: Questions that are related to the key topics

##### Identity Status

- What were you doing before the trail? Do you have plans for anything afterward?
- Could you tell me a bit about why you decided to do a long hike on the PCT?  
What attracted you to the PCT?
- In your life, when have you felt most like yourself? (Is the trail bringing you back to yourself? I.e., “convalescence.”)
- Is there something you strongly believe in?
- Do you think you'll thru-hike another long trail or do something like this again?
- Have you learned anything about yourself on the trail?
- What is your dream? Or, what are some of your life goals?
- What do you think about the idea of “settling down”?
- Are you happier on the trail than you were in your former life?

##### Liminality

- Was there a turning point in your life when you said, "OK, that's it, I'm going hiking"?
- Can you compare and contrast yourself at the beginning of the trail to where you are now? How similar or different are you on the trail compared with yourself off the trail?
- Have friends or family members mentioned anything about you since you've started the trail? Are they supportive?
- Is there a hiker "community" out here on the PCT? How would you describe it? Are there any problems with it?
- Can you describe how the weeks leading up to getting on trail felt? How about the first few days on trail? How do you feel now?
- Are you worried about what you'll do after the trail?
- Do you think that the trail has changed you in some way? Positively or negatively?
- Are relationships between people different out here? How so?
- Did you have any expectations for self-change coming out on the trail?
- Have you heard about post-trail depression? How do you plan on dealing with it?

#### Relationship between composition practices and identity development

- Do you keep a journal out here? What do you write about in it?
- Do you keep a blog? What is it called? What do you write about?
- Do you write letters to people back home?
- Do you take many pictures or videos? Do you upload them to the internet? Why?

### **Section 3: Closing questions**



- Is there a particular person you've met or encountered on your trip that has really inspired, intrigued, or interested you?
- Is there anything you think you'll always remember after your hike?

## Appendix B: Thru-hiking Argot

- Thru-hiker*: A "thru-hiker" is itself a liminal term, and those who claim this identity exist along a continuum, for a "thru-hiker" is one who hikes the entirety of a long-distance trail within a year's time, yet those who are currently on trail are only "thru-hikers" insofar as they've committed themselves to this goal. In other words, "thru-hikers" don't really exist, since one is only a thru-hiker if one hikes a long trail within a year's time, however, one is only a thru-hiker while they are on the trail, and so even if one hikes the entirety of a trail within a year's time, they would not be thru-hikers because they have finished with their journey. Because the designation of "thru-hiker" is mercurial in nature, there exists some conflict within the thru-hiker community as to who is a "real" thru-hiker and who isn't. The terms below denote the various positions in the horizontal hierarchy that constitute some of the social tensions on long-distance hiking trails. "Thru-hikers" distinguish themselves in a vertical hierarchy from other trail users, including *section hikers*, who are hiking a large or small section of the trail; *weekend warriors* who are out for the weekend or on an institutional "break"; *day hikers*, who are only out for a day, and *tourists* who crowd popular attractions along the trail. Finally, I choose to use the term "thru-hiker" instead of "long-distance hiker" to describe this community of persons whose intentions are to hike the entirety of the Pacific Crest Trail, and to delimit them from others whose intentions differ.
- Trail Name*: Most thru-hikers, though not all, follow the tradition of adopting (or being designated) a pseudonym to go by during their hike. While serving practical purposes (such as retaining anonymity when meeting strangers in uncertain situations), the trail name is a highly symbolic phenomenon, which represents the "trying on" of a new

identity. People sometimes decide on a trail name for themselves, but often, people are given trail names by other hikers, a practice which some (Fondren, Siudzinski) believe establishes a hierarchy through the power of "naming." Trail names are an integral part to thru-hiker identity, and thru-hikers report that after re-integration that responding to their birth names is an uncanny experience (Rush, Fondren, Siudzinski).

- *Hike Your Own Hike (HYOH)*: This is the thru-hiker mantra. When discussing differences in hiking or camping habits, this mantra is often invoked to protect or validate the many different approaches to life on the trail and in the towns. More significantly, this phrase is used to legitimize factional splits between hikers or hiker groups and to de-escalate tensions if there happens to be any fall out. Along with *Leave No Trace (LNT)*, these dominant mantras originate from the individualistic value of self-reliance. In the Sierra in 2017, a new spin on the mantra was inspired by the dangers of hiking alone; "HYOH, but you're a dumbass for leaving us."
- *Purists*: Purists are those who are determined to hike every inch of a long trail without deviation. In an inclement weather situation, for e.g., a purist would make sure to return to the section of the trail they had skipped so that they could say, factually, that they "thru-hiked" the entire trail. Purists are often highly goal-oriented and motivated by achievement. The term "purist" has taken on a slightly negative connotation in some circles. Purists may be called the "chest-thumpers" of the community, and some hike from dawn and into the evening; they are often criticized for not "enjoying" the trail as much as the blue-blazers (Fondren, Rush).
- *Blue-Blazers*: This term is derived from the blue blazes that signal alternate routes along the Appalachian Trail and denotes those who aren't hung up about hiking only on the

official trail. The term has found its way on to the Pacific Crest Trail, even though there are no blue-blazed trails. Blue-blazers may be ridiculed by purists and vice-a-versa. Blue-blazers could be described as the romantic "dreamers" of the community who may or may not pitch a tent by a waterfall and call it an early day (Fondren 102).

