Walking Pilgrimage as Ritual for Ending Partnerships

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Abstract: Scholarship in pilgrimage studies suggests that people use travel to sacred sites to mark life transitions such as moving into adulthood, retirement, the death of a loved one, or the ending of an intimate relationship. This research has also illustrated how walking pilgrimage can provide physical and symbolic structures for individual therapeutic and spiritual practice. However, pilgrimage scholars have not put the experience of ending long-term partnerships at the center of analysis, and family scholars have yet to explore how people might use extended walking pilgrimage as ritual when relationships end. Recent scholarship in pilgrimage studies has called for a more dynamic and inclusive approach that highlights the multiple and varied social forces at work in travel to and around sacred spaces. I draw from existing empirical studies, recent theory in pilgrimage studies, the literature addressing divorce rituals, and my qualitative document analysis of published narratives of extended walking after ending long-term partnerships to identify important sociological questions, methods, and perspectives for future research.

Keywords: pilgrimage; divorce; religious ritual; spiritual practice; travel for transformation; therapeutic culture

1. Introduction

In 1988, well-known performance artist Marina Abramović and her partner Ulay walked from opposite ends on the Great Wall of China to meet in the middle. Accompanied by photographers and videographers, their work was captured in film, and a museum exhibition with a catalog with photographs and text by the artists. The performance began as a celebration of their union: an extended journey for reflection about each other, the practice of walking, and the charged historical path and people they encountered. At its culmination, the artistic endeavor became an ending ritual. Toward the end of the museum book that accompanied their 1989 exhibition, The Lovers, there is a photo of Abramović on the Wall waving a flag, the quote on the opposite page reads: “We each take 2000 km march to say goodbye” (Abramović and Ulay 1989, p. 173). The Lovers was shown in museums across the world, bringing together multiple layers of cultural expression, poetry, musings about movement over landscapes, encountering others, and most important to the subject here, the physical and emotional work of ending a long-term partnership. Abramović and Ulay’s work represented an ideal of relational ending in their cooperation and shared performance. Whether intentional or not, The Lovers was a moral performance of deeply felt cultural understandings related to ending intimate partnerships, therapeutic expectations that are pervasive across cultural contexts.

Travel to sacred sites and extended walking have increased over time, as has the scholarship dedicated to these practices (Coleman 2021; Hall et al. 2018; Olsen and Timothy 2022). Business, government, and volunteer structures that support extended walking practices have also grown (Reader 2014). Three routes speak to this growth and popularity: the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, multiple routes in Europe that lead to a Catholic shrine in a cathedral in the city of Santiago de Compostela in northwest Spain of medieval origin; the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), a 4279 km trail that runs through California, Oregon, and Washington from the border of the US and Mexico to the US/Canadian border; and the Appalachian Trail (AT), a 2181 mile-long route that crosses fourteen states in the US,
beginning in Georgia and ending in Maine. The AT and PCT have origins in the early 20th century United States and the creation of the National Trails System in the 1960s. Despite heightened scholarly interest in sacred sites and extended walking pilgrimage, few have analyzed the stories and experiences of those who use extended walking pilgrimages like the PCT, the Camino de Santiago, and the AT as ritual for ending long-term partnerships.

Most of what scholars know about extended hiking as an ending ritual is embedded in empirical research dedicated to other concerns. For example, researchers have focused on the therapeutic individual and relational benefits and motivations of walking pilgrimage (Basil 2022; Frey 2004; Hetherington 2018; Jenkins 2021; Kurrat 2019). While some people walk for secular reasons, such as cultural tourism or leisure, scholars have found that extended walking is often a spiritual choice, with the intention of travel for transformation (Frost and Laing 2018; Oviedo et al. 2014; Sørensen and Høgh-Olesen 2023). Relational endings, grief, or other significant life shifts and disruptions can drive individuals to search for new or “authentic” self through such practice. However, there is little research that puts ending partnerships and extended walking at the center of analysis.

At the same time, there is a lack of scholarship addressing how people might end marriages and intimate partnerships through ritual practices. Sociologists who study family and kinship have brought little attention to religious and/or spiritual rituals for ending marriages. Research in the broader social sciences on relationship disruption gives marginal attention to process and meaning with respect to ending partnerships and related rituals associated with faith traditions. A few researchers have noted nascent and established practices in religious and faith traditions for addressing endings, as well as therapeutic and secular ritual approaches for those ending long-term partnerships (Hoondert 2019; Jenkins 2014).

