

Everyman's Right and the Politics of Walking: Identity, Contestation, and Semiotics while on the Trail

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Introduction

This research project is a work in progress. I argue that the act of walking is so commonplace that we rarely think about how it is political. The acts of walking, hiking, running, cycling, and the access to nature have multiple implications that are rarely considered within the discipline of political science. As rare as such discussions are, walking and hiking in comparative context is even rarer still. I examine various aspects of the politics of walking through multiple lens in this paper, and I divide the topic into five broad categories: how walking is political, the motivations to walk, the politics of creating trails, the semiotics of trails, and notes on more inclusive trails. The purpose is to explore the intersection of walking (including hiking and, to a lesser extent, running and cycling) with politics in multiple ways. My plan is to use this exploration as the basis for a manuscript proposal about the politics of walking in the United States and northern Europe.

What is Political about Walking?

Walking is the most basic and oldest form of human locomotion, yet it is rarely considered by the discipline of political science, perhaps because it is so common. Walking is at the intersection of public health, recreation, infrastructure, public planning, environmental policy, and property rights, requiring a management of competing interests. The second half of the twentieth century saw a significant decline in walking across economically developed societies because of the increasing dominance of automobiles and other motorized transportation. Yet, walking remains a prevalent form of exercise, social interaction, and entertainment. If we think of popular culture as “a form of entertainment that is mass produced or is made available to large numbers of people,” requiring no

special knowledge to be enjoyed,¹ then walking, hiking, rambling, and other forms of perambulation fit into this category.²

To provide an example about how walking intersects with our daily lives, consider my walk to work on a university campus: The walk to campus is only about two miles; however, the first half mile is fraught with a dilemma. The only access to the borough center from my housing development is a two-lane road, with a speed limit of 40mph (65kph), which is more often ignored than observed, and no sidewalks. The berms of the road are narrow, and despite often being used by Plain People,³ most would consider it extremely dangerous. The other option is to access the borough through a fallow field, which is privately owned land. Occasionally people walk through, or children play on it, but its use is legally questionable.⁴ Faced with unpalatable options, I usually drive to the local grocery store, park my car in a relatively large lot, thereby bypassing the dangerous road and private property. From the grocery, it is a straight path past an eighteenth-century tavern that served as the county's first courthouse, historic cemeteries, and a famous college "dive bar."⁵ I traverse a neighborhood where many students live in off-campus housing, which is notorious for its Saturday night parties. The street ends at the intersection of a rails-to-trail path that was once a conveyance corridor bringing students to campus by train. From the rail-trail, a set of dodgy stairs some female students refer to as "the rape stairs," because escaping from an attacker would be nearly impossible in a hurry, that surmounts the hill upon which the campus sits. I must cross a campus ring road dodging faculty, students, and staff who all seem to be late for class or an appointment. I have reached the relative safety of an auto-free campus quad, even though one should be mindful to the cyclists who are often late as well. The 1.6-mile (2km) trip takes a little over 20 minutes, 25 minutes if I stop for a coffee at the local convenience store.

My walk incorporates many of the aspects of the politics of walking: how transportation and infrastructure money is spent, the balance between modes of transportation, between private and public interests, the development of commercial enterprises, as well as determining who has the

¹ Street, 1997:7.

² Walton, 2013. There is an interaction between the act of walking and popular culture, and it has prompted several films, including *Wild* (2014), *The Way* (2010), and *Ich Bin dann mal weg* (2015) and many popular nonfiction books, such as Bryson 1998, Kerkeling 2009, and Moor 2016.

³ I use this term to distinguish those in my community from an Anabaptist religious tradition, primarily Amish and Mennonites, who often use non-motorized transportation, such as bicycles and horse-and-buggy.

⁴ A sign, old and rusted, warns people that the land is private property; however, I am not aware that the property rights have been enforced.

⁵ A dive bar is a colloquial term for an old-style, unglamorous bar or pub that serves inexpensive drinks. In the United States, dive bars are traditional gathering place for university students.

privilege to safely walk. Along the way, signs and plaques designate what events should be remembered historically. As a social scientist, investigation while on foot ensures a different type of observation, providing a keener sense of a place. The world looks quite different from 3.5 miles per hour versus 35 or 65mph (5kph versus 50 or 100). Taking a stroll through neighborhoods highlights the challenges people face; driving through only provides fleeting glimpses.⁶ Analyzing my excursions by foot creates a problem in nomenclature. My walk is voluntary, I could drive to my office and substantially reduce the amount of physical exertion. Thus, is my decision to walk based on exercise or enjoyment? Is it recreational or motivational? Like many activities, it is hard to assign a single causal motivation for such a simple activity.

Walking has multiple purposes, including entertainment, social interaction, exercise, and improving mental wellbeing. In English, there are several ways in which we can refer to the act of walking depending on the purpose and intent. Terms, such as walking, hiking, and rambling, can be used interchangeably depending on the individual's usage and intent. In this study, I will primarily use the terms walking, hiking, and rambling. Walking will refer to recreational exercise usually taking place in residential, suburban, and urban settings. Hiking, as used particularly in American settings, denotes perambulation involving substantial changes in elevation or particularly long distances. Rambling, particularly in a British setting, is a recreational walk without a particular destination or prescribed path. Each of these terms encompass the varying degrees of entertainment, social interaction, and exercise, as well as improvements in mental wellbeing. We could add additional terms, such as *flâneur*, the act of strolling or sauntering particularly in urban settings, and promenading, walking in a style to see and be seen by others as well; however, for this study, I will leave these terms for a later version. The place where people alternatively walk, hike, bike, ramble, or explore is difficult as well: path, trail, or towpath usually all convey the same idea. In this study I will use the term *trail* to refer to that which is being investigated.⁷

⁶ Consider, for example the work of Helmreich (2013), which sought to better understand New York City by walking every street in the five boroughs.

⁷ In the United States it is common to use the terms *trail* or *path*, interchangeably, to denote where these activities might occur. In a larger context, British terminology makes a distinction: a path is a way specifically made for people on foot, often in a park or alongside a road. On the other hand, a trail is a passage made by people travelling in the wild or uninhabited regions. A secondary definition refers to it as a "rude path."

The Motivations to Walk: Health, Spiritual, Transportation

For the sake of brevity, I will summarize the literatures on the health and safety aspects of walking. Suffice to say, in many global north countries, and increasingly so in the global south, non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as heart disease and diabetes, are fast becoming a public health crisis.⁸ Often this is the result of a lack of a proper diet and exercise. Lower income people and minorities are disproportionately affected by this trend. While exercise can alleviate and reverse many of the maladies, it is often construed as “working out,” particularly with expensive equipment, which is a barrier to those who are economically disadvantaged. Instead, several studies and medical experts suggest that the simple act of walking helps tremendously. But this also raises the question of where one is to walk safely. The benefits of walking are not just physical, it also helps mental and psychological wellbeing as well.⁹ Popular books, such as Williams (2017), Jones (2020) and Louv (2019) have illustrated the physical and psychological importance of humans interacting with nature too.

In an automobile dependent society, walking is an out-of-the-ordinary activity.¹⁰ In her seminal history of walking, Solnit observes that the solitary walker is often viewed with great suspicion. One who is walking in areas where they would normally not venture because of regular discrimination takes a risk.¹¹ The expensive accretions of “hiking,” walking sticks, expensive backpacks, hiking boots, provide a passport to those who can afford such things. Thus, the purchase of such equipment allows people some leeway, but at the same time it creates an economic barrier for those without substantial means. Hence, even as an exercise or leisure time that does not require any special materials, there are still barriers.¹² The idea that someone who is poor, of limited means, might be reconnoitering

⁸ For example, prior to the pandemic, NCDs were viewed as the primary health concern among Caribbean countries. The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) estimated that 78 percent of deaths in the Caribbean could be attributed to NCDs or their associated risk factors in 2010 (PAHO, n.d.; Alleyne 2018; CARICOM, 2008; CARPHA n.d.).

