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Transformed ecologies and transformational saints: Exploring new pilgrimage routes in North East England

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Abstract

County Durham in the UK has witnessed dramatic social and environmental shifts over the past 50 years, yet Durham Cathedral has stood at the heart of the region, seemingly solid, unchanging and eternal. It is frequently narrated as a prestigious jewel (a national treasure) that is surrounded by a countryside (and people) that clearly bear the time-marked scars of the processes of industrialisation and deindustrialisation. In this paper, I explore a recent moment in time when a partnership between the Cathedral and the local secular authorities aimed to rapidly transform our understanding of this space by connecting Cathedral and county through the newly laid Northern Saints' Trails. These Trails were designed as both a response to rapid changes in the local ecology and a catalyst for further transformation. The processes of this formation were ultimately delayed by the outbreak of COVID-19, yet this external force allowed the Pilgrimage project to find new life as a powerful healing practice for those who dwell in Durham. Attention to this process of purposeful, regular pilgrimage directs our attention towards the entangled nature of the home anthropologist and their role in the co-construction of space, leading to a call for a new

articulation of both core methods in the anthropology of religion and a return to a form of prophetic anthropology (Miles-Watson, 2020).

KEYWORDS
pilgrimage, prophetic anthropology, sacred ecologies, sacred space

1 | INTRODUCTION

February 2020, Durham, North East England, 1 month before lockdown. Light rain finds me without a hood, hurrying as quickly as dignity allows across an open expanse of ground that lies between my Georgian office building and the adjacent Romanesque cathedral. The short journey is lengthened by work that is occurring to automate the giant main doors and this sends me on to enter via the Galilei chapel. As I pass by St Bede I nod my head in respect and then gesture in the direction of St Cuthbert, before moving into the central cloisters. Feet echoing on flagstones I clip clop out the other side of this transitory space into the rain once more before swinging a sharp right through a bright red door that is set in a beautifully preserved stone wall. This takes me to my final destination, Prior's Hall, an ornate, tapestry-filled meeting venue that was once the monks' refectory. I am here for a local briefing about the region's new pilgrimage trails, the Northern Saints Trails, which are set to launch next month. I arrive just in time and take a seat towards the back of the room, joining the rows of mostly smartly dressed, grey-haired Caucasians. At the front of the room a middle-aged man, dressed in a grey suit, is talking freely and passionately about the way that a partnership between the Cathedral and the Tourism Board is going to rapidly transform the local area. He relates that the project will redefine the region in the national imagination, opening up previously unimagined possibilities for prosperity and growth for the local population:

> We are throwing pebbles into the water ... there are so many possibilities for how it will ripple out; but, it's going to be big! We intend to be up there with the Camino!

The person delivering the speech to the assembled crowd of local business folk and other stakeholders is a manager with the Durham Tourist Board (known as Visit Durham). He has kindly spoken to me about the pilgrimage project on several occasions prior to this talk and I am by now familiar with the passionate faith that he radiates when speaking about this project. The Camino (or way) that he refers to is of course the well-known Camino de Santiago, an internationally popular pilgrimage that regularly attracted over 300,000 people prior to the COVID-19 outbreak (Mróz, 2021, p. 629). The Camino is a staple of pilgrimage studies, the backdrop to now classic academic writings about pilgrimage (and wider theory), stretching from the Turner and Turner (1995) though to Frey (1998) and beyond (Doi, 2011; Egan, 2010; González, 2013). What is important for our purposes here is to note both the scale of the ambition and the fact that the Santiago pilgrimage is indeed a remarkable, rapidly growing and ever-transforming religious practice that has attracted the attention of both the religious and non-religious, and been the subject of both academic and non-academic writings. Invoking the Camino, therefore, sets a scale for the ambition of expectations around Durham's pilgrimage project and highlights the

vitality of pilgrimage within the international community, suggesting it as a worthwhile path to pursue for the assembled stakeholders. This invocation also resonates well with wider national processes of what has been termed 'Caminoization' (Bowman, 2020, pp. 459–461). What is more, the summoning of the spirit of Santiago was sure to make its way into my field notes and subsequently into this account, for it was bound to strike me as instantly important given the capacity of this allusion to remind me of how my involvement with this pilgrimage is part of a long and ongoing tradition of professional anthropological engagement. We have from the start then a perhaps unwitting, dual hook in the bait of these words though the calling forth of a concept with such highly developed public and academic resonances.

