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Running Away From the Taskscape: Ultramarathon as 'Dark Ecology'

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Abstract

Drawing on reflections from a collaborative autoethnography, this article argues that ultramarathon running is defined by a 'dark' ecological sensibility (Morton 2007, 2010, 2016), characterised by moments of pain, disgust, and the macabre. In contrast to existing accounts, we problematise the notion that runners 'use' nature for escape and/or competition, while questioning the aesthetic-causal relationships often evinced within these accounts. With specific reference to the discursive, embodied, spatial and temporal aspects of the sport, we explore the way in which participants begin to appreciate the immense power of nature, while being humbled by the fragile and unstable foundations of human experience. Accordingly this article contributes novel insights into the human-nature complex that seek to move beyond Romantic analyses towards a more sophisticated understanding of the relationships between (nature) sport, people and place.

Keywords

Ultramarathon, running, nature, dark ecology, autoethnography

Introduction

The relationship between humans and nature is one that is often framed through perspectives that consider 'nature' as a phenomenon that is battled with, in order to

achieve some form of personal and/or sporting achievement. In such accounts nature is conceived as something to be 'tamed' by athletic prowess or by the heroic virtues of the intrepid explorer (see, for example Krein 2008; 2014). This is reflected in the case of extreme nature sports, whereby:

the essential relationship between the natural world and the extreme athlete is to battle against or attempt to conquer or vanquish part of the natural world. In these accounts of extreme sports, the natural world has only anthropocentric worth, that is, it is recognized only for its use or value to humanity (Brymer and Gray 2009, 138).

By proving a 'value to humanity', nature becomes a tool through which an individual's 'true', 'authentic' or 'inner being' can be discovered and laid bare amidst the travails provided by nature (Arnould and Price 1993).

This perspective on nature is particularly evident in the discipline of obstacle running. Here, Weedon (2016) explains how much of the promotional material for the popular 'Spartan Race'¹ reinvents the Protestant work ethic while reinforcing the racial, gendered and classist exclusions that were typical of the nineteenth century wilderness movement. Notions of strong mindedness, personal suffering and bodily discipline can combine with Darwinist and Romantic notions of nature that preserve a Conservative vision of a past life, unfettered by 'overcivilisation' (Weedon 2016), global immigration and progressive political change. In doing so:

mud running is premised on an attitude to bodies in and of nature recuperated from the nineteenth century, through which the dynamic of reclaiming and breaking with the past characterizes the spirit of modernity, the renaissance of (interest in) physical culture, and the esprit de corps of the focal practice (Weedon 2016, 47).

Therefore, while maintaining 'a lingering cultural derivative of colonialist, imperialist and modernist thinking, and reflective of how mainstream-sport cultures often value the spirit of conquering in/as the athletic process' (Atkinson 2010a, 1262), obstacle sports, such as the Spartan Race, serve to reinforce the perspective that nature is something that can be 'sought' as a remedy for the 'degenerative effects of modern life' (Weedon 2016, 47).

In contrast, Morton (2007, 2010, 2016) undermines traditional conceptions of nature as something which was, at some point, before human intervention, thus challenging the belief that nature acts as a panacea for social problems. Instead, he proposes that nature has never been 'free' from disturbance and that if one is to understand the profound ecological impact that human beings have on their surroundings, then a far more nuanced approach is needed in which nature is "concieved not as riefied nature 'over there' outside the city or the factory gates, but 'right here'" (2007, 89). Important here, is the way in which humans orientate their relation to the 'symbiotic real' - 'an implosive whole in which entities [*both human and non-human*] are related in a non-total, ragged way' (2017, 1 [*italics added*]). This is particularly relevant to the study of nature sports, as we are interested in the various ways that nature is enacted, sensed and embodied in the movements of a runner, as well as the ways in which runners make sense of these movements in particular temporal, spatial and symbolic locations.

Taking the above into consideration, this paper will examine the relationship between nature and sport via the reflections of an ultramarathon runner². Ultramarathon running is fast gaining popularity as an athletic competition and a means of personal accomplishment, the latter of which has exhibited the greatest mass appeal (Hashimoto et al. 2006). Although once considered a fringe sport, ultramarathon has seen a steady rise in popularity in the last 30 years (Hoffman et al. 2010), and is now a highly-competitive and often commercial pastime. Footraces are contested the world over in extreme and exotic environments. Most ultramarathons cover distances from 35 miles³ (56 km) to 150 miles (240 km) in a single-stage, and up to 1600 miles (2500 km) in multi-stage events. Distances are often traversed solo and unaccompanied, but relay and/or team events are not uncommon.

In view of this discipline, we do not seek to criticise or denounce existing work on nature sports but to modify and extend it in order to encompass the discursive, embodied, spaced and timed aspects of nature sports and, therefore, explore how nature and the movements made in these environments, are thoroughly 'enmeshed' (Macnaghten and Urry 1998). To borrow a phrase from Latour (2004, 16), we wish to 'slow down' discussions regarding political ecology, in order to revisit the dichotomies of human and nature, subject and object, and consider how they are enacted by those who participate in ultramarathon running.

Nature sports: Examining the relationship between sport, nature and running

Drawing on the spatial triad developed by Lefebvre (1991), Hanold (2016) convincingly shows how scientific measurements of time and distance are privileged by traditional cultures of distance running, which is evident in both the measures used to determine an athlete's success (minutes per mile/kilometer), and the experiential feedback that guides the pace and rhythm of their movement (heart rate, breathing, sweating). Similar findings are evidenced in studies concerned with the phenomenology of running; in which aspects geared towards measurable and linear standards of success, include: 'thermoregulation' (Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2016); 'aural attunement' (Allen-Collinson and Owton 2014); 'footwork' (Allen-Collinson 2011).

According to Hanold (2016), however, ultramarathon running has been noted for transforming and subverting dominant neo-liberal sensibilities, including those relating to linear movement. As a result, Hanold (2016) argues that, though not totally free of these tendencies, ultramarathon runners are able to destabilise the relationship between time and space by focussing on the distance moved as opposed to the time in which this distance is run. As a result, the athletes' movement is much more variable, shifting constantly between walking, scrambling and running. The by-products of this include both greater levels of interaction between runners, and increased support (both emotional and physical) for those who are struggling to complete the distance. In such instances, the experience of ultramarathon running is typified by 'extraordinary moments of elation for a million reasons, nearly none of which had anything to do with running quickly' (Hanold 2016, 216).