I draw here from my analysis of ten published narratives of ending long-term partnerships and extended walking pilgrimage, identifying dominant themes that reflect wider discourse around pilgrimage, relational grief, and therapeutic goals and expectations. The recent popularity of extended walking pilgrimage is reflected in an explosion of travel memoirs from people who have walked trails like the Camino, the AT, and the PCT. While scholars know little about how many people engage in such journaling as creative writing practice, multiple online publishing options make the act of writing one’s pilgrimage story and sharing it with others accessible across a range of life positions. Narratives are curated biographical performances of individual experience, but they are also valuable representations of the social expectations and ideals that support the use of extended walking pilgrimage to make sense of and heal from relational disruption. Based on my document analysis, existing empirical studies of walking and transformation, and current methodological discussions in pilgrimage studies, I introduce research questions, methods, and perspectives that put pilgrimage and ending long-term partnerships at the center of analysis. I encourage scholars to consider the pervasive nature of therapeutic culture, access to a digital voice, and how ability and choice might shape experiences and expectations. Pursuing these questions can expand scholarly understanding of contemporary experiences of ending intimate relationships, and be beneficial for religious, spiritual, and therapeutic counselors, as well as all those concerned with providing ritual practice for people who are dealing with loss and grief.

Scholars debate the meaning of religion, pilgrimage, spirituality, and what constitutes sacred practice. I use the term pilgrimage in this article to represent those who walk to established religious sites, as well as to represent subjective understandings of extended walking practices as spiritual, transformative, and/or transcendent. When I use the term religion, I do so from a broad definitional stance that includes implicit and explicit religious understandings. Many experiences of extended walking rituals can be understood as religious practice, deeply shaped by charged social ideals and relationships born from religious and/or spiritual/therapeutic culture that embraces transformative and mystical practice. Long-distance trekkers on hiking trails often speak about their journeys as spiritual, describing connections with nature, or deep relationships with a community of walkers.
as transcendent. Others may describe a higher power or mystical force at work in their experiences, without naming it as spiritual. In addition, pilgrims who walk to established sacred sites and long-distance hikers often speak about liminal ritual time and space, an experience where they eschew everyday social roles and bond with other walkers who share trail identity and beliefs. They may name connections as they walk as spiritual, or not, but their stories are often charged with religious and/or spiritual/therapeutic understandings (Fondren 2015; Frey 1998; Jenkins 2021; V. Turner 1969; E. Turner 2012).

I use the terms divorce and ending long-term partnerships here interchangeably. My emphasis is on individuals who have ended what they understand to be long-term, intimate, and committed relationships. Contemporary structures like the AT, the PCT, and the Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela provide multiple options for walking, regarding distance. I use the term extended walking pilgrimage in this research to reflect journeys that are typically at least a week and where individuals walk approximately 4 h or more each day.

2. Endings and Dominance of the Therapeutic

Scholars who study therapeutic culture stress the individualism at work in self-help beliefs and approaches that can be both empowering and occlude larger structural inequalities and precarious economic systems (Illouz 2008; Klein and Mills 2017; McLean 2022; Pagis 2021; Rimke 2020; Sheehan 2021). Existing divorce rituals surrounding the ending of long-term partnerships are deeply shaped by core tenets at work in therapeutic culture: the belief that individuals can work to transform, change, or find an authentic self through challenging emotion work. One-on-one counseling, participation in self-help groups, and creative acts of self-expression are associated practices meant to address the pain of grief and fuel a search for why a relationship ended and how one might form healthy and lasting future relationships. Another significant tenet at work in therapeutic culture is the belief that one should turn to experts for guidance and advice on how to approach challenging life issues. These therapeutic ideals and approaches bear down in cultural settings where neoliberal ideas abound and where, despite ones’ social location and access to resources and specific self-help practices, individuals feel the responsibility to improve and be happy (McLean 2022; Pagis 2021).

Much of what we know about divorce rituals reflects the dominance of therapeutic ideals and approaches. Martin Hoondert (2019) speaks about contemporary divorce rituals as “emerging” and notes that in the Netherlands “divorce rituals are not asked for very often, but in some cases are performed with the help of a ‘ritual counselor’, a new profession”. He offers descriptions of practices in this nascent field: a divorced couple taking vows to parent together, the severing of a ritual chord that represented a union, and explicit religious practices such as a hymn added to the Dutch Protestant Hymnal to usher in “new beginnings” and restore faith. Scholarship addressing religious approaches to endings suggests that even rites and ceremonies linked to specific faith traditions, such as the Get in Judaism or an Annulment in Catholicism, may reinforce religious beliefs but are deeply shaped by contemporary therapeutic practices and ideals (Jenkins 2014). Clergy who counsel people who are ending relationships have often gone through training programs that merge clinical psychological approaches with religious beliefs. Spiritual and/or religious practices surrounding the end of long-term partnerships resemble divorce-work in wider culture in that they are deeply shaped by therapeutic ideals and grief-work models, and in many cases underscore the intense emotional and physical pain that often accompanies this self-work (Jenkins 2014).

