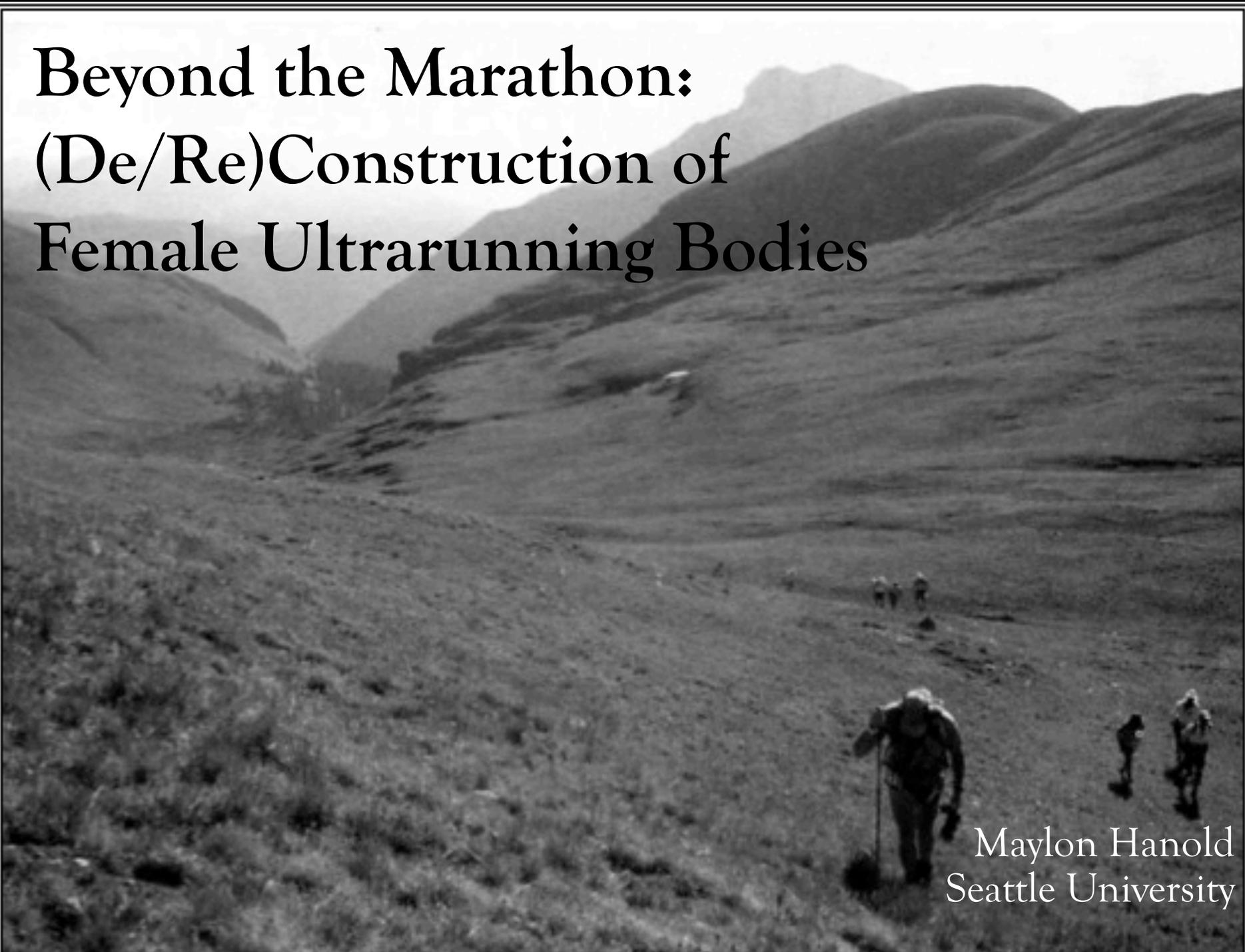


Beyond the Marathon: (De/Re)Construction of Female Ultrarunning Bodies



Maylon Hanold
Seattle University

Overview of Presentation

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Uniqueness of Ultrarunning

- Number of ultra races has tripled and the participation rate of women has increased six-fold since the 1980s (Medinger, 2009; Milroy, 2001).
- “in no area does ultrarunning differentiate itself from other sports, even endurance sports, than in the excellence of women” (Allison, 2001, p. 7).
- Despite significant growth over the past two decades, ultrarunning has received little theoretical attention (see Sknobe, 2009; Terjesen, 2008; Tulle, 2007, 2008) and specific research into female ultrarunners is nonexistent.

Contextualizing Ultrarunning

- any race longer than a marathon, 26.2 miles
 - common distances are 50k, 50 miles, 100k, and 100 miles
 - multi-day or timed events such as the 12-hour and 24-hour runs
- Varied terrain, varied surfaces, extreme weather
- Female participants: 1980s at 4% and 2008 at 27%
- 2008 women won 13 races outright

Disciplined Running Bodies

- Normative long distance running body is constructed as lean and muscular (Abbas, 2004; Greenleaf, 2002; Johns & Johns, 2000; Smith, 1998).
- Gay marathon runners disciplined by lean, muscular body, but such practices resist “gay buff” bodies (Bridel & Rail, 2007)
- Clydesdale runners resist lean, muscular runner, but ultimately do not count as legitimate running bodies by marathon culture (Chase, 2008)
- *No studies have specifically explored ultrarunning bodies*