Expanding our understanding of running as beyond simply an activity that is completed to achieve a particular time, achievement or qualification, Atkinson (2010a, 1261) examined how the sport of 'fell-running crosses out dominant constructions of modernist sports forms'. Competing across 'mountains, elds, streams, hills, valleys and plains' (Atkinson 2010a, 1261), Atkinson (2010a, 1262) identified how:

The rigours of running focus the mind on the present, and the body on the culturally uncooked nature of the space. When a run is stripped of urban contexts, and as the person is immersed in mud, wind, rain, grass, rock, sweat and occasionally blood, an almost Zen-like state may follow.

What was made explicit from Atkinson's (2010a, 1263) account was the 'communion with nature' that was expressed by fell runners. Both here, and in other work (Atkinson, 2010a; 2010b; 2011; 2016), Atkinson (2010a) highlights how, alongside other sports, interactions between fellrunners and natural environments developed into various 'scapelands'. Following Lyotard (1989), Atkinson (2010a, 1253) details how 'Scapelands are ... heterotopic encounters with physical space that produce an emancipating experiential awareness of impermanence, emptiness, unconscious remainder and missing presence'. Key to this process is the ability of the runners to find a balance between the physical challenges that the landscapes present, and their ability to manage psychologically with the omnipresence of fear, in a manner similar to that of the runners in Csikszentmihalyi et al's (2017) study of 'flow'. It is in this state that athletes are able to experience a state of 'voluptuous panic' (Caillois 1967) which, through playful and childlike engagement with nature and the unpredictability of the terrain, can temporarily disrupt the rational, comfortable and lucid self, leading to profound moments of personal transformation. As Monbiot (2016, 98) elucidates:

In these places we can leave our linearity and confinement behind, surrender to the unplanned and emergent world of nature, be surprised once more by joy, as unexpected encounters with great beasts ... (almost all of which, despite our fears, are harmless to us) become possible again. We can rediscover those buried emotions that otherwise remain unexercised.

This feeling, writes Atkinson (2011, 11), is not goal-centred or outcome driven, but pursued for its own sake, sought for no other reason than the ability to temporarily relinquish one's self-consciousness and to abandon oneself 'in movement and flight'. Fell-running can thus be defined as a 'post-sport' (Pronger 1998) or 'anti-sport' (Atkinson 2009), in which modern sporting practices and institutions revolving around hierarchical competition and measurable outcomes are eschewed in favour of alternative states of being. Consequently, athletes can reflect critically on the complex relationships between nature, bodies and culture.

Nevertheless, while various 'post-sports' seek to escape the modernist entrapments that encase contemporary sports, in many instances, the act of running, whether middle, long, or ultra, is one in which 'physical space appears to figure prominently in the production of this social space and informs what it means to endure'

(Hanold 2016, 181). Indeed, it is a sense of endurance that permeate accounts of running. For Howe (2016, 213), 'Running, like all physical activities, is a sensuous experience' and it is this sensuous experience which needs 'capturing', not as pure transcendence, but as something that is 'produced' in particular 'natural' spaces. Accordingly, Howe and Morris (2009, 309) argue that:

middle-and long-distance running, unlike many other sports (including other types of performance running such as sprinting), is a spatially extensive practice involving multiple sites, spaces, and places and has a particularly close relationship with 'natural' spaces, both in terms of training and competition as evidenced in the disciplines of cross-country and fell running.

Detailing how running bodies and nature are co-produced through a range of corporeal schema inherent to the execution of a run, Howe and Morris (2009) draw on the work of Ingold (2000) to differentiate between two elements of running: 'dwelling', which refers to the ways in which human bodies are embedded in organic life; 'taskscape', defined as 'any practical operation carried out by a skilled agent in an environment as part of his or her business of life' (Ingold 2000, 195). In applying these two notions, Howe and Morris (2009, 322) illustrate how athletes treat the landscape as both a gymnasium for physiological improvement and a 'shrine', which has spiritual, emotional and psychological connotations. Importantly, however, the treatment of these landscapes is paradoxical, in that the runners see them as both a source of physical enhancement and a place of worship (though these sentiments are dynamic and relational). Specifically, in case of the former, nature affords a particular set of opportunities for making the body faster, stronger and quicker. In the latter, it is experienced as having a particular role to play in rest and rehabilitation.

Together, both Atkinson (2010a, 2011) and Howe (2016; Howe and Morris 2009), draw attention to the notion that nature sports involve a communion with nature, rather than a battle to overcome or destroy it (Brymer and Gray 2010). This is also considered by Brymer and Gray (2009) who adopt the metaphor of a 'dance' to elucidate on the extent to which self-understandings are symbiotically changed with nature. With regard to participants of extreme nature sports, they detail how:

The metaphor of ‘dance’ recognizes a dynamic, rhythmical, harmonious, fluid and responsive interplay between the extreme sport participant and nature. ... The dance metaphor embraces the holistic experience of extreme athletes within nature. Engaging in extreme sports (just like dance) is a transformational experience for some participants that taps into the emotional, spiritual and physical realms (Brymer and Gray 2009, 138).

What becomes apparent from these accounts is the extent to which the relationship between sport and nature remains tied to the notion that the sporting activity is itself a form of participation that is performed to either ‘transcend’ (Cidell 2014) or ‘escape’ modernity (Weedon 2016). Simultaneously, it is nature that presents a workable and ‘task’-driven environment that can be used to help produce and train a sporting body (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2010; Bale 2004; Howe 2016; Howe and Morris 2009). Unsurprisingly, therefore, running has been adopted as part of wider health and fitness initiatives as an activity that can be ‘used’ to help bolster government attempts to improve public health (Shipway and Holloway 2010).

