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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Journeying with: qualitative methodological engagements with pilgrimage

Autoethnography is increasingly being appreciated as a tool to engage with embodied practices and spatial performances by combining the experiences of both participants and researchers. This paper examines its deployment in the study of a walking pilgrimage on the mountain Croagh Patrick in Ireland. The significant growth of pilgrimage in recent decades has prompted the development of concepts and approaches to examine the motivations and experiences involved. Autoethnography enables the researcher to become a co-participant, getting closer to the processes and substances of the activity. Using vignettes from the performance of the Croagh Patrick pilgrimage, I illustrate how this approach is enacted in the field providing embedded qualitative insight to this socio-cultural phenomenon. The practical and analytical aspects of this process are discussed, alongside the multifaceted nature of contemporary pilgrimages.

Introduction

> Lines of pilgrims trail on the mountainside. The path is animated by hundreds of pairs of feet. I climb Croagh Patrick along with thousands of others. Children and grandparents, whole families and friends, youth groups and lone walkers, all merge in the ascent of this peak. Each one on their own journey, an intermix of faith, tradition, exploration, and exercise. My presence is one of these strands, a researcher whose participation draws me into the pilgrimage through the performance. – Fieldwork Diary, 28th July 2013

Drawing on my deployment of an autoethnography, this paper examines pilgrimage as an embodied spatial practice, through which distinctly emplaced meanings emerge. It contributes to methodological discussions by highlighting the value of autoethnography as an approach that leverages the involvement of the researcher as an analytical conduit and a means of deeper engagement with research participants. Excerpts from fieldnotes and interviews illustrate the corporeal, affective, and spiritual aspects of pilgrimage. Also, this paper stresses the importance of field-based and participative interventions in the study of pilgrimage and other performative phenomena.

Pilgrimage has witnessed a considerable growth in recent decades. While major shrines are receiving increased visitors, new destinations are emerging across a range of faith systems,

cultural movements, and civic centres (Coleman and Eade 2012; Gale, Maddrell, Terry 2016). In Ireland there has been an increase in visitors to religious shrines and an emergence of walking pilgrimages tracing medieval routes, against the backdrop of decline in formal religiosity (O'Dwyer 2013; O'Mahony 2011). With different reasons driving participation, I am compelled to delve deeper into the motivations and experiences of pilgrims to offer insight into the revival.

This paper is based on research of Croagh Patrick (Figure 1), one of the primary Irish pilgrimage sites. The mountain has been the site of religious significance over millennia, with the modern Roman Catholic pilgrimage occurring on the last Sunday in July, Reek Sunday, when up to 20,000 people participate (Gibbons and Walsh 2005). Masses are said on the mountain-top chapel, while a temporary infrastructure and support teams facilitate the event. Similar to other pilgrimages, it is a hybrid space at once spiritual and secular, with people partaking in the annual practice for a multitude of religious, cultural, and personal reasons.

The following section outlines key aspects of the geographies of pilgrimage, and their connection to discussions of religious and spiritual practices. I then illustrate how autoethnography can be deployed to address the distinct character of pilgrimage as a performative and temporal arena. Next, examinations of the actualities of the route reach different insights through shared embodied encounters and located conversations with research participants on Croagh Patrick. In concluding, I reflect on the analytical opportunities presented by autoethnography in the examination of pilgrimage and other embodied and temporary practices.

Approaching Pilgrimage

Central to understanding pilgrimage is an appreciation for its role as a journey. Studies of the Camino de Santiago, for example, have found that it is the encounters on the path which are the most resonant features, rather than the arrival at the cathedral (Frey 1998; Lois-González and Santos 2015; Peelen and Jansen 2007). The performance becomes the site of significance in which outer physical journeys facilitate inner spiritual and emotional ones (Maddrell 2013). Turner and Turner (1978) prominently argued that pilgrims enter a liminal

phase by withdrawing from the normative and forging a *communitas* with fellow travellers. Through this liberation, they can (re)focus on the more meaningful aspects of life. Research on pilgrimage needs to both conceptually and practically foreground the journey experiences as the very substance of this phenomenon.

These appreciations have challenged geographers and others to improve their approaches to fully engage with the practices and participants. This has involved researchers taking to paths, joining these transitory communities, and enacting religious rituals (Davidsson Bremborg 2013; Coleman and Eade 2012; Maddrell and della Dora 2013; Maddrell, Terry, Gale 2016). Analysis of the journey space is also informed by the larger 'mobilities turn' in human geography which critically attends to the geographies of movement (Cresswell 2010; Scriven 2014). Additionally, these studies align with methodological innovations promoted by more-than representational concerns to 'try and get closer to objects and the practices of people in real time' (Lorimer 2009, p.351; Morton 2005). My journeys on Croagh Patrick occur within this context, as I climb this mountain sharing the path with others to reach new understandings.