The ethnographic record of pilgrimage practices and associated theorisation is long and complex. It is both unnecessary and undesirable to repeat it here, given the number of excellent surveys of the field that already exist and the way that any attempt to seriously catalogue this debate would derail what I want to achieve in this paper.[1] However, it is important to note this history of engagement at the outset, precisely because it points directly to my core purpose. For, here, I will explore the importance of pilgrimage in relation to both time and the action of anthropologists. I will do this in relation to one particular set of pilgrimages—the Northern Saints Trails—which offer an important (and rare) insight into the way that individual actors can intentionally spark rapid social and environmental transformations through the intentional creation of a new pilgrimage. This nascent pilgrimage, however, also provides an excellent demonstration of the limits of an individual's agency within any given environment that we will interrogate. The paper then is concerned with pilgrimage as a focus for rapidly transforming (and transformed) relations that are grounded in space and forged through time. These relations both include and encompass the anthropologist, not least through the practice of what I have termed 'prophetic anthropology' (Miles-Watson, 2020, p. 147). In what follows I present a highly positioned account of the genesis of a new pilgrimage trail, from its roots to its launch, setting it in its complex and transforming unique ecology, while being aware of the way that it is intimately connected to a wider global set of influencing factors. Through this exploration we will be led to reconsider the traditional practices of the anthropology of pilgrimage and to put forward a distinct method of practice that focuses on the combined spiritual significance of diverse asynchronous engagement with a single, shared environment.

2 | PILGRIMS, RESEARCHERS AND PROPHETS

Before we journey further into this tangle of relations, separated by time and joined through space, we need to return to Prior's Hall on that rainy February. Not because this was the beginning of my exploration of this project, but because it is the centre of the spiral of significance that I am here sketching. Indeed, far from being a beginning, this meeting was something of an ending. Prior to the meeting in Prior's Hall, I had enjoyed plentiful discussions and meetings around the Northern Saints Trails project with a range of key actors from the Tourist Board, the Cathedral and beyond. For the project also drew in many other collaborative partners, thickening the vision for change, including local business leaders and land-owners, bridging clearly any perceived sacred/secular divide (Clausen, 2016). In this respect, the situation resonates with that found elsewhere in England (Eade, 2021) and in neighbouring Scotland (Bowman, 2020, pp. 471–473). Here, we have a clear sense that the Trails are presented as having benefits to a wider group that might at first be imagined. However, I want to further stress that this wider group includes the academy. For academics in general, and anthropologists in particular, have been engaged with this project

from the beginning, entering not simply as passive observers, but as meaningful actors whose palpable contribution can be clearly traced. As you would expect for a project involving a Cathedral, especially one in a university town, the project is surrounded by experts in religion and history. Furthermore, the direct engagement of anthropologists of religion is particularly notable and this stretches back to the days when I regularly walked these Trails without the slightest thought of the possibility that I was engaging in an act of pilgrimage or research.

The Northern Saints Trails were in part encouraged by an academic and largely historical, but also notably anthropological, exploration of England's cathedrals that ran from 2014 to 2017. It is worth mentioning that this project also crosses sacred/secular divides, being funded by a secular body, the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council, and involving researchers with a range of faith perspectives; what is more, the funding made no religious demands of the academics involved. This project was headed by three giants of the study of religion: Professor Simon Coleman (Toronto), Professor Dee Dyas (York) and Professor Marion Bowman (Open University). There was a clear anthropological element to this project (not least through Coleman as Investigator and Reader as a member of the Executive Board). It produced several theoretical insights and a good degree of ethnographic data that I will build on here, but I particularly want to draw forward the way in which this project concluded with concrete recommendations to Durham Cathedral that are of direct relevance to the talk in Prior's Hall with which I opened this article.

The AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) project's final report moves beyond simply presenting data to clearly put forward a series of informed recommendations, at the heart of which is the suggestion that it would be highly beneficial to further develop 'pilgrim routes connecting the Cathedral to a network of local sites [that will] reinforce and support [the] spiritual learning and experience' the community seeks to foster (Arts & Humanities Research Council, 2017, p. 21). We have then, 3 years prior to the presentation of the transformative possibilities of new pilgrimage routes in Durham that I opened with, a different kind of sacred/secular partnership seeding (or at least nurturing) the same idea. The report presents a clear and direct recommendation, partly informed by social science fieldwork, for the foundation of a sacred journey, or rather a set of pilgrimage trails, an idea that surely is come to fruition in the Trails that I later enter into. There is then a clear link here, a thread, of academic (often anthropological) connections that I am joining onto with this exploration and while my recommendations will be less direct and my influence less clear I am, if anything, even more enmeshed in these Trails. In contrast to my previous research, I am here then something of 'a native anthropologist', although of course how 'native' any so-called 'native anthropologist' is, is always an issue (Narayan, 1993).

This paper is written from the centre of engagement with a life that moves across and through these Trails long before they were considered formal pilgrimage routes by me, or others; my engagement proceeds my research and my research flows naturally from both my engagement and my inclination to notice and take interest in a pilgrimage unfurling under my nose. At the same time (crucially) this work is clearly informed by an awareness of the way in which this pilgrimage project links to pilgrimages that I have taken and studied elsewhere (Miles-Watson & Miles-Watson, 2011; Miles-Watson & Quiroz, 2022); alongside, of course, those that I have learnt about through the writings of others, including both Eade (1992, 2014, 2018) and Coleman (2002, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). I was therefore heavily grounded in this particular pilgrimage project and someone with a keen awareness that things that seem natural are not actually necessary, for I know well different ways of walking, in other places and other times.

