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(T)Racing the Great North Run as a ritual process using GPS mapping

The Great North Run witnesses 55,000 plus participants run from Newcastle to South Shields and is an annual ritual for many runners. The event reaches audiences around the world and is well documented by the media, yet the remains of such an event are as much embodied in the memory of a runner. Despite this, memories can be unreliable and forgotten, much like routine daily interactions with familiar environments. This article explores how data gathered using a GPS running watch is employed to reflect on and relive participation in the 2019 Great North Run (GNR) as part of a cyclical process between a body and a digital platform. In doing so, the author uses a structure of ritual process to make a case for how digital data collaborates with the body to reshape, distort and transform experience without detriment to embodied memories. Rather, data augments, enhances and deepens human memory.

Keywords: autoethnography; Great North Run; GPS; memory; running; ritual

September 13, 2020

Standing outside my home in Newcastle only a few kilometres away from the official start line of the Great North Run (GNR), I am about to set off on an unusual journey. The 2020 GNR, like many other large-scale events involving people gathering in close proximity, has been cancelled due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Despite this, the race organisers have devised an alternative half marathon experience in which runners complete the distance as a virtual event. Although this is not the race I had anticipated running when my entry was confirmed many months ago, I am committed to completing the distance. There is something within me that compels me to run the 21.1 kilometres on this specific date and time when I know thousands of other runners all over the world are doing the same. I only participated in the GNR for the first time in 2018, but it has already become a ritual I must complete each year. It feels like an important part of living in Newcastle, almost like a sense of duty. As I locate the GPS signal (or as the signal finds me) and I press “start” on my watch, the cycle of my body feeding corporeal experience into a data gathering machine begins once again.

At 09:30am, the designated start time, I imagine other runners beginning the race. As I start to run, I feel a sense of being a participant in a mass event. In the
act of beginning a run at the same time as many other runners, albeit in a solo capacity, the embodied memory of last year’s event is returned to me. Although I run this route most days, today it touches me with a heightened sensuousness as the act of running along its path is loaded with memories. Passing the first 1K mark through Newcastle’s town moor, I see other people running their own race, sometimes in groups and sometimes alone. It feels clear, however, that we are all running together, evident in the hand waves and nods of heads as we cross paths.

**Running, autoethnography, ritual, and memory**

This article acts as one runner’s record or history of an event. It explores how memory is augmented, challenged and disrupted by GPS data recorded on a Garmin sports watch. In his autobiographical work *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*, novelist Haruki Murakami (2009, 178) reflects that “running for a quarter century makes for a lot of good memories.” Murakami, in discussing the importance of maintaining a regular running routine, describes muscles as being like work animals: “as long as you explain to them by actually showing examples of the amount of work they have to endure, your muscles will comply and gradually get stronger” (ibid, 71). Being kept in such a routine enables muscles to embody the memory of what they need to do. As ethnographer Dwight Conquergood (1991, 180) notes, memories made in this way, with each foot strike, become a “deeply sensuous way of knowing.” Engaging with my relationship with running, and the data it generates, is a method of remembering that maintains a connection with myself as well as with the places I run through. Autoethnography embraces memory as a tool with which to make sense of lived experience, particularly the traces left on the body. The physical effect on the body makes running an activity through which I know myself better physically and mentally, meaning that memory becomes something embodied rather than easily retrievable as if from a filing system stored in the brain. Although I ultimately argue that embracing digital ways of remembering helps to fill in gaps or deepen as well as challenge memory, it is the co-existence of remembering embodied experience alongside digital data that creates a cycle of recollection. Therefore, neither corporeal memory nor digital memory are privileged but are embraced as equal partners in my use of autoethnography.
I started running regularly in 2002, and its increasing significance in my life has also caused it to inform my research. Therefore, within the field of running studies, I position myself as using running as a way of discovering more about my body and its capacity for running and, in doing so, to learn about how I inhabit the places I run through as well as how they inhabit me. In this vein, I follow other running researchers who have used the practice in a similar way. In *Footnotes: How Running Makes Us Human*, Vybarr Cregan-Reid documents his running and journeys around the world in pursuit of an understanding of this practice and uses each location to prompt reflections on an embodied engagement with environment. Part travelogue, part science, part philosophy, part literature, Cregan-Reid (2016, 287) concludes that running is important to him as “I want to stay curious … [because] nothing unites us with the world so completely as our curiosity for it.” Like Cregan-Reid, I use running as a means of discovering my environment and my interaction with it as well as a way of connecting with my body. Robin Harvie (2011) and Bernd Heinrich (2002) present narratives that foreground the author as runner. In his discussion of ultra-running, Heinrich explores the evolutionary processes that give humans a desire to run whilst Harvie’s narrative reveals the obsessional nature of running, something that I can appreciate in relation to, what I feel, is an obligation to run that makes the practice ritualistic. Both authors illustrate there is something primal about running which, for me, connects with ritual processes. The apparently primal nature of running suggested by Harvie and Heinrich foreground knowledge as embodied and for this reason, in this account of the GNR, I reflect on the sensuous ways of knowing provoked by running. To examine the primal nature of running and my assertion that this facilitates a corporeal understanding, I examine the relationship between the embodied and the digital that, I suggest, reveals new knowledge about my experience of running.

