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The Things We Carry: Pilgrim Identity and Material Culture Along Spain’s Camino de Santiago

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The Things We Carry:
Pilgrim Identity and Material Culture Along Spain's *Camino de Santiago*

Thesis by Isabelle Moore

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For my parents.
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Introduction

Some say a journey of 500 miles begins with a single step. I say it begins with a packed bag. My motivation to undergo this research stemmed primarily from my desire to walk the *Camino Francés*. Also known as the Way of St. James, this medieval pilgrimage route begins from the French-Basque town of St. Jean Pied de Port and ends at the Cathedral of Santiago in Spain. Over the last few years my fascination with this walk grew as I leafed through Camino guidebooks and read online blogs and travel forums. The more I researched, the more I noted how essential materiality is in the context of the Camino. I consumed packing tutorials on YouTube, personal blogs detailing essential and extraneous objects, and countless aerial photos of “inside out” backpacks. Together, these prompted me to wonder what a material story of the Camino would look like and how this might convey ideas and experiences of pilgrimage.

I plunged into the academic literature surrounding pilgrimage to find a stark distinction between those scholarly analyses and the material-focused Camino guides I had started from. Indeed, there exists a wealth of literature on material culture and pilgrimage studies but very little that connects these two spheres. The primary aim of this thesis is to bridge that thematic gap. The other goal of my research is to engage in the broader academic discussion over the theoretical dichotomy between so called “pilgrimage” and “tourism.” I embarked on this project with the intention of applying a material analysis to the following questions: What is the difference between pilgrimage and tourism? Beyond the ways in which these
labels are classified and challenged in academic literature, how do Camino walkers themselves employ these terms? Finally, what do material objects, decisions, and processes reveal about individual expressions and experiences of pilgrimage?

After walking and conducting fieldwork along the length of the Camino Francés, I have become less interested in arguing over what constitutes a “pilgrim” or a “tourist.” Forty years of debate has resulted in a recent rise of post-modern and post-secular philosophies that acknowledge these categories and their mutual entanglement. Despite this, identity remains an interesting point to consider in analyzing the meanings, motivations, and experiences of pilgrims. For this reason, I have turned my attention to representing the ways in which carried objects manifest pilgrim identity and experiences. I employed participant observation and conducted semi-structured interviews with pilgrims to answer the following questions: What objects do pilgrims carry and why? How do they bear and employ these items? How is personal identity implicated in these objects and processes?

I took care to look beyond scallop shells and other obvious symbols of the Camino. Rather, my research considers more mundane objects of pilgrimage: backpacks, walking poles, food, and cellphones. My ethnographic analysis is divided into four chapters, each addressing a different material sphere of the Camino. Here I illustrate the varied ways in which pilgrims use, talk about, embrace, reject, and share these specific items along the Way. In doing so, I demonstrate the extent to which these objects fundamentally assist Camino-walkers in feeling and acting out their pilgrimage in ways that manifest their specific pilgrim identity. Finally, each
chapter considers a unique social or material paradox exhibited by the object in question.

I begin my analysis with backpacks as the most singular object carried by pilgrims. Beyond their practical purpose, backpacks provide a social service by signaling a pilgrim’s status as a traveller as well as a metaphorical service as a symbol of emotional or spiritual weight. The paradox I explore in this first chapter deals with the packing principle of “less is more” and the politics of balancing physical comfort with the social expectation of struggle. Chapter Two focuses on walking poles to illustrate the politics of authenticity as well as systems of exchange along the Camino. The paradox revealed in this chapter considers various meanings and applications of donation and gifting within the Camino sphere. Chapter Three considers food to reveal the broader social trend of communitas and sharing culture along the Camino. The paradox exhibited here is that a pilgrim’s success is often measured in terms of their social, as opposed to spiritual or physical, capacity. The fourth chapter addresses cell phones to illustrate the connective and reflective properties of digital devices and social media. This presents the final paradox whereby pilgrims embark on the Camino seeking distance – but instead find themselves more connected than ever before. I conclude with suggestions for further research on the material elements of pilgrimage and identity.
History of the Camino and Its Contemporary Revival

The Camino de Santiago is a medieval Christian pilgrimage to the tomb of Saint James the Apostle, located in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela situated in northwestern Spain. It is also known as the Way of St. James – or simply, “the Way.” While the route is technically a web of trails spanning across Europe, the most famous and popular segment in the contemporary era is the Camino Francés. This 774km long path begins at the French-Spanish border town of St. Jean Pied de Port and moves westward through the Pyrenees Mountains and across northern Spain via the Spanish cities of Pamplona, Léon, and Sarria to Santiago (American Pilgrims on the Camino 2016).