⁹ O'Mara 2021; Mayo Clinic 2019.

¹⁰ The dilemma of the modern walker is captured in the lyrics of the ironic new wave hit, “Walking in L.A.” by Missing Persons. In the lyrics, songwriters Paul Maurice Kelly and Martin John Arminger juxtapose two phrases: “Nobody walks in L.A.” with “Only a nobody walks in L.A.” symbolizing both the norm and status of those who walk.

¹¹ Solnit, 2000: 11.

¹² The “need” for equipment evokes Huxley’s dystopian vision in *Brave New World*, wherein society and humans are programmed by a government comprised of World Controllers to consume rather than to think and philosophize. The Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning muses to his students, “Imagine the folly of allowing people to play elaborate games which do nothing whatsoever to increase consumption. Nowadays the Controllers

neighborhoods or “up to no-good,” is prevalent. Ramshackle clothes, untidy or unfamiliar appearances, can be taken as a sign by locals of ill-intent. Furthermore, those who walk at night, primarily men because of “the moral opprobrium and danger to women,” might be exercising their freedom but are regarded with great trepidation and concern.¹³

The modern walker, especially in urban areas, is an anomaly; hence, the novelist and lecturer, Wil Self argues all walking is political.¹⁴ In a modern age where seeming all information is at the tip of our fingers, our ability to connect with our world, the environment, and each other is severely curtailed by the very technology that many of us have come to rely on. As Putnam famously argued, increased technological advances increases the isolation of individuals.¹⁵ The decline of walking reduces the random interactions between people. Many of us in the global north have become isolated in our automobiles, with luxury, information, and entertainment at our fingertips. Chesters and Smith postulate that with the rise of mass automobile ownership, those without cars, such as hitchhikers, were viewed with increasing suspicion and concern.¹⁶

Many commentators have noted that our increasing reliance on GPS technology and electronic maps have decreased the frequency of “happy mistakes,” where we learn more than if we found the thing we were searching for.¹⁷ The same technology that helps us navigate the world, makes people ever more dependent on it for that same navigation. Rather than exploring, seeking, finding, and happy mistakes, we rely on electronic maps. Instead of enjoying nature, we count how many steps we have taken. The debate about the role of technology and technology companies in modern life and its potential to distract us or prevent “deep thinking” or exploring has a multitude of political consequences.¹⁸ Walkers-writers frequently report their thoughts and insights are significantly enhanced during perambulations. Thomas Hobbes, for example, had a special cane constructed with an ink well so he could jot down notes during his walks, lest he lose the idea before returning home.¹⁹ Many walkers,

won't approve of any new game unless it can be shown that it requires at least as much apparatus as the most complicated of existing games” (Huxley 1932: 20).

¹³ Beaumont 2020: 47. Furthermore, Beaumont's discussion of the etymological origins of the word street provides illumination into how we use the word and the impact on how certain activities are understood (3).

¹⁴ Self, 2012.

¹⁵ Putnam, 1995.

¹⁶ Chesters and Smith, 2001.

¹⁷ In research and library terms, this would be the “law of the good neighbor,” wherein the information or inspiration one is looking for is not in the book you are seeking, but in the books that are adjacent to it on the shelf (de la Durantaye 2009).

¹⁸ Newport 2019, 2016; Lanier 2017; Chatfield 2014.

¹⁹ Solnit 2000: 16.

myself included, will use the note or sound recording apps on their smart phones to do the same. The line between inspiration and distraction is fine indeed.

Most religious traditions have some form pilgrimage that includes walking. Indeed, one of the earliest examples of English-language literature, *The Canterbury Tales* (1392), is based on a group of people, from all walks of life, making a pilgrimage to the famed cathedral. Some of the most famous walks today, such as El Camino de Santiago, began, and ostensibly still are, the routes of religious pilgrims. This practice of pilgrimage extends around the world, in many different forms, across a wide variety of spiritual beliefs.

The ubiquity of pilgrimages suggests that the act of walking together is a powerful method of community formation. It creates a shared experience, with stories that can be shared and retold. But group walking and community formation is not limited to religious experiences. For example, the Scouting movement uses hike as a bonding and team-building activity. Political movements, of all varieties, use walks and marches to protest, advocate, and raise awareness about issues. These mass walks, which are given various names to signify importance or aims, helping to build community and raise awareness through shared experiences and stories. Often these walks, marches, and/or protest involve hardship or tribulation that demonstrate the resolve of the group and recruits new members. Thus, the Salt March of 1930, led by Mohandas Gandhi, the AIDS Walks beginning in the 1980s, and the Women's March of 2017, all served a purpose by physically demonstrating the strength of the movement, to voice displeasure or support, and to build camaraderie and community among the followers. Thus, walks, marches, and/or runs become an important tool in coalescing political action.

Walking, regardless of motivation, whether political or recreational, requires a space to do so. Thus, a tension between being able to walk and property ownership emerges. Roads and streets in the first half of the twentieth century were increasingly given over to automobiles, while sidewalks, a path for pedestrians, are increasingly rare or not accessible. With the focus on the automobile as the primary mode of transportation, public space was dramatically changed. As Norton argues, streets in the United States prior to 1915 were multiuse thoroughfares, where vendors, children at play, casual social gatherings, and perambulation all coexisted. After 1930, however, these same streets were the exclusive domain of automobiles. Implicit in this change from pedestrians to automotive transportation, including the decline of public transportation networks, is a question of power: Who has the ability to inhabit the street? Norton questions why it becomes the purview of the motorist to honk a pedestrian out of the

way, rather than the other way around.²⁰ This primacy of the automobile led one official in the early 1960s to opine, “The Pedestrian remains the largest single obstacle to free traffic movement.”²¹

While politicians often expressed concern about crime, surely a winning strategy during elections, pedestrian deaths typically outnumber homicides. In fact, during the so-called homicide surge in New York during the 1990s, more than double the number of people died as pedestrians than were murdered.²² Highway injuries remain one of the top ten reason of death in most of the world.²³ And that trend continued, despite significantly reduced automobile traffic during the pandemic.²⁴

The origins of the debate about where, when, and how people are legally allowed to walk, popularly known as the “right to roam,” predates the early modern period of Europe. For example, in Britain the process of enclosures (inclosures) of formerly public lands before the agricultural and industrial revolutions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries help shaped the debate about rambling in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Prior to the enclosures, much of Britain’s land was held publicly, or at least communally. Everyone in the village, regardless of status or wealth, had the right to graze animals and to gather food and fuel. Since coordinated labor was necessary to undertake planting and harvests, discussion about when and what to plant was made by the collective community rather than an individual. The enclosure process was a series of parliamentary acts creating a legal process whereby land was privatized, and smaller farms were combined to make larger ones. This process was deemed necessary to rationalize and modernize the agriculture process in Britain. Yet, it created a significant loss of political and economic power for commoners.

As walls and fences were erected, and land was coalesced under the private property of a single person or family, increasingly those without significant economic means, lost access to wild foods, such as berries and mushrooms, and the ability to gather firewood, the only source of fuel for households.²⁵ Opposition to the enclosures were substantial, but ultimately futile.²⁶ The owners of such lands argued

²⁰ Norton, 2008: 1-18, note especially pages 6-7.