Present at the heart of the tangle that is the Northern Saints Trails are academics (myself included) and businessmen, locals (myself included) and visitors, people of faith (myself

included) and the religious Nones. They have been there since the Trails' inception and in many ways the pilgrimage project can be seen as simply an acknowledgement, a formalisation, of the interconnectedness of those pre-existing threads. At the talk, however, there was a sense that those present chose to be part of a movement, of something transformational, rather simply listening to a categorising, a drawing out, or analysis of pre-existing trends. There was a sense that the project was born from a palpable need for a comparatively urgent reshaping of engagement with the world, especially concerning attention to spirituality. This transformation had clear economic, social and cultural goals, which it was genuinely believed could be achieved (relatively rapidly), even if it was in part a case of creating a certain inertia and letting social physics take care of the rest: 'We are [but] throwing pebbles into the water', our charismatic leader repeated, but I want to add to that 'we', alongside those who have been throwing these pebbles into this lake for a while—maybe there are so many there now that it has formed a dam, it has certainly gone beyond ripples, after all—everyone feels that 'it's going to be [perhaps already becoming] big'.

3 | THE SACRED CENTRE

Durham Cathedral is long established as a place of national fame and international renown. The idea that a significant shift in global appreciation of the sacred value of this environment seems therefore strikingly at odds with the understanding that the Cathedral is (and long has been) a significant centre of spiritual and tourist activity (Calvert, 2017). Indeed, it is undeniable that (as one of Britain's best loved sacred sites; Glancey, 2011) and as a place of globally significant heritage (Labadi, 2013, p. 116) the Cathedral enjoys a good deal of fame. People of all faiths and none do indeed regularly swirl around it, constituting it through presence and actions that can be plotted on a continuum of spirituality (Davies, 2013). Several of these people are simply going about their daily routines, others their more marked weekly routines, including ritual service, but a great deal of people are drawn to the town specifically to see the Cathedral (Dowson, 2019). The extent to which this is defined as destination tourism, or a form of destination pilgrimage, is open to debate (Banica, 2016; Miles-Watson & Miles-Watson, 2011). I do not want to recapitulate, or overly labour, the arguments around these divisions. It is important, however, to be clear, lest such issues waylay us as we further explore the Trails, that for the purpose of this paper, all these actors are seen as a crucial part of this landscape ecology (Miles-Watson, 2020, pp. 3–6).

The complex weave of relations that constitutes the Cathedral can be unpicked at a number of different points of interest, but the most useful separating out of these threads is along the lines of types and levels of enskilled reckoning with the environment (Miles-Watson, 2020, pp. 110–116). That is to say, the degree to which people are able to engage sensitively with other actors (human and non-human) in the weave and the extent to which they blend with the flow, or pull the tangle tighter through contrary movements. Self-definitions are also important here and it is worth understanding that while I may want to place a definition of 'pilgrim' or 'tourist' on travellers to this place, both the people themselves and others with whom they interact have their own ideas as to how such things should be defined (Goffman, 1978). Moving to explore the relations at the level of overall ecology, however, allows us to see patterns in the flows of engagement without needing to go deeper than an awareness of the contestations of identity that are playing out inside the complex of relations. For our purposes then it is necessary to state that the site is clearly both complex and significant.

The widespread awareness of the scale of history, contestation and expectation that surrounds the Cathedral seems to clash with the call of Prior's Hall to witness the radical transformation of something small, a ripple, into something 'big'. However, an answer may be found if we shift our

gaze from the Cathedral itself as a landmark and towards the movements that result in people arriving at the sacred site. From this perspective the 'something big' can be read as concerning the act of engagement in something formally defined as pilgrimage. Or rather a clear signposting of pilgrimage through the surrounding materials of a pilgrimage route that has come to be associated with the great routes of Europe. This hypothesis is strengthened by the way the Tourist Board has emphasised the need to implement signs of pilgrimage, including waymarkers, maps, window stickers and a pilgrimage passport. It is easy to dismiss this as operational rather than strategic and in the least generous interpretations it can be dismissed as an attempt to dress existing practices of tourism and flow in the new shiny clothes of pilgrimage. However, I hold that these waymarkers are key materials that spark a transformative agenda by reflecting the significance of the Cathedral into its hinterland. Here the mana (if you will) of the Cathedral is envisioned as enabling a radical and rapid transformation in the engagement of humans (from near and far) to engage with this environment; the symptoms of this revolution presented as the prosperity and wellbeing of local residents.

County Durham is located in the centre of the main island of Britain, but at the northern edge of England. It is therefore historically and geologically central, but nationalist politics have made it into a peripheral area on the political map (Robb, 2018). A millennium ago, Durham was a clear centre of spiritual learning and military power. The Cathedral was founded on the shrine of St Cuthbert, and built around his undecayed corpse, which settled there after wandering for some time around the county avoiding Viking looters (Willem, 2013). It quickly grew as it benefited from the associated prosperity of medieval pilgrimage until that practice gave way to the more restrained spiritual practices that followed the reformation (Freeman, 2011, p. 111). The region was again transformed with the advent of coal mining and a generation of people in the region drew their income and identity from their work in the mines, until this seemingly stable employment collapsed almost half a century ago (Hudson & Beynon, 2020).