Historically speaking the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage is based on the Legend of Saint James the Apostle. Saint James is said to have travelled along the Iberian Peninsula to northwestern Spain in the 1st century A.D. to convert Galicians to Christianity. Artists’ renditions of St. James often depict him wearing simple clothing of the period, including a wide-brimmed felted hat to protect him from the wind and rain. He is also commonly portrayed holding a long wooden walking staff, a water
gourd, and a scallop shell to symbolize his travels along the Iberian coast. Over time these accessories have come to symbolize him as well as the Camino.

Fig. Statue of St. James outside of an albergue.
According to myth St. James was beheaded by Herod Agrippa in 44 A.D. at which point his body was interred in the northwestern coastal town of Finisterre, Spain. It is said that his remains were located in the 9th century on the spot where the Cathedral of Santiago now stands. This discovery, or inventivo, marked the beginning of pilgrims flocking to Santiago to pay their respects and hoping for miracles. The popularity and infrastructure of the Camino grew throughout the Middle Ages. During this period, European Christian kings and queens seeking salvation supported the route by protecting the region from Moorish invasions. The first known Camino guidebook, Codex Calixtinus or “Pilgrim’s Guide” surfaced in the 12th century, offering medieval pilgrims practical as well as spiritual instruction. The decline of the Camino came in the 16th and 17th centuries following wars across Europe, religious reformation in Spain, and anti-Christian sentiments brought on by the Enlightenment (American Pilgrims on the Camino 2015).

The renaissance of the Camino in the modern era began in the 19th century with the second inventivo and re-discovery of Saint James’ remains that were rumored to have been hidden in the Cathedral at Santiago (Lois-González and Santos 2015). The Camino route was more or less maintained throughout the 20th century. The Pilgrim Office in Santiago began keeping official records of pilgrim numbers in the 1990s. Holy Years occur when the feast day of St. James (July 25th) falls on a Sunday. These events are famous for drawing increased numbers of pilgrims to Santiago. The first recorded Holy Year was 1993, in which the number of registers pilgrims skyrocketed to 99,439 from a mere 9,764 in the year before (Confraternity of Saint James 2017). Following this event, Spain’s Board of Tourism
sought to formalize the phenomenon of route-based religious tourism by re-
constructing and marketing pilgrimage journeys to sites of cultural or religious
heritage (Santos 2002). In 1995, the regeneration and growing popularity of the
Camino resulted in the city of Santiago winning the bid to be one of Europe’s “cities
of culture” in the year 2000 (Badone and Roseman 2004).

Today, the Pilgrim’s Office in Santiago is responsible for collecting data and
statistics on the pilgrims that walk the Way. Walking pilgrims are counted based on
whether they have covered – at the very least – the last 100km into Santiago on foot.
The Pilgrim Office counts each pilgrim who can prove via stamps in their Pilgrim
Passport that they have travelled the appropriate distance. The office distinguishes
between religious and non-religious pilgrims in the form of different Compostela, a
kind of certificate of completion. Self-identified spiritual pilgrims are awarded a
document written in Latin, while those travelling for “cultural or historical
purposes” receive one in Spanish (The Road to Santiago 2018). The Pilgrim Office in
Santiago recorded a total of 277,915 pilgrims in the year 2016 (Confraternity of
Saint James 2017). Of these, 45% were Spanish nationals and a total of 63% walked
the Camino Francés (ibid).
Fig. “Pilgrim Passport” and *Compostela*. 
The Camino As An Extended Physical Metaphor

One cannot fully grasp the socio-spiritual meaning of the Camino without appreciating its function in metaphor. Metaphors are more than rhetorical devices, but affect thoughts and actions by forming the basis for our conceptual system (Lakoff and Johnsen 2003, 4). Throughout my fieldwork, I frequently heard pilgrims talk of their journeys in metaphorical terms. The one that I feel best encapsulates the multiplicity of the experience is the “Three Caminos” analogy, built on the idea that a pilgrim encounters different and sequential challenges along the Way.