While the reasons for running are various (Cidell 2014), we remain critical to an underlying functionality in the ways in which natural environments are ‘used’ by humans for particular purposes. We raise this issue on two important grounds. First, in much of the literature, there seems a tendency toward binary thinking in which nature is ‘severed’ from humanity (Morton, 2017:13). In many of these accounts, ‘either nothing is socially constructed, or everything is, and in both cases, ‘socially’ means ‘by humans’ (2017:10). Indeed, while Brymer and Gray’s (2009) ‘dance’ metaphor may ultimately continue the human versus nature separation – as nature is almost always considered the ‘partner’ – even ‘post-sports’, such as Parkour, are ‘in the first instance[,] a political re-appropriation of commercial urban spaces. Buildings, parks, walkways, dumpsters, steps, and practically any edifice is viewed as an obstacle to be used *for* spiritual and physical development, and site for disrupting the order of technocapitalist space’ (Atkinson 2009, 183).

Secondly, in thinking about nature as the site of human intervention, these interpretations fall back on a patronising vision in which nature is judged to be passively encountered; there to be used up and harvested for the purposes of human enjoyment. As a result, nature is reduced to an ‘aesthetic judgement’ (Urry 1992, 9), rather than a reasoned or principled one, in which we conveniently forget that our use,

and over-use of nature can often have dark and disastrous consequences (i.e., disruption of habitats, pollution, etc.). Ecological thinking of this sort is problematic, according to Morton (2007, 98), as it 'offers the illusion of false intimacy that is belied by the immersed yet laid-back aesthetic distance it demands'. In other words, in treating nature as an object of beauty, humans create an artificial distance between 'them' and 'it', which results in the treatment of plants, animals and landscapes as ends rather than means. In the context of nature sports, we would add that such Romantic interpretations have the potential to legitimate long-standing inequality of access, because such inequalities are subsumed by the supposed healing qualities that nature is said to provide (Kay and Laberge 2004). Thus, it is important to remember that while nature sports can provide the opportunity for positive and meaningful interaction, they can also be the site of (further) regimentation, marginalisation and oppression (Melo and Gomes 2017).

In view of these criticisms, we adopt a way of thinking that considers how natures and cultures might 'coalesce' (Cherrington and Gregory 2017). That is, how nature(s) both extend and reduce human capacities, and, more specifically, how ultramarathon running is constitutive of a particular type of nature experience that emerges through movement and dialogue (Folch-Serra 1990; Zimmermann and Saura 2017). In particular, we draw on Morton's (2007, 2016) notion of 'Dark Ecology' to illustrate how the subject of our narrative embraces a different type of ecological awareness that is less about an appreciation of the sublime than an openness towards the disgusting, inert and ruthless qualities of his surroundings. In what follows, we contend that this can have profound implications both within and outside of nature sport settings, as it offers a means of decentring Romantic portrayals of nature, while also encouraging more responsible, caring and accountable attitudes towards the environment.

Methodology: Collaborative (Analytic) Autoethnography

The analysis that follows is the culmination of a collaborative autoethnography (Martinez and Andreatta 2015; Williams and Bin Zaini 2016), the purpose of which was to collectively examine the personal experiences of a colleague. Following a series of chance corridor conversations beginning October 2016, the first and third authors established a shared passion for nature sports and agreed to examine this phenomena further. An added impetus was the third author's existing interest in creative writing and critical reflection which he felt were forbidden in scientific publications. This led him to

conclude that *real* science puts bias and subjectivity aside (Neuman 1994), and that creative writing, such as the type with which he was engaged in his spare time, was to be enjoyed as a form of 'release' rather than a legitimate mode of academic inquiry. Such experiences are not uncommon, and are reflected in other commentaries on autoethnography which indicate that, despite progressive attitudes towards qualitative research, traditional epistemological and ontological assumptions regarding validity, reliability and generalisability, continue to prevail (Sparkes 2000). However, having partially explored this method of writing in his own research on university basketball (Cherrington 2016), the first author encouraged the third author to bring his own experiences to bear on the cultural context of ultramarathon running.

Following initial discussions, the research followed the five-stage process for collaborative autoethnography outlined in the work of Chang et al (2013), although in practice our roles and movement through each stage were more dynamic. Having formed our initial research partnership (stage 1) and agreed on our focus (stage 2), we held regular meetings to discuss the significance of the third author's existing reflections that extended back over a 6 year period. At this point, the researchers were engaged in a period of immersion, in which the first author became an active listener, absorbing the third author's stories while offering examples from his own experience to provoke further discussion. Our roles within the research and level of contribution to the personal narrative (stages 3 and 4), therefore, became more clearly delineated as the frequency of our meetings increased. More specifically, it was agreed that the third author's experience of ultramarathon running was integral to the study. Therefore, the first author would make only a partial contribution to the autobiographical data.

This intermediary period was significant for two reasons. Firstly, it enabled the third author to build confidence in the relevance and style of his storytelling, while receiving support and encouragement from two experienced qualitative researchers (first and second authors). During this time, conversations between the first and third authors became very informal, often relating to topics that did not have an immediate relevance to the research (e.g., work, family, or diet). This allowed the researchers to develop significant rapport which, we would argue, served to temporarily suspend our disciplinary allegiances and sustain an emerging friendship (Cann and DeMeulenaere 2012). This became pertinent when deciding on the order with which the authors should be listed on the final paper (stage 5), as there were frank and honest discussions about the respective contributions, and the manner in which they should be rewarded.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, by reading the autoethnographic accounts aloud, the first and second authors were able to add new layers of meaning and context to the existing story, which further enriched the ongoing analysis.

Following a period of immersion, the authors began to engage in a narrative thematic analysis (Smith 2016). This process allowed us to explore the layers of meaning that underpin the third author's perception of reality and make sense of the social worlds around him. Our choice of narrative analysis was predicated on our belief that human beings are 'meaning makers who, in order to interpret, direct, and intelligibly communicate life, configure and constitute their experience and sense of who they are using narratives that the social and cultural world have passed down' (Smith 2016, 260).

The subsequent sections are a rich amalgam of different voices that represents our 'collective story' (Richardson 1990, 25), comprising all the meetings - formal and informal, email exchanges and phone conversations that have taken place over the course 12 months between three people with a shared interest in nature sports. That being said, we are committed to the type of analytic autoethnography outlined by Anderson (2006) and believe, in agreement with Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont (1999, 57) that autoethnographic work of this kind should not 'lose sight of the ethnographic imperative that we are seeking to understand'. That is, to shed light on 'the complex social worlds that we are only a part (but a part nonetheless)'. Therefore, the overall goal of our analysis, represented in the commentary that follows, was to represent the dialectic between the subject and object of nature sport, while gaining complex insights into the 'nature-cultures' (Latour 1993) that transcend the stories themselves.