The region has never recovered from the loss of mining and the decline of the steel industry, and there are now multigenerational households of unemployed who live in neglected cities surrounded by a mix of breath-taking countryside, ancient ruins and decaying industrial buildings that are being slowly reclaimed by the forest. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that it is today an area that is behind the national curve on what are often seen as the key markers of health, wealth and formal educational achievement (Hewitt & Surtees, 2020), and this spectre of a forgotten periphery haunts a wider understanding of the region. There is then a sense in the region of two lost pasts: one industrial and one medieval. In both can be found a claim to prestige that seems to have dwindled, or diminished, in the present. In the local population there is a notable pride in central Durham's national fame, at the same time as a resentment of the seemingly privileged students, academics and clerics who dominate it today (Watkiss, 2016). It is against this backdrop that the Northern Saints' Trails have to be understood as a church/state partnership program that aims to reposition both the Cathedral and the region, transforming local lives and national understandings of the region.

4 | TRANSFORMATIONAL TRAILS

At the presentation in Prior's Hall the details of the transformative plan are unfurling; we hear about the terrain the routes encompass and how the project has been intricately organised across a range of different authorities. I jot in my journal masses of interconnected lines that draw the surrounding countryside into the Cathedral at the same time as they draw it out into its hinterland

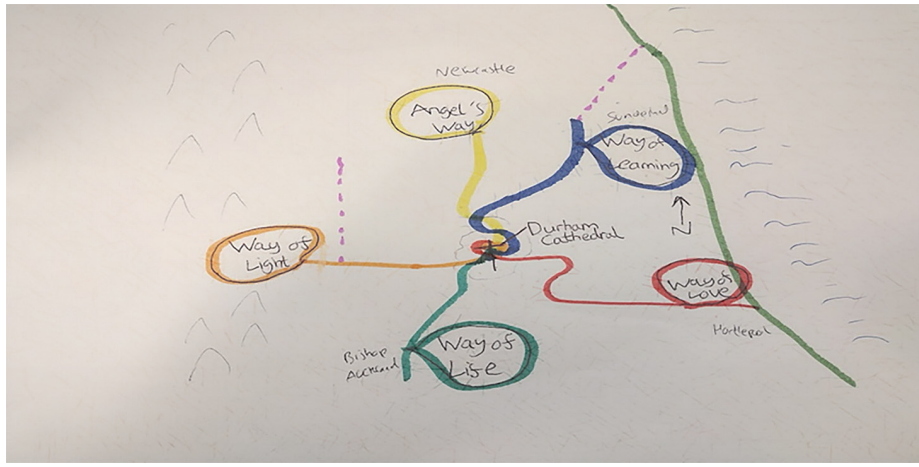

FIGURE 1 Author's sketch enhancing the official map of the trails

(see Figure 1). I was familiar with the Trails already and had previously heard a lot in various discussions about both their origin and the complexities of running the routes. This included securing access across multiple constituencies, putting up physical signposting and laying a web of accessible trails across long-inhabited land. I was drawn here to the idea of the Cathedral as a node, at the centre of a tangle, with the Trails as threads stretching out into the earth. A sense that, on the one hand, this is a gathering in of the land to the Cathedral as a destination and yet, it is also a drawing out of the Cathedral into the land. It is a movement against a form of destination tourism that sees that Cathedral as a node on the map to be reached as quickly as possible and reasserts the peregrinus (or wandering) aspect of pilgrimage (Dyas, 2001, p. 1). I see here the idea that what is important is not getting to the Cathedral, so much as how to get there. Moreover, these sacred wanderings are directed along one of a number of trails that wind and meander through parts of County Durham that the average visitor, student or even resident of the central city would have traditionally little thought of and scarcely visited.

The Trails do not follow pre-existing routes of pilgrimage, nor did they emerge from within the community; rather they were devised by David Pott, an individual with a track record of designing pilgrimage routes in the Midlands. I have encountered some in the Durham community who were initially unhappy that these Trails seemed to break fresh ground and yet these complaints have gradually faded to the extent that the Trails now seem to weave organically across the county, following routes of action rather than neatly joining co-ordinates of significance. Figure 1, which is my sketch on a map that was distributed at an early planning meeting, captures this sense well. Displayed on the map is a series of brightly coloured threads that tangle and knot together around Durham Cathedral. The lines of the Trails are also given colourful names, to go along with the bright colours—these names have largely stuck and are in the process of being popularised. The names are all various 'ways of', a phrase that captures the dual meaning of a way through landscape and a way to navigate through life, pointing to the religious significance that lies behind the labels. For, while the origin of the naming of the Angel's Way might be easy enough to guess, the other names are, at first glance, more mysterious. This is, of course, a deliberate strategy to avoid limiting the reach of the transformative powers of the Trails at the same time as adding an element of both the allure of mystery and the satisfaction of revelation.