A pilgrim begins by walking the “physical Camino” which takes him or her from St. Jean through the Pyrenees. Indeed, the mountainous terrain in this section poses difficulty for the fittest of pilgrims. Furthermore, most pilgrims struggle in the first weeks to adjust to walking 10-30km per day. The middle segment of the journey constitutes the “mental Camino” which brings pilgrims across the flat, dry terrain of the Meseta. While the Meseta boasts impressive views of the horizon, this portion of the journey is renowned for being boring as well as quite lonely. Some days, for example, a pilgrim can only expect to pass a single café on the route. This is a stark contrast to the charmingly busy sections that precede and follow the Meseta. The third and final Camino a pilgrim is said to walk is the “spiritual Camino” which includes the journey through the hills of Galicia and into the city of Santiago. Many of the self-identified secular pilgrims I encountered in Santiago confirmed that they felt a sense of transcendence after enduring the physical and mental challenges posed by the Pyrenees and the Meseta.
What I like about this metaphor is that it breaks the Camino down into different embodied elements while also framing the journey in its entirety. For a reader with limited pilgrimage experience, I hope that this account will enhance his or her understanding of the range of challenges and experiential planes presented within such a journey.

A Day in the Life

The field notes that follow outline an ordinary day in the life of a contemporary pilgrim walking the Camino towards Santiago during the summer. I have included them to provide the reader with a rough idea of quotidian pilgrim practices while highlighting the four key material items I address in this thesis.

5am. You begin your day by waking up to the muffled sound of a phone alarm, either yours or that of another pilgrim. You hear shuffling and hushed voices in the communal room of your albergue. You rise and climb down from your bunk as quietly as you can, pack your toiletries and ultra-light sleeping bag in your backpack and get dressed in the dark. Quickly you scan your bunk and the floor to ensure that you have not dropped or left anything behind. This process is easier if you use the flashlight function on your phone, but you refrain because it appears that your bunkmate is still sleeping.

By the door you collect your boots and walking poles. Seated on the ground or in a chair, you apply Band-Aids to the blisters on your feet from the previous day of walking. Finally, you rub your feet with a layer of Vaseline
before putting your socks on to avoid developing any new hotspots on the long
day of walking ahead. You swing your backpack onto your shoulders, click the
waist and chest buckles, and cinch the straps into position. If it is raining
outside, you cover your backpack with a fitted rain cover, or else you simply
don an enormous plastic poncho over your entire person. You lace your
protesting feet into your boots, grab your poles, and you are on your way. You
are not yet hungry because it is still too early. This is just as well because cafés
will not open for several more hours. Instead, you sip some water as you walk
and keep your eyes peeled for painted yellow arrows, pointing the Way.

8am. You stop at a café for breakfast. Before going in, you leave your
backpack in a chair on the outside terrace or else propped against the wall
with all the others. You expect that there will not be enough space inside the
café for twenty pilgrims and their backpacks, and anyway you will likely bring
your tortilla and café con leche outside to enjoy in the fresh air. In the event of
rain you make do by shoving your sodden backpack under the bar inside.

12pm. You have been walking for nearly six hours today, so you find a
café or comfortable patch of trail to break for lunch. You lie back against your
backpack to relieve the tension in your back and shoulders and prop up your
booted feet while you eat a sandwich made from the leftover bread and chorizo.
Your bag has gotten progressively lighter throughout the morning because of
all the water you have drunk, but you refill your bottles or camelback bladder
at a fountain marked “agua potable,” and your backpack is heavy once more.
2pm. Siesta time is nearing, so you have a choice. If it is a nice day you may rest for a bit in the shade. If you have the energy or feel that you must cover some extra ground you may also continue walking. However, if the heat or rain has become unbearable or you are anxious that the albergues will fill up, you might instead chose to find your accommodation for the night.

You consult your guidebook and select an albergue based on price, number of beds, whether or not it offers a communal meal, or if it is where your walking companions plan to stay. When you arrive, you check in and pay at the front desk where your pilgrim passport is stamped. For the price of three to fifteen euros you get a twin sized bunk in a shared dormitory. For upwards of twenty-five euros you can skip the snorers and get a private room. You deposit your dusty boots in one of the many cubbies by the door and your walking poles point-down in a large bin with the rest. You swing your bag over one aching shoulder and shuffle through the hostel in your socks to find your bed.