Another key feature of pilgrimage studies has been a focus on the role of individuals in defining their journeys. Increasingly pilgrimage is described as multifaceted and personal encompassing a vast range of spiritual, emotional, and cultural journeys (Campo 1998; Gale, Maddrell, Terry 2016). The definition of a pilgrim is broadened to encompass a whole series of journeys which share a desire to search for distinct meanings through located performances (Feldman 2017; Nilsson 2018). These orientations prompt layered examinations of pilgrimages considering their character and sensibilities by attending to their spiritual and emotional features as distinct and connected dimensions.

These understandings can be situated within geographical examinations of religion, spiritualties, and faith. Research in this area has been reinvigorated since the early 1990s, with a focus on how these features shape identity and spatial experiences (Kong 2001; Yorgason and della Dora 2009). This inherently subjective arena demands examinations of personal experiences and their interpretation in socio-cultural environments to appreciate the differences in these categories (Saunders 2013; Sutherland 2017). Moreover, this

landscape is becoming more complex with 'cohabitation and competition between multiple forms of belief and non-belief' (della Dora 2016) and a shift from institutional and formal religiosity towards spiritual self-fulfilment and immanence (Nilsson 2018). Following Tse's (2013, p.202) prompt, these circumstances require geographies that focus on the 'grounded theologies' of spatial performances and place-making. These conceptual vectors help embed pilgrimage in a fluid milieu through which the sacred and secular intersect, overlap, and intertwine.

Walking with

I am a co-participant in the Croagh Patrick pilgrimages; sharing the trail, observing, and talking (Russell 2004). Informed by pilgrimage studies and the practicalities of this research, I adopt a phenomenological approach which enabled the appreciation and incorporation of different accounts of the Croagh Patrick, including my own. Located and experienced understandings of the route and its meanings are uniquely rendered through this lens.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology understands that people and places are co-emergent features (Cresswell 2004; Macpherson 2010). He argued that the 'self' is inherently *of* the world as an embodied being (Merleau-Ponty 2002). This ontology foregrounds existence as a located performativity in which meaning and form are continuously generated together. Humans and environments shape, define, and create each other (Cresswell 2004). From this foundation, pilgrimage can be examined as an embodied spatial practice that forges participant and path. In this framework, knowledge is appreciated as being situated, it is produced in the interplays of self, others, and world (Obrador-Pons 2007). This position prompts located interventions that attend to incipient emplaced and inter-subjective understandings.

Autoethnography facilitates this process by combining perspectives of the self and others to arrive at larger insights (Stanley 2014; Sultana 2007). This model centres on incorporating the researcher as a participant alongside others to reach 'richly textured, powerfully evocative accounts' (Allen-Collinson 2013, p. 282). It emerged in the 1980s as a re-orientation away from research as a detached and universal narrative system towards an iterative, partial, and socially-embedded process (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011). Critiques

flow from this foundational ontology, with more positivistic inclinations chiding autoethnography as lacking rigor and critical analysis. While in response, its practitioners apply the same exacting interpretative frameworks of more orthodox ethnography to reach new social insights.

Within pilgrimages, autoethnography presents a distinct avenue into generating encounters as 'the shared experience and shared purpose led to a great frankness and willingness to share personal stories among pilgrims' (Peelen and Jansen 2007, p.79). The fellowships of the route facilitating conversations. As Dubisch (2004, p.113) explains 'the analytical and experiential merged in the course of the journey, providing me with an understanding of pilgrimage I am not certain I would otherwise have had'. This involves a critical reflexivity to ensure a rigorous research process, especially when this methodology is subject to criticisms of 'navel-gazing' and 'flirting with indulgent' (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2008). Additionally, the same ethical standards which shape social science research define this work, although they are a manifest in the practice and flow of fieldwork, rather than a pre-defined scheme (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011; Sultana 2007).

This paper's use of autoethnography aligns with inter-corporeal strands in pilgrimage studies which emphasise the value of shared journeys. Notermans and Kommers (2013, p.611) argue that to 'capture the pilgrimage experience, researchers also participate in rituals and observe people praying, making gestures, handling objects, or moving through the landscape'. Michalowski and Dubisch (2001) adopted an 'observant participation' which accounted for their intimate involvement with a motorcycle pilgrimage (see also Maddrell 2013; Maddrell and della Dora 2013). Comparably, walking the Camino de Santiago has been appreciated as facilitating situated access to pilgrims and distinctly corporeal insight (Frey 1998; Peelen and Jansen 2007).