Given the emphasis on physical and emotional difficulty in divorce-work in secular, religious, and spiritual approaches to ending long-term partnerships, it is not surprising that extended walking pilgrimage would be seen by individuals and therapeutic experts as an exemplary practice for endings. Extended walking structures are by nature physically challenging and evoke emotions, some more so than others; however, all invite time outside of ones’ everyday life for self-reflection, creative expression, and most encourage
relationality with fellow travelers. These structural elements are a powerful backdrop for moral performances of divorce and identity work where the therapeutic goal is working through painful emotions related to grief to achieve transformation, self-growth, and/or restore an authentic self (Bruner 2002; Giddens 1991; Goffman 1959).

3. Walking Pilgrimage as Ending Ritual

The scholarship in pilgrimage studies provides some evidence of extended walking as ritual for ending intimate partnerships; however, these findings are embedded in research that focuses primarily on why people turn to pilgrimage structures and what they find meaningful. For example, Jørgenson and colleagues (Jørgensen et al. 2020a) use qualitative interviews to explore the goals and motivations of people who walk the Norwegian St. Olav Way, as well as the health impacts and therapeutic processes and mechanisms shaping pilgrims’ experiences (Jørgensen et al. 2020b). Some of their data speak to processing endings and therapeutic motives. For example, one woman noted an “existential crisis” that had “reached its peak” with her divorce: “After my divorce I felt very worried inside. I was deep in a sea of emotions, very upset. So, I decided I needed to go far to make a change in my life”. Going on pilgrimages have “helped” her to “close and bless past stages” of her life, to “flow and open up to new beginnings” (Jørgensen et al. 2020a, p. 114). Jørgenson and colleagues also note how pilgrims reported processing ongoing problems related to endings through extended walking. One of their respondents relayed overcoming deeply buried emotions: “Quite a lot of anger and frustration came up...I had been divorced for almost 10 years. Nevertheless, it was something I had not processed/discovered before” (Jørgensen et al. 2020b, pp. 37–38).

Scholars have also drawn from their own experiences of ending and walking, using therapeutic expectations and discourse as a ground for analysis, while at same time reinforcing the emotional and physical challenge as transformative self-work. For example, in an autoethnographic piece by education scholar Elizabeth Tisdell (2017), she notes that “following a divorce in the fall of 2011, and its resultant disorientation”, she was “ripe for a spiritual pilgrimage”. Her previous research on spiritual development led her to predict that walking the Camino de Santiago would “speed up the healing/orientation process” (Tisdell 2017, pp. 342–45). Tisdell walked 500 miles in the summer of 2012 and describes actively working to integrate her Camino experience into her daily life on return: for example, she notes incorporating walking as a daily practice, contemplating new understandings of hospitality, spending more time thinking about the “wisdom of nature”, and developing an understanding of pain that she saw as “transformational in terms of a sense of self” (Tisdell 2017, pp. 347–48). Tisdell writes: “walking this labyrinth to move beyond pain was utterly transformational...not so much pain itself, but learning to move beyond the pain, is one of the ordinary miracles of the Camino” (Tisdell 2017, p. 348).

Scholars have also documented the emergence of therapeutic structures and professions on extended walking trails related to ending long-term partnerships. For example, Dane Munro (2021) explores the Walk of Wisdom in the Netherlands, an approximately 136 km week-long walk that was created to bring attention to environmental sustainability, as a site that ushered in the profession of the pilgrim coach, born from the “now established specialism of walking coaches and nature coaches”. Munro examines the practice and experiences of one Dutch pilgrim coach who notes divorce as a personal theme in her work: “How do I deal with emptiness (internally), e.g., after a divorce (externally)”. The coach offers an example of how an ending comes to the surface: “A woman...goes on pilgrimage”, the coach notes, “because she is in between relationships. There is a new love in her life while she is still saying goodbye to her previous one. This causes her considerable tension and confusion...during the coaching sessions, it emerges that she has difficulty being alone” (Munro 2021, p. 79). The experience of this pilgrim coach reflects the popularity of life coaching as a therapeutic practice and the emergence of walking guides and trail coaches who market physical and transcendent experiences and emotional counseling to potential travelers.
4. Published Narratives of Ending and Walking