²¹ Quoted in Rudofsky 1982:106.

²² Solnit, 2000: 254.

²³ World Health Organization, 2020. The World Health Organization does not distinguish between those killed in automobiles and those killed by automobiles; however, from other data, it is safe to assume the number of pedestrian deaths is substantial. See also: Eid and Abu-Zidan, 2015; Charter, Gabbe, and Mitra, 2017; Yasin, Grivna, and Abu-Zidan, 2020.

²⁴ Romero 2022.

²⁵ For a history of the enclosures, see Overton 2010.

²⁶ For example, the work of John Clare (1793-1864), the Northampton peasant poet, frequently lamented the enclosure process, and the loss of freely wandering. In his poem, “The Mores,” he wrote, “Unbounded freedom rules the wandering scene / Nor fence of ownership crept in between / To hide the prospect of the following eye /

that the incursion of people on the now private land would spoil hunting, a new and increasingly popular sport among the gentry. Hence, the battle over access to uncultivated areas was transformed from debate about economics to one about leisure time. Food and diet remained a key element: game for the rich, berries and herbs for the commoners. These pastimes, like most, are loaded with the overtones of social prestige.²⁷

During the mass urbanization of nineteenth century industrialization, former agricultural workers migrated to often overcrowded, burgeoning urban centers. Centered around new factories, life in cities were laden with high levels of poverty and pollution. As conurbation occurred, with gentry and nouveau riche relocating to country homes to escape urban problems, fresh air and nature were further out of reach for the urban poor and the purview of the rich. Recreation, leisure, and access to nature were primary concerns of many nineteenth century writers.²⁸

Holt argues that the Puritanical tradition in England particularly has emphasized the importance of work; leisure has been trivialized. Yet, this calculation underestimates, both physically and psychologically, of the importance of leisure time. Whether it is walking or other forms of diversions, time away from the demands of a work life are necessary for rejuvenation and, for most, are what makes life interesting and pleasurable. But diversions and pastimes are “loaded with connotations of social prestige.” Hunting in Britain, hence access to the outdoors, was seen as the purview of the upper class. For working class people, the struggle for access to nature and leisure were framed as a case of the rights of ‘property,’ highly valued in the British legal tradition, versus the rights of ‘people,’ particularly in the 1920s and 1930s.²⁹ Following demands from the working class, the introduction of parliamentary acts, such as The Access to Mountains (Scotland) Bill in 1884, guaranteed access to uncultivated mountains in Scotland, later expanded to the rest of Britain, for the purpose of recreation

Its only bondage was the circling sky.” Reeves argued that Clare’s poetry had a quality of “skilled journalism or reporting” that provided a sense of what nature was like not found among his contemporaries. Although there is a debate among historians about the need and efficacy of enclosures, Reeves nonetheless argues that the process was unfair to the working class: “During the period of the Industrial Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars [the cottage farmer] class was obliged to struggle hopelessly against rising prices and the stranglehold of enclosure, by which meant the open fields and commons where small holders grazed their animals were legally stolen in the interest of the large landowners.” (Clare, 1957: xiii, xviii).

²⁷ Holt, 1989: 41.

²⁸ For example, Dickens described Coketown (a stand-in for Preston) in *Hard Times* as a place of polluted rivers and smoke-filled air, where there were scanty any forms of entertainment or diversion from the repetitive and monotonous work that dominated workers’ lives (Dickens 1854:1-5; 2004:27-30). Likewise, Gaskell illustrates the importance of walking and leisure to the working-class people in *Mary Barton* (Gaskell 1848: chapter 1; 2003:5-9).

²⁹ Holt 1989: 40-41.

or study.³⁰ The piece meal approach would be continued until the adoption of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949, which was, in part, prompted by the mass trespass incident at Kinder Scout, outside Manchester, in 1932, where a group laboring hikers intentional violated private property.³¹

In northern Europe, especially Scandinavia, a different tradition emerged where the ability of people to access uncultivated land for leisure or gathering is an enshrined right. Alternatively known as the Right to Roam, Everyman's Rights, or the Right of Public Access to the Wilderness, the concept is broadly understood "as the right to move about, stay and camp on another's land and utilise certain natural products without the consent of the landowner."³² Countries have different rules to implement under what circumstances can be enjoyed and most prevent any individuals from encroaching on buildings or dwellings by at least 500 meters (about a third of a mile). Most recently, Scotland introduced the right to roam in The Land Reform Act 2003.³³

Philosophical differences about how nature should be conceived help us understand and appreciate the differences in philosophy and ideology of the environment. Thus, is nature a set of resources to be exploited, a view dating to Mackinder,³⁴ who argued that the most powerful countries are those with the most territory and, therefore, the most exploitable resources? Or is the environment the natural system of all planetary life, including humans, where all the component parts make a whole? It is axiomatic that both are true; however, in thinking about where individual thinkers and policymakers place their emphasis in terms of developing rules, regulation, laws and policies.

Access to Trails and Recreation

In terms of policymaking, private (read exclusive) property manifests itself today in the perpetuation of inequalities. Racial and ethnic minorities, differently abled, and women are often denied access to walking, leisure, and recreational activities through safety concerns in many parts of the world. The 2020s, with the focus on the pandemic and racial justice, as well as exercise and fitness in

³⁰ Holt 1989: 40.

³¹ The incident has taken on a mythical aura, and its true significance is debated. Stephenson, 1989: 153-163. See also the Hayfield Kinder Trespass Group's website, KinderTrespass.org.uk.

³² Tuunanen, Tarasti, and Rautianen, 2015: 9.

³³ Wrightman, 2015; Government of Scotland, 2005.

³⁴ Mackinder, 1904, 1943.

an era of social distancing, has directed attention on who has access to recreation and exercise. For example, the case of Ahmaud Arbery, who was killed in February 2020 in a Georgia neighborhood, was justified on the claim that he was suspicious and did not belong in the neighborhood where he was jogging.³⁵ Denying the poor, or the disadvantaged, access to leisure and recreation, that is restorative, creates bigger social problems, including physical and mental health issues. This extends to other activities as well. Thus, we find those birdwatchers who are black, for example, being subjected to stereotyping and abuse and women subjected to harassment and violence while engaging in exercise.³⁶ The theme of access and privilege while walking permeates the popular literature of travel and hiking. For example, in the opening pages of his bestselling memoir of hiking the Appalachian Trail, Bryson recounts the dangers of through hiking, including to women.³⁷ Kerkeling notes his female friends face sexual harassment and assault on the Camino de Santiago.³⁸

One does not have to be walking long before you realize the power dynamics of who is safe to walk. While walking is free, healthy, and cathartic, it can be dangerous. Certainly, in a place like the United States, women and people of color can find it difficult to carefreely stroll through neighborhoods or to enjoy nature in ways that the privileged, the wealthy, and especially men can.³⁹ The cases of Ahmad Aubrey and Christian Cooper (the Central Park bird watcher) are but examples. But this is true in other countries, with lower crime rates, as well. In January 2022, a young schoolteacher, musician, and athlete, Ashling Murphy, was attacked and murdered in a small town in central Ireland while going for a run along a greenway canal. The murder sent cultural and political shockwaves through the country that has recently had a reckoning of how women and babies were treated by homes, run by the state and the Catholic Church throughout the twentieth century. The subsequent conversation about the treatment of residents in the *Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation* report (2021) offered hope that the treatment of women had improved, that the government, politicians, and society were committed to a safer society. But the death of Murphy raised questions about the level of that progress and the safety of women in the country.⁴⁰ Murphy's funeral was broadcast on television where both the President and Taoiseach attended, and her murder made news outside of Ireland as well. A

³⁵ Fausset, 2021.