As an Irish person, raised Roman Catholic, and having previously climbed the Reek, I am familiar with this pilgrimage and its tropes. I blend easily into this majority white Irish event as another participant undertaking the climb. I interact with others largely of the same cultural background, with common understandings of this pilgrimage. However, rigour demands this familiarity is tempered by a critical distance. My purpose simultaneously

separates me from others. I embody the autoethnography, a balance of participant and observer. I must leverage this proximity to reach new understandings, pushing beyond the normative to grasp the complexities of personal experiences and motivations.

This study is based on six visits to Croagh Patrick during 2013 and 2014, centring on Reek Sunday. While it is climbed year-round, I focus on people choosing to participate in the pilgrimage. Fieldnotes, photographs, and audio-visual recordings document the practices for discussion and analysis (Morton 2005). Influenced by the growing use of walking interviews (Holton and Riley 2014; Warren 2017), I conduct fifteen interviews on Croagh Patrick which offer insight from within the practice – four with people ascending, five on the summit, and six with those descending or at the mountain base. These participants are self-selecting as I discuss my work with those I walk with and ask them to share their stories. A research diary supplements the process, allowing further self-reflection.

Performance

> Each footstep is a purposeful act. The slope and scree combine to demand complete attention. Physiologically, I am drawn into this process. The path is corporeally registered in my muscles, joints, and sweat. Moreover, I perceive it in the movements of others. The strains of the climb visible in reddened faces, stops to catch breath, and the cautious steps on the loose surfaces. Commonalities interweave our journeys. (Research Diary, 28th July 2013).

I perform the climb *with* other people. Thousands of us stream up together. Terrain and event combine to evoke the hardship of an authentic pilgrimage (Gibbons and Walsh 2005). The path demands effort and attention, enveloping me and others into the practice. This is an intersubjective experience with individual and communal enactments intertwining.

Conversations readily begin within this shared space. From a grounding in the mutualities of the climb, discussions evolve and dissipate as I move and pause amongst others. The weather, the path, and routes travelled are all common topics arising from our corporeal context. These discussions of the tangible speak to the collective nature of the conditions and experiences. Building on one exchange during a moment of rest, I conduct a short

interview with Tracey who is descending the path. Her reflection on the climb as she returned down is especially evocative:

> It is a steep and tough climb to the shoulder with loose stone underfoot making it all the more difficult as you struggle to get a grip...the cone is very steep, and loose underfoot, in parts you literally need [to] use your hands and feet. It seems to go on forever and it is exhausting (28th July 2013).

Croagh Patrick imposes exertion on Tracey's body and movements, which she can viscerally describe. Similar to my experience, she is rooted in the immediate: the next step, the next rise. It is an absorbing and encompassing activity which firmly locates our awareness in the practice. Her account of the strains of the climb are embodied in my own actions and those of the crowds passing by (see Figure 2).

Comraderies are generated in this context. People offer helping hands, while pilgrims descending offer words of encouragement to those climbing, especially if someone is struggling. The challenges of the route are encountered both individually and collectively; although the path is registered internally it simultaneously enables external dispositions to connect personal experiences. Embodied understandings create empathetic linkages. These phenomenological affinities emerge from our located knowledges and the social conditions of the pilgrimage. Geraldine, who I talk with shortly after her pilgrimage, explains how she relates with other pilgrims:

> No matter how you feel you'll meet someone maybe twice your age - and I don't mean that in an ignorant way – but you'll meet them coming down holding a child in each hand and you'll say to yourself, 'I can't make it up or down on my own, and they're, do you know, doing it for three people' (27th July 2014)

She respectively outlines her thoughts and the motivation she gets from these encounters. These affinities centre on the embodied knowledges of the path that are instilled through the efforts of the climb. Personal experience is grafted onto the movements and actions of others in a reflective process that strengthens resolve and increases the value of the pilgrimage. These intercorporeal connections involve an appreciation of the extra effort required by some pilgrims in performing the path transforming acts of hardship into meaningful practices.