John Bale’s *Running Cultures: Racing in Space and Time* examines running from both professional and amateur perspectives and, like Cregan-Reid, discusses a range of other
topics illustrating the universal significance of running to the human body and environment. In relation to achievement (or elite) running, Bale (2004, 50) suggests that it might be perceived as “a much-impoverished form of locomotion compared with other forms of perambulation, including walking, when seeking to experience environmental quality” because there is an inattention to location. However, he also argues that some of “the rural locales in which world record breakers have trained have become almost sacred places, providing a sense of place, of topophilia” (ibid, 61). This topophilia, defined by human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan as the “affective bond between people place and setting” (1974, 4) is evocative of the way in which my experience of training and racing in a city strengthens my affective bond. I also suggest that this bond is tested by engaging with digital data post-race. This test sometimes strengthens and sometimes challenges my memory and perceptions of the run. In using the digital records from a Garmin GPS running watch as a means of reliving the embodied memories and experiences of a trained and raced body, I look to translate data into a description of sensory experience and demonstrate how the digital works as part of a cyclical process in which the data informs embodied memory. Looking back at the digital data from an event both deepens and challenges my embodied sense of the experience in an ongoing post-race relationship with the GPS maps.

John Hockey (2019, 79) explores the relationship between ritual and distance running, noting that rituals are body techniques used for altering our relationship with the world and that we “learn and enact those rituals with others who possess the same embodied understanding and who are predisposed to engage in that particular form of ritual, so as to move from one particular corporeal and interactional state of being to another. Following Hockey in discussing ritual and running, I use Arnold Van Gennep’s (2004) three stages of ritual – separation, liminal and reincorporation. As Victor Turner explains,

The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a ‘state’), or from both. During the intervening ‘liminal’ period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the ‘passenger’) are ambiguous: he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past
or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. (1969, 94)

The ritual stages described by Turner resonate strongly with me in my running practice and relate to my interest in viewing performance through the lens of ritual. The stages of separation from everyday life as performer and spectator, the liminality of existing simultaneously in real and fictional worlds during a performance, and the reincorporation processes of post-performance cool down and onward journey draw clear parallels with my running practice. Preparing for a training run separates me from non-running life. The liminal stage of running itself brackets me from everyday life, placing me in a state of ambiguity whilst the post-run stretching and rehydration is the reincorporation stage.

Using Van Gennep’s three stage ritual process, my experience of preparing for and competing in the 2019 GNR is explored from an autoethnographic perspective. To examine this process, I use the digital records from a Garmin GPS running watch as a means of reliving my embodied memories and experiences of the race. This digital record of a half-marathon enables me to enhance my memory of the event, whether that reinforces or challenges memory. Thus, the focus is on autonoetic or episodic memory, of reinhabiting a memory and experiencing it again. In contrast to semantic memory – which enables us to remember facts such as names, colours and dates – autonoetic consciousness helps make sense of memories because we have an awareness of being part of them, we remember episodes from our past experience and use them to place ourselves in past, present or future situations. In other words, my memories are what happened to me and, as such, I have ownership of them. Whilst we use autonoetic memory continuously as a means of making sense of the world, the digital data are used in this article as a catalyst to reflect on and subsequently reinhabit a specific event. I use the Strava data to purposely prompt my remembering and reliving of the event as part of a cycle from body to data to body; a digital record, acting as a guide or replay. The kilometre-by-kilometre data have simultaneously and importantly provided a structure by which I have been able to explore my embodied memories.
Warming up: From solitary runner to ritual participant

