PRACTICES

RUNNING

LINDSEY A. FREEMAN

Running

Practices

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Running

Lindsey A. Freeman

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for Jessi

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Introduction

I was born during the late twentieth-century American jogging boom. My family was part of the newly distance-obsessed masses running through the 1980s in tall socks, waffle-soled shoes, and short shorts. We kissed the roads, tracks, and trails of East Tennessee with Brookses, New Balances, and Nikes adorning our feet. As young as five, I ran 5K and 10K races, alongside my parents, collecting T-shirts that fit more like knee-length dresses and trophies topped with golden shapely women whose bodies bore no resemblance to mine. On Sundays, my parents would drive me to the high school track, where I would run lap after lap, timing my splits and miles. I wrote these numbers down in a little notebook, like a pint-size bookie taking bets on myself. I was carefully tracking my progress and dreaming of hitting a personal best or a "PB," as we runners call them.[1]

Most children run spontaneously and freely, but I trained. Before I was allowed to run free in the neighborhood by myself, I created running loops around the yard, jumping over the

ivy that lined the sidewalk, weaving in and out of the dogwood trees, and giving a high five to the waxy-leaved magnolia as I zipped by. I did hill work, sprinting up the big slope behind the house and jogging slowly back down to touch the fence covered in honeysuckle, licking the sweet nectar from the blossom stems as a reward before racing back up again. I ran countless miniature laps around the cul-de-sac at the end of my street, until I became dizzy. I could have been a tough, tiny contender for the type of "last man standing" backyard ultraraces that are held now: those races where competitors make small circuitous routes over and over, until there is only one runner remaining.[2]

For as long as I can remember, running has been something I do in an earnest and serious way, which is how I do everything I love.

Despite running nearly all my life, I am not an exceptional or elite athlete. I would describe myself as an OK runner. I have set two track records in competition: one in the 800 meters in college and the other for the mile in middle school. I am unlikely to set any more, outside of PBs, and even those seem improbable with my growing collection of tendonitises, but I hold out hope. The last race I ran was a half-marathon in the small coastal city of Anacortes, Washington. When I finished, I had a flush of pride because I thought I might have won my age-group. As it turns out, the runner who beat me was so far ahead that I never even saw her. Half-marathon and marathon racing are full of moments like these that don't quite register as humiliations, because no matter what, I've gone the distance.

I'm sure that this feeling manifests after longer races too, in the aftermath of ultramarathons of 50K, 50 miles, 100K, 100 miles, and more (always already more), but I haven't experienced this feeling of ultracompletion . . . yet.

While setting records certainly ferries pleasure, what I love most about running is the way it allows me to make time and space for being in a body feeling my way through a landscape and my own thoughts. When running, I'm not asking myself to be anything other than a runner, a human animal breathing, covering distance, briefly flying, while maintaining a sense for the shifting ground. When I find a rhythm, I can let go, and feelings and thoughts come in waves; it is not unlike dreaming. Running (although not racing) can be freedom from pronouns and peer review.[3] What a relief sometimes, to simply be a person, temporarily shaking loose.

This is not to say that the space of running is a utopia; a variety of mean and terrible things can interrupt even the best run, snap a runner right out of their flow. There are accidents and injuries; dogs that want a piece of you; people on the street and in vehicles who scrutinize bodies, gender police, racially harass, intimidate, and worse. It is puzzling to me, but the very act of seeing someone running seems to trigger rage in a large swath of humanity.

Many years ago, my white middle-aged father was shot with a paint gun while jogging alongside the highway, turning the chest of his white T-shirt a bright crimson. We suspected that the boys who shot him from a minivan, whose wide door they swung open with verve, were my brother's friends, but it might not have been personal; it may be that they just saw a lone runner as an easy target.

I do not know many runners who have not had something hurled at them through the window of a passing car. I have been hit with misogynist insults, gay slurs, ripe peaches, half-full beer cans, and once a fuzzy, red Tickle Me Elmo doll. Men in pickup trucks, in luxury sedans, and on bicycles have ridden alongside me, letting me know they could do anything they wanted to my running body, vulnerable in shorts on the side of the road. Sometimes these men let me know that they saw my body as a feminine one, other times a queer one, and occasionally both.

The murder of Ahmaud Arbery is on my mind too as I write this handbook. I have been thinking of the frightening rage of those three white men who felt that a Black man had no business in their neighborhood. I have been thinking of the gross injustice that many people fear being assaulted or murdered for doing such a simple thing as running.