Within these enactments, we have embodied and situated understandings of the pilgrimage landscape. The physicality of the path renders a pronounced consciousness of bodily

movements. We not only have a heightened sense of awareness concerning our embodied practice, but also are pre-disposed to talk about it. Without the intentional interventions of autoethnography these direct insights would not have been possible. In explaining my purpose many people are very interested, and conversations develop from there, with several gladly allowing me to record and others declining. My presence as a researcher serves to capture these located conversations; while I prompt specific responses these remain examples of exchanges that occur across Croagh Patrick.

Discerning meaning through the journey

A processual analysis of pilgrimage appreciates how meanings arise through the journey. The practice is a dynamic combination of pre-conceived understandings of pilgrimage and their enactment, disruption, and (re)creation on the path. There is substance to this climb; the challenge of the route, the vibrancy of the crowds, and the fellowship are emotionally and spiritually charged. It is 'more-than-walking' (Maddrell 2013, p.75) with affective layers of significance interweaving personal and mutual journeys. We each contribute to and are influenced by an atmosphere that distinguishes this trail from other hillwalks. The challenge is to access and consider this 'more-than' dimension.

A focus on the incipient meanings involved is shaped by analysis of pilgrimages as containing a range of spiritual and secular elements that are practiced spatially (Coleman and Eade 2012; Nilsson 2018). Participation occurs in a cultural context where the religious conception still holds a significance, albeit performed for a variety of motivations even with individuals having both profane and numinous reasons. My involvement is an enactment of a research agenda, but is nonetheless located in my cultural awareness of the activity from a Roman Catholic upbringing. While I am not spiritually motivated, I remain open to the different corporeal and social encounters along the way, valuing this as a distinct space of meaningful human-environment interactions. Crucially, for many Croagh Patrick continues to serve as a framework through which physical enactments enable journeys of reflection. It prompts considerations of the essence of our walking and its role in producing the distinctive nature of this pilgrimage. The ongoing conversations present articulations of these processes as we consider our participation.

Faith remains a strong feature of Croagh Patrick. It is embodied in the performances of many. It can be observed in the hundreds of people attending the mountain-top masses and groups reciting prayers (see Figure 3). Anthony, who I talk with after he had attended mass, is on a larger walking pilgrimage which included Croagh Patrick. For him, celebrating the Eucharist is a culmination of his spiritual journey:

> It's a sacred place…and for me travelling to a sacred place is, is so important because it allows me to be connected spiritually to my God and to be in closer relationship with him (28th July 2013).

He presents an almost prototypical understanding of pilgrimage destinations, as distinct places in which communication with the divine is more accessible. This mountain enables him to feel nearer to Jesus Christ and to reflect on his faith. In sharing these personal motivations, which demonstrates an intimate relationship with God, Anthony places a considerable value on Croagh Patrick and the pilgrimage. His words and inclination combined to show how it is a spiritually affective journey of Christian faith, which had deep resonances for him and his life. It seemed to encapsulate so much of what a pilgrimage ideally can be. This is a sacred place for Anthony, and the physical and spiritual journey is a thing of significance.

Strands of meaning were manifest in exchanges along the route, as each participant forges their own understanding. The dyadic interviews allowed for the exploration of these themes and the generation of fresh insights for both me and them. An interview with Patricia, at the base of the mountain, illustrates the meeting these elements:

> I didn't have a high expectation of a spiritual experience, em, and it just became something I wanted to do…the climb up was very emotional…I was raised Catholic, but left the Church at about sixteen…I've kind of, you know, at certain points in my life I made little efforts to get back to it. Anyway, today's ascent was quite surprising to me because I was praying the prayers that I prayed when I was a child (26th July 2013).

Her pilgrimage is an intersection of performance, memories, and a life-long spiritual journey. It had unexpectedly stirred up feelings of nostalgia and searching. As we talk, she is still contemplating what these things mean for her, but it is a distinct experience prompted by her understanding of the climb. Patricia's journey encapsulates the multiplicity of features which a pilgrimage can encompass, as well as speaking to a transformative potential. Additionally, she emphasises the value for her in being able to discuss these embryotic feelings which help me understand the reflective and collaborative nature of

these conversations. A more secular understanding is presented by Ciarán in our conversation near the summit:

> I wouldn't think of myself as a pilgrim, I'm undecided about religion, I am part of the Catholic Church but I don't hold that much belief in its teachings or ways…I go hill-walking quite a bit so I'd say I come under that term! (27th July 2014)

He encapsulates the uncertainity which many people can feel about the nature of the event. Although he is participating and declares a Catholic identity, he intentionally distances himself from the religious dimension. Ciarán has a layered appreciation which recognises the spiritual and social heritage of the site. Sacred and secular, personal and communal all overlap and intersect along this path in spatially performed process that generates and renews meanings and understandings.