When you locate your allocated spot you greet the other pilgrims who have already arrived, including your bunkmate. You drop your bag on the ground beside the bed. You note the sign warning you not to place your backpack on the mattress because of the risk of spreading bedbugs. Sitting on the bed or the floor, you peel your sweaty socks off your bandaged and blistered feet. You unpack your “clean” non-walking clothes, quick-dry towel, and shower gel (which also serves as your shampoo, conditioner, and laundry detergent) and head for the showers. After showering you wash and rinse your walking clothes by hand in a deep sink the albergue washroom and hang then to dry.
outside in the sun. If it is raining you hang them inside, knowing that you will probably hike in damp clothes tomorrow. You might have the option of washing and drying your clothes in a machine or even by the hospitaleiro who will return them folded on your bed – but the service costs anywhere from five to ten euros so you refrain from doing this everyday.

5pm. You pass the time during siesta napping, reading, writing in a journal, tending to your blisters, or playing cards with other pilgrims in the albergue common area. If where you are staying has decent Wi-Fi (the password is inevitably “Camino” or “Santiago” followed by a year that does not correspond with the current one) you might watch an episode of Netflix on your phone or iPad. The heat of the day has passed, and the local tiendas begin to reopen. The town you are staying in is likely to have a church that you may visit, while the bigger cities will have Cathedrals and other sights. You slip your tired, aching feet into your flip-flop shower shoes to explore the area and find some food.

If you are staying in a large city, like Pamplona or Burgos, you might have plans to go out to dinner or visit a bar with your walking companions. However, if you are in a small town or trying to save money you might arrange to cook a communal meal at the albergue with a few other pilgrims. These are almost always pasta-based and supplemented by bread and wine. These quickly become festive affairs and can go on until midnight – or until the hospitaleiro turns the lights off.
After eating your meal and cleaning up you check to see if your laundry has dried. Even if it has not you still bring it in to hang your bunk in case it rains in the night. You might also decide to sleep in you “clean” hiking clothes to streamline your early morning departure. After brushing your teeth, you pack your backpack for the following day. You take care to position the heaviest items towards your back to relieve your front and shoulders, and the ones you will need to access first, like toiletries and raingear, towards the top. You do this quietly because the first pilgrims begin going to sleep around 9pm.

When you are ready to sleep you crawl into your sleeping bag or silk sleep sack. Someone is always snoring, so you drown it out by listening to music through headphones or with in-earplugs. More than anything you hope your bunkmate is a sound sleeper, because any flouncing or turning is guaranteed to shake the metal bedframe and wake you in the night. If you are lucky to have a bottom bunk near an outlet you can have your phone in your bed while it charges overnight. However, it is much more likely that your device is across the room, charging on the floor in a pile with everyone else’s. You briefly hope that you will be able to hear the sound of your alarm, but then remember that you will wake to the sound of other pilgrims shuffling about at 5am either way.
Fig. Sign along the road into the city of Santiago decorated with pilgrim gear.
Literature Review

This review of pertinent literature is divided into two main sections. The first addresses the trajectory of pilgrim-tourist theory over the last forty years. I begin with the Turner’s seminal hypothesis of pilgrimage as a ritual process defined by liminality and communitas. Here I also address the problem of authenticity in pilgrimage-tourist studies. Following this I address the emerging discussion of the 1990s, a decade that constitutes a “growth stage” in pilgrim-tourist theory (Collins-Kreiner 2016, 325). This era presents more expansive definitions of what constitutes a pilgrimage in such a way as to fundamentally challenge the pilgrim-tourist dichotomy. By the 2000s, religious elements no longer necessarily constitute the core of pilgrimage. This fundamental shift allowed for secular journeys to be included in volumes covering pilgrimage research. Today, ethnographers continue to push the post-secular boundaries of tourism and pilgrimage. My contribution to this conversation comes in the form of a material analysis of contemporary pilgrim practice along the Camino de Santiago. For this reason the final section of this chapter addresses the material religion theory that underpins the research and analytical methods for this thesis.