Running Away from the Taskscape

Although I've contested a number of races in recent years, Sahara was the last time I can remember being fully-immersed and committed to my training. The early appeal was that ultramarathon represented an unknown; a genuine unfathomable challenge that would test my physical and mental resolve. Having successfully finished the Marathon Des Sables (MDS), and others since, I now know that I am capable of extreme commitment and focus, with a strong mental and physical resilience. The sport of ultramarathon, therefore, became a sport of diminishing returns, and the problem was a question of my motivation.

For considerable time since, I contested races without any real enjoyment. There were moments of beauty, and fleeting elation, but marathons and ultramarathons became formulaic, following the route as a matter of course. The sport that once held so much mystery and intrigue had become stale and dull. Training was due process, for I knew that I could contest a marathon or an ultra, in the hills or on the fell, and drag my lazy feet kicking and screaming around the course in a respectable time. I also knew I could rely on my experience and resolve to bare the fatigue and finish a race that, for many, would be unreasonable without dedicated training. I was running for all the wrong reasons.

I would run through wonderful rolling hills, valleys, snow-capped mountains, green forests, and not enjoy nor appreciate them. Forest floors were reduced to mud and wet leaves and mountains became just another sharp, steep obstacle, littered with dangerous rocks. My lack of dedication had left me intrinsically focused, forcing me to dissociate from my surroundings, perhaps a necessary prerequisite to managing the fatigue. After many months of reflection, facilitated by this writing process, I finally understood that I needed to stop trying to recreate the experiences of my former races.

My journey into ultramarathon, the adventures in the mountains and in the desert, began with a simple desire; to push myself to perform to my potential, in any sport, with no expectations, and no boundaries. So, I decided to rekindle my love of exercise by running shorter races, curbing ultramarathon for a time, and instead focusing on expressing myself authentically and, more importantly, having a pleasurable experience. Finally, I am enjoying running again, because each session has a different focus and a short-term goal. I'm excited to see how far I can push myself.

This change in attitude was manifest in a recent footrace. I competed in a 16 mile trail race through the Derbyshire Peaks. It was a wonderful experience. For the first time in years I was fit and strong enough to enjoy the race; the scenery, the trails, the mountains and trees. The trail was short enough to avoid substantial pain or fatigue, but I was also well-conditioned, and I felt able to push my body without substantial restraint; my conditioning was no longer a boundary between me and a direct experience of the environment. I felt more connected to my surroundings this time.

Reading the race reports from this year's Ultra Machupichu and seeing the pictures of desolate desert and rolling snow-capped mountains, I feel thirsty once more. I could hike or trek the Machu Pichu trail, but for some reason that is relatively less appealing to me. It's important that I am able to run the trail, because running embodies freedom. It's more direct; more primal. Perhaps this is linked to an evolutionary vestigial trait? Does running in nature represent survival, or hunting? When I have good physical fitness, I feel like I can go anywhere and do anything. I have a basic confidence that I have the fitness and engine capacity to sustain the rigours of the environment, and be able to move with it, rather than being stifled by it. Ultimately, there is a conflict between running to push myself, but remaining fit enough to experience nature, directly, without barriers.

In the various dwellings encountered by the author, non-human actors, or 'actants' (Latour 1993) such as mountains, rocks, trails and deserts play a significant role in that they can reveal the frailty of human agency. This is especially pronounced in the passage regarding the changing significance of the author's surroundings, particularly when they suggest that 'the forest floor becomes nothing but mud and wet leaves and the mountains are reduced to steep obstacles, littered with dangerous rocks'. For Latour (1992), these instances of non-human intervention suggest that rocks and leaves, despite being designated as 'natural' phenomena, are as capable of causing human action as anything inherently 'human'. On numerous occasions throughout the author's narrative, he describes the pain that is induced by various non-human obstacles such as hillside trails. In these instances two things happen: first, the agency of the non-human is revealed; second, and, perhaps more significantly, his dependence on such intermediaries in daily life is temporarily exposed - suggesting, paradoxically, that nature is being both *done* and *undone* through the act of running.

Thus, to say that ultramarathon running represents an uncritical harmony with nature is to underplay the reflexive and lived qualities of these phenomena. Here, specific instances of shock, sadness or discomfort may encourage new body projects to be triggered (Crossley 2006), as opposed to the body's relationship with nature being thought of as static. For example, in the above narrative, the author's reflections continually oscillate between feelings of joy on the one hand, and sadness and confusion on the other. In the beginning, he is largely positive about his training and his

motivations for competing; there is synergy between his expectations as a competitor (an enjoyable challenge) and his lived experience of each event (the joys of physical resilience). Consequently, he feels compelled to maintain an 'extreme commitment and focus'. However, shortly thereafter he goes on to suggest that certain body techniques (Mauss 1973) somehow become 'pointless' and 'dull' - that the sense of fatigue ingratiated by previous activities had now become 'unreasonable'.

The turning point in this process was his immersion in, and subsequent disenchantment with, the 'taskscape' (Ingold 1997) that emerges within these particular dwellings. Here, it would seem, nature had been *overtasked*, resulting in an inauthentic and impure experience. In one of our meetings, the author described the moment that he came to this realisation. Having reached the top of the first hill during a race in the Peak District he stopped to talk to a fellow runner who was struggling with her fitness. He sat for a while as they spoke, sharing experiences of the race thus far, and regaling memories of past events. Having waved good bye to the runner he sat at the top of the hill for a while longer. At this point he began to do something that he would not normally have done. He observed the beautiful colours that surrounded him: the greens of the flora and fauna, and the oranges and purples of the heath. He was astounded by the size and beauty of the surrounding hills and took pleasure in the gentle breeze that was encircling his face, and for the first time in a long time he felt irreverence for nature. It was at this juncture, as he rose to his feet, that he decided to slow his pace and spend more time appreciating his environment, rather than striving to win. His sense of place, to paraphrase Brymer (2015) had been reconstituted from a unfamiliar landscape to one that was aligned with the human experience.

