May 2019

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PILGRIMAGE PALIMPSESTS

Storytelling and Intersubjectivity
Across Multiple Shrines, Sites, and Routes

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On the Productivity of Pilgrimage Palimpsests: Traces and Translocations in an Expanding Field

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FOREWARD

Some years ago a colleague of mine, Tiina Sepp, was carrying out fieldwork as part of our project examining the links between pilgrimage and cathedrals in contemporary England.[1] While at Canterbury Cathedral, she began to talk to a middle-aged man called Michael. At first glance, Michael seemed like an unlikely source of information about pilgrimage on the grounds that he was a committed Methodist. Yet, when he heard about our project, he was eager to tell Tiina of his experiences. Originally from Yorkshire in the north of England, he now lived in the south of the country, in Kent, while often going to Wales with his family on holiday. What was striking about Michael's conversation was that each of the places that had contributed to his biography were also highlighted in his list of the pilgrimage sites that were most important to him:

> St. David's [in Wales] is very close to the wild wilderness, you know, cliff tops, sea, which is a strong thing for me. In York, it's where I come from, Yorkshire's where I come from, it represents the strengths of the hillsides, you know, the history. And Canterbury clearly is the center of our Protestant faith. So those three places are … maybe I'll feel it elsewhere, I don't know, but those are my three… like a magnet.

Narrative, memory, and meaning-making—all important components of this issue—combine in Michael's words, as he weaves together three shrines in giving an account of his life that is close to a religious testimony. His comments provide a powerful warning against what the editors of this issue on Pilgrimage Palimpsests, Marc Loustau and Kate DeConinck, see as the dangers of "singularism" in the study of pilgrimage. They refer to the tendency of ethnographers to focus on single, relatively bounded sites, reflecting a long fieldwork tradition of drawing a close boundary around one's location of study. In line with their argument, Michael reminds us that if we want to understand the perspective of the pilgrim who traces significant biographical and narrative threads between multiple places,

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1   The interview took place on November 13, 2014. For details of the project see https://www.pilgrimageandcathedrals.ac.uk/team.

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"singularism" makes very little sense.

Michael's words also resonate closely with an observation I have made about the fieldwork process itself. It has always seemed to me that we do not examine closely enough the multiple connections that can be discerned among the different sites that we visit throughout our research careers. As I have put it elsewhere,[2] we are not only increasingly practitioners of multisited ethnography—reflecting our growing understanding that "no place (or shrine) is an island"[3]—but we should become more aware of our status as multisited ethnograph*ers*, moving between fieldwork sites that we may represent as separate but which contain implicit and explicit strands of intellectual, biographical, and social connection. Indeed, my own entry into the study of pilgrimage reflects this process. I began studying Catholic shrines on the rebound from research on Pentecostalism—only to come to the gradual realization that such "separate" fields were united by underlying questions concerning mobility, materiality, and religious pluralism.

Michael's observations take us still further in reflecting on the "non-singularity" of sites. Note how the places he mentions complement each other, forming a division of spiritual and spatial labor that encompasses a peripheral wildness (St. David's), a powerful sense of home (York), and acknowledgement of an ecclesiastical center (Canterbury). The suggestive connections between the sites that make up Michael's assemblage may remind us of other significant linkages that we read about in the contributions to this special issue: Medjugorje and Lourdes for Michael Agnew; Lourdes and Csíksomlyó for Marc Loustau; September 11 and Sandy Hook for Kate DeConinck; and perhaps even a Roman Catholic cathedral and a simple wooden cross for Iuliia Buyskykh.

The cumulative layering implied in the idea of the palimpsest can also take on literal dimensions in some places, such as the placing of a Christian veneer over older Andean sites that remain "invariably pregnant with pagan associations," so

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2   Simon Coleman, "The Multi-Sited Ethnographer," in *Critical Journeys: The Making of Anthropologists*, ed.Maya Unnithan and Geert de Neve (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 31-46.