³⁶ Nir, 2020; Clerkin, 2020; Whitfield, 2020; Joynton 2021.

³⁷ Bryson, 1998: 6-7.

³⁸ Kerkeling, 2006, page 194.

³⁹ According to one report (Fearson and Hoeffler 2014), interpersonal violence is responsible for nine times the number of deaths than collective violence, such as war and terrorism.

⁴⁰ Lord 2022; Power, Nugent, and Raleigh 2022.

prominent Irish author and commentator used his column to ask readers, particularly, to consider explain how women looked at and experienced the world differently than men, using the example of his family to help the reality of safety and privilege:

Women learn from girlhood to be cartographers. They make maps in their heads, atlases of danger, charts of the reefs and shoals around which they must plot their course, away from misogynist men.⁴¹

On his walk across the United States, this is an early lesson for Forsthoefel. Less than ten miles into his 4,000-mile walk, he encounters a group of Latino men remarkably close to his home. It is startling for him to encounter these men he would likely not otherwise see in his daily life. Initially he is concerned for his own safety.⁴²

But still, I felt something was missing on that path, and it had nothing to do with money or accumulation or achievement. It had something to do with the fact that I was a living mystery, and so were all of the neighbors I'd never met, none of us were gathering together to discuss that astonishing phenomenon, the phenomenon of our existence and all the questions that came with it. No one seemed to care. No one even seemed to notice.⁴³

For all the psychological good, and health benefits, that walking and other similar outdoor activities may incur, there remain significant barriers to those who can participate. This section has discussed a few communities, but other groups can be added to this list as well. For example, indigenous communities and those who have physical disabilities often find it difficult to access these benefits as well.

The Politics of Creating Trails and Building Communities

Moor notes that the creation of a walking trail is a connection between humans and other animals. Most trails, and ultimately roads and transportation corridors, do not appear out of nowhere. Typically, they begin as animal traces, where the easiest, most energy economical route is found through a terrain.⁴⁴ The decisions to build multiuse paths, suitable for walking, running, and bicycles,

⁴¹ O'Toole 2022.

⁴² Forsthoefel, 2017, pages 5-10.

⁴³ Forsthoefel, 2017, page 7.

⁴⁴ Moor 2016: 29-58

while appearing to be apolitical, in fact, has political implications in terms of choosing how to spend government and community resources.

It is increasingly common for communities to “recycle” abandoned transportation infrastructures into walking and cycling paths. Among the abandoned infrastructures that have been repurposed as paths are canal towpaths,⁴⁵ railway rights-of-way, trolley car lines, automobile roads, and even subway lines. One of the earliest projects to convert an existing infrastructure was along the route of the Chesapeake and Ohio (C&O) Canal from Washington DC to Cumberland, Maryland. The canal, 184.5 miles (297 kilometers) in length, was constructed primarily in the 1820s and 1830s and designed to make barge traffic navigable along the Potomac River. The canal commercially transported several goods along the river, including coal, from 1830 until a flood causes extensive damage in 1924. In 1939 the US government obtained the track of land, after which members of Congress formulated plans to turn the canal into an automotive parkway so that the river’s natural beauty could be enjoyed widely. Famously, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, an avid hiker, organized and led an eight-day hike in 1954 to call attention to what would be lost.⁴⁶ Eventually, the plans to create a highway would be abandoned, the canal would become a National Monument, and later a National Park in 1971.⁴⁷

Evolution of Trails / Walking Paths



⁴⁵ Towpaths were developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries alongside canals or navigable rivers and is the path created where mules or other animals towed the barge. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the oldest reference to the word towpath, is from the diaries of George Washington in 1788, in which he mentions the term “tow path” on the Maryland side of the river. See: George Washington, *The Diaries of George Washington*, edited by John Clement Fitzpatrick (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1925), Volume 2, page 361.

⁴⁶ In another strand of research, future incarnations of this paper will include the importance of Douglas as a patron in building a trail under the perspective of exclusive land ownership in the United States.

⁴⁷ High, 2015; Reel, 2004; US National Park Service, 1991; and Kyle, 1983.

In the United States, the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC), a non-profit group founded in 1986, is currently the most prominent advocate for creating trails for recreational purposes. It is notable that the RTC touts the both the health benefits opportunities created by trails as well as the creation and building of communities. Utilizing a provision of the Railroad Revitalization and Regulatory Act of 1976, the RTC raises funds and coordinates the preservation of abandoned railroad line for the purpose of creating publicly accessible trails. In doing so, the RTC makes the case that there are significant economic incentives for creating paths and trails on preexisting transportation lines, including economic and tourism development.⁴⁸ Although, generally embraced by communities across the United States, there is opposition as well.⁴⁹

Semiotics: The Messages of Trails

Most trails and walking paths, whether through rural areas or urban/suburban settings, post signs. The signs can be directions reminding the traveler how to remain on the path.⁵⁰ Others can point out interesting features, a type of plant, the kind of animals that might be seen, rules and regulations, significant buildings, and/or important historical events. Lowenthal argues that memory and nostalgia are powerful motivators that humans to travel. If a person believes that they have a connection to a place or a person, even if that connection is tenuous, then one is more likely to engage in travel that explores that connection. He mentions the impulse of Americans, presumably white Americans, to want to travel to Europe rather than other places, to connect with “their” history. The desire to see, experience, or express adoration for a place or person(s) prompt many to explore. Travelers and tourist often express a desire to “walk in the steps” of others.⁵¹ Trails make this easier. For example, an introductory plaque for the Blind Willie McTell Trail in Statesboro, Georgia, honoring the life of a man largely obscured by history, invites the visitor to retrace his footsteps. It is a powerful motivator for people to symbolically connect with a person, idea, or place.

As mentioned above, walking can help create communities. Neighborhood walks facilitate random interactions between people, breaking down barriers and creating social trust. Trails help to

⁴⁸ Kapp, 2020.

⁴⁹ Kirk Teska, “The Dark Secrets of Rail Trails,” Foundation for Economic Education, 1 December 2004, <https://fee.org/articles/the-dark-secrets-of-rail-trails/>.

⁵⁰ It is the case, with long distance trails there are far fewer signs. For example, on the Appalachian Trail there are few signs, relying instead on the iconic white hashes painted on trees to designate the path.

⁵¹ Lowenthal, 1975.

build civic relationship as well. In the United States it is a social convention to greet or acknowledge other walkers/hikers. (This is not the case in most of Europe, with Ireland being an exception.⁵²) There are other ways in which we can study communication and interaction, including semiotics, the study of signs and symbols. Most trails have bulletin boards offering community announcements, news, and information, including upcoming festivals, picnics, runs, and other local activities. The message boards can also disseminate information about lost items or pets, it is a continuation of non-electronic information in a social media age. Along the Appalachian Trail, periodic wooden boxes contain spiral notebooks wrapped in plastic, where hikers record thoughts and messages. Often these messages are little more than an affirmation that people enjoyed the trail. On occasion, however, the notebooks can be cathartic or offer warnings about trail hazards.