For me, training for a half marathon is a solitary process in which I prepare by undergoing the repetition of long runs for endurance with a focus on an event. I do acknowledge, however, that many runners train in groups, as part of clubs, or participate in regular informal timed events such as Parkrun. I train alone as I regard it as an opportunity to step outside of my usual everyday rhythms, much like others who take part in other regular rituals demarcated from ordinary life, whether that is the formality of a religious ceremony or practicing meditation. In the race event itself, I sense a move from the solitary to the social, whereby I transfer my solitary training experience to run with a group of people with a common goal. In doing so, a transformation occurs that is akin to the results of a ritual process; this transformation is in the form of a connection with the places I run in and through. My ritual begins with the stages of training during which I record times and distances, measuring improvement with the simple equation of distance run divided by time. A process of dressing in running gear, lacing up Asics, and hydrating before stepping out of the door and setting my Garmin to find the GPS signal is the stage of separating myself from non-running life. On each run, often taking a similar route, I feel increasingly part of the places I travel through as I see familiar sights and people, hear recognisable sounds, and smell freshly cut grass or whatever else permeates the air. After each training run there is time to reflect on the data in a constant process of moving towards what psychologist Abraham Maslow (1943) would have referred to as self-actualization.

In Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, once an individual has their physiological, safety and esteem needs fulfilled, they can reach a place of self-actualisation, manifested as peak-experiences, which are “transient moments […] of ecstasy which cannot be bought, cannot be guaranteed, cannot even be sought” (1971, 46). The feelings of mental and physical well-being produced by the activity of running generates the kind of peaks described by Maslow and, for me, it is in the process of reflecting on the run and its data that recognises that these moments of deep fulfilment have happened. Each training run is a step towards the goal of completing the distance of a race event or simply meeting a weekly target; running is a ritual process in which I move from one state to another. Having separated myself in preparing for a run, the liminal stage of running offers the possibility for something to shift within me, and upon returning home to stretch
and cool down, I am reincorporated into my everyday life with a new status as more miles are added. The liminal may be the most important stage as it allows me to experience the highs and lows associated with running. The high of a personal best time and feeling of effortless running can only be appreciated if I have experienced the low of running when each step feels like a hard slog. For Turner, this high/low dichotomy is essential in a successfully functioning society. Crucially, the reincorporation stage of this ritual process is where the digital data are important and a way of recognising and validating the prior stages of separation and liminality. Examining the data provides a visual acknowledgement of miles run and route taken. In doing so, my relationship with the physical world is explored through a digital rendering of my running and – in an era of increasing disconnectedness from a physical environment as smartphones becomes means of navigating places – provides a way of recognising the ritual process. In examining the data, I am prompted to reflect on my former self which gives me a sense of stability whilst also acting as a resetting or refreshing of experience that, like Cregan-Reid, keeps me curious about the world. This also, as Turner argues, places the reincorporated individual in a position where “he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards” (95) which, for me, is about my place within the city I live.

Separation
It is 2019. I am standing at the GNR start line on Newcastle’s central motorway, surrounded by thousands of other runners. I reflect on the months of training leading up to this point. This event is an opportunity to step outside of my everyday rhythms; it enables a sense of what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2008, 54) terms “flow”, a complete immersion in the act of running that is “seemingly effortless [...] where there is no need to reflect, because the action carries [one] forward as if by magic.”
In the GNR, it is clear how a ritual process is realised. This first stage of the race demarcates me from the non-runners as I line up at the start, separated from spectators by safety barriers. In his seminal study *The Rites of Passage*, Van Gennep (2004, 3) suggests that transitions from one state to another are “as implicit as the very fact of existence […] every one of these events […] is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined.” The GNR can be regarded as a rite of passage as there is a definite sense of participants passing from one defined position (competitor with race number and timing chip) to another position (finisher with medal, t-shirt and official time).