What the discussion herein reveals is exactly what Howe and Morris (2009, 325) concede, in that 'any one site or series of sites within the running taskscape could be differently co-produced at different times and in different places'. In addition, even when dwellings are constructed as taskscapes there remains the possibility for alternative interpretations to emerge. Ultramarathon runners engage with nature in ways that are very different from more orthodox sports, in that the body and the athlete must anticipate and react to the constantly changing environment (Hanold 2016). In so doing, they reveal the need for an expanded understanding of nature that moves away from simple causal explanations in favour of the kind of theorising that understands nature as a complex virtuality (Thrift 2001). In our author's narrative there is a constant tension between deliberated embodied action (*techne*) and imagination and spiritedness

(thumos) (Heywood 2006), and the more he moves towards the latter the more his activities threaten to dis-embed the taskscape. It is perhaps for this reason that the author enjoys running instead of hiking, as it requires a closer relationship with the landscape that is more 'direct' and 'primal', and therefore much easier to affect.

Interpassive Escape

The beauty of a long, multi-stage race like the Marathon Des Sables (MDS) is that you can truly immerse yourself in the experience. This is true of any multi-stage race, but is compounded in the Sahara by the remote location and the solitude wrought by the arid desert. Under these conditions, my daily routine was quickly stripped to its bare essentials and I lost sight of the aesthetics that usually contrive to distract me from directly experiencing the world. Consequently, the challenge embodied something primal, in which the fabrications of common existence, e.g., money, power, work, relationships, ceased to harbour any significance. The tasks before me compelled a sense of urgency, and my day-to-day concerns were limited to how far I needed to travel, and what I was going to eat. Despite the physical and mental strain I endured, this liberation from civility was more of an escape than any holiday I'd experienced.

The MDS organisers are savvy to the sense of escapism afforded by the environment and the arduous task of traversing it. In preserving the ethos of freedom, runners are encouraged to leave their electronics (mobile devices, cameras, etc.) at home. Fortunately, most contestants preferred the relative isolation of the desert by forgoing their mobile phones, etc. I left mine at the hotel in Morocco, a few hundred miles north, and was delighted with my decision. Those who decided to retain their electronic connection with civilisation observed the site boundaries with respect by making calls to family and loved-ones on the perimeter, away from other competitors. This meant that I wasn't constantly reconnected with the daily existence from which I'd been temporarily emancipated.

When I am running I find myself continually searching for solitude. I am reminded of another, more recent, occasion when I was struck by a sudden sense of isolation. I was about halfway through a rugged and technical trail marathon staged in Yorkshire's Peak District. The ground was muddy; sliced and churned by

hundreds of heavy, sodden trail shoes. I was one in a long line of runners trying to keep my footing among the mud and the rocks. I was surrounded by a sea of beautiful green hills, lightly-trodden pathways weaving in all directions into the distance, and the sky was mostly blue with pillows of bright white cloud. At the time, I was naïve as to why I wasn't enjoying the run (despite the aesthetic beauty), but reflected afterwards that it was because the race didn't feel organic; i.e., the process felt contrived and formulaic. I felt disconnected from the environment and restricted as a result.

After a time, we came to a fork in the path at which runners were directed in one direction if they were contesting the half-distance, down a valley to the left between some hills, and in another direction, into a vast clearing, if they were contesting the full marathon distance. I swayed right following the track, leaving the remaining field of runners in my wake. Within minutes I was alone, with only the tall grass, the mud and a handful of cows for company, and my mood lifted. Once I was alone, I felt able to acknowledge the temperate weather and the beautiful views overlooking the vast Peak District. I suddenly embodied a sense of adventure. There were no footsteps to follow here, no definitive path leading me to safety, no restrictions or ties, just endless green grass and a strew of cow shit. I felt free and, finally, this was my adventure.

In the Sahara, moments like these were laced with irony, because there was a wonderful sense of freedom afforded by the environment, but with an imposing sense of purgatory from all the sheer space, and the disconcerting notion that I could shift direction by just a few degrees, miss the checkpoint, and be lost to the desert. There are only a handful on environments on the planet where such a paradox would be possible.

A driving impulse here is the sense of isolation brought about by the author's spontaneous acts of subversion, in which the waymarked track laid out by the event organisers is rejected in favour of his own route. This is equivalent to the situationist notion of drifting, in which movement becomes less automated and is instead characterised as 'locomotion without a goal' (Plant 1992, 121), involving playful, imaginative interactions with the environment. Like the fell-running practices described by Atkinson (2010a, 2010b), ultramarathons are encountered as a form of scapeland (Lyotard 1989), which 'produce an emancipating experiential awareness of

impermanence, emptiness, unconscious remainder and missing presence' (Lyotard 1989, 6). These encounters act as the setting for a number of deviations, in which the runner's body is temporarily detached from the rigid hierarchies of interaction (i.e. winning, recognition, reward) and movement (clearly delineated start and end point, performance judged by the clock), and is instead defined by moments of boundary transgression and 'socio-spatial inversion' (Laviolette 2011, 30).

What is significant, however, is that these perversions are predicated on the author's reflexive relationship with nature, and this is dependent on the practitioner being capable of understanding the ideologies controlling their geographical environment (i.e., a realist notion of nature and the manner in which nature is 'tasked') and the effects that these ideological arrangements have on the emotions and behaviour of its inhabitants; a tendency already established in the author's behaviour. Nonetheless, while they still carry an element of risk with regard to the sense of isolation and self-sufficiency that is experienced when negotiating unfamiliar territory, ultramarathon running requires an element of voluntary risk-taking (Stranger 2011) in that the activities that it comprises involve the increased likelihood of fear, anxiety and injury evident, for example, in the final paragraph of the narrative.

For the author, this is precisely the allure of such sports, which explains why he describes these moments as the 'embodiment of adventure'. Atkinson (2011), for instance, argues that running in treacherous and unfamiliar landscapes, as well as the forms of physical suffering that accompany these runs, can induce a sense of vertigo that delivers a momentary disruption in consciousness, inflicting 'a kind of voluptuous panic on an otherwise lucid mind' (Caillois 1967, 23 cited in Atkinson [2011, 106]). He continues: 'in all cases, it is a question of surrendering to a kind of spasm, seizure, or shock that destroys reality with sovereign brusqueness' (Caillois 1967, 23 cited in Atkinson [2011, 106]). Lyng (1990) sees this as increasingly important given the predictable nature of contemporary life, in which institutionalised routines, alienation and hyper-commodification are commonplace.