Signs place by those who manage the trails carry a patina of authority. The purpose of any sign on a trail is education, endeavoring to inform the hiker-walker about something, such as hazards, boundaries, or directions. I distinguish between two primary signs: an interpretive sign and a historical marker. The first offers additional information and provides context, while the latter commemorates the location where a significant historical event occurred.⁵³ Much like displays in a museum, information signs help to define the history and values of a community, both nationally and locally. This definition of a community is simultaneously for members of the community (internal definition), and for visitors (external definition). Like museums, these signs, I argue contain authoritative weight with the public that is greater than other sources of historical information.⁵⁴ Explanatory signs, which elucidate history of the trail, historical events of the vicinity, or a unique feature, are a mainstay of many trails. The signs can point out natural features, how the resources of the area were utilized, or events and incidents that may have occurred on or near the trail. They are limited in terms of space, and an expert might question the completeness or accuracy of these signs, which typically range from 200 to 400 words at most. White argues that the distillation of historical events into an understandable narrative is the primary task of a historian. The process he refers to as *emplotment*, involves taking a great deal of information

⁵² However, I have noticed that reaching a destination after a walk often prompts a conversation among people. For example, atop Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh, there are frequently communal conversations among different groups.

⁵³ In the United States, historical signs are usually sturdy metal signs with official state or federal insignia. The construction of these signs often conveys a durability that suggests permanence. For examples, see Appendix 2. A more comprehensive comparison between historical markers will be included in future versions.

⁵⁴ Gray, 2015: 2,13; Luke, 2002; Rosenzweig and Thelen, 1998:20-21,90-92.

and sorting incidents, people, and trends into a discernable and coherent narrative.⁵⁵ These signs, in their omissions, tend to reinforce the dominant narrative of a community's history, offering a rosier picture of events and people. Those who have faced historical discrimination and prejudices claim their stories are not told and prefer a deeper more contextualized account. In a limited number of words, it is difficult to outline debates, provide details and alternative explanations. Nonetheless, the lessons and stories are impactful and help shape a narrative that ties the trail to the identity of the community. As Lowenthal observed, the stories and symbols need not be completely accurate, "they need only convince us that we are connected with something that really did happen in the past."⁵⁶

But there is a deeper significance suggesting, "This is who we are; this is our heritage..." The signs are a form of socialization, providing a story about the people and the land. Sometimes, the signs can create a sense of nostalgia for a time that no longer is, and perhaps never was. Weil argued that a community was dependent on its history, "A collective has its roots in the past... we possess no other life, no other living sap, than the treasures stored up from the past and digested, assimilated, and created afresh by us."⁵⁷ Storytelling is an important part of defining *us*, argues Chamberlain. Stories bind people together, give a sense of belonging to something larger than the individual, and orient people to their families' origins. They build wider communities. As social scientists, for example, we use stories to illustrate concepts and understandings of our world. Chamberlain continues, "Stories give us a way to wonder how totalitarian states arise, or why cancer cells behave the way they do, or what causes poor people to live in the streets..."⁵⁸ Anderson takes this farther arguing that a community perpetuates itself through the stories it tells. The stories create a community of the mind, between individuals who will likely never meet, but nonetheless believe they share a common history and values.⁵⁹

To demonstrate the link between walking culture, and community, my developing research design analyzes signs on walking trail to understand the construction of political identity.⁶⁰ If trails, as suggested by the RTC, help to build communities, then the kind of information provided, or the stories told, determines how inclusive that community. Walking trails, which often includes access to cyclists as well, vary in length, purpose, and governance quite a bit. These variations speak to the communities the

⁵⁵ White, 1973: ix-x, 4-5, and 7-11. White (1988) also notes that the process historians use in writing a history is much like the process a filmmaker would use in creating a story on film.

⁵⁶ Lowenthal, 1975: 11-12.

⁵⁷ Weil, 1971: 8,51; quoted in Lowenthal, 1975: 12.

⁵⁸ Chamberlain 2006:2-3.

⁵⁹ Anderson, 1983.

⁶⁰ A list of the trails used thus far in my research is available in Appendix 1.

trails serve. Who governs or manages the trail, the goal of that organization, and its outlook, help to shape how the trail is overseen are to be explored? Interpretive signs seek to explain and justify to the traveler the importance of the trail or path.

As way of example, consider two information signs at Kings Gap Environmental Education Center, part of the Pennsylvania State Park System. The first sign located at a scenic overlook along the primary road in the park, highlights the work of Dr. Maurice K. Goddard, who served in several Pennsylvania gubernatorial administrations and is considered an important figure in creating the state's park system. Goddard's stated goal was making parks and recreation accessible for all by securing funding streams. The sign, decorated with a photograph of bald eagle, the national symbol of the United States, implores the reader to become involved in conservation and supporting the park system. The second sign, located at the conjunction of three hiking trails, conveys information about timber rattlesnakes. The sign emphasizes that the snake is a protected species in Pennsylvania and provides safety measures in case one encounters a snake while, at the same time, dispelling myths. Within the text, the narrative breaks to highlight the esteem with which the snake has been held, specifically by "our forefathers so respected the 'quiet and passive until messed with' snake that they made it a symbol of our nation's might." The use of the collective pronoun "our," symbolizes the formation of a community, in effect arguing, "this is the history of us." The protection of the snake is linked to the protection of the country's history and heritage. Rather than the environmental or safety importance of species protection, the sign links timber rattlesnakes to the country's history and identity. White's *emplotment*, selecting and arranging events to create a narrative that was more comprehensible to a particular audience, is evident. In this way, motives become more defined and singular, discarding complexities and ambiguity, and the audience is not overly burdened with information that is not pertinent to understanding the events.⁶¹

While these signs, because of their cost and permanency, suggest authenticity, member of a community or outsiders who disagree with the memory or sentiment respond in diverse ways, usually with alternative signs or graffiti. It is not uncommon for people to engage in both, but the responses tend to be impermanent and are swept away by those who manage the trail. A subaltern reaction to the dominant messaging can take the form of graffiti. While government officials and many citizens are resistant to the claim, graffiti can be used as a form of political expression and social dissent. Bloch argues that graffiti is societal commentary and/or an act of defiance. To dismiss the motivations behind

⁶¹ White, 1973.

graffiti, he asserts, is to minimize the motivations that motivate artist to take to street art and social commentary.⁶² Mitman argues that graffiti undermines the dominant semiotic systems of an urban environment, while at the same time reinforcing it by demonstrating that there is a “‘criminal’ underbelly of the city, seeking to abuse and exploit the fair and good law-abiding citizens.”⁶³ Favretto demonstrates that when formal avenues of dissent and protests are closed, those without significant power can resort to the “weapons of the weak,” including graffiti.⁶⁴ It is difficult to systematically quantify and record this subaltern response. For example, Crutchfield’s photographic record captures the fleeting messages of homeless people in the San Francisco area protesting high rent and government policies. But within hours of her photographs, the graffiti was erased.⁶⁵

Graffiti on the trail can be offensive and racist; and sometimes it can be puerile and braggadocios. The political graffiti, regardless of veracity or civility, reflects the sentiments of the creator. An increasingly frequent graffiti message scrawled on the C&O towpath signed reminds travelers that there are no trashcans along the path and to carry trash out. Despite parts of the towpath being remote and difficult to reach by vehicles, the graffiti authors embrace the concept of lazy government workers not wanting to do their jobs rather than the concept of pack-in-pack-out model of hiking. Following voting patterns across the United States along urban-rural divide, quite a lot of the anti-government graffiti is found in more rural areas, often near boat ramps and drive-in campsites. Graffiti that is designed to be more inclusive, or during 2020 and 2021, that called for a communal response to the pandemic, is typically located in suburban areas.⁶⁶

To examine and better understand how signs highlight information for identity and community building, I have examined waysides (interpretive signs) from several trails to offer comparisons and elucidate trends. Because of the restrictions of the pandemic, my analysis is not yet complete and systematic. In some cases, I have relied on my personal journals to illustrate cases and need to verify the data in the future. I find that interpretative signs generally fall into four categories of information:

1. Historical relevance of the trail
2. Local history

⁶² Bloch, 2019; 2020.