Telling stories of walking ritual as transformative to a counselor, coach, or a larger public audience through online blogs, published narratives, or podcasts is a social performance of being a good therapeutic self. Today’s pilgrims live in a mediatized society where smartphones and tablets offer multiple private and public options for telling one’s story, as well as communicating with significant others while traveling (Amerson et al. 2020; Basil 2022; de Sousa and da Rosa 2020; Jenkins and Sun 2019; Jenkins 2021; Murray 2019; van der Beek 2018). Not all pilgrims compose or share personal stories of walking; however, digital narratives produced while walking, or on return home, are valuable data sources for uncovering pilgrims’ goals, expectations, and perceived impacts of walking (Yamane 2000). They are also born from and reinforce a dominant discourse that supports religious and/or spiritual/therapeutic walking practice as transformative (de Sousa and da Rosa 2020; Coleman 2021). Analysis of these narratives can thus help identify cultural assumptions and norms related to the emotional work of ending partnerships and the role of religion, spirituality, and therapeutic culture in divorce ritual.

I conducted a qualitative document analysis of nine published memoirs and one documentary from US authors who had engaged in extended walking after or as they were ending a long-term partnership. I searched online media sites related to popular extended walking structures with the goal of locating recommended books published within roughly the last twenty years. Qualitative analysis of these narratives identified unique features in each that reflect the specific walking structure’s discourse and individual identification with religious or spiritual traditions: some prayed to a divine source, others spoke of Camino or Trail “angels”, “magic”, or “miracles” revealed. Some described mystical encounters with nature, stressed the formation of family-like relationships with other travelers, or talked of finding a new long-term partner. In a handful of these narratives, the practice of writing and reflecting about the relationship that was ending was central to their story, for others, details about their partnership and the circumstances surrounding the breakup stayed in the background. Open and focused coding of these primary texts identified a broad narrative theme (Charmaz 2006). Despite particularities, all told stories of creative selves engaging in physical and emotionally challenging journeys that brought individual growth, transformation, or reclamation of self. I offer a few examples below to illustrate elements of this overarching narrative theme.

4.1. Creative Selves

A core value at work in a therapeutic sensibility is the embracing of creativity and self-expression (Aubry and Travis 2015). Clinical psychologists, popular self-help texts, and other therapeutic experts reinforce the empowering nature of creative seeking to transform self and relationships (Straus 1989). An emphasis on searching for, uncovering, and a becoming an authentic self through creative writing was a significant force in these narratives.

In Thomas Buzas’s (2015) memoir, Moments Along a Trail, Buzas talks about walking the AT as an adventure that provoked creative reflection and poetry. He writes that in his fifties, “single after 20-some years of marriage”, and on “a pilgrimage of sorts to experience solitude”, he was in a place to “assess” his life “try” his “hand at writing poetry”. Walking pushed reflection and composition: “At times on the Trail, I would speak fragments of a poem to myself, as if I were talking to an imaginary friend . . .Somehow the physical exertion of the Trail made it easier for the words expressing emotions and thoughts to surface”. Several of his poems speak to love, relationships, and deliberations on relationships ending.

In her memoir of walking the AT, My Own Hike: A Woman’s Journey on the Appalachian Trail, Nancy Shepard (2005) speaks of her divorce propelling her to walk: “I got divorced and my children grew into self-sufficient adults. It was a turning point in my life . . .I found I needed something, a way to mark a division between the old life and new life so I could perhaps create a more satisfying way of being for myself, a way that was me and not just a re-creation of my family history” (Shepard 2005, p. 6). As she describes her hike up
Mt. Greylock in Massachusetts she breaks into fiction, embracing the “medieval feel” of the surrounding forest: “I became convinced that I would find Merlin in a castle on the summit of Greylock. I could ask him to give me wings or cast a spell that would make my quest easier” (Sheperd 2005, p. 158). At the top of Katahdin, the final climb of her walk, she returns to the medieval allegory to summon a freeing self: “Turning to the summit cairn, I lifted the very top stone...there is was—the key that would set Merlin free from his solitary imprisonment...the key emitted an all-encompassing glow, and suddenly I knew that Merlin was free...‘The key is yours’, I heard Merlin’s voice in the wind. ‘You’ve earned it. It unlocks the highest truth and the answer for which you’ve quested these long months’” (Sheperd 2005, p. 217).