Our conversations on Croagh Patrick illustrated the fluid and multifaceted character of pilgrimage, revealing how it resonates as a 'more-than' walking experience. Although there are a range of dispositions present, there is an underlining intentionality in choosing to be *on the* mountain *on this* day which propels further considerations of what it is to participate in a pilgrimage. While the label of pilgrim can retain religious connotations, it is increasingly appreciated as a means of defining a searching figure on a journey towards potentially meaningful encounters (Feldman 2017). In various manifestations participants expressed similar sentiments, as each one recognised their involvement in a distinct form of activity which has both individual and collective meanings. It is in these realms that pilgrimage is encountered, as additional significances and distinct characteristics are generated and felt on the path.

In meeting these interpretations, I most concurrently reflect on how my presence influenced these discussions. Critical self-reflexivity and ethics are inherent in autoethnography; in the midst of fieldwork they are manifest through sensible decisions and judging social circumstances. All the interviews emerged from conversations and chance encounters, with each research participant being fully informed. Significantly, in the context of pilgrimage speculative conversations and evolving understandings were entirely appropriate. The path offered an active medium for each person to both bring and take away meanings. Our conversations acted as a vehicle for reflection and expression. The

questions presented opportunities to discuss developing feelings and ideas which had been stimulated by Croagh Patrick. Situated and nuanced appreciations arose through these expressions (Holton and Riley 2014; Warren 2017). The autoethnography simultaneously facilitated these discussions and provided access to the evolving meanings.

Reflections

> [Resting on the evening of Reek Sunday] Stiffness is a lingering reminder of a day on the path. Equally felt are new meanings, new threads woven by each person on the mountain; others are (possibly) reflecting now as well (Research Diary, 28th July 2013).

My understandings of the Croagh Patrick pilgrimage have developed through situated qualitative interventions and discussions with fellow travellers along the way. This paper argues that autoethnography enables access to the inter-subjective spaces, emotions, and spiritualities which would otherwise remain beyond the capacity other methodologies. It provides a unique scaffold for qualitatively experiencing, examining, and making sense of socially complex phenomena. In deploying this approach on Croagh Patrick, insight is generated through located encounters with others and is, then, assembled in an iterative and reflective process. Moreover, it unfolds in spatial experiences and relationalities with other people, research elements which we must ensure remain at the core of human geographies.

This paper also reinforces the significances of researchers engaging with pilgrimage, and other forms of mobility and performativity, as embodied spatial practices. Within ontologies based on phenomenological and other processual understandings of human-environment interactions there is a definite value of 'being there' in the midst of the unfoldings to observe and reflect (Maddrell and della Dora 2013; Rountree 2006). Autoethnography directly engages with the emplaced and embodied experiences of participants, while also incorporating my insights as a co-participant, to reach new understandings of the Croagh Patrick pilgrimage as an active and multifaceted arena (see Michalowski and Dubisch 2001). Moreover, it facilitates the foregrounding of the corporeal and performative through the grafting of my own accounts and those of others to engage with the tangible being on a pilgrimage.

Exploring contemporary pilgrimages reveal the layers of interpretation and motivations involved which intermix religion, spirituality, secularity, emotions, and cultures. As definitions of 'pilgrim' broaden, people are increasingly engaging with the sentiments involved while lingering religious associations still influences understanding (Maddrell, Terry, Gale 2016; Nilsson 2018). Building on other studies from within the practice of pilgrimage (Davidsson Bremborg 2013; Frey 1998; Maddrell 2013), this paper finds that the activity holds a significant appeal to a range of people who bring appreciations which are re-shaping in the performance. Research participants found themselves, sometimes unexpectedly, deeply affected by the experience, as their encounters with the place and with fellows seemed to prompt emotions and re-considerations of beliefs. There is an alignment with the focus in geographical considerations of religion and spiritualities on personal dispositions, practices, and material contexts (della Dora 2016; Tse 2013). These findings reinforce the need for continuing detailed and nuanced examinations of pilgrimage and religious/spiritual experiences.

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Figures



Figure 1: The annual ‘Reek Sunday’ pilgrimage on Croagh Patrick, a mountain on the west of Ireland.



Figure 2: The challenges of climbing the trail are embodied in the actions of those participating in the pilgrimage.



Figure 3: Different forms of journey intermix on the summit as pilgrims pray at a shrine adjacent to others resting after the strains of the climb or people sharing in small talk with their fellow participants.