⁶³ Mitman, 2018:34.

⁶⁴ Favretto, 2019.

⁶⁵ Malika Zwanya Crutchfield, “Capturing a Black Aesthetic: Urbanity, Racialized Space, and Spatial Poetics,” *Equity & Excellence in Education* 50(4): 446-447 (November 2017).

⁶⁶ See appendix 3.

3. Economic and industry
4. Ecological and environmental information.

These are not discrete categories, meaning that a sign can conceivably fit into more than one category. My research question is whether the weight of different signage helps to build a sense of national and/or community identity? A complicating variable is the role of nostalgia in the signs. Nostalgia is an effective political communication tools that invites people to reconsider the current direction of a community or country suggesting that the recovery of past values and lifestyles that was better. Unlike a utopian impulse where changes will create a better, perhaps idyllic future, nostalgia suggests that there is an idyllic past that needs to, or should, be recovered.⁶⁷

Especially on rails-to-trails paths, there is a particular focus on the historic relevance of trails, often evoking a nostalgia for “simpler times.” As a largely disregarded mode of transportation in the United States, there is a romance about rail travel, even though most Americans currently avoid it as mode of transportation. Most signs on the Heritage Trail in York County, Pennsylvania, for example, is given to the history of the rail line on which it is built. In fact, an excursion steam powered train continues to run on the weekends. The short Lehigh Memory Trail in Williamsville, New York, is anchored by a restored depot and reminds visitors and residents that the small village once was a place on the tracks that took people from New York City to Niagara Falls, a popular destination for honeymoon couples. Several signs on the Chesapeake and Ohio (C&O) Canal Towpath highlight the artistic quality and architectural importance of the eleven aqueducts and seventy-four locks that dot the 184.5 miles of the former canal. Many signs detail the construction of the canal and the lives of people who lived and worked on the canal. The same is true of the Lehigh Canal in Walnutport, Pennsylvania, part of the Delaware and Lehigh Trail, as well. Sometimes, these interpretive signs lament the loss of crafts or the slow pace but are also quick to point out the difficult lives most people faced at the time.

It is notable, however, that there are very few waysides that discuss who constructed the canals, which were primarily immigrant laborers, particularly Irish and German. A single sign, in a remote part of the C&O, discusses a riot/fight that broke out between Irish and Germans laborers over wages, benefits, and working conditions. Elsewhere, a historical sign in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, on the opposite of the Potomac River, notes the contribution of Irish immigrant labor to the construction of the canal. An Irish cross, near the terminus of the towpath in Cumberland, Maryland, commemorates those workers

⁶⁷ Taggart, 2004. For the possible political implications of nostalgia, see also Steenvoorden and Hartevelde, 2018 and Smith 2021.

who died in the canal's construction. Although within sight of the towpath, the cross stands on city land. The lack of signs about migrant labor is intriguing in the context of current politics.

The second category, local history, is particularly prominent and overlaps with the first. Significant local events often coincide with transportation corridors. For example, a marker on the Cumberland Valley Rail Trail (CVRT) stands on the approximate site of a dramatic train crash in 1888.⁶⁸ For many trails in the mid-Atlantic, there is an overwhelming emphasis on the American Civil War. Many signs will detail how the war impacted the local community or discuss battle maneuvers and battle sites. The Potomac River was dividing line between the Confederate States and the Union. Thus, the C&O Towpath is adjacent to several American Civil War battle sites, including Antietam, Monocacy, and Williamsport. Further north, however, interpretive signs tend to focus on other events. How to remember the American Civil War, those who fought and died, and the legacy of the Confederacy and slavery is a long-running cultural conversation in the United States.⁶⁹ Most of the time, this plays out in terms of museum displays and monuments. A similar cultural conversation has taken place in across the North Atlantic as well, regarding the role that colonialism, slavery, and the treatment of minorities have played in societies. Thus, discussions about renovations to the Royal Museum for Central Africa,⁷⁰ outside Brussels, or the status of monuments in places like Bristol, Edinburgh, Antwerp, and Oostende follow a similar pattern and reverberates globally.⁷¹

As Neiman argues, coming to terms with past injustices, harm, or even evil, that a community or country has committed is difficult to do. As humans we naturally believe that our tribe or nation may

⁶⁸ *New York Times*, 1888.

⁶⁹ For example, see the discussions about the renovations of the Alamo in San Antonio, a historical site that is steeped in American and Texan legend, but has multiple interpretations and meanings for several groups, Webner, 2021.

⁷⁰ Originally opened in 1910, but with its origins dating from the Colonial Pavilion at the Brussels International Exposition of 1897, the Royal Museum for Colonial Africa was the depository of artifacts from Belgium's colonial rule of the Congo. Today known as the Africa Museum, it has struggled with how to depict the country's colonial history. Built as a celebration of colonial rule, with gold-leaf lettering in the central dome claiming, "Belgium brings civilization to Congo," by the twentieth century the museum was antiquated, offensive, and tone-deaf. Hochschild's (1999: 292-93, 312-13) account of the museum helped to high its glorification of Leopold and Belgian rule in Central Africa. After a five-year renovation, in which a historical reassessment took place, the museum reopened in 2018 to much fanfare but continued criticism persisted for not adequately addressing colonial atrocities and brutality. Hassett, 2020; Hochschild, 2020; Bickerton, 2019; Bernhard, 2019; Marshall, 2018.

⁷¹ Hochschild, 1999: 168-69; Charles, 2020; Deutsche Welle, 2020; Landler, 2020; Pronczuk and Zaveri, 2020; Boffey, 2019.

have made historical mistakes, but we rarely attach labels such as “evil” to these actions, regardless of how horrific.⁷²

Out of that suffering some will weave a theodicy. All that pain cannot be without meaning. The weavers need not be those who remember the suffering directly. Often it’s the suffering of their ancestors, more imagined than experienced, that drives the search for a framework with which to understand it.⁷³

My initial findings suggest that trails often reinforce a dominant narrative that supports the existing status quo understanding of history. However, new trails have been developed in recent years, particularly in the United States, to change the narrative about history to make it more inclusive and balanced.

The third category are signs that emphasizes the economic and technological development of the vicinity. The CVRT strong emphasis on the role of agriculture and its importance to the local economy, while the D&L recounts the importance of the slate industry to northcentral Pennsylvania. These signs emphasize the economic success of these industries and will often implicitly encourage the protection and continuance of these business. I suspect, in many cases, that these same industries are primary donors to the trails and their upkeep.

The final category of waysides focuses on ecological and environmental attributes and concerns in the area. Surprisingly, these signs are the least common signs, despite most trails encourage people to recreate outside. Yet, I believe that the more urban the trail, the higher proportion of signs. Thus, the Highline in New York City and Promenade Plantée in Paris celebrate the importance of bringing greenery to urban spaces. Nevertheless, ecology and nature feature frequently in interpretive signs in the United States, even if it is a lower rate than historical signs. The importance of nature is usually emphasized by highlighting unique flora and fauna of an area, such as wildflowers on C&O, rare plants on the Heritage Trail, and the protection of a species of dragonflies in Watkins Glen. In County Westmeath, Ireland, along the Old Rail Trail Greenway, promotional materials emphasize birdsongs and biodiversity as one of the most important aspects of the trail.