One example where this manifests is in the author's discussion of the Marathon des Sables, in which he celebrates the (optional) removal of mobile phones, describing these as antithetical to the ethos of the event. According to Beal and Smith (2010), this reflects the marketing strategies of most major lifestyle sports corporations, in which the emancipatory potential of authentic, natural spaces is compromised by modern processes of rationalisation and commodification. Therefore, the more natural and

authentic the event is perceived to be, the more profit is likely to be made in its organisation. Indeed, much of the promotional material surrounding Marathon des Sables draws on popular cultural tropes regarding the inherent virtues of the wilderness, in which runners are encouraged to explore their inner selves and contemplate the aesthetics of nature, free from the trappings of modern technology. It is in these instances that an inherent contradiction emerges regarding both the difficulty in maintaining the nature/culture binary and the contentions surrounding romantic notions of escape. That is, in succumbing to the allures of this ideological narrative, the runners are endorsing a 'demodernising impulse', indicating 'a resistance to modernization which is nevertheless at the same time a product of it' (Rosen 1993, 499).

We contend, therefore, that ultramarathon running can be analysed through the notion of 'interpassivity' (Žižek 1997, 111). This is defined as 'believing or enjoying through the other', in which individuals 'break out of the passive observer following a spectacle staged by others, not only to participate actively in the spectacle, but more and more to establish its very rules' (Žižek 1997, 111). This notion allows us to account for the tensions that exist between the de-legitimation and deconstruction of ideological versions of 'nature' conducted by human agents, as described in the first part of this analysis, and the re-reconstructed, re-appropriated (late-capitalist) narratives that appear in the promotion of the Marathon des Sables.

Indeed, according to Žižek (1997), ideologies – such as those surrounding nature (i.e., free from technology, isolated, authentic,) – stand in for impossible-real belief; an idealised but nonetheless believable 'thing' or notion. However, because we are enlightened beings we are also aware that these beliefs are partly constructed, that is to say, fabricated on behalf of the majority. It is for this reason that nature sports participants such as the author in this study choose to celebrate the virtues of nature and, therefore, participate in the perpetuation of ideological narratives, via a process of 'delegation'. This, in turn, acts as a defence mechanism that saves them from admitting what is real (i.e., that it is impossible to truly escape from the urban, technology, etc.). Such modes of existence are more widespread in modern societies, as the pace of life has accelerated and individuals are left searching for ways of decreasing their passivity, and increasing their activity, or rather projecting 'a *semblance* of incessant activity' (Van Oenen 2016, 8). The upshot of this is not one of indifference to, or detachment from, resistance, but rather a form of being which attempts to 'embed passivity within the interactive relation' (Van Oenen, 2016, 15) and, therefore, experience life at a slower

pace. This becomes increasingly important when we consider the arguments made in the following section, in which we explore the way in which ultramarathon running may encourage alternative, 'darker' readings of nature.

Ultra Marathon as Dark Ecology

Just over seven hours into day four – the 52-mile stage which is sandwiched between a series of marathons – I am making good time but ultimately, my work rate will prove too high. The expanse of Saharan ground underfoot is flat and sandy, littered with rocks and dead trees, and flanked either side by an endless throng of red and yellow mountains and canyons. Yesterday we spent several hours traversing colossal, energy-sapping sand dunes; thick, dense sand clawing at the ankles, trying to pull you under with each and every step. My feet are swollen and bloody. My trainers are drowned in sand and they tear at the skin on my heels, but still I hold a tenacious pace. The midday sun is high in the sky and completely exposed, relentlessly radiating a raw naked heat which slowly boils my blood and cooks my brain. The hot, dry air gradually heats the electrolyte water in my bottle making it undrinkable, and forcing it down makes me nauseated. In about 30 minutes I'll be too dehydrated to stand.

I've been doing this now for many years. The pain that comes from an ultramarathon is different to the fatigue that manifests during standard exercise. There's the usual peripheral fatigue one feels in the legs, muscular pain and soreness, lethargy and tiredness; but in ultramarathon there's an altogether more visceral experience; a deep guttural torment that manifests long after most have receded to the sanctuary of their living-rooms, an affliction that your body slowly rejects and fights with each passing mile. This extreme fatigue used to scare me, but I now recognize it as an old foe, not to be resented, but accepted as a welcome companion, because it's in these moments of fatigue and anguish and vulnerability, your soul stripped-bare, that you're given the chance to respond, endure, and learn your true self-worth.

I vividly recall an occasion, during the opening days of the race, when I ran into a large clearing that was speckled with dead plants and other foliage, and there,

half immersed by the convections of sand, was a complete and undamaged camel skeleton. Its naked bones jutted from the ground, its curved ribcage picked-clean by the process of time. I was struck with the sudden and profound realisation that I really was in the desert.

There were hundreds of other contestants in this race, but there were substantial stretches of time and space when I saw nothing but miles of dry, flat, arid desert land. Quite often, between the various checkpoints, my only semblance of humanity manifested when another runner, several miles away, passed as a fleeting-spec in my peripheral vision. These were the moments I most valued during the race; traversing alone the desert plains that few before me had travelled as the sun slowly cooked my central nervous system, watched indifferently by colossal desert canyons that cared not for my presence, existence, or survival. My only company were the critters (beetles, scorpions and snakes) buried in the sand underfoot. I followed the generally-prescribed route, but from time-to-time I was compelled to take a somewhat drunken, swaying path on the landscape in the vain hope that I was, perhaps, the only person ever to have trodden this terrain. My footsteps crunched lightly on the ground as I moved, but were instantaneously lost to the vast emptiness. There was an overwhelming sense of the here and now, a mindfulness, that this step, in this place, at this time, would never be repeated.