In Chandi Wyant’s (2017) Return to Glow: A Pilgrimage of Transformation in Italy, Wyant writes about her walk on the Via Francigena pilgrimage to Rome. Broken from emergency surgery, a difficult recovery, and the emotional pain of facing a divorce, she takes on the physical challenge of walking for 425 km in pursuit of healing. On her return home, she works hard to “learn the craft”, of writing a memoir. At the end of her book, she reflects on heeding “the call of the pilgrimage, and then the call of writing”, noting that “the courage required for the pilgrimage was small in comparison to the courage required to send her ‘story into the world’” (Wyant 2017, p. 272). Crafting this memoir becomes a part of her resolution to “know and trust” her “heart” and regain her strength (Wyant 2017, p. 268).

In Katharine Elliott’s (2016) A Camino of the Soul, after caring for several family members with a terminal illness and realizing her marriage was over, Elliott wonders if the Camino might bring new perspective: “Will it [Camino] bring the clarity and sense of life purpose I have so been craving and searching to find in these last few months? My soul has known I would walk...I must trust the answers will come” (Elliott 2016, p. 55). Later, she writes of her deceased sister bringing a message: “She came as angel wings, a gentle breeze bringing shivers in the late morning sun. My search for purpose, the search which led me to this trek of 500 miles, was being answered in her loving order to me: ‘Start writing. Don’t ask what or why...just start’” (Elliott 2016, p. 80). Elliott, like Buzas, Wyant, and Sheperd, is not a professional writer but presents herself as embracing a creative self through her assembling of journal entries, writing, and publishing her memoir of transformation through walking.

Several of the texts I analyzed were written by people who identified as writers or artists, practiced creative selves. In well-known author and podcast host Cheryl Strayed’s (2012) Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail, Strayed claims and performs creative self throughout the text. She describes multiple traumas leading her to walk: her mother dies unexpectedly, she develops self-destructive behaviors, and her husband initiates a divorce. “Of all the things I’d done in my life”, she notes, “of all the versions of myself I’d lived out, there was one that had never changed: I was a writer”. Erin R. Dooley, who identifies as a filmmaker and a Catholic, released her documentary, A Way to Forgiveness, in 2016. In the documentary, Dooley represents her pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago as an appeal to God to help her forgive a husband who “betrayed” her and “played” her “as a fool for twelve years”. As she films herself walking, documenting her journey of forgiveness that features conversations with other pilgrims, her painful emotions, and ritual attempts to bring about forgiveness on the path, she wears a cap that reads “writer”.

4.2. Hard Work: Physical and Emotional Pain

The link between emotions and physical pain in promoting transformative healing is prominent in larger therapeutic discourse and expectations of divorce-work and grief-work. Such an emphasis on engaging challenging physical practice to address life disruptions and difficult emotional issues is at work in discourse related to extended walking pilgrimages, and in Christian pilgrimages like the Camino de Santiago through individual efforts toward absolution (Frey 1998, p. 22). Similar ideas regarding practice can be found in various spiritual and religious traditions and wider wellness practices; for example, through yoga and exercise approaches that promote the transformation of body and mind through often
difficult and at times painful physical routine (Bost 2015). Contemporary pilgrims who walk for a variety of reasons often tie pain and pushing their body to transformation and self-growth (Luik 2012). The self-work involved in ending long-term partnerships presents in most of these memoirs as hard emotional labor accompanied by physical pain and/or injury.

In Elliott’s (2016) A Camino of the Soul, she describes deep physical and emotional pain on her journey: “My heart ached realizing that dear friendships would die away; that is what happens in divorce...my body simply ached with weight of my pack and with the weight of tears that refused to flow” (Elliott 2016, pp. 91–92). In Wyant’s (2017) Return to Glow: A Pilgrimage of Transformation in Italy, Wyant develops a case of plantar fasciitis early in her pilgrimage that she described at one point as “walking over nails” (Wyant 2017, p. 129). Later in the memoir, Wyant ponders pain as “our unfinished evolution demanding that we develop further”. In Strayed's (2012) Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail, Strayed relates the pain of extended walking to feelings of relational loss: “I stopped in my tracks...hiking the PCT was the hardest thing I’d ever done. Immediately, I amended the thought...hiking the PCT was hard in a different way. In a way that made the other hardest things the tiniest bit less hard. It was strange, but true”. In Crazy Free: An Epic Spiritual Journey (2015), Melissa Wyld chronicles the end of a partnership and her related spiritual practices, which included walking 2660 miles on the PCT. Wyld recounts: “If my ankles rolled outwardly ever so slightly, shooting pain climbed up the side of my shin bones. If they rolled inwardly ever so slightly, the massive blisters on my heels straightened my gait”. She accepts that “the pain was an intrinsic part” of her long hike and notes that she became “fond” of it, knowing that “like everything else”, it “must have existed” for her “benefit” (184–185).