Data collection has been difficult during the pandemic, especially for locations outside the United States. Yet, some of my observations merit further consideration. Waysides on most trails, focus

⁷² Nieman, 2019: 23.

⁷³ Nieman, 2019: 63.

on history rather than ecology or economic development. The latter may indicate a form of nostalgia that demonstrates a pre-industrial preference.

Many of the waysides that focus on history, reflect a local understanding about what happened, particularly when it concerns a particularly sensitive period of history or people who have been historically marginalized. Evidence suggests that the dominant narrative of the community is most prevalent. Signs typically do not raise uncomfortable or challenging issues. Of the approximately 170 waysides along the C&O Towpath, a National Park that parallels the Potomac River, closely following the battlelines of the American Civil War, several discuss some aspect of the conflict. Yet, none that I have yet found that use any variation of the word *slave/slavery*. This is not an uncommon event. Nearby, on the Cumberland Valley Rail Trail in rural southern Pennsylvania, one third of the trail's eighteen waysides focus on the Civil War, without a mention of enslaved people. In fact, one wayside that recounts the role of African Americans contributions to the war fails to mention any form of the word. At Crooked River State Park in Georgia, a historical marker commemorating a sugar plantation, its unique design and importance to the area, fails to mention that vast amount of enslaved people that would have been necessary to run such a plantation. Written in the 1950s, but because of its durable construction, the sign has not physically needed to be replaced and thus, despite an increased awareness of the brutal history that belies the site, no opportunity has been taken to update the narrative of the sign.

Hayden White's question about what is being left out of history informs my research questions. Along the Royal Canal in County Westmeath, Ireland, there are two cemeteries within a mile of the town of Mullingar. The one to the west is adjacent to the foundations of a church, the writing on the tombstones had worn away, and the gravesites are overgrown. After some exploration at the site, I uncovered a sign that became obscured by bushes and tall grass indicating it was the site of a church where many victims of the cholera epidemics of the 1850s were buried. On the northside of town, there is a clearing where several victims of the Famine were buried in mass graves during the 1840s. New monuments to the dead have been dedicated in recent years. The Great Hunger, or Famine, plays a significant role in defining modern Ireland and, as such, its commemoration part of the national story. The same is not true about cholera outbreaks.

Frequently, there is a subaltern response to signs on the trail; however, it is difficult to accurately quantify and catalog these responses. Also, along the Royal Canal Greenway, on the outskirts of Mullingar there is a simple white cross with the name Mary Walker who died in 1909. It is not an

official sign erected by the county of the Royal Canal Commission; it was placed by local volunteers to honor Walker, a telephone operator at the local post office, who was killed while taking a pleasure walk in an attempted rape. The sign is a response to the “official” account of history, an alternative remembering. On the other hand, on the C&O Canal Towpath, graffiti often takes the form of anti-government rhetoric. Similarly, it is difficult to be everywhere on a trail to systematically record subaltern messages, to know how frequently and effectively the graffiti appears. Nevertheless, I provide examples of how subaltern messages respond to the dominant narrative. This third hypothesis presents challenges in terms of assessment. Yet, represents an important aspect of the politics of specific areas.

Notes on More Inclusive Trails

As a response to the dominant narrative on trails, I argue that there has been a change on trails in three ways. First, there have been an increase in waysides that recounts history that is not typically recounted in dominant narratives. This includes signs that includes stories about marginalized communities that have faced discrimination, including Black people, Indigenous, and physically and mentally challenged people. Second, new trails have been developed that honor people from communities that have experienced discrimination. Finally, there has been an effort to make trails more accessible by all people, developing strategies and safety procedures to ensure that all have access to trails. These measures might include forming clubs, lighting, and monitoring to make walkers, hikers, runners, and cyclists a sense of security while accessing the trail.

Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land,” is one of the most popular folk songs in the American songbook. It is a song that in the mid-twentieth century, most American children learn in school and was sung as an ode to the beauty and ecological diversity of the country. The song, which emphasizes walking as a mode of transportation, with an easy to sing and familiar melody, celebrates the beauty of the land in a way that encourages travel and exploration. Yet, it is the verses that are omitted from most songbooks that are intriguing and revelatory, ruminating on the politics of access and poverty.⁷⁴ Woody Guthrie’s song, along with others, sit at the intersection of popular culture, politics, and perambulation. I

⁷⁴ Woody Guthrie, “This Land is Your Land,” (c.1940); https://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/This_Land.htm. The song written about 1940 was first recorded in 1944, but not released until 1951. Many sources cite that Guthrie’s This Land is Your Land, is a response to Kate Smith’s popular rendition of Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America,” her version resoundingly patriotic and ubiquitously played on the radio during the 1930s and 1940s. Ray Allen, “Guthrie Centennial Scholarship: Ruminating on Woody at 100,” *American Music Review* 41(1): 14-18 (Fall 2012), page 14.

have argued elsewhere that popular culture has become instrumental in developing awareness, knowledge, and understanding of significant political events.⁷⁵ People are far more likely to watch a film, documentary, or television show about historical events or political controversies than read a book or academic articles. Hence, the understanding of these events is without nuance and frequently assign unidirectional motivations that belie complex situations. This is not necessarily the intention of the artists (novelist and film directors, for example) but popular entertainment creates an incomplete understanding of political events.⁷⁶ For example, many Anglophones' knowledge about the French Revolution is filtered through Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). In turn, novels by Dickens today are filtered through film, because most readers come to the novels after seeing film and television adaptations rather than the other way around. Meaning for most people, political knowledge and identity is not based on empiricism. Thus, for trails to be more inclusive we should consider not only physical access, but cultural-historical access as well.

There have been official attempts to redress how historical events have not been included in dominant remembering. Thus, relatively new trails, such as the Black Freedom Trail in Boston, the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail in Alabama, and the Blind Willie McTell Trail in Statesboro, Georgia, offer alternative historical interpretations. Plans for new trails, such as the proposed new trail to Harriet Tubman's house in Eastern Maryland,⁷⁷ are in this vein.

The choice to name a trail after Willie McTell in Statesboro, Georgia, is illustrative. He was a talented and brilliant African American blues singer, endured the biases and prejudices of the early twentieth century. Being black in Georgia was difficult enough, and his lack of eyesight made his life harder. Yet details about his life are obscured by the lack of information. His biographer, Michael Gray, notes that McTell was an accomplished artist who lived in the American South that was shaped, and continues to be impacted, by a "bizarre and extraordinary history."⁷⁸ Blues music was, and is, an alternative form of storytelling, commentary, and oral history that diverged from the dominant narrative. It was a way to recount what was happening to a community that was not included or covered by dominant media outlets, such as local newspapers and radio stations.⁷⁹ Consequently, several trails,

⁷⁵ Sachleben 2014.

⁷⁶ Baum (2006) wrestled with the idea that many people calculated they knew far more about political events than they did because they frequently watched soft news reporting.

⁷⁷ Villareal, 2021.

⁷⁸ Gray, 2009:xi. Despite his rather difficult life, and his battle with alcoholism and diabetes in his final years, his songs were rather upbeat and engaging.

⁷⁹ Anderson, 2020.

such as the American Tobacco Trail in Durham and Louisville Riverwalk, now acknowledge the role of traditional music with waysides and monuments.⁸⁰ Broader, music is a source of identity for many locations around the world that is not always incorporated into the dominant narrative of national identity.