**Entering the Liminal**

At the start line runners are caged into pens according to a (self) predicted finish time. I wait in anticipation for almost an hour as the elite races get underway. In the moments before the mass race starts, when *Local Hero* is proudly played over the speakers, I have a sense of being about to undergo a physical and mental challenge that will bring about a change, however small or significant. For many Newcastle residents, *Local Hero*–a piece of instrumental music by Mark Knopfler–has strong local resonances. The music is used at the beginning of Newcastle United football games and therefore has strong associations with the city’s identity. Standing with 55,000 other people in the early September sun, my ritual is about to begin. I set off as the starting klaxon bellows. At first it is only a gentle walk as we meander towards the start line which–I soon discover–is about ten minutes’ shuffle away. Once over the line, I start my Garmin and begin to settle into a comfortable pace. The sound of running shoes hitting the hard surface of the central motorway jars me slightly as I get a feeling of being lost in a crowd. My competitiveness kicks in and I pick up my pace slightly, afraid of being left behind. As I pass individuals and small groups of runners, I catch snippets of conversations uttered between carefully calibrated breaths. I feel a shift from the stage of separation to the liminal as I move past the first 500 metres: my heart rate steadily increasing, my pattern of breathing adjusting, and the sound of other runners’ footfall blending into my aural environment.
At the first kilometre marker, I realise I am running at a slightly faster pace than planned. I am carried away with the tide of runners ahead and those advancing towards me from behind. Along the central motorway, dipping downwards slightly, there are plenty of people to cheer me and my fellow runners on. Lines of spectators lean eagerly over each side of a motorway bridge watching the runners who flood the lanes usually reserved for cars. The road is already littered with empty plastic bottles, energy gel wrappers and clothing that the runners discarded when the race began. The race organisers will clean everything up after the runners have gone; the physical traces of pre-race nutrition and pedestrian comfort erased at one end of the 13.1-mile course.

Looking at the Strava data now, I see that the first two kilometres show familiar territory: Exhibition Park (which I run through regularly), Haymarket and Grey Street. Whilst the maps reveal little more than lines indicating streets and roads, it is the street names that galvanise vivid memories of other times spent in this city. The data prompts memories unrelated to the GNR: memories of walking along Haymarket and onto Northumberland Street when shopping in town, or nights out which ended up in The Vineyard on Grey Street. This conjures memories of other races: standing outside this bar on June 9, 2018, waiting for the Blaydon Race to start. Beyond the times, pace, cadence and heart rate that are seemingly inconsequential, Strava data acts as a catalyst for deeper embodied memories, held somewhere within reach yet hidden. These memories are accessed incidentally, summoned involuntarily and without warning. Embodied memories which are absent from the digital data may be hidden in Strava; they remain virtual until actualised by a prompt or perception that occurs when I open an app which then connects with my body. In actualising or reinhabiting memories, in awakening memories in my body temporarily, they are enhanced, deepened and challenged although like the liminal stage of the ritual process, they are a betwixt and between, something that cannot be permanently harnessed.

At 3K I start the hard slog of the betwixt and between, no longer a starter, but not yet a finisher. As I approach the Tyne Bridge, which connects Newcastle to Gateshead, a
sense of civic pride overwhelms me. The Tyne Bridge segment is the apex of the GNR, despite it happening early in the race. It is often used to represent the race in media images and symbolises the heritage of Newcastle. Crossing the bridge is a transition from one city to another. Is the bridge itself a liminal space with water below swilling and swelling perpetually from one city to another? As I cross the bridge, up above I see the Red Arrows dispensing coloured jet streams. Feeling a warm sense of satisfaction that I was on the bridge as this happened remains in my body. It is a visceral memory, deep and embodied. Recalling the jet stream colours with any certainty later is difficult; I would, more likely remember some previous (or later) memory of seeing the Red Arrows on film or in a photograph.

Later, reviewing the data, I switch from the ‘standard’ to ‘satellite’ view, hoping for a further reminder of this moment in the race. The satellite image shows a mass of clouds, which did not reveal much beyond the perfunctory details of timing, gradient and cadence I had already accessed. Regardless, the embodied memory of crossing the Tyne Bridge is enhanced. The feeling of seeing the jets above me is fleetingly present, coming and going involuntarily. It is ephemeral yet it lives permanently in my body. The disparity between embodied memory and digital data makes me uncertain about how and what I am tracing. Am I tracing my memories as if they were a piece of low opacity paper overlaid on a digital record of events? Or is it the other way around? What I am certain of is that both ways illuminate each other. Looking at the data prompts something in me that is felt corporeally as the cycle of remembering continues to course through my body.

Running over the Tyne Bridge elicited an emotional resonance and reverence that was lacking in competitive running events I had completed in other places. The GNR begins only a few kilometres from my home, strengthening my personal connection and the draw to participate. The route takes me through familiar places and there is a palpable sense of the history of this event and of the almost one million people who have run this course before me; each person with a story to tell. This resonance heightened my sense of the GNR as a ritual,
elevating it beyond other half marathons. Reflecting on the digital evidence before me now, I feel a sense of being at home, of being supported by a home crowd, which makes competing in the Great North Run a distinctive experience. The embodied memories absorbed by me during this liminal stage of the race are connections which are deepened each time I remember; whether prompted corporeally or through digital means and transform me further from the solitary and closer to the social.