- *Yellow Blazer*: This term denotes those who hitchhike up the trail *without informing the community*. In other words, while blue-blazers may take an alternate route or skip a small section of trail so that they can resupply, yellow blazers do this and more, but they lie about completed sections of the trail that they didn't actually hike. This is the pariah of the thru-hiking subculture; for example, on the Appalachian Trail, one may find indignant accusations of yellow blazing by hikers in shelter logs (Rush).
- *Slack Packer*: This term denotes those who "slack pack", a practice that involves paying someone or having a friend or family member meet the hiker in a vehicle at a trail head. Wealthier (and often, older) hikers slack pack sections of the AT and PCT, however, most in the thru-hiking community eschew this practice, unless an offer is made by a *trail angel* to hold their pack and meet them at a trail head further along.
- *Trail Angels*: Often thru-hiking alumni, or associated in some way with the thru-hiking community, these are kind folks who offer refreshments, transportation, lodging, showers, a slackpack or some other accommodation to hikers along the trail *pro gratis*. Sometimes, trail angels are affiliated with hostels or religious groups located near a long trail.
- *The Pacific Crest Trail (The "PCT")*: One of the "Triple Crown" hiking trails, this 2,659 mile trail stretches from the Mexican border in Southern California to Manning Park in British Columbia. While it is less well-known than the Appalachian Trail, and has a (false) reputation for unnerving solitude, the Pacific Crest Trail has seen a surge in thru

and section-hikes over the last several years: "With the increase from 1,041 attempting a thru-hike in 2013 to 3,498 in 2016, and a leap in section hikers from 834 to 2,159 over that same period, some hikers have begun camping in groups," ([www.pcta.org](http://www.pcta.org)). The rise in popularity of this trail in recent years has been attributed to the film *Wild*, a 2014 film starring Reese Witherspoon, who plays the role of a recent divorcee who hits the trail in search of self-discovery and healing.

- *The Appalachian Trail (The "AT")*: The most well-known of the "Triple Crown" trails, this 2,200 mile trail stretches from Georgia to Maine (or Maine to Georgia, depending on which way you go). It follows the rangy Eastern Continental Divide and while it is logistically the easiest of the "Triple Crown" trails, it is arguably the most physically exhausting, due to the old age and rugged terrain of the Appalachian Mountains. The Appalachian Trail sees over 3 million visitors each year, and over 6,000 people have reported thru-hiking the trail over the past six years (<http://www.appalachiantrail.org/>).
- *The Continental Divide Trail (The "CDT")*: The most logistically challenging and least-attempted of the "Triple Crown" hiking trails, the 3,000 mile CDT follows the Continental Divide from the Mexican border in New Mexico to the Canadian border in Glacier National Park. Traversing the hot deserts of New Mexico, the snow bound San Juans in Colorado, and the grizzly bear and gray wolf territories in remote Wyoming and Montana requires more logistical planning and derring-do than the other trails; in 2016, only 40 people reported a complete thru-hike of the CDT. However, as only two people reported a complete thru-hike in 2009, 2016 indicates a 1000% increase in successful thru-hikes over a seven year period (<http://continentaldividetrail.org>).
- *Guthook*: A smart-phone application that nearly every thru-hiker used to navigate the

trail. Essentially, it overlays a red line representing the trail, comment-enabled information about the trail (including water sources, good camp sites, places to hitch hike into town and information about the town itself), and the user's GPS location over topographic maps that can be downloaded from the USGS. It essentially makes thru-hiking fool-proof and has been cited by a particularly venerated Trail Angel as one of the main reasons there has been an explosion of thru-hike attempts in recent years (Ob 44).

- *Sun Cups*: Snow fields melted into a hive of concavities by daily melt/freeze patterns, which take about three times as much time and energy to cross.
- *'Flipping' and 'Skipping'*: Flipping is taking a train, plane, or automobile to a safer or more desirable section of trail, and then hiking back in the other direction to avoid seasonal conditions such as snow or intense heat; 'skipping' is going around an undesirable section and continuing in the same direction one was originally hiking and coming back later when conditions were more favorable to hike the section skipped.
- *Hiker box*: A box or crate, typically set outside hostels, post offices, and motels, where hikers can leave things they no longer want or need, so that other hikers can use them. Many hikers hit the hiker box first thing when they get to town, as it may be full of food or supplies from hikers who over-prepared for their trip and sent themselves too much food in their bounce box.
- *Bounce box*: A bounce box is a container that hikers send ahead of them to post offices in towns that has limited resupply options.