3   With apologies both to the poet John Donne and the editors, who echo these words in their introduction.

that "native and nonnative religious traditions are brought into direct relation."[4] In addition, we must acknowledge the numerous ways in which scholars of pilgrimage in India have shown how both scriptural and ritual legitimation has long existed for Hindu shrines to be understood as interlinked, drawing regions and even the whole nation together through a spiritual geography that operates at different scales.[5] Nonetheless, we might ask whether the recognition by both informants and researchers of multiple inter-connections between the Christian sites covered in this special issue tells us something about certain contemporary trends that go beyond pilgrimage itself. As ideas, people, and objects move more than ever before, mutual awareness and mutual entanglements become more obvious, so that the development of the "palimpsest" as a productive object of study by ethnographers can itself be understood as emerging out of a wider political economy of transnational mobility and mutual awareness.

Let me make a small linguistic observation that illustrates this wider point. One of the things that strikes me about some of the papers in this volume, but also other parts of the burgeoning pilgrimage literature, is the increased use of the words "porous" and "porosity" to describe the experience of visiting sacred sites. Loustau and DeConinck refer to "increasingly porous state borders" that both reflect and foster journeying to multiple shrines; Agnew observes that shrines themselves become porous "as pilgrims travel between them, with cross-currents flowing back and forth," as well as pointing to the "translocative and transtemporal crossings which point to the porous and malleable boundaries of the pilgrimage shrine"; and finally Loustau invokes the word again in his own paper, this time drawing on Tanya Lurhmann[6] to reflect on the way one of his informants, the young woman called Bíborka, had once felt that her mind and the outside world were connected by a barrier that was porous.

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4   Michael Sallnow, *Pilgrims of the Andes: Regional Cults in Cusco* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 3.

5   See Surinder Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India: A Study in Cultural Geography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) and Ann Grodzins Gold, *Fruitful Journeys: The Ways of Rajasthani Pilgrims* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

6   Tanya Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Alfred E. Knopf, 2012), 32.

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Compare these uses with others that I have observed recently. The Brazilian anthropologist Carlos Steil, writing about the intersections between Roman Catholicism and New Age sensibilities, refers to "the porosity of the boundaries between the established (institutionalized) religions and the 'religions of the self,'"[7] as well as "the porosity of the boundaries separating the experience of the sacred and the secular spheres of modern life, showing that the motivations for setting foot on these paths no longer fit pre-established frameworks of the kind locating tourist and religious experiences in separate domains."[8] Similarly, Mats Nilsson and Mekonnen Tesfahuney[9] refer to the ways in which the place identity of Santiago de Compostela—the ostensible endpoint of the famous Camino through Europe—"is gradually shifting from a place whose meaning is tied primarily to a collective religious identity into one that is fleeting, porous and personal or individualized." Possibly the most developed use of the term in relation to pilgrimage comes from Katherine Rousseau[10] in her study of spatial interaction and memory in Marian pilgrimage sites, where she comments for instance that the long-standing debates over the role of authenticity and its subversion at pilgrimage sites[11] "does not account for the varied potential for porous boundaries at pilgrimage places, where heterogeneous audiences engage with the pilgrimage environment and its interpenetrating devotional, cultural, and commercial aspects." Furthermore, in her view, sites must be understood as inherently engaged "with global audiences and vigorous marketing industries."[12]

One reason for the increased use of the porosity metaphor may be the influence of Charles Taylor's discussion of the contrast between the modern, "buffered" self that

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7   Carlos Steil, "Caminhos de Santiago in Brazil: Body, Spirituality and Market," in *Pilgrimage and Political Economy: Translating the Sacred*, ed. Simon Coleman and John Eade (Oxford: Berghahn, 2018), 156.

8   Steil, "Caminhos de Santiago," 157.

9   Mats Nilsson and Mekonnen Tesfahuney, "Performing the 'Post-secular' in Santiago de Compostela," *Annals of Tourism Research* 57 (2016): 25.