Behind each of the names shown on the map lies an attempt to tie together and propagate a mythology, centred on the life of a local saint, which is then tied to contemporary (more secular) life in the region, through a connection to a shared, dwelt in, landscape. The Way of Life, for example, draws its name from the actions of the region's most famous Saint, Cuthbert, whose tomb I passed on my way to the meeting. The highlighting of his way, as a 'Way of Life' is intended to draw attention to his famous connection to all forms of life (both human and non-human) in this corner of the planet (McManners, 2008, p. 103), as well as his association with health, wellness and healing (Bonner et al., 1989). Cuthbert (and the Cathedral that surrounds him) has clearly lodged in the public imagination as a node of spiritual importance. However, this celebration of Cuthbert often does not extend to embrace the wider Durham County.[2] It is common to hear (both within Durham and outside of it) of a perceived divide between the University, which has the Cathedral at the heart, and wider County Durham. The Trails are a deliberate intervention to remedy this, through rapidly and radically reshaping the discourse. They do this by both extending the legacy of Cuthbert out into the surrounding ecology and firmly drawing the surrounding landscape into the ecology of the Shrine of Cuthbert.[3] To be on these Trails is to follow the lines of connection that move throughout County Durham and across the imagined divide of centre and hinterland.

The Trails also tap into the Slow Movement (Honoré, 2006) by literally encouraging slow and steady travel through areas of County Durham that are usually rapidly navigated on the way to somewhere else. That is not to say that they flow consistently forward, but rather they ebb, surge and spiral on their way, creating (or emphasising) deliberate eddies of significance at key nodes of narrative and action (such as Hart, Kelloe and Nebitt Dene). This transformation in the meaningful flow and focus of travellers is propagated by the physical marking of places, in the form of highlighting existing historical sites, and adding specially commissioned artworks and wayfinder posts. Alongside this there is a digital element that uses technology to augment reality, especially through a special app that can be downloaded. This app is no mere token gesture to the digital age, but promises to deliver an understanding of the Trail that crosses the boundaries of intent, action and reflection. Prior to the commencement of physical movement, the app pre-empts, facilitates and directs that movement; during movement it enhances the skill of the wayfinder to reckon with their environment and after movement it allows for the recording of the mingling of the wayfinder's movement with that of others, past present and future (Ingold, 2000, p. 219). The app therefore both allows people to scent the trail before them and create a digital trailing after them; at the same time as enhancing the skill of the wayfinder to engage meaningfully with the landscape around them.

The Trails also diversify the connections of the region to the sacred node of the Cathedral, through the incorporation of significant past actors other than Cuthbert. Most obviously, The *Way of Learning* points to the legacy of Bede, often said to be the most significant early English scholar, whose tomb the pilgrimage and cathedrals report as feeling like the warmup act for the Shrine of Cuthbert, when typically encountered by visitors today (AHRC Report, 2017, p. 13). The *Way of Learning* aims to redress this by emphasising the legacy of Bede and his importance in the region and beyond. It does so by taking the traveller intentionally through places like Jarrow Hall, on the South Bank of the Tyne, where the visitor can encounter Bede's world, an 11-acre reconstruction dedicated to St Bede, but significantly, set in an area more readily associated with declining manufacturing and the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution.[4] Before moving through to Sunderland, where a series of specially commissioned glass sculptures redirect the visitor's attention away from this area's declining industrial heritage and towards its historic associations with the great scholar.

In a similar vein, the *Way of Love* looks to rehabilitate the general perception of Hartlepool, widely understood as a place struggling to come to grips with transformations in shipbuilding and the steel industry that left it behind. Yet this story is, of course, only one narrative of this place, which also claims strong connections to St Hilda, who was Abbess of Hartlepool Abbey and is widely known for her wisdom, learning and compassion. The linking, through the trail of St Hilda in Hartlepool, to St Hilda's position in the Chapel of Nine Altars at Durham, provides a valuable historical thread. And this is reinforced by its contemporary relevance, from the presence of women (and female representation) in (and around) the Shrine of Cuthbert, through to the charitable work of the modern trust that bears St Hilda's name, not least in insuring the presence of underrepresented groups from the North East at Matriculation in the Cathedral.

Many of these initiatives intertwine distinct heritages as a way of making one element accessible to those more closely connected to the other. As such they provide something of a levelling device and help to address one of the large equality and diversity issues of the region. Namely, allowing those from local areas of socio-economic disadvantage to access (and flourish) in the prestige elements of the environment, including the university. The project, however, is not perhaps as wary as it should be of ensuring that, in promoting one kind of heritage, it does not create an environment that excludes those from a wider range of backgrounds. Just as the gathering of stakeholders that I opened with was overwhelmingly white, so too there has been a notable lack of racial diversity in all the main players (from all sides) I have encountered. Furthermore, much of the promotional material, including videos, pamphlets and web resources lack any visible diversity (Miles-Watson, 2022). If the Trails are to truly succeed in altering the perception of the county in the wider world then they must also address this issue and if they do so then they can truly work towards the goal of rapidly altering the course of a century, or more, of drift in the narratives and place-making practices of the region. Crucially, this remapping does open diversity by shifting the narrative's focus on the Cathedral to the surrounding region. The Trails open the connectedness of the Cathedral to embrace and draw in the surrounding regions, their history, and legacy, while attempting to ameliorate the unhelpful view of the Cathedral as somehow transcendent of its environment.