The release found in running comes from a desire to touch something beyond or within yourself that is difficult to access when still. To run is to move and be moved. This is why it is vital that everyone have access to spaces for running. The ability to enter these spaces, material and immaterial, is what makes it possible to be present for the beautiful and unusual experiences that can emerge from repetition, and from the combination of preparation and chance. These experiences can exceed your imagination; they can shift your sense of what you thought you knew. That the touching and pleasurable spaces of running can be accessed more easily and freely by some runners than others is yet another deep unfairness of our world.

Despite the hostility and violence—the body, gender, racial, social, and spatial boundary policing that runners sometimes receive, and receive unevenly—I still believe that running al-

lows for a space of freedom. It freaks me out to use such a lofty and loaded word as *freedom*, but I'm at my most effusive and sincere when I write about sporting.[4]

Although I have always been drawn to the practice of running, I often feel distant from its popular representations. I come to running culture, as I do with most things, at a slant. I do not often or easily find a sense of queer possibility in most popular books, magazines, or films about running, and it is increasingly difficult to find athletic clothes that both fit my body and match my gender. Each decade seems to bring a narrowing in the options available to athletes who run in clothes purchased from the women's section of sports shops. When I enter these spaces, I often leave confused, having bought nothing and wondering why running clothes need so many cutouts in the thighs, open backs, and spaghetti string tops. I am not opposed to these styles for those who want them, but I wish that there were more options for those of us who don't. Still, I feel a capaciousness in the practice of running itself. I know I'm not alone in this and that there are a lot of us running in the gap between our practices and our desires, our abilities to kit ourselves out in what feels good, and in the representations of what we see in print and through images of others supposedly doing what we do.

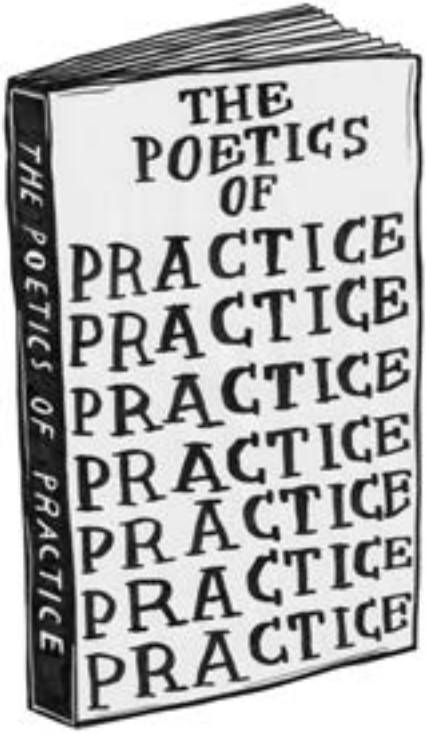
Running can be a method and a genre, but it is always laced to the feet of those who carry it. I have not found my pacer among the authors of the dozens of racing memoirs I've read or my ideal pack to train with through the collection of running handbooks I've amassed. Although I have been drawn in by their covers and enthusiasm since I was a kid, poring over

the handbooks my parents had lying around featuring images of strong, ropey running legs and promises to address elusive categories like "being," "innerspaces," and "the zen of running," I have not found kinship.[5] While reading popular books about running, I have often been stopped in my tracks midsentence by categories I have come to think of as "weird misogyny," "out-of-the-blue anti-queerness," "casual racism," and "strange essentialisms." When I'm moving through otherwise banal paragraphs, these moments hit me unexpectedly, like an object hurled from a moving car as I run along the road, but they can sting more because I have approached these books willingly; I have come a distance to meet their phrases on the page, paid money for the experience, and expended energy; and I have done so because I love running. As a reader of these books, I'm looking for something, to gain new knowledge—technical or emotional—to experience a world, to touch and be touched by a space of running. Getting struck by these moments of misalignment with the words on the page leaves me angry, disappointed, and longing for another kind of runner's world.

I learned from all my queer punk heroes and heroines who came before, if you don't like the songs on the radio, start your own band, and if you don't like the glossy magazines that pretend you and those you love don't exist, make a zine for your community—do it yourself—and so I wrote the running handbook I couldn't find. Feminist and queer writers require new literary styles to hold us: running is the genre I'm working in now. We also need to make adjustments to old forms that cause us injury, so I wrote this handbook first in running and then translated it to language that works on the page.

