Pilgrimage Practices: Embodied mobilities of pilgrims in Ireland

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Introduction

My research engages with pilgrimage practices in contemporary Ireland as embodied mobilities. I will look at practices at traditional, religious/spiritual sites, primarily, a selection of holy wells in the Cork-Kerry area and Croagh Patrick.

The recent ‘mobilities turn’ offers new possibilities for the study of pilgrimage. Treating pilgrimage as an embodied mobility allows for research that is focused on movement as a geographical concept. The active nature of pilgrimage means that both subjects (pilgrims) and spaces (sacred places/landscapes) can be seen to be defined by and to emerge through their interactions with each other.

In theoretical and methodological terms, I am eager to engage with pilgrimage in terms of both its representation (meanings, symbols) and practical/nonrepresentational (experiences, beliefs, the sensual) nature. This research process aims to further understandings of pilgrimage practices and discussions regarding the geographies of mobilities.

Methods

A Mobility Ethnography

I am adopting a ‘mobility ethnography’ as a methodological framework, to understand the active, spatial and temporal nature of pilgrimage practices. This approach is informed by the trend of using ethnography in geographic studies, especially in terms of examining mobility (Cragin and Cook 2007; Jensen 2009; Morton 2005).

My approach has three main components:

- Observing and recording: participant observation including fieldnotes, mapping movements, audio recording, photography and video recording.
- Asking/conversing and gathering: interviews, both the face to face and semi-structured interviews, and the gathering of visual and documentary materials.
- Understanding and (re)presenting: analysing, making sense, writing up and presenting – including audio-visual recordings.

Case Studies

The research will be based on five holy wells in the Cork/Kerry region and Croagh Patrick, Co. Mayo.

Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is one of the most prominent and ancient religious and cultural phenomena in the world. It is characterised by movement (journeys, performances and rituals); spatiality (sacred places and routes); meaning (belief, faith, secular/cultural motivations); and, embodiment (corporeal practices, lived and sensuous experiences).

Geographies of Mobilities

The geographies of mobilities offer new opportunities for research, by placing movement at the centre of analysis (Adley 2009; Cresswell 2010, Cresswell & Merriman 2011; Jensen 2009). Mobility is defined in terms of ‘meaningful movement’ physical motion that is invested with meaning (Cresswell 2006).

Aspects of Mobility: Cresswell (2006; 2010) proposes three aspects of mobility to assist in the study of mobility within geography.

- Movement: Physical movement as the raw material of mobility. (e.g., walking as a physical activity).
- Representation: Interpretation and representation imbues motion with different meanings (e.g., walking as recreation, exercise or recovery).
- Practice: Mobilities are practiced and embodied. This emphasises the experienced, sensual and nonrepresentational nature of the activities. (e.g., walking as laboured, relaxing or having a spring in your step).

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Select References


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