1970s – Starting Out and the Problem of Authenticity

I have decided to begin my analysis with Victor and Edith Turner because they are principally responsible for introducing several essential social theories to the domain of pilgrimage studies (ibid, 324). The Turners published their seminal
volume *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* in 1978, and in defining pilgrimage as a ritual process they introduce two significant theoretical social concepts: liminality and *communitas*. Liminality refers to the social anti-structure that results from travelling, including “homogenization of status, simplicity of dress and behavior, [and] ordeal” (Turner and Turner 1978, 34). According to the Turners, these experiences fundamentally assist in “reflection on the meaning of basic religious and cultural values” (ibid). In this way, the Turners find pilgrimage to exemplify a “passage of rites” (ibid, 3). Meanwhile, *communitas* is the “commonness of feeling” that results from a “likeness of lot and intention” or otherwise shared experience (ibid, 13). It works with liminality to combine the “lowliness, sacredness, homogeneity, and comradeship” of undertaking a pilgrimage to produce an essential bond between travellers (ibid, 250).

Despite the structural-functionalist framework of their analysis, the Turner’s conception of liminality and *communitas* continue to inform pilgrim theory today (Collins-Kreiner 2016). In addition to these ideas, the Turners also introduce the following essential comparison between pilgrims and tourists:

“A tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist. Even when people bury themselves in anonymous crowds on the beaches, they are seeking an almost sacred, often symbolic, mode of *communitas*, generally unavailable to them in the structured life of the office, the shop floor, or the mine” (ibid, 20).
While the Turners are essentially conflating pilgrims and tourists, this passage still implies a fundamental distinction between them. Even if tourists and pilgrims are half of one another by both seeking *communitas* in a liminal setting, the statement itself reinforces their categorical dichotomy. Fundamental to this question of pilgrimage and tourism is the notion of authenticity. Indeed, the label of “tourist” is typically applied derisively to one that finds pleasure in seemingly inauthentic experiences (MacCannell 1973, 592). Meanwhile, based upon the framework provided by the Turners, pilgrimage is clearly embedded in religious tradition or motivation. This is represented by their clear typology of pilgrimage, encompassing four different types of pilgrimage (prototypical, archaic, medieval, and post-medieval), all of which are based in religious belief and practice (Turner and Turner 1978, 17-18). Indeed, this dichotomy and reactions to it forms the basis for the next forty years of theoretical discussion surrounding pilgrimage.

**1990s – Pilgrim Typologies and False Dichotomies**

In 1992, the journal *Annals of Tourism Research* published an issue entirely devoted the joining the themes of pilgrimage and tourism. This event marks a turning point in their combined study. Anthropologist Valene Smith introduces the issue by establishing that “[the] contemporary use of terms, identifying the pilgrim as a religious traveller and the tourist as a vacationer, is a culturally constructed polarity that veils the motives of the travellers’ quest” (Smith 1992, 1). While this finding served in opening up the theoretical landscape of pilgrimage and tourism,
the scholarly distinction persisted in the form of definitions and typologies of pilgrimage established by the Turners.

One example of this is anthropologist Erik Cohen’s structural functionalist defense of the pilgrim-tourist dichotomy. He defines pilgrimage as “a movement toward the Center” and travel tourism as “a movement in the opposite direction, toward the Other” (Cohen 1992, 50). Although both destinations are liminal, the Center “possesses a creative, comicizing potential” while the Other is situated in the “chaos on the margins of the cosmicized world” (ibid, 51). In line with MacCannell’s view of pilgrimage as a search for authenticity, Cohen concludes that the institutional function of pilgrimage is to produce a profound experience that recommits and reconciles one with the center of his or her culture (ibid, 59). On the other hand, as a practice tourism is far less institutionalized and is expected instead to bring pleasure and recreation (ibid, 53). While Cohen’s analysis is less explicitly exclusionary, there remains an implied judgment between the two kinds of movement – one towards the “Center” of all things and another towards the periphery.