Running is always about more than running. When writing about running, the author's way of seeing and modes of being in the world are inevitably folded in. What has been missing for me in most of the running books I've read is a poetics of practice and a resonant theory of running that is not overly confident in what it means to run. Beginning in the seventeenth century, handbooks have traveled under the phrase *vade mecum*, from the Latin meaning "go with me." The meaning is twofold: the first is that the author should be a guide, and the second is that handbooks are designed to move. They should feel good to hold and slip easily into a tote bag or running vest. They should make practices legible and inhabitable: they shouldn't weigh you down. Cousins to manuals, but with more of a personal touch, handbooks separate themselves from the dry books of operation that come in the glove compartment of a new car. At their best they are an invitation to a practice and are thoughtful about form. The kind of handbooks I like contain helpful advice, along with prompts for creativity; they have an emphasis on style rather than an insistence on a mechanical correctness; and they are oriented toward possibility instead of being simply a compendium of rules.

There is always an element of memoir in running handbooks, with the goal of giving a sense of who is behind the paragraphs written to move the reader, and I have kept that convention. Through writing about my practice, I discovered something akin to what Haruki Murakami documents in *What I Talk about When I Talk about Running*, which is that "writing honestly about running and writing honestly about myself are really the same thing."[6] Memoir functions as both a research method and a window into an individual practice, but the sec-



tions of personal history aren't only meant to be a description of what's particular about my running. They are also invitations—openings—to think about your own practices.[7]

Throughout the handbook, I repeatedly turn to artists, poets, queer theorists, and writers, those I think of as my front-runners in theories of love and touch, and whose attention to form and style moves me to make sentences. Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse*, a queer endurance project if there ever was one, has often been a handbook for me when tormented or enchanted by love. With this project I move the object of affection from a person to the practice of running and find that Barthes's formulations resonate just as strongly.[8] I'm especially moved by how he compares the lover to an athlete who strains and struggles and exhausts themselves.[9] In this handbook I'm collapsing the comparison and taking up a hybrid identity, the lover and the athlete, in one freckled body in hot pursuit of what running is and can be. I feel encouraged in this approach through the words of the Scottish writer and Highlands hiker Nan Shepard, who in the foreword to *The Living Mountain*, a book about her endurance practice of hiking in the Cairngorms, writes: "Love pursued with fervor is one of the roads to knowledge."[10]

Running is a durational act, which at its most simple is about time and timing, and about a body (or bodies) moving at pace through space. By developing a practice and doing this simple thing over and over, you learn things about your body and your personality; the bodies and personalities of those you run with; and the textures, surfaces, and atmospheres you run in and through. Following Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, I

want to think about the practice of running as a somesthetic space of "hapticality, or love," where hapticality is a capacity for feeling, "a way of feeling through others" and "a feel for others feeling you."[11] So often running is thought of as a solitary practice, but it is also a space full of the potential for connection, and for the kind of beautiful formlessness of friendship that can be a way of life if you let it.[12]

In the essay "Love, a Queer Feeling," Lauren Berlant writes that love creates "an environment of touch . . . that you make so that there is something to which you turn and return."[13] Berlant is not writing about running, but still those words feel like something I can run with. While writing this handbook, I thought about the spaces of touch that running creates. I turned and returned to Berlant to touch a space of queer theory, and as I continue to go through the miles, lines from their essay zip through my "runner-brain" as part of the cadence of my thinking.[14]

The practice of running always exceeds its normative and institutional forms, even when exercising in and through those forms, such as organized marathons, track meets, and the Olympics. To be in excess of institutions, the habitual, the self, identity, pronouns, and/or the body requires stretching. I want to think of stretching in terms of desire and as an increased capacity for feeling. Following Barthes, I see stretching as a form of self-extension that reaches out toward someone or something and as a gesture or a practice that has the potential to "baffle paradigms." Stretching can be a question, a going out on a limb to offer an invitation that pulls up a potential moment of contact, which can be as subtle as a barely perceptible wink or as overt as a grasping for another's hand. Stretching can also be

an answer to a question, a response to someone or something else's extension, a reaching toward possibility. It can open you up to a desire you didn't know you had or a connection you never imagined.[15] Stretching is a start to creating environments of touch that you can turn and return to, and a repeated action that allows you to keep touching spaces that feel good.

Running is a handbook that is made possible through friendship, community, and practices stretching toward each other. Alongside the sentences I've written about running are drawings by Hazel Meyer. This collaboration is a direct manifestation of the queer and feminist sporting worlds that shaped me as a runner and a writer. Meyer's body of work—including past and current projects and performances such as *Muscle Panic*, *Walls to the Ball*, and *Witness Fitness*—is built around engagement with feminist and queer aesthetics and histories of athletics. Her strengths as an artist and a documenter of queer and feminist cultures augment my writing, as Hazel and I stretch to meet each other in these pages.