5 | TRANSFORMED ECOLOGIES

The development of the Northern Saints Trails is clearly a deliberate, religiously engaged innovation, which responds to a need arising from a gradual transformation in the world that surrounds the Cathedral and attempts to rapidly transform human engagement with the wider sacred ecology of the county. What we see here is a religious rapid innovation that does not so much incorporate traumatic change while appearing to remain static—as Lévi-Strauss (1966, pp. 68–69) would have it—but rather a sacred centre that opens itself to transformation in the belief that there is a need to change that which could be seen as non-religious (society, environment, economy and so forth). My understanding of these events has been significantly deepened by the generous time offered to me to explore these issues by some of those close to the project at the Cathedral. During one of these discussions the extent of the transformative religious vision of the Northern Saints Trails was wonderfully encapsulated when my interlocutor suggested:

> For many involved with the Northern Trails project this is not simply about walking, or even developing commerce and tourism; rather, the project is an intervention in a time of crises, an attempt to transform people's vision of Durham from a border

> region, somewhere left behind, to somewhere that was a crossroads of ancient spiritual traditions ... it can be the cradle for a new spiritual movement—a movement that is directed towards living ethically in the undoubtedly challenging times ahead.

In both the above expression and the three Trails that we have explored I cannot help but see a solidification of the areas of concern that I began this paper with. Namely, action in time to reshape our engagement with space.[5] I want to now use this as a way of drawing out a less commonly told story, one that shifts the focus away from issues such as the pilgrim/tourist divide (Graburn, 2011) and/or communitas/contestation (Eade & Sallnow, 2000), at the same time as moving our gaze away from the bulk of the Cathedral, towards the more sprawling (and ephemeral) Trails. In doing this I seek to build on Bowman and Coleman (2019); Coleman and Bowman's (2019) exploration and in particular the consequent theory of exploring 'adjacent' rather than 'liminal' spaces of worship. By 'adjacent worship', I understand Coleman and Bowman to mean that instead of the Cathedral space stressing its separateness from the world it has built into it features that welcome the world into it, along with of course those people who are not accustomed to engaging in traditional forms of worship. By further highlighting the importance of these 'adjacent relations', Coleman (2019b) demonstrates that there is a wide range of significant action that unfurls on the margins of this sacred place, even if that significance remains somewhat contingent on its continuing operation as a place of worship.

Coleman developed this idea further in his recent presidential address to the Society of the Anthropology of Religion, in Toronto in the spring of 2019. In this address, he argued for the importance of paying attention to that which occurs on the edges of formal ritual and is maybe even occluded by formal ritual (Coleman, 2019c). Here he opens usefully the possibility that the significance of the Cathedral for the majority of actors who engage with it may lie outside of narrowly prescribed notions of sacred action. For our purposes, this is particularly useful as a way of pointing to the possibility of the building of the Cathedral occluding the connection of Cuthbert's legacy to wider County Durham. By drawing the gaze so inexorably towards it we miss the subtler, yet insightful, legacies of Cuthbert that can be found around County Durham. If this focus on the adjacent is put together with what I have previously described as a focus on 'mythological terminalia' (Miles-Watson, 2019, pp. 271–273) then we can begin to usefully incorporate the Trails into this. For if the Cathedral exists as a mythological terminus, then the Trails represent a deliberate drawing of the lines of signification (past/present, synchronous/asynchronous) out from that sacred node. This transforms the Cathedral from a static place of endings into a dynamic terminal of emerging possibilities.

From the terminalia we can see the Northern Saints Trails as being a deliberate intervention to quite rapidly shift attention to these occluded elements as a foregrounding for a more radical shift in the sacred ecology. For, the Trails reposition the Cathedral as an important, but nonetheless very partial, element in a series of meaningful movements in and around the environment of County Durham. It is a shift from a static, bounded sense of the sacred to a dynamic, fluid encounter with that which is predicated on movement through (and engagement with) the wider environment. And this, of course, taps into the general drift towards (and the need for directed attention to) the environment. It is, in a way, a creation of a form of indigenous environmentalism, which draws inspiration from tales of Saint Cuthbert's seemingly environmental exploits. Crucially, the Trails move beyond Cuthbert to encourage reflection on connections to the wider ecologies of human and nonhuman action that constitute the genuinely 'awe-inspiring' landscape of County Durham (Sheldrake, 2007, pp. 243–258).