Alan Morinis offers a more inclusive definition in the same anthology of pilgrimage and tourism. He defines pilgrimage as “a journey undertaken by a person in quest of a place or a state that he or she believes to embody a valued ideal” (Morinis 1992, 4). I find the concept of a “valued ideal” to be much broader and more generous than Cohen’s idea of moving towards or away from a Center. Morinis further distinguishes between “conventional” pilgrimages where the aim is “an actual shrine located at some fixed geographical point,” and other kinds of sacred
journeying that can also include “journeys to a place of importance to [oneself] alone” or even “wanderings that have no fixed goal” (ibid). Indeed, according to Morinis it is the actual practice of pilgrimage itself that is most significant in the sense that “movement” provides the very “essence of the journey” (ibid, 15).

This proposed framework defines pilgrimage as something that is done. However, the challenge remains that there are always different ways of doing something. Morinis attempts to encapsulate these by delineating six different “types” of pilgrimage based on ranging levels of formality (ibid, 1) as well as five different “planes” of pilgrim experience (ibid, 21-25). By differentiating and categorizing different kinds of pilgrimage, Morinis follows in the footsteps of his academic predecessors (Turner and Turner 1978, 17-20). To contrast this, the theoretical outlook presented in the years following the 1990s focused far less on what differentiates pilgrimage-based experiences and far more on what unites them.

2000s – The Post-Secular Paradigm Shift

In her review of the literature surrounding the intersection of religion, pilgrimage and tourism, geographer Nola Collins-Kreiner refers to the 2000s as an era of “maturity” and “new paradigm” (Collins-Kreiner 2016, 326). While the previous period assumed religion to be the core element of pilgrimage, this theoretical turn could be characterized by the growing number of scholars “exploring various aspects of pilgrimage in their respective contexts” (ibid).
This post-modern and post-secular theoretical shift was reflected in the anthologies concerning pilgrimage and tourism. One such volume is *From Medieval Pilgrimage to Religious Tourism*, published in 2002. In the introduction, editors William H. Swatos and Luigi Tomasi explicitly challenge the pilgrim-tourist theoretical dichotomy in an effort to “lift up and critique facile assumptions about both ‘pilgrimage’ and ‘tourism’” (Swatos and Tomasi 2002, xii). This unambiguous naming and direct opposition to the old paradigm indicates a decisive moment in the theory of pilgrim-tourist studies. Two years later, Ellen Badone and Sharon Roseman published *Intersecting Journeys*, another postmodern collection of ethnographic essays seeking to bridge the theoretical gap between pilgrimage and tourism. Like Swatos and Tomasi, Badone and Roseman challenge the dichotomy by outlining the intersections and problematizing the boundary between the supposedly “religious” and “secular” (Badone and Roseman 2004, 9-10). These volumes encompass a wealth of ethnographic information to illustrate this new theoretical framework.

One element of post-modern pilgrim-tourist studies is that the practice and understanding of pilgrimage has changed along with other aspects of religion. In the first chapter, Tomasi notes this fundamental shift in religious tourism as a result of post-modern ideals about the individual and our “relationship with the absolute” (Swatos and Tomasi 2002, 20). Drawing upon Durkheim, he describes this post-secular state as a mixing of the sacred with the profane. As such, Tomasi finds pilgrimage “compelled to change its form, although its essential core remains the same” (ibid). Tomasi concludes that “every age has its own mode of relating to the
sacred,” and because of this the pilgrimage we see today is “so different from, yet so similar to the pilgrimage of the past” (ibid). This statement suggests that to understand contemporary pilgrim practice, ethnographers must relate and reflect upon them in new ways. I have attempted to do this in my own work by explicitly focusing on the material elements of pilgrimage as a departure from concentrating on individual internal drive or final destinations.

The material framework I employ relates to another essential piece of the post-modern pilgrim-tourist model, which is a renewed emphasis on the lived experience of pilgrimage. In line with the work of Morinis, the element of movement is emphasized. Anthropologist Judith Adler refers to “Peregrinatio” as the culture of geographic mobility that characterizes pilgrimage. According to her, the process and experience also incorporates ascetic themes through the physical struggle and voluntary exile (Adler 2002, 27).