This small queer handbook is not likely to make you a better runner, but if it does, full credit lies with you. *Running* is ultimately a stretch, an invitation to think about what it means to have a regular practice and to run through things at whatever pace, legging it out the best you can with heart and style. There are stories of races here too, and of training for them. These stories are chosen to give a sense of a running life, but they are only a small part of what it means to run. I'm more invested in honoring the work of daily practice, by making visible and beautiful the sometimes weird experiences of running in and of itself. In the following pages, you won't find arguments that humans were made to run or born to run either barefoot or

with the most high-tech materials ever imagined strapped to our feet. I'm not convinced that humans were born to do anything in particular, which is part of what makes the things we choose to do carry meaning. To find kinship in this handbook, you don't need to be a runner, a sporting person, or even a writer. You must simply allow for the possibility that logging mile after mile can lead you to places and things you didn't expect, and to consider that running can be an act of love and a means toward contact. Let's keep running. You've already started. *Vade mecum.*

NOTES

Introduction

1 The term *personal record*, or *PR*, is also frequently used. My initiation into running came with the term *personal best*, so it remains at the forefront in the glossary of my running memories.

2 An "ultra" refers to an ultramarathon, which is anything over the standard marathon length of 26.2 miles. In a "backyard ultra" runners must consecutively run the distance of 4.1666666 miles in less than one hour. A loop of this distance must be repeated every hour to stay in the contest. The distance is measured in this way so that any runner who completes twenty-four laps has run 100 miles in one day. "Last man standing" refers to the rule that the race is not over until all the competitors or all the competitors minus one have failed to complete the distance in the time allotted or have dropped out. If no runner outlasts another, then all competitors receive the distinction of "DNF," or "did not finish," and there is no winner.

3 This is not to say that freedom from pronouns and peer review is always desirable. Constraints can be lovely. Peer review can

be immensely helpful; it can give you things that can help shift your thinking and writing. And pronouns, too, are stretchy and stretchable constraints that do a lot for an identity moving in a world. Here, I only wish to say that I think sometimes a space where identity is on the move and thinking and feeling are unfixed, at least for a while, can be a wonderful thing.

4 Soon after I wrote this paragraph, I read the introduction to Maggie Nelson's *On Freedom*, where she asks: "Can you think of a more depleted, imprecise, or weaponized word?" (3). This question zipped right through me because I'm not sure I can. But also because, like Nelson, I think it is still worth thinking with, and sometimes it is the only word that feels right.

5 Running handbooks that could be found in my childhood home: Fixx, *Complete Book of Running*; Rohé, *Zen of Running*; Sheehan, *Running and Being*; and Spino, *Beyond Jogging*.

6 Murakami, *What I Talk about When I Talk about Running*, vii.

7 There are lots of models of writers working in this mode. I'm particularly moved by the way Ann Cvetkovich uses this strategy. She puts it thus: "The memoir also functions as a research method because it reveals the places where feeling and lived experience collide with academic training and critique." In *Depression*, 80.

8 Barthes was no stranger to writing about sports; two of his best-known "mythologies" are about the semiotics of competition and performance in the Tour de France and in amateur wrestling. See "In the Ring," 3–14; "Tour de France as Epic," 122–33. Barthes also wrote the text for a documentary film for the Canadian Broadcasting Company directed by Hubert Aquin called *What Is Sport?* that was then published as a book. In this slim volume, he extends his reading of sport outside of France to include meditations on the relationship of five sports, which are matched to five national cultures, including bullfighting in

Spain, car racing in the United States, cycling in France, hockey in Canada, and soccer in England.

9 Barthes, *Lover's Discourse*, 4.

10 Shepard, *Living Mountain*, xliii.

11 Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 98.

12 Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," 135–40.

13 Berlant, "Love, a Queer Feeling," 439.

14 "Runner-brain" comes from Sillitoe's novella *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*.

15 Barthes, *Neutral*, on "baffling paradigms" (6) and on stretching as a form (197).

On the Subversive Nature of This Handbook

1 Deloria, *Playing Indian*.

2 Barthes, *Lover's Discourse*, 136.

3 Baudrillard's disgust with running in the United States can be found in multiple texts, most notably *America*, 20, 38–39; but also in *Simulacra and Simulation*, 13; and "Operational Whitewash," 44–50.

4 Ullyot, *Running Free*, 10.

5 For more on the story of the cover, see Metzler, "Iconic and Ironic."

6 Fixx, *Complete Book of Running*, xv.

7 Fixx, *Complete Book of Running*, 11.

8 Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," 137.

A Note on "Just Do It"

1 Norman Mailer wrote extensively about Gilmore in his Pulitzer Prize–winning book *The Executioner's Song*.