Disciplined Running Bodies

- Running is perceived as an ideal activity for weight control in gay marathoners, rowers and gymnasts (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Chase, 2008; Johnsgard, 1985; Major, 2001; Markula, 2000)
- Ideal female body is thin, but toned (Markula, 2000)
- Psychological investigations explore eating disorders that result in female runners (Parker, Lambert, & Burlingame, 1994; Thompson, 2007; Weight & Noakes, 1987)
- *No studies have employed a sociological perspective investigating how the normative running body functions alongside the ideal feminine body for female distance runners*

Pain-Full Sporting Bodies

- In highly physical, aggressive sports, articulations of pain serve to reproduce masculinity (Collinson & Hockey, 2007; Hockey, 2005; Major, 2001)
- Pain also serves to de-stabilize dominant forms of masculinity (Pringle & Markula, 2005) and dominant conceptions of ideal femininity (Chase, 2006)
- Running is typically constructed as demanding, arduous and injury prevalent in which pain is an expected part of their experience (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Collinson & Hockey, 2007; Hockey, 2005; Major, 2001; Markula, 2000)
- *No studies have explored pain in-depth in non-aggressive sports such as distance running*

Purpose

- To examine the ways in which high-performance female ultrarunning bodies are created by and understood through the discourses of the normative running body, gender/femininity and pain.
- To interrogate *how* the ultrarunning body becomes a desired body and *how* these same desires produce multiple and complex subjectivities for female ultrarunners

Theoretical Framework

- “Sport is a key site of pleasure and domination. . . . and these dualities, the tensions they embody, are nowhere better analysed than with the tools provided by ... Foucault” (Miller, 2009, p. 190).
- **Technologies of dominance** - when discursive power relations set up a sense of normal and produce desires, which result in “disciplined” bodies (Foucault, 1970, 1977b, 1983, 1995).
- **Technologies of the self** (Foucault, 1985) result from problematizations that allow for questioning of dominant discursive constructions and multiple subjectivities to be experienced

Methods & Participants

- Qualitative, semi-structured in-depth interviews (Patton, 2002)
- 8 high performance female ultrarunners
 - 5 top five places in nationally recognized ultras in the past three years
 - 30 to 47 years
 - From health industry, education, coaching and environmental organizations
 - Mostly white, middle-class, and from the U.S. Rocky Mountains, south and Pacific Northwest

Disciplined Ultrarunning Bodies

1. Legitimize a body that does not DNF

After suffering muscle cramps and being carried to the next aid station, Ada explains, “I decided, well, I’m just going to start walking and see what happens . . . I ran through the night and I finished. So I did not have that dreaded ‘did not finish’ next to my name.”

2. Normalize discomfort and “good” pain

“to become a better ultrarunner, you’ve got to be in discomfort. . . but that’s good. Discomfort is not going to hurt me.” (Ali)

Good pain “feels like though you are working hard and things ache, feel tired, and burn, I know that I can continue for hours” (Ada).

(De/Re)Construction of Ultrarunning Bodies

1. Normative distance running body was not dominant

There are so many different body types. If you show up at an ultra it's not like Ironman where everybody's lean, mean and buffed out. (Val)

Sometimes I've been self conscious about it [her body], other times, I'm like, well, whatever, my body seems to work (Christine).

2. Ideal female body was problematized

My body is strong and for me, you know, when you think about the ideal body, the ideal female body . . . I think what good is that kind of body going to do for you? I want a body that is powerful, that can propel me up mountains (Marne)

[ultrarunning has helped] totally and absolutely because rather than my body being something that in the past I've targeted almost with hate in a way that a lot of people with other eating disorders would, blaming all their problems on their body, my body's changed from a vehicle of something that I hate to something that helps me get to amazing places. (Ali)

3. The gender binary was unstable

There are certainly more than two genders. There is sort of an athletic feminine, there's a model heroine chic feminine. There's all these different concepts of gender and they are linked to someone's sex, but not necessarily. You don't have to be masculine if you are male. . . . we can be as feminine as we want . . . and also go out there and run and fall and be covered in mud and blood. I just think that's a really neat juxtaposition . . . It's sort of creating another. . . there's a cool gender play we get to experience

4. **Bad pain not normalized**

“pain that is injury” (Christine) or when “you’re on the verge of hurting yourself” (Elena) is viewed as problematic because it jeopardizes finishing a race (DNF) or being able to run as a daily activity.

5. **Body Experiences lead to nuanced negotiation of pain characterized by patience**

They never feel exactly the same one time to another. I mean, it can feel like dying- like this sort of disintegration- like the body’s shutting down and it’s usually followed by some sort of resurrection, literally, like something outside of yourself, something bigger than yourself comes in and gives support.
(Marne)

Discussion & Conclusion

Multiple Subjectivities are Created

- The normative distance running body is disentangled from the ideal female body
- Pain becomes nuanced and negotiated

Ultrarunning Bodies Remain tied to Middle Class Sensibilities

- Whiteness is the “unquestioned social norm” (Kusz, 2007)
- Ultrarunning reproduces the neo-liberal notion of self-empowerment (Atencio & Wright, 2008; Cole et al., 2004)

Implications

1. Legitimate sporting bodies can be shaped by what is valued, which can lead to problematizations of limiting discursive constructions.
2. Participation in sport can lead to the reproduction of dominant discourses while simultaneously providing sites for multiple and complex subjectivities.

Future Research

1. What are the experiences of “middle of the pack” or “back of the pack” runners?
2. How do elite men experience their bodies?
3. How does ultrarunning as a practice support classed, raced and hetronormative identities?

Questions