In Dooley’s (2016) documentary, Way to Forgiveness, Dooley’s journey is framed by a Catholicism that stresses hard physical and emotional work as revelatory. While talking with others on the path about the nature of forgiveness, Dooley films multiple scenes alone, speaking to the camera as she works through emotions related to her husband’s betrayal, reflecting at times on Jesus’s human experience of emotional and body suffering. She accuses her husband of having torn away their future. She tells her audience that “on top of all these assaults on my emotions this [Camino] is becoming quite an assault on my body as well”. Dramatic scenes throughout the documentary capture her crying; in one particularly painful moment, she places the camera on a picnic table, recalling the day her husband left their home, and sobs. Joan Renou’s (2019) One Step then the Other: How the Camino Became my Life, talks about managing emotions as she endures long-distance walking: “Since I am already frustrated with climbing, I can yell and cry and rage and get it out of my system. But when I allow myself to do just that, I realize it is far too exerting, the sadness only makes my load feel heavier”. She decides to work through feelings using breath: “I keep my head down and concentrate on my feet. That’s all I can manage. And breath. I have to remember to breath...I tell myself, instead of thinking about what I have just lost and worrying about what I am going to do with my life...think about what I HAVE”.

4.3. Individual Growth: Transformation and Discovering Self

Western pilgrimage discourse supports the idea that pilgrim spaces are a place of discovery and personal transformation. Whether using explicit religious frames that imply revelation and divine force, or more spiritual/therapeutic discourse of finding ones’ true self and self-betterment, individual change and discovery are at the heart of these memoirs. A focus on individual transformation appeared as authors spoke about their goals for walking, and as they reflected on the meaning of their pilgrimage on their return.

As Dooley’s (2016) documentary nears its end, she walks with a woman that she encountered earlier on the Camino who names Dooley’s transformation: this woman talks of observing Dooley changing from a woman whose “pain was palpable”, to a woman who entered a room with “a smile on her face”. She tells Dooley: “look how far you have come...literally you are a different person, your energy has shifted”. A strong message
resounds at the end of the documentary: “I walked to find forgiveness and I got it”, Dooley tells us. We hear such a transformative moment in Elliott’s (2016) Camino memoir as well, as she leaves a stone and prayer at the Cruz de Ferro [Iron Cross], one of the most charged rituals for pilgrims on the Camino, where Elliott experiences “calm” and can let go of emotions: “Tears flowed as a sense of release came over me”. In a chapel nearby, she places her written words at the altar: “Tears of love, anger, blame. I release blaming you [Jack, her husband]. You are forgiven. I am letting go now” (Elliott 2016, pp. 98–99). Joan Renou (2019) ends her Camino memoir stating, “I’m glad I did this pilgrimage because it’s been a journey into my soul. . .I’m going home changed. I think I have found the real me”.

In Buzas’s (2015) memoir of walking the AT, the trail drives his transformation into a creative self: “If I hadn’t started the Trail, I wouldn’t have found my joy in writing, perhaps for the rest of my life. I must create, I must write. It is what I do now: write and hike”. At the end of Sheperd’s book (2005), she reflects on lessons from the trail and her life: “There are hardships, challenges, and great beauty. We meet people; some pass by quickly, some stay with us. Some show us selfless kindness, some wish we would go away”. She is “no longer intimated by new things”, making her life her “own life” (Sheperd 2005, pp. 221–22). Kevin Runolfson’s (2010) memoir, The Things you Find on the Appalachian Trail: A Memory of Discovery, Endurance and a Lazy Dog, details his experience of walking from Georgia to Maine with a newly adopted dog after four years in the Marine Corps and what he describes as a three-year “angry marriage” (Runolfson 2010, p. 1). He writes that after being on the trail his “divorce is fading fast” from his head and that being in the woods with a new woman has helped: “I am away from everything that reminds me of my ex-wife and am starting a new life on my own” (Runolfson 2010, p. 93). At the end of his memoir, he professes: “During these last six months of hiking I have gone through tremendous change. I’ve healed completely from my divorce, made the transition from Marine to civilian, met the woman of my dreams, and fallen in love” (Runolfson 2010, p. 219).

Strayed (2012) writes of her desire for change when planning to walk the PCT, not into someone different, but “back to the person”, she “used to be—strong and responsible, clear-eyed and driven, ethical and good”. The PCT, she thought, would “make me that way”. Her memoir ends with revelation and change; reflecting on the day she finished her hike, when she was not yet aware of the magnitude of what she had accomplished and what was to come in her life, she notes that it was “enough” to “trust” that what she had done “was true”. She understood the meaning of her journey, “without yet being able to say precisely what it was”. She speaks of full discovery in telling her story years later to her family: “It would be only then that the meaning of my hike would unfold inside me, the secret I’d always told myself finally revealed”. Melissa Wyld (2015), after completing the PCT, wrote in her journal that it was “anticlimactic” and wondered if there was “no magic beyond the trail”, and what she would do after the walk (Wyld 2015, p. 240). Yet, she describes feeling “reintegrated”, and “whole again” after time passed (Wyld 2015, p. 365). Transformation is not always immediate and is often realized in full much later through reflection on or creative writing focused on one’s journey.