This reflection contains many of the observations listed in other sections: the author's disenchantment with the taskscape; the intervening presence of non-humans (i.e., trainers, 'critters') and the overwhelming sense of (interpassive) escape brought on by running in the desert. At the same time, however, there is a distinct change in tone during this passage which suggests an altogether different relationship with nature. The author's words are sombre, the tone is bleak, and the movements being described seem laboured and painful. These are not the words of a person who feels harmony with nature (Brymer and Gray 2009), nor are they the words of someone who believes that these landscapes can be easily 'tasked' (Howe and Morris 2009). Furthermore, the transcendence, if any is experienced, is unlike that experienced by Atkinson's (2011, 2016) fell-runners. It is not joyful and uplifting but terrifying and ugly. Nature is not seen as a friend, but neither is it seen as an enemy, but rather a 'foe' that is hostile and unfriendly. In a word, nature is 'dark' (Morton 2007, 2010, 2016).

Morton's (2007, 104) dark ecology is a 'perverse, melancholy ethics that refuses to digest the object into an ideal form'. It is a mode of existence in which nature is treated as strange rather than familiar, and the individual is encouraged to question reified versions of nature in both their aesthetic and experiential forms. As Morton (2016, 125) explains:

ecological awareness is dark, insofar as its essence is unspeakable. It is dark, insofar as illumination leads to a greater sense of entrapment. It is dark, because it compels us to recognise the melancholic wounds that make us up – the shocks and traumas and cataclysms that have made oxygen for our lungs to breathe, lungs out of swim bladders, and crushing, humiliating reason out of human domination on earth. But it is also dark because it is weird.

For Žižek (2015), achieving such ecological awareness requires us to dispense with three orthodox perceptions. Firstly, we must learn to dispense with the notion that we are able to encounter a pure nature, untouched by human intervention. This becomes increasingly significant in the era of the anthropocene (Wark 2015), in which human activity is said to become a salient factor in geological change. This was evident, for instance, in the previous section when we described the way in which ultra-running landscapes can be constructed in rationally organised ways in the interests of capital accumulation. The number of people now inhabiting planet Earth, combined with our appetite for expansion and exploration, demonstrates the end of nature as an independent force. We are no longer, therefore, able to think of ourselves as a species that is influenced by larger forces - 'now we are those larger forces' (McKibben 2003, xiv).

Secondly, we must learn that human activity cannot be separated from nature's influence. 'Nature is not an abstract 'in itself' but primarily the counterforce that we encounter in our labour' (Žižek 2015, 4), as per the manner in which non-humans intervene in the author's experience of a run. In this segment of narrative, we learn of the agency that is being exercised by the 'colossal, energy sapping sand dunes' and how the 'hot, dry air' heats the electrolytes in his water bottle to the point that it becomes undrinkable. In doing so, the various 'intermediaries' violently interrupt the 'semiotic flows' (Michael 2001, 116) between runner and the landscape, which make it difficult for the author to appreciate the sublime characteristics of nature. The level of pain

induced by these obstacles is 'more visceral' than other forms of exercise, in that it permeates every ounce of his muscles, and in these moments the author begins to appreciate the immense power of nature as manifest through his bodily fatigue. This sense of awe is inherently perverse, as in realising how deeply connected we are to nature, we both surrender ourselves to non-human objects while being humbled by the fragile and unstable nature of human experience (Morton 2016).

However, the most important feature of a dark ecological awareness, and the one that requires the biggest leap of faith, is to dispense with the fiction of a stable nature, disturbed by human intervention. Nature is already disturbed and out of joint, and needs to be recognised as such if we are to appreciate its profound effect(s) on human life (Morton 2016; Wark 2015). This is most evident in the author's recollection of the dead camel in the desert, in which the baron, savage and destructive qualities of nature are laid bare to his audience. At this moment, the author discovers the thing that he has been trying to avoid – death and decapitation, which is arguably more pointed given the author's professional background as a practitioner of health and wellbeing. Yet, despite this sense of melancholia, the author reaches the profound realisation that he 'really was in the desert'. This further illustrates how dark ecological experiences such as those that are encouraged by ultramarathon running can stimulate a disruption in the aesthetic-causal notion of nature that can shock and disturb the participant in perverse yet positive ways. In addition, it requires the 'necessarily queer idea that we want to stay with a dying world' (Morton 2007, 185). In witnessing the skeleton remains of the camel, the author is encouraged to consider his own mortality while facing up to the realisation that he is deeply implicated in this process of death and decay.

Conclusion

This article has sought to consider how nature and culture coalesce in the sport of ultramarathon running. Primarily, this aim was presented as a way of navigating the distinction between nature and culture, by exploring how such a distinction is dissolved in the ways in which a participant lost their sense of individuality as it merged with the natural surroundings.

Consequently, while nature sports can entail elements of 'nature mysticism' (Parry et al. 2007, 104), we were unconvinced by accounts that conceptualised nature's

'mysticism', and felt that the meaning of these transcendental practices extended beyond the 'unadulterated now' (Thorpe and Rinehart 2010, 4). Instead, one of the most important implications of nature's mysticism is that it is deeply tied to action and commitment. Accordingly, in view of both the literature and the author's narrative, the following experiences were identified.

First, in conjunction with other extreme nature sports, the author's accounts of ultramarathon running provided a clear interpretation of how the sport is closely related to nature and, in particular, the environments in which the sport takes place. Crucial here were the affordances (Ingold 2000) that allowed the author to engage practically with the lived environment, both constraining and accommodating his behaviour. The mountains, forests and valleys were perceived to be beautiful and picturesque, a relationship that was 'dialogical' (Folch-Serra 1990) in that the meanings attached to any given landscape were both 'anchored' and 'destabilised' as the author's body encountered them. Accordingly, rather than viewing nature as a taskscape, from which the 'task' of running in the quickest time possible could be achieved, for the author, an alternative account was presented, whereby the 'task' no longer mattered. Despite the long hours of training, the author was willing to permit a more 'direct' relationship with nature through which the unfamiliarity of the environment was directly appreciated. At the core of this experience was a partial merging with his surroundings, in which nature moved from being an 'other over there', to being fused with the self in the 'here and now' (Langer 1990).