10   Katherine Rousseau, "Pilgrimage, Spatial Interaction, and Memory at Three Marian Sites," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Denver, 23.

11   See Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978) and John Eade and Michael Sallnow, eds., *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (London: Routledge, 1991).

12   Rousseau, "Pilgrimage, Spatial Interaction and Memory," 25.

is separated from others, and the "porous" self that is more open to influences from others, including worlds of spirits and wider cosmic forces. For Taylor, porosity becomes subject to a kind of longing, as he states: "Perhaps the clearest sign of the transformation in our world is that today many people look back to the world of the porous self with nostalgia, as though the creation of a thick emotional boundary between us and the cosmos were now lived as a loss. The aim is to try to recover some measure of this lost feeling."[13] In his terms, contemporary pilgrimage might be seen as an attempt to regain the sensibility of the past. However, when we link porosity to the idea of the palimpsest it refers to still wider social processes, both including and reaching beyond notions of the unbuffered self to include unstable boundaries not only between sacred and secular, but also between ostensibly separate sites, even when they appear to represent very different religious traditions and regimes. In a similar vein, Ian Reader[14] points to the ways in which organizers of the famous Japanese pilgrimage to Shikoku drew on the example of Santiago de Compostela in a campaign to enhance the standing and clientele of their own site—a transposition not of theology so much as marketing strategy.

The proposal that sites should be understood as interlinked—even in surprising and implicit ways—contributes to a more general realization that we need to expand our ethnographic and theoretical horizons if we are to realize pilgrimage's full potential as an object of study. Links between shrine and shrine, shrine and home, shrine and numerous other institutions, must all be explored by ethnographers prepared to go beyond the basic model of focusing on the most obviously pious and peak experiences displayed in a single, sacred center: thus our understandings of contemporary piety and porosity are expanded and possibly even reconfigured. Each contributor to this volume provides us with ways to go beyond the basic model. Agnew replaces a temporal version of "singularity" with *seriality* as he explores the significance of going to multiple shrines, but also of going to the same shrine multiple times: in this sense a degree of accumulated repetition, and not merely the

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13   See Charles Taylor, "Buffered and Porous Selves," The Immanent Frame (September 2, 2008), https://tif.ssrc.org/2008/09/02/buffered-and-porous-selves.

14   Ian Reader, *Pilgrimage in the Marketplace* (London: Routledge, 2014), 27.

unique, is given heightened religious value.[15] Buyskykh's exploration of "guesthood" as a complex vision of sharing space among varieties of Catholic and Orthodox believers points to the long anthropological tradition of studying the power-laden reciprocities and suspicions associated more generally with hospitality.[16] In his discussion of the perceived congruence of the "narrative arcs" between Lourdes and Csíksomlyó, Loustau offers up the possibility of substituting stories not only with reference to pilgrimage sites, but also, I would maintain, regarding shrines and apparently very different institutions. Elsewhere, I have argued that significant parallels are discernible between a woman's story of visiting the pilgrimage site of Walsingham and her narrative of picking fruit with her family.[17] In both Loustau's and my examples the act of narrative substitution is both strategic and inchoate at one and the same time. Finally, DeConinck's account of trans-situational bonding between two sites of trauma, mediated by a "moving" (in both senses) object, explores how narrative erasure rather than substitution may at times be necessary for effective and affective connections to be made. There is of course much more to be said about each paper, and so I am happy to invite readers to explore the truly expansive vision of pilgrimage that they offer.

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15   Compare Andreas Bandak and Simon Coleman, "Different Repetitions: Anthropological Engagements with Figures of Return, Recurrence and Redundancy," *History and Anthropology* 30 no. 2 (2019): 119-132.

16   Matei Candea and Giovanni Da Col, "The Return to Hospitality," *JRAI* 18 S1 (2012.): 1-19.

17   Simon Coleman, "Pilgrimage as Trope for an Anthropology of Christianity," *Current Anthropology* 55 S10 (2014): 287

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