4.4. Discussion

Extended-walking pilgrimage emerges in these texts as a powerful ritual, a practice that enables people to tell a story that adheres to therapeutic scripts, and for many, one that embraces explicitly religious, spiritual, or mystical beliefs and practices as transformative. These narratives are stories of bruised, tired, and hungry bodies at work reflecting, expressing feelings, and searching for an authentic self. They each represent complex and dynamic individual experiences and intimacies, but at their core, they are creative stories about transformation that uphold a dominant Western pilgrimage narrative. Their stories may indicate that extended walking pilgrimage is an effective healing ritual; at the same time, they are frontstage performances, creative renderings of self as being able to withstand physical and emotional pain, survive deep emotional loss, and emerge a changed person (Goffman 1959). These authors activated cultural strategies from shared ideas and practices
found in pilgrim, religious, and/or therapeutic culture as they worked to represent their approaches to making sense of an unsettling life disruption (Swidler 2001). Their stories are inspired in part from existing media products like films, documentaries, and other memoirs that encourage pilgrimage as religious, spiritual, and leisure practice (Frost and Laing 2018; Illouz 1997). The authors’ expectations, goals, and narratives of walking are also likely shaped by official texts and online sites related to these structures. These are people compelled to tell their story, individuals who have the means to create a public story, and who had the resources and time to engage in walking pilgrimage. In the end, these memoirs represent dominant pilgrim narrative tropes and can tell us little about the effectiveness of extended walking for changing self or perspective on relationships after ending long-term partnerships.

5. Implications

The existing literature and analysis of published narratives of ending and extended walking pilgrimages suggest important directions for future research. People may find therapeutic benefits in using extended walking ritual for confronting and coping with ending life partnerships; however, published memoirs and scholarly research also confirm a pervasive pilgrimage discourse that promotes extended walking as transformative. Extended walking may also fail to bring a new understanding of self, transformation, and/or transcendence. It could lead to disappointment in faith or spiritual beliefs, a lack of trust in others, and disillusionment with extended walking as an effective ritual practice. Where are the stories that move away from familiar transformative tropes, and what are the important sociological questions and methodological approaches that pilgrim scholars might consider for coming to a more comprehensive understanding of how people experience extended walking pilgrimage as a ritual to address painful relational disruptions?

First, the bulk of stories about extended walking pilgrimage as divorce ritual are from those who are willing, able, and have the means to tell their stories. Study participants may respond to a call for interviewees because they feel they have a story that the researcher will want to hear. Pilgrims write memoirs, blogs, and tell their stories on podcasts partly because they want their creative material to be known to wider readers (Murray 2019; Sayeau 2015). When people tell stories of extended walking after ending a marriage or long-term partnership, they may do so partly because they have a good social story, and a strong performance of self and journeying. Telling a story of transformation and self-discovery can empower individuals within their family, religious communities, clinical therapeutic settings, and other institutional spaces. However, embracing a transformative narrative can also reinforce institutional control; for example, scholars have noted that those who have suffered intimate partner violence may receive government or legal benefits or rewards for telling a narrative about individual change, and people in prisons who embrace redemption and transformation narratives often support carceral control (Sweet 2019; Ellis 2020). Researchers should pursue questions that speak to the institutional circumstances that may encourage and constrain choices regarding pilgrimage practices for healing from relational disruption. In addition, scholars could dig deeper into how a range of emotions such as guilt, embarrassment, and fear might impact social shame and shape how and if one tells their story about engaging ritual to address divorce (Goffman 1959; Scheff 2000). Analyzing narratives of failed religious/spiritual and therapeutic ritual pursuits could provide a more complete picture of the cultural dynamics in and around peoples’ experiences of ending long-term partnerships and extended walking.