This focus on movement is then part of a highly spiritual engagement that ties quite naturally to the concept of wellness, and redirects this, moving it away from the online commercialism of influencers, towards a potentially sacred revelation of Batesonian (1987) 'grace', in the context of a plausibly (yet non-threateningly) religious journey. However, to walk the Trails does not necessarily mean to abandon technology. Instead, through the app, our technological dependencies are harnessed and redirected towards an ability to engage with the environment in a way that is both sensitive to the movement of others and lays a clear and meaningful trail for those who follow. To what extent these Trails follow a classical pilgrimage form is debateable. Yet, their claim to be a pilgrimage extends beyond the trappings of pilgrimage (signs, passports and so forth) to the rather strict test of Michael Sadgrove, Dean Emeritus of Durham Cathedral, who ruled that 'Pilgrimage, if it is real, must always be a journey into truth ... There must be some glimpse of truth: about ourselves, our world ... God' (Sadgrove, 2006).

The Trails reveal truth about the ecology of relations that surround the Cathedral and this truth moves us back to our discussion of prophetic anthropology. For this truth is not the truth of cultural relativism, nor is it the culturally constructed truths of Geertz's (2002) religion as a cultural system. Rather, it is a co-constructed insight into the understanding of our place within the world and connection to a wider ecology of being, or what Bateson and Bateson (1987) terms a sense of grace. This truth of the interconnectedness of things became vitally important during the writing of this article as the global pandemic known as COVID-19 swept through this part of the region in much the same way as it moved across communities around the globe. The movement of the pandemic showed the negative aspects of connection, but the restrictions that surrounded the pandemic reminded us of the need to feel connected. These connections were challenged by the pandemic and it is here that the Trails sprung to life in a remarkable and largely unforeseen way. Lockdown saw people in Durham confined to their homes and cut off from their usual social relations. Three weeks after the optimistic meeting in Prior's Hall the region and the country were in a state of lockdown; people were only allowed outside for brief periods of exercise, and the official launch of the pilgrimage was sensibly postponed. Yet, the Trails had been laid and began to enter into a life of their own as locals wandered the paths and shared their experiences of the Trails online. In so doing they shone a light on true connectedness even in a period of rapid rupture.

6 | FROM FIELDWORK TO PROPHETIC ANTHROPOLOGY

During the pandemic I too entered onto the Trails, deliberately moving over land in an act of purposeful walking. Where previously I had walked following my instincts, with the primary intent of arriving somewhere, I now moved across land searching for waymarkers that guided me through an act of attentive movement where movement itself was the aim. Rarely on these wanderings did I actually arrive at the Cathedral, although often I saw it on the horizon, a sort of waymarker of its own, reminding me that the path I now trod led to both it and my now forbidden, adjacent office. Walking the Trails therefore connected me to my past, at the same time as it helped me grapple with my status in the present and (just as goat trails form in the grass) I began to lay the trail for my future. A future that moved beyond the Durham bubble and engaged better with the haunting landscapes of lost industry that surrounded it. This sense of loss in the landscapes connected (for the first time) with my own sense of loss. It was a loss of community and emplacement that drew from the shrinking of my sphere of existence during lockdown. In this I was not alone.

I reached out through online networks to find others in similar situations, some expressing their position through blogs, proudly for all to see, others in closed groups and still others in voice, aided by Zoom and phone (Miles-Watson, 2022). Through these separate wanderings a sense of collective belonging emerged, of being together while apart. The Trails did then indeed come to life; they operated during lockdown to point attention away from formal religious pilgrimage to the Cathedral and towards the adjacent areas of action. There was no great commercial gain through this, or sudden revolution in the way that the area was perceived nationally, or even globally. However, like the ripples from the stones cast, the Trails did begin to have a life, a meaning and purpose and I was part of that movement of connection to space in that moment in time.

In the tale that I have presented of the genesis of these Trails we see then a movement that crosses boundaries (sacred/secular: town/gown) in an attempt to respond to a disequilibrium in the ecology of a certain area (County Durham). The rupture in the flow of history is caused by dramatic political shifts that begin before the dawn of nations and come to be shaped by concepts of nationhood and national politics. It is an attempt to forge a future by drawing on the prestige of the past. This was driven by the belief that the rapid rise of pilgrimage elsewhere points to the possibility for a rapid and dramatic transformation within this region. This project, therefore, responded to trends set in flow (the rise again of cathedrals, an increased interest in the natural world) and it aimed to harness these trends in the service of manifesting a collective vision of a prosperous, spiritually centred and world-renowned County Durham. Of course, this vision was neither as unified or as broad as it could be or should have been. It was also impacted by a remarkable rapid global transformation, the profound and devastating global transformation brought about by COVID-19. This may well have been felt (up to the point of writing) in this little corner of England less markedly than in other areas, where vaccines and health-care systems were less able to provide support, but it was certainly felt. Lives have been lost, families irrevocably transformed and basic freedoms restricted. Against this backdrop the pilgrimage Trails, although officially frozen at birth, unfurled unofficially and responded to a new found love of walking, providing resources for people to add extra value and a shared sense of belonging to their daily movements beyond the confines of their dwellings.