4K 5.16, 5K 5.12
Somehow the digital acts as a means of keeping my memory in check, reminding me that memory can be unreliable. Although data cannot offer the nuances that lived experience brings, digital memory bears witness to embodied memory, recording a digital map of the route taken by the body. I pass Gateshead International Stadium and realise that, at a quarter of the way through the race, I have run a 26.10 5K. Feeling good, I continue at a similar pace as I settle further into the liminal field of runners, some of whom are clearly slowing down and attracting robust encouragement from the spectator lined streets. For some of the running bodies around me, the race is visibly draining. Runners who streaked ahead in the first 5K now slow to an occasional walk, before resuming a jogging pace. My own body feels strong; I know from experience that to push too hard in the early stages of a race never leads to a good outcome. I also seem to know when I need water or fuel, not just when it is crying out for sustenance, but before it reaches that point. My training and the ritual actions of preparing for each run has embedded these details in my body. Again, the data revealed little more than perfunctory details of pace, distance, cadence and gradient; however, examining the data on a screen prompted these memories. Data acts as a conduit through which memory travels to the present moment.

6K 5.17, 7K 5.27.
At around 7.5K I am ready to take on board some fuel, I rip open a sachet of energy gel and gently squeeze some of its contents into my mouth. As I continue to run, the sweat on my hands coagulates as the gel gently spills from the sachet, creating a sticky feeling on my hands. The taste of the gel is sickly sweet, although not completely unpleasant. As I run the back of my hand across my brow to wipe sweat away, the stickiness is
smeared further onto my body. Despite this slight sense of discomfort from the sweat and gel combining, my body feels refreshed as I push on towards the halfway point: **8K 5.22, 9K 5.13.**

**10K 5.20**

I continue at a steady pace and I have a tangible sense of being in the centre of this ritual process. This is the betwixt and between of the liminal stage where I imagine the possibilities of the run and because only some of these possibilities will become reality, other details of what I imagined are lost; the possible becomes the real and the impossible fades away. The feeling of my body in motion places me in a state of flow which is almost a trance like experience. The depth of this moment as a key part of the ritual process precludes me from being able to describe it in detail. This paradox—of an intensely deep and rich experience that produces only sparse and superficial description—indicates the truly ritualistic nature of my involvement in the GNR. Like someone in a trance, being simultaneously present and absent in the moment is a deeply liminal experience. My only recollection of this stage in the race was of having brief thoughts about the remaining distance ahead. The digital data indicates that I was passing through flat ground. I remember that the landscape, a long road punctuated by occasional roundabouts, provided little inspiration. Unlike a photographer who chooses where and when to take a picture, the data captured by the Garmin records a route unblinkingly. The rich detail of the satellite takes me by surprise. Large expanses of greenery and fields edges houses into neat cul-de-sacs and rows. None of this had remained in my memory; the image somehow completed the missing embodied experience. As I shuffle between views – map image, satellite image, hybrid image – the data creates a pentimento effect, redolent of how memories are made, overwritten and remade. Similarly, the process of data prompting embodied memory builds on what was experienced, the overwriting of that experience as data, and its subsequent recall. Like pentomenti, something new emerges, although traces of the original always remain. Still in the liminal stage of the race, I too feel like a painting in progress, a map being drawn, or a role being rehearsed. There are still many brush strokes to make and edges to perfect, marks on a map that need a legend, and lines to be learnt before I am
ready for the reincorporation stage. I remain under a cloak of liminality as I run through the next few kilometres, pushing on further into the second half of the race.

On each return to the data, another memory is renewed until it becomes immediately striking, like Roland Barthes’ (2000, 51) notion of the punctum in a photograph. In this concept, the viewer experiences a “sting, speck, cut, little hole […] [a] photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me),” although I experience it, in fact, as a lack of something hitting me as the viewer. The power in the Strava image in this instance lies in its ability to make me question my experience rather than affirming it. Its bruising or poignancy (to use Barthes’ terms) is in the stress testing of memory that imbues a closer engagement with my own being-in-the-world.