Second, various methods and research perspectives would shed light on the multiple social dynamics and spaces at work in experiences and narratives of walking and ending. To offer a more complex understanding, researchers might provide more in-depth qualitative investigations of impact and memory over time. There are few studies that follow individuals who have shared their narratives of walking and ending back into their everyday lives. Nancy Frey (1998, p. 99) found evidence of the Camino sparking a long-term creative painting practice and subsequent Camino walks for a person who first came
to the pilgrimage after a divorce and two years of depression. Scholars could use more longitudinal approaches in the assessment of the religious, spiritual, and therapeutic impacts of extended walking pilgrimages to see if creative or reflective practices become more engrained life rituals. Scholars might also pursue ethnographic methods to explore the fractured nature of intimate relationships and spiritual/religious experience and identity in contemporary settings. We know that the number of women on the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela has increased over the last twenty years, but researchers have yet to shed light on how contemporary family structures, challenges to heteronormative marriage, and understandings of gender shape storytelling and experiences (Pilgrim’s Office 2023). In addition, how might contemporary understandings of spirituality and what it means to belong to a religious community impact interpretations and understandings of transformative and/or transcendent sacred walking practice? Scholars could also explore how experiences might differ across religious traditions and outside of dominant Western therapeutic and spiritual discourse. Ethnographic endeavors that involve researchers spending extended time walking on pilgrimage structures and in spaces where pilgrims gather could offer access to a more diverse sample of expectations, experiences, religious/spiritual orientations, race, and class. The AT, PCT, and other National Parks and Trails are historically white spaces that have made recent efforts to become more inclusive (D’Anieri 2021; Evans 2020; Finney 2014; Partnership for the National Trails System 2023). An ethnographic perspective could provide a deeper understanding of the institutional efforts and individual experiences of extended walking for marginalized groups. In addition, considering multi-sited ethnography could uncover social forces that may lead people to use extended walking to address relational endings, as well as highlighting common experiences across cultural settings.

The concept of communitas is a familiar trope in pilgrimage studies research that puts focus on the dynamic of pilgrims entering a liminal state, in which they drop familiar social roles and take on shared identity with other travelers; such a concept takes on complex and challenging forms in our mediatized society (Frey 1998; V. Turner 1969; E. Turner 2012; Couldry and Hepp 2017). Digital practices have disrupted the liminal character of many journeys, a shift that demands an analysis that recognizes the wide reach of media and digital connections when people travel (Amerson et al. 2020; Jenkins and Sun 2019). Pilgrims may write blogs while journeying, text with intimate others, and receive information about the challenges and joys back home, bringing the flow of everyday life into their walking and engagement with fellow travelers. People may also engage, before, during, and after walking, with online social groups associated with trails. Research that focuses on the multiple spaces and experiences outside of the walking structure itself could provide a more in-depth picture of contemporary relational experiences and fractured identities, as well as the various and fluid ways that people embrace what it means to identify as spiritual or religious (Ammerman 2013; Coleman 2021; Giddens 1991).

Several questions come to the forefront given the above suggestions for perspectives and methods. How do people manage relationships that are ending as they engage in extended walking ritual, given that smartphones and tablets often bring intimate ties and familiar spaces from the outside world into the practice of walking? How might the circumstances that surround the end of a relationship shape the choices and experiences of pilgrimage as ending ritual? How might the character of the intimate relationship (religious, legal, or long-term partnership) impact endings and ritual experiences? What kinds of choices do people have for walking as they end relationships; for example, is extended walking an option locally, and how might people’s ability to consume such practices be tied to their socio-economic position? I began this article with a reference to Marina Abramović and her partner Ulay’s performance piece The Lovers; what forces might lead partners who are separating to engage in an extended walking pilgrimage together, and how might such ritual practices shape their relationships with kin, and other family dynamics, over time? To what extent are therapeutic professions like life coaching and pilgrimage coaching at work in assisting and shaping pilgrimage narratives and experiences across cultures?
What is the impact of these therapeutic experts’ approaches regarding a pilgrims’ religious and spiritual identity, and are such efforts only available to those who can afford them? How might creative expression through social media—documentaries, public blogs, or “selfies”—shape pilgrims’ interactions and identity in everyday life upon their return? Studying online narratives and digital ritual memories of walking related to endings could also promote scholarly discussion of ethical issues regarding researcher’s positions and participants’ voices, especially given the emotional work of endings as grief-work and the vulnerable situation of those who have experienced intimate partner violence (Jenkins 2014; Matthee 2019).

Placing relational endings and extended walking pilgrimage at the center of analysis in the ways noted above could be beneficial for scholars across disciplines and fields of study, as well as a valuable engaged sociological endeavor. Divorce and pilgrimage as a case studied broadly across space and time can provide a window into the social power of therapeutic culture, its relationship to religion and spirituality, and contemporary understandings and expectations of intimate partnerships. Such knowledge could also be helpful for local practitioners concerned with individual and family relational health and well-being.

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