

Alterity: The Dartmouth Journal of Intercultural Exchange

Volume 2018
Issue 1 *The Shoebox Issue*

Article 12

June 2019

On the Run?

Anna Ellis
Dartmouth College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/alterity>

Recommended Citation

Ellis, Anna (2019) "On the Run?," *Alterity: The Dartmouth Journal of Intercultural Exchange*: Vol. 2018: Iss. 1, Article 12.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/alterity/vol2018/iss1/12>

This Creative Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Student-led Journals and Magazines at Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Alterity: The Dartmouth Journal of Intercultural Exchange* by an authorized editor of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu.

On the Run?

By Anna Ellis

First, they stared. They just gawked at me as I panted and sweated my way down the awkwardly thin sidewalk, dodging street vendors and attempting to jam my sweaty headphones back into my ears.

After the gawking came the jeers. They started out quiet, but grew relentless. My face burned, even though I couldn't understand them. I held back a few tears- *stupid, stupid, stupid! Only tourists cry! You're here for four months, pull it together!*

Two voices joined the first caller, then three others followed. The voices were raspy, aggressive, audacious. They were accompanied by flailing arms and restless kicks- just enough to blatantly disregard my being. The callers danced and thrashed around me as I trudged up the street. I was hardly jogging anymore- my path was crowded with onlookers. I tried not to look at any of them, tried not to let them intimidate me. I was furious. Didn't I have the right to run here? The right to take up space on this street? The right to move my body in any way I damn well pleased?

Apparently not. When the crowd realized that I wasn't getting the message, they mobilized. They ran after me, screaming and chanting and gasping for air. They crudely mimicked my running form, laughing at each other, and at me. They pulled up beside me and gazed with bright, eager eyes, anticipating my next move. Would I keep running? Would I confront them? Would I turn around? What did they even want?

I kept running; that's what I wanted. I picked up the pace and headed uphill, away from the crowded streets, the colorful vendors, and the skinny sidewalks. I vanished into neighborhood territory, where the fences of Johannesburg's elite population served as an intangible barrier to my crowd of onlookers. Heart pounding, chest heaving, breath coming in sharp bursts, I sprinted past massive homes, tall fences, and complex security systems. There was some comfort in privilege. Was this okay?

Later that night, I told this story to my classmates. I talked about the jeering, the taunting, the chasing, and the rich neighborhood's solace. However, when the other women responded to my narrative, I was deeply bothered.

The other Dartmouth women on the trip expected me to be scared, which frankly infuriated me more than the jeering men. They suggested that I run with a male Dartmouth student the next time I wanted to exercise. Of course, the male students had never experienced these problems. Of course they were capable of navigating the city streets by themselves. I realized that, on Dartmouth's campus, I had been lucky to have basic freedoms, but here? I was quickly losing my agency, my capability, my competence.

Even though the majority of my Dartmouth Foreign Study Program was incredible, and was executed without a hitch, this situation was challenging. I refused to accept that my

physical body was a reason that I couldn't move through space as freely as my male classmates. I found it utterly ridiculous that Professors were consistently reminding me to "be careful" while they told the men on the trip to simply "have fun." I couldn't believe that, when people looked at me, they saw someone who needed protecting instead of someone who could stand up for herself. This continued to bother me throughout the program, and I probably spent an unnecessary amount of time asserting my competence to make up for this perceived imbalance.

Reflecting on this situation after coming back to the United States, where I can run freely with only the occasional honking car horn or passive "nice ass" comment, I realize that my anger came from privilege. I grew up in a small town in Maine, where safely running was taken for granted. When I arrived in South Africa, this privilege was removed. As a racial minority for the first time in my life, and as a woman choosing to run, I was already an extremely rare phenomenon. This, coupled with some of the systemically sexist responses to women in South Africa, drastically impacted my time there. While I hold on to my anger with those who did not trust and respect my competence, nor the strength of the female body, I understand the cultural differences that were tested and transgressed by my desire to move through space as an empowered woman.