14K 5.37
As I reach the 14K mark I slow my pace a bit. I feel the middle part of the race, and its cloak of liminality, ebb away as I begin to move from ‘what was’ to ‘what might be’. My legs feel sensitive to the undulations of the road, my feet are more tactile, the physical effects of the run more visceral. The uneven road surface and intermittent potholes throw me off balance, an experience compounded by veering from left to right as I pass other runners. Occasionally, a runner signals their impending presence with a shout ahead although, in a race of so many people, the rarity of such an occurrence stands out as equally jarring as the effects of the road surface on my body. Splashes of water strike my ankles as I and other runners discard half empty water bottles. For a few hundred metres after each water station, I navigate my way through the plastic, unintentionally kicking bottles across the path of others.

15K 5.31, 16K 5.33, 17K 5.36
The map data between 14K and 17K shows an increasingly urban landscape. The race routes directly through this scene, carving a linear path towards the finish line. It is a long road, allowing for an intense focus to be maintained in these latter miles. The final stages of a long run such as the GNR are, as might be expected, the hardest part. My
energy levels are depleted, my legs are tired from pounding the concrete and thoughts of returning to the role of non-runner are more prominent.

18K 5.55
The 18K marks hits me hard and I slow to a 5.55-kilometre pace. Looking at my Garmin, I see that I am heading for a sub-1.55 race which encourages me to keep going. These few kilometres, from 17 to 20, are the most gruelling part of my race. I am already thinking about how I might feel when I cross the finish line. I struggle to retrieve much from my memory here, despite looking carefully at the map image. Alternating between map and satellite view does little to provoke a response: human memory sometimes fails when data remains constant.

19K 5.48.
Somewhere between 19 and 21K, as I run parallel with the coastline, there is a runner hobbling awkwardly as he continues towards the finish line. He moves slowly yet purposefully, ignoring the obvious pain he must be feeling. I empathise with the man and wonder how far along the course he has had to limp. He receives words of encouragement from spectators and fellow runners as well as an occasional pat on the back. There is a clear sense of solidarity apparent and my awareness of the race being a community of practice is increased. I have run the race alone; in doing so, however, I have felt increasingly affiliated with the runners with whom I shared the road. Sensing this man’s obvious pain emphasised my own corporeal experience of running the course. Although I was not injured or in pain, our bodies were connected—and I felt connected to all the runners around me—because we were emerging together from the other side of this ritual experience.

Reincorporation
The flat summary of data gathered using a GPS watch transforms a runner’s body. There is a tacit communication occurring between my body and the watch, in which the digital learns from the corporeal and the corporeal learns from the digital. The data is taught the route by a runner’s body which then affords a runner insight into embodied experience. In this sense, it is difficult to separate embodied experience and digital
records as they interact in a cycle of responding to each other that merges with memories and their making.

20K 5.42, 21K 5.29, Finish 1.54.45.

800 metres to go. A surge of strength moves through my body as I head towards the finish line. At the same time as I experience this swell of vigour, I feel a change in my leg muscles as if they know I am almost at the end. Once over the line, we are shepherded into queues according to a preference for ‘small’, ‘medium’ or ‘large’ T-shirts, which are handed out along with medals and water. This is where the return to everyday life begins. The post-race ritual of cooling down, collecting baggage and meeting friends and family. My post-race experience is dominated by the physical feedback from my body as it cools down, needing to be stretched, hydrated and refuelled. Like the race itself, this cooling down process unfolds at different paces. I spend less time stretching than I should, unlike many other runners who treat their bodies with the aftercare deserved after a long run. Walking to the baggage buses feels prolonged, perhaps because my muscles are starting to understand they can now relax. The first bottle of water, taken from my finisher’s pack, goes down almost in one. Upon reaching the bus and collecting my backpack, I feel the cold on my body as it adjusts to a walking pace, signalling a move towards a more relaxed post-race experience.

The reincorporation that happens in the process of post-race celebrations is fleeting, though it stretches out for a few hours as I spend some time in the beer tent, sitting on the grass and talking with other finishers. My journey back to Newcastle involves a bus to the South Shields ferry terminal, crossing the River Tyne to North Shields, then by car to Newcastle. Given the scale of the event, returning the 13.1 miles to my home takes many hours as well as an unusually circuitous route involving several forms of transport. I stand for over an hour queuing for the ferry, watching the sun move lower in the sky, as the day begins to draw to a close.
Over time I experience reincorporation more fully, as I relive the event using the data gathered during the race. Pace per kilometre, 5K and 10K split times, maximum heart rate and cadence are analysed and used as an assessment of success or failure. This data acts as a witness to the event; it is a symbol of a newly held status. A public declaration of split times and results is means of announcing a new status, as a runner is reincorporated into a position of faster runner, veteran runner, serial Great North runner or other such markers of esteem in the running community.