Second, we identified a level of interpassivity in the author's experiences. That is, while the author lamented the routine trappings of everyday life in Western late-capitalist societies, in which technology, work and over-crowded cities are ubiquitous, and the negative connotations associated with his 'daily routine' and the sense of meaninglessness derived from modern 'fabrications' such as 'money, power, and work' prevailed, the sense of escape from these various 'contrivances' was reflected in the primal and immersive experience of ultramarathon running. Nevertheless, what emerged from such accounts was how these experiences centered on the extent to which the author's narrative paradoxically highlighted underlying contentions regarding the desire to use ultramarathon as a form of escapism. That is, while the sports were marketed as a form of escapism, such 'escape' and liberation was a constitutive feature of the sport's marketing. While these events were rationalised and marketed as 'escapist' pursuits, the author interpassively submitted to the illegitimacy of such

hegemonic interpretations. Indeed, it was this sense of contradiction which underscored a 'darker' reading of nature.

Accordingly, in the penultimate section, we proposed that the author's experiences could be considered in accordance with Morton's 'dark ecology'. The profound effect of seeing the decayed remains of a dead camel – an affect that emphasized the author's realization that he was 'in the desert' – highlighted how 'nature' was no longer 'out there' and no longer an environment from which the task of running was simply completed. Instead, the binary between nature and culture, and between self and nature, had been dissolved through a sense of melancholia and the abject realization of nature's 'dark ecology'.

Certainly, the application of Morton's 'dark ecology' to the case of ultramarathon running is not an attempt to present nature as inherently exotic and mysterious, a perspective that, while acknowledging the 'threat' posed by nature, simply reinstates a privileged neocolonial, western-centric appreciation (Graulund 2006). Instead, Morton's (2007, 2010) perspective is one that promotes a form of ecological entanglement. Here, nature is not neutral, but rather, it is always defined, shaped and interpreted by the spaces in which it appears. Consequently, while Morton (2007, 2010, 2016) highlights that recent interpretations of nature have stressed the ecological impact of human beings, in contrast, he has emphasized the interdependence between humans and nature.

It is here that the experience of nature in ultramarathon running can be understood in accordance with Morton's notion of the 'mesh' (Morton 2010). Like a mesh, the concept of nature is both hard and delicate. Its premise is firmly held and staunchly defended, but can gradually unravel through reflexive embodied practice(s) such as those described in this paper. It is also a material that is characterised by a series of dense interconnections which are difficult to clearly delineate. Since the author is so embedded in this mesh, it is difficult to ascertain where nature ends and humanity begins. His feet become bloody from the sand in his shoes, the dunes swell his ankles, and the sun cooks his brain, resulting in nausea and panic, but as the human and non-human interact they become part of the same fabric. This merger carries with it a 'perilous sense of vulnerability' (Morton 2010, 25), but it is these moments that the runners crave. They thrive off a baroque sensibility in which the body is construed as a 'site of impurity and corruptibility, at once the locus of pleasure and suffering, of the most beautiful seductions and the basest deceptions' (Clark 2001, 18). As a

consequence, ultramarathon running helps the author to realise nature for what it is – a disparate number of interconnected factors that never add up to a coherent whole.

Accordingly, we argue that such a realization is closely tied to notions of reflexivity and in the interdependence that locates such reflexivity as forged in/with nature. As noted above, it is through reflexivity that the concept of nature both exists, but also, unravels. For Atkinson (2010a, 1259), reflexivity ‘is first achieved when one is literally forced to face the “essence” of one’s self through rigorous movement and guided meditation’. As a form of ‘knowing’, reflexivity has been considered in relation to the way it is embodied (Burns 2003) so that individual actions are subject to interpretation.

Nevertheless, while remaining critical of these perspectives, we concur with Macnaghten and Urry (1998, 157 [italics added]) that ‘notions of reflexivity need to be connected to people’s sense of agency, that is, to their felt ability to structure or influence events through *their actions*’. Indeed, it is in accounting for these ‘actions’ that understandings of reflexivity can be ecologically reconfigured so that the relationship between nature, culture and human action(s) can be collectively considered. Moreover, it is by examining accounts of these actions that Morton’s ‘dark ecology’ can be extended in the context of sport.

For instance, paradigmatically, Morton’s (2013) work follows the ‘object-oriented ontology’ perspective (OOO). This approach asserts that ‘The world is made of things that elude any other kind of knowing’ (Wark 2017, 270) and that ‘objects’, whether these be real or fictional, human or non-human, are autonomous and exist beyond human interpretation. The obverse of an object means that no object is ever complete. By way of explanation, Wark (2017) highlights how Morton uses an example from Husserl to make sense of this withdrawal. By ‘Holding a coin, one sees its face. But you can’t see the other side of the coin *as the other side*. You can only flip it over and make it *this side*.’ (Wark 2017, 272 [italics in original]).

While we remain open to Morton’s ‘dark ecology’, and the benefits that it can have when studying nature and sport, we are also open to Ward’s critique that the OOO approach ‘continually represses ... the labor or praxis via which a thing is known’ (Wark 2017, 272). For Wark (2017), it is ‘a mix of the human and inhuman’ which provides a form of praxis that allows, in the first instance, for the ‘object’ – ‘nature’ – to be contemplated through action (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998).

When applied to the current study, it is clear that such praxis forms an integral part of the author's understanding of 'nature' as *something* that is indelibly linked to the activity of ultramarathon running and which dissolves any nature and culture dichotomy. As noted by Wark (2017), this is not a simple reinsertion of the subject-object relationship, but rather, a consideration of the ways in which nature and society are interdependently conceived to the point that such distinctions can be upheld and dissolved through embodied actions that orientate individuals' perception of where nature begins and ends. It is these practices and actions (Macnaghten and Urry 1998) – processes of orientation (Black 2018) – that are performed through levels of praxis (taskscape/non-taskscape, interpassive and dark) and which serve to locate 'our' orientation to nature.

Notes

¹ 'Spartan Race' is a franchised obstacle race, which began in the US.

² Ultramarathons do not always take place in 'natural' environments. The actual criterion for classification is broad, and the substance of a given ultramarathon comprises absolute race distance, terrain, environmental conditions and challenge difficulty.

³ Throughout this paper we use imperial measures of distance. For those readers more familiar with the metric system, 1 mile is approximately equal to 1.7 kilometers.

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