I was part of these wanderings, as an anthropologist, a resident, a researcher. On this journey I both followed and departed from the trail of those academics who stood before me. The AHRC Pilgrimage and Cathedrals project recommended these Trails before I knew of them as such and, half a century before I walked with others on them, the Turners wrote about walking to Santiago, which I would read about (and be formed by), half way between the two times. Yet, just as my experiences were shaped by this work I have also to admit that I find that I have departed from these trailblazers. For, my research did not involve a journey to a sacred centre out there so much as walking around a centre to all aspects of my life (work, home, play), with an eye (and an ear) to the potential of that journey to be more than the sum of its parts. An understanding of the research process as something that connected me to others, in times past and, crucially, in this time now. It is these connections that allowed me to come to see the everyday as insightful, maybe even sacred. This then is a rather different kind of anthropology, one that involves both participating and observing, but with an eye to the edges and the connections of voices and actions bound together by space, yet disrupted by time.

The nature of researching pilgrimage during a highly contagious pandemic has also lent itself well to the sort of autoethnographic account that I have employed here. This is perhaps not that radical; autoethnography after all is today a well-established, if still somewhat marginal, anthropological form of writing (Anderson, 2006).[6] However, this is also not a classical autoethnography, for it is one that is deeply informed by the voices and actions of others who walked these paths

with me, in the same moment in history, but separated in time. Sometimes we were separated by days, sometimes by hours, on a few occasions only by minutes, yet we were always connected. I am advocating here then for a way of exploring religion that follows Coleman's (2019b) suggestion of turning away from the central, and the spectacular, to focus instead on the peripheral and every day. What is more, this is a deeply entangled way of working that is less a movement from without to within than a waking within to attend anthropologically to the sacred possibilities of the everyday environment that we as academics inhabit.

I use this uniquely subjective and messy position that I inhabit to engage in a form of prophetic anthropology (Miles-Watson, 2020, pp. 146–147). In a nutshell, this is a form of anthropology that 'Speaks to those in power with the voice of the people, acting as a check, or balance, against other dominant forces in the ecology of relations (Miles-Watson, 2020, p. 136). It does this from a uniquely achieved position, arrived at by entering sensitively and with great skill into sacred landscapes as a way of gaining skills that are used not so much to advantage the individual as much as the collective (Miles-Watson, 2020, p. 157). From this methodological position I can clearly state that the Northern Saints Trails are a worthwhile development. They have already helped many people in ways that could not have been fully foreseen and undoubtedly have more to offer as they open more widely going forward. The Trails may well yet succeed in shifting the widespread perception of County Durham as a place on the margins, alongside the more ambitious goal of actually moving its people out of the shadows of the industrial past. However, the project, as conceived, undoubtedly risks (most certainly inadvertently) creating (and reinforcing) new marginalisation, centred this time not on class and dialect, but on race and bodily diversity. I urge those who have the power to do so here (as I have done previously orally) to actively work towards this goal by both paying attention to the diverse reality of those who regularly constitute these pilgrimage trails and embracing this. This embrace could take the form of new, more naturally formed, community-owned routes and the movement to represent diversity in the outward projection of the Northern Saints Trails. History teaches that where diversity is embraced life is enriched; where it is rejected, through action as much as through word, life becomes impoverished (Thorne, 2013). County Durham is a far richer and more diverse place than is often credited and embracing this on the pilgrimage trail will only add to and enhance the value of life lived in and around this ancient cathedral.

ENDNOTES

[1] An excellent summary of the arguments and positions has recently been put forward by Di Giovine (2011).

[2] The annual feast of St Cuthbert and the associated gathering of the parishes, along with the miners' events at the Cathedral are but two examples of several actions that already move against this dominant narrative, but the marginalisation of the region of County Durham undoubtedly still persists in the popular imagination.

[3] I have found the concept of sacred ecologies the most useful way of capturing the interrelation of human and non-human actors within any given node of sacred significance (Miles-Watson, 2012, p. 3; Miles-Watson, 2020, pp. 4–5; Miles-Watson, 2022). It is this use, which is heavily indebted to Bateson (2000), that I continue to employ here, where the concept (as will become evident) allows for the evocation of the lived reality of the wonderfully profound and messy realities of pilgrimage.

[4] The Jarrow March of 1936 may be seen as an early form of secular pilgrimage that is founded in this very sense of declining standards of living associated with lost employment (Eade, 2021).

[5] Throughout this article I use the concepts of space and time as two artificially divided elements that in reality are always bound together and I draw these into my concept of ecology, discussed further below. There is a vast amount of literature on space, time and religion that I (and others) have already covered well elsewhere (Miles-Watson, 2015, pp. 150–157; Miles-Watson, 2016, pp. 37–39; Miles-Watson, 2020, p. 2). The concept of place

is similarly well covered by myself and others (Holm & Bowker, 2001). In this article I take place to refer at its best a node of activity, of intertwining significance within an Ingoldian Whirl (Miles-Watson, 2022, pp. 41–51). At its worst I use place to suggest the opposite of that, a seemingly fixed point that is in reality a set of living processes.

[6] An excellent use of autoethnography to explore the messy tangles of pilgrimage in England has recently been drafted by Katic and Eade (2022).

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