In completing the GNR, I am prompted to reflect on my association with the city of Newcastle upon Tyne and my place in the running community. In this sense, reincorporation is about the integration of memories, both pre and post-ritual. My footsteps leave an invisible trace on the city as much as the city leaves an invisible trace on me. As the embodied memories of my footsteps fade, revisiting the digital footprint of GPS running data reminds me of moving through the city I call home. This cycle of remembering is a necessary collaboration between human and digital forms of memory. Digital data only becomes meaningful to the lived experience of the human body when used in a way that can be recognised and appreciated as affective textures. For me, it is these affective textures that help to forge deeper connections with places as I inhabit them with my running body.

Sometimes, there is a mere auxiliary function to the hard and fast Strava data; the images reveal little but, through that paucity of revelation, deep and surprising memories are prompted. Examining my experience of the GNR through the lens of ritual provides a method for accessing embodied memories. The Strava data allows me to revisit the ritual stages of my run although, like the symbolic props used in some rites of passage, the data acts as a vestige of something that cannot ever truly be recaptured. Traces of the original experience, however, remain in my body and lie dormant until presented with a visual reminder. Using GPS technology to capture embodied memories may be a way of exploring the tensions that exist between machines and human data although it could also be a timely reminder that we are human, something that is
deeply ingrained in ritual practices. The affective bond formed between myself and the city in which I trained and raced emerges from recognising the experience as ritual. In the liminal stage of the GNR there is a suspension of status as everyone is aiming to reach the finish line thus providing a sense of kinship with both fellow runners and my environment. In Turner’s (1969, 106) discussion of the ritual process, he suggests there are binary oppositions between liminality and status systems. Whilst, during the liminal phase there is a “[s]uspension of kinship rights and obligations”, reincorporation returns the ritual participant to a status system. It would, however, be returning with new perspectives which enhances my relationship with the city. These new perspectives, which are in a constant state of becoming after each run, provide and strengthen a sense of place. Like athletes’ training locations that accrue a quality of sacredness (Bale 2004), my relationship with the city becomes imbued with a similar quality. But, unlike sacred places that might be unreachable or even mythical, accessing the GPS data brings my sense of place to the present and affirms my kinship with the city.

This revisiting or rerunning of the GNR illustrates that memory can be made deeper, richer and more powerful when it is explored as part of a process that allows embodied memories to be (re)awakened by the digital. What emerges strongly from experiencing the corporeal and digital in this way for me is an altered disposition towards the city where I live. I feel a deeper and more affective sense of being part of the places I regularly inhabit. This interaction between hard data and embodied memory is a process through which I continue to develop an affective bond between body and place. The reliving or virtual rerunning of the race that happens each time there is a transmission of data to the body, whereby corporeal memory is evoked, is a means of reevaluating and challenging memories.

Embracing the digital

In The Sadness of the Machine, Ollivier Dyens (2001, 78) suggests that we “live in a world of mostly inhuman memories. If there is a memory of the world today, it is a memory of machines. Without them, I do not exist, for without them, I, personally, have no
memories.” Dyens’ assertion that memories can only now originate from machines, that we “empty more of our memories into culture and technology,” implies an increasing device dependency (77). Surely then, it is incumbent on us to use technology as a means of prompting embodied memories and exploring the tensions that exist between machines and human data. Dyens’ argues for embracing the interplay between human memories and machines and, because the world we live in is a world in which memories are no longer the singular preserve of humans, he questions whether we are “offloading […] our phenomenology onto technology” (77) in such a way that meaning can only come from this relationship between embodied memories and technology. Although Dyens is critical of this interplay, he is also accepting of it and argues that machines are the devices to which we pass on our memories. Much in the same way that children inherit their parents’ memories, machines are “memory children” (79). It is a similar interplay that happens between my body and the Garmin watch. Whilst they operate independently of one another (in a sense of merely existing), they support each other to function in a meaningful way. The Garmin becomes a conduit through which memories pass and are stored until reawakened by my viewing of the data on Strava.