This trend extends beyond African Americans in the United States. Marginalized people in many countries seek access to trails and nature and have form groups and alliances to secure the right to do so. Also, notably, many of these groups are missing from the historical narratives of communities and part of the process of inclusion is the telling of those stories as well. Included among these groups are Indigenous peoples,⁸¹ ethnic minorities, immigrants, those with physical limitations and the disabled.

Conclusions

This is a work in progress. The politics of walking, and the access to nature, is more complex than one would originally think. Examining the motivations to walk, why it is important to different people, and who has relative safety while walking is firmly at the intersection of public health, allocations of funds, and public safety. How communities and governments decide where and how to construct trails needs to be developed in this project, but it has been analyzed by others. Suffice to say, the process is usually difficult and fraught with political considerations. Once on the trail, the walker, runner, cyclist, and/or traveler faces a barrage of information, much of which has political ramifications and considerations. Like museums and national monuments, it is a place where historical interpretations and political dialogue takes place.

At first glance, the emphasis on new trails, and interest in walking, bodes well for environmental politics in the future. Yet, we should note that these trails create greenspaces, but they are not the reintroduction of wildernesses. I am particularly fond of Eastern bluebirds because as a child I remember my grandparents, normally very stoic, were excited to see one fly in front of their car while driving in a rural area. My grandmother commented at the time that it had been years since she had seen one. The bluebird had been in decline since the early twentieth century because of invasive species, habitat loss, and pesticides. Trails, like rail trails, provide a habitat, supplemented with human created birdboxes, and

⁸⁰ The American Tobacco Trail has a small monument for Blind Boy Fuller, a Piedmont blues singer and guitarist, not far from his burial spot. A historical marker honoring Earl McDonald, influential jug band artist, is located near the Ohio River on Louisville's Riverwalk.

⁸¹ See, for example how the history of indigenous peoples has been incorporated into the trails, parks, and historical markers (McDonald, 1988).

that has helped the bluebird population recover. I regularly observe 40-45 species of wild birds on my local trail each year. These trails provide a “nature fix,” for humans. But these narrow pieces of land are spinneys, not forests. For true ecological recovery, habitat loss must be arrested. Trees need more undisturbed room to develop complex interactions with other plants and animals. Through their growth of a canopy, trees can manage their climate. Shade from the trees to maintain an ambient temperature, allowing for a biodiverse forest to emerge. It remains a question in my mind if people are willing to pay for restoration of wilderness areas even if they do not have easy access. How the movement to protect species and ecosystem fits into the calculation of the politics of walking remains an open question.

Many localities, from Frederick, Maryland to Cork City, Ireland, that have relied on automobiles for primary transportation, temporally pedestrianized streets in the city center to facilitate outdoor dining during the pandemic. In a few instances this has become permanent and follows a broader trend to make cities more friendly to people on foot.⁸² As the global human population continues to move to migrate to urban areas, the need to rethink cities and greenspaces becomes increasingly important. Hence, the questions of walking are not just about health or rights, history or identity, but about transportation and the environment as well. I would argue all of which are issues at the heart of twenty-first century politics.

⁸² Kelleher, 2021; Plitt, 2020.

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Appendix 1. List of Trails

Trail	Length Miles	Location
Abandoned Turnpike	13	Fulton County, Pennsylvania
American Tobacco Trail	22.2	Durham, North Carolina
Appalachian Trail	2200	14 US States
Assawoman Canal Trail	1	Bethany Beach, Delaware
Auburn-Fleming Trail	1.5	Auburn, New York
Blind Willie McTell Trail	1.1	Statesboro, Georgia
C&O Canal Towpath	184.5	Maryland and the District of Columbia
Charlie C. Major Nature Trail	0.8	Skaneateles, New York
Cheektowaga Historic Rails to Trails	2.3	Cheektowaga, New York
Cumberland Island National Seashore (several)	--	Cumberland Island, Georgia
Cumberland Valley Rail Trail	14	Cumberland County, Pennsylvania
Dingle Way	101	County Kerry (Ireland)
Erie Canal Trail	363	New York State
Gorge Trail (Watkins Glen State Park)	1.5	Watkins Glenn, New York
Heritage Rail Trail	27.4	York County, Pennsylvania
Junction and Breakwater Trail	6.4	Sussex County, Delaware
Lehigh Memory Trail	0.7	Williamsville, New York
Louisville Loop	50+	Louisville, Kentucky
Mason Dixon Trail	193	Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware
Promenade plantée	2.9	Paris, France
Red River River Walk	7	Winnipeg, Manitoba
Royal Canal Greenway	81	Province of Leinster, Ireland
Selma-Montgomery	55	Alabama
St. Magnus Way	58	Orkney Islands (United Kingdom)
The Highline	1.5	New York City (Manhattan)

Appendix 2: Examples of Historical Markers

In the United States, historical markers carry an official insignia of the state and are composed of sturdy metal materials that suggests durability and, therefore, permanence. The cost and permanence lend historical weight and authority that the site commemorated, and the information contained on the sign, are authoritative.

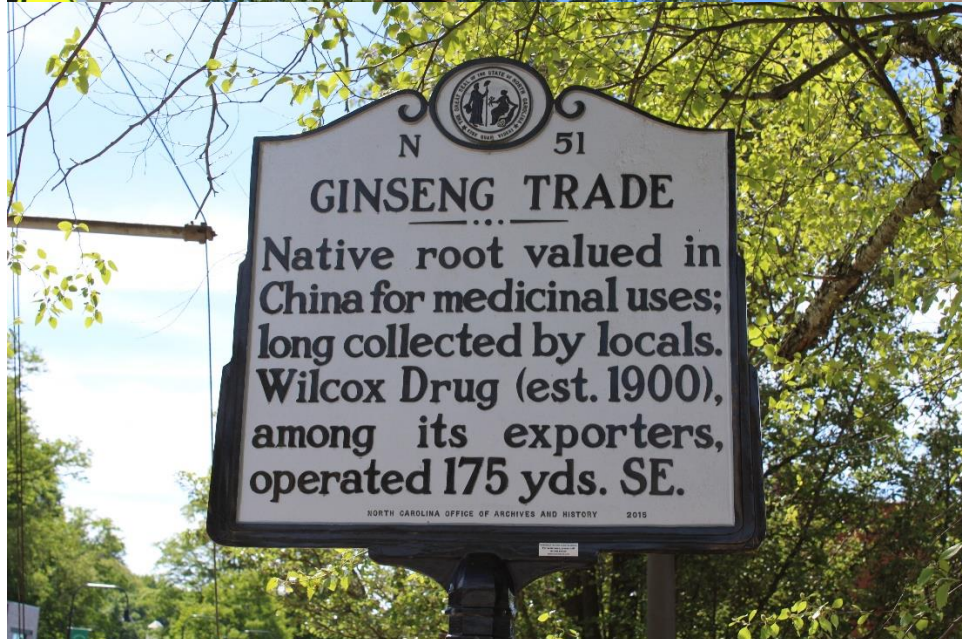
New York

Location:
Seneca Falls



North Carolina

Location:
Boone



Appendix 3: Examples of Political Graffiti

I use the term political graffiti to indicate where individuals make a political claim, or counter dominant narratives, on the trails.

C&O Canal Towpath
(July 2020), near
Spring Gap,
Maryland.



C&O Canal Towpath
(November 2020),
near Potomac,
Maryland.