Some scholars have observed that there is a pressing need to engage with this interplay between technology and human experience. For example, Robert Colville (2016) suggests that although there are dangers associated with technology such as the acceleration of our lives, it should be embraced rather than resisted. A similar argument that resonates with Dyens is voiced by Judy Wajcman (2015, 184) who, in addressing the same problem, sees technology as a source of “creative tension […] provid[ing] an unparalleled opportunity for realizing a more human and just society.” This interplay between human memories and the machines and technology that store them is not immediately visible as technology has become ubiquitous to the extent that – in my experience – many of the boundaries between phenomenology and technology have been erased. This is not to suggest that humans are now so dependent on technology that we are cyborgs and have lost human agency, but that technology is a kind of back up or Time Machine with an ability to record specific moments of life. Users of Apple iPhones will be familiar with a function that periodically curates albums of stored photos into slideshows called ‘Memories.’ Despite these photo memories being accessible at any time to the user, in waiting until Apple offers the apparently random and unexpected prompt to view a slideshow, human agency is subjugated by the machine. I prefer an alternative view: these unanticipated digital
memories are working in collaboration with human agency in a cycle of images recorded by human, stored in a machine, and then returned to the human. Like the relationship between me and my Garmin, there is a necessary interplay. What is revealed in my exploration of digital and embodied memory is that embracing the former can enhance the latter. What my autoethnographic approach might add to this exploration of memory and the digital is to illustrate how the interplay between humans and machines enhance and enrich embodied memories.

Charles Fernyhough suggests that the act of remembering anything “depends on the process of encoding, the conversion of the relevant information into a code that is recognisable to the memory system” (2013, 92). In using the Strava data as part of a cycle involving digital and human memory, a tension occurs that might be considered to have a negative impact on the reliability of memory. One might regard this as challenging perceptions of the past which, ultimately, affects the future. Memories are always contextual and, as Fernyhough says, “remembering […] is a social process: it happens in collaboration with other people” (2013, 238). He acknowledges that this collaboration is not an indicator of the reliability of memory but, what it does illustrate, is that remembering happens because we are prompted to do so. Whether that is a seemingly arbitrary reminder of someone or something because of visiting a place, hearing a song, experiencing a smell, or looking at a photograph, these aides to memory are welcome. Like a place no one visits or a photograph devoid of a viewer, the Strava data has little meaning without the presence of the runner to awaken it.

What this revisiting or rerunning of the Great North Run – and my running history more generally – illustrates is that memory is deeper, richer and more powerful when it is explored as part of a process that allows embodied memories to be (re)awakened by the digital. This interaction between hard data and embodied memory is a process through which I continue to develop an affective bond between body and place. In this sense, the reliving or virtual rerunning of the race that happens each time a cycle involving body and data is invoked, is a structured approach to the remembering of events. This cyclical process in which the corporeal and the digital are in an ongoing conversation with each other is a means of revaluing and challenging memories. This dialogic practice between body and data does not privilege one over the other, as both embodied
memories and their digital traces can be (un)reliable records. What emerges strongly from experiencing the corporeal and digital in this way for me is an altered disposition towards the city where I live. I feel a deeper and more affective sense of being part of the places I regularly inhabit as well as the places being inhabited by me.

References


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i Parkrun is a worldwide community 5K running event, usually held in parks and other open spaces. Designed to be inclusive, there is no entry fee and no time limit for finishing as each runner competes to gain a time rather than against other runners. To date, Parkrun has been held at 727 locations with over 2.3 million people completing the distance.

ii Garmin is perhaps the most well-known manufacturer of sports watches. Designed to measure distance, pace, heart rate, cadence, steps and much more, Garmin watches use Global Positioning Systems (GPS) to record this data which can then be viewed on the watch itself as well as on an app. Garmin also allows for its data to be accessed by third party apps such as Strava, which enables tracking and analysing data as well as acting as a social platform for athletes who choose to share their information publicly. In this article, I draw on data that has been generated using a Garmin GPS watch and subsequently viewed on Strava.

iii For health and safety reasons, participants are advised to wear a disposable outer layer whilst waiting for the race to begin to keep warm. These garments are then collected by the race organisers and donated to charity.

iv The Blaydon Race is a 5.5-mile road race from Newcastle to Blaydon inspired by nineteenth century local music hall performer and songwriter George Ridley. Ridley’s
song, “The Blaydon Races”, tell the story of a group of locals beginning a journey along Collingwood Street, which is close to The Vineyard.

I refer to Apple’s Time Machine facility on iMac and MacBook computers which allow users to periodically back up a machine and subsequently restore it to a specific date and time.