Anthropologist Lilian Voyé also addresses the physical dimensions of popular pilgrimages in the contemporary era. Focusing on pilgrimages in Western Europe, Voyé finds that pilgrimage incorporates specific corporeal practices or “rites”, spatial and temporal dimensions, as well as a specific “festive and aesthetic appearance” contained within “objects that can be touched and seen” (Voyé 2002, 131). She offers the material example of “souvenirs” or “kitsch” that symbolically serve in “appear[ing] as intrinsic elements of the proper movement of many pilgrims” (ibid, 132). Voyé’s focus poses a significant analytical turn because prior to this it was a pilgrim’s personal motivation, spiritual or otherwise, that formed the basis of ethnographic interest.
Building on the work of previous scholars (MacCannell 1973, 592), the post-secular era of pilgrim-tourist studies continued to wrestle with the question of authenticity. At this point in the debate, the discussion has become increasingly embedded in pilgrim movement and practice rather than any measure of the depth or purity of their religious belief. Speaking in the context of the Camino de Santiago, anthropologist Nancy Frey draws upon Judith Adler’s theory of human mobility to oppose the pilgrim-tourist binary. She defines both as “expressive, stylized, and analyzable types of meaningful human action” (Frey 2004, 89). She notes that the formal defining characteristic of an “authentic” pilgrim is his or her religious motives. Meanwhile, in practice “people who travel by bus and car are often labeled tourists even if they have a religious motive because they do not make the long, arduous journey” (ibid, 91). Frey interprets this standard as an implicit rejection of consumer society and technology (ibid, 106). Building off the work of others (Morinis 1992; Adler 2002) Frey draws an essential correlation between movement and pilgrimage as a “physical act that occurs on the ground, not just a spiritual exercise” (ibid, 92). Once again, these findings suggests that authentic pilgrimage is something one does rather than feels.

Present – The “New Tourist”

The post-modern shift in pilgrim-tourist studies persists today, albeit not without some residual discord. In 2012, a trio of social scientists defended the differentiation between pilgrims and tourists on the basis that pilgrimage explicitly involves reasons for religious sacrifice (Palmer, Begley and Coe 2012, 72). While
somewhat of an outlier, this publication suggests that the debate over this binary persists beyond the post-modern and post-secular turn. In 2015, geographers Rubén Lois-González and Xosé M. Santos coined the term “new tourist” to describe an individual who holds a mix of classic pilgrim and tourist motivations (Lois-González and Santos 2015, 149). I find this definition both acceptable and highly applicable on the basis that it intersects religious and spiritual incentives alongside a desire to travel, experience the landscape, and unwind from the stress of daily life.

Indeed, the most useful definition for my purpose and research is an applied one. Pilgrimage today is a diverse and total phenomenon – one that straddles the secular-post-secular divide through different forms of practice, performance, and construction of individual identity (Nilsson and Tesfahuney 2016, 18). In addition to these personal and social aspects, state and economic elements inevitably lead to the paradoxical entanglement of sacred and modern geographies. These entanglements make it impossible to consider pilgrimage as strictly religious, secular or even post-secular (ibid, 28-29). Despite the semantic and theoretical complications these factors pose, the continued success of the Camino into the modern age depends on the route’s ability to adapt and compliment a multiplicity of tourist profiles (Lois-González and Santos 2015, 161).

**Materiality of Religion and Identity**

One cannot analyze contemporary pilgrim material culture without more broadly addressing material theory of religion. Émile Durkheim famously classified all religious displays into two separate categories, the *sacred* and the *profane*
These are defined by action and in relation to one another, in that “sacred things are [...] protected and isolated by prohibitions; [while] profane things are those things to which the prohibitions are applied and that must keep at a distance from what is sacred” (ibid).

While we are in the habit of thinking of rosary beads, pilgrimage routes, and apostolic tombs as sacred, what about a scallop shell or aluminum walking poles? Is it possible that these items might also represent the sacred path and individual journey of a pilgrim? Victor Turner suggests in *Image and Pilgrimage* that they do, noting how “toward the end of a pilgrimage, the pilgrim’s new-found freedom from mundane or profane structures is increasingly circumscribed by symbolic structures: religious buildings, pictorial images, statuary, and sacralized features of the topography, often described and defined in sacred tales and legend” (Turner and Turner 1978, 10). Here Turner advocates for the symbolically transformative properties of pilgrimage.

Despite this, I have noted a lack of ethnographic literature depicting the actual processes these mundane objects undergo along the Camino, as well as the effects felt by contemporary pilgrims in terms of their experience or identity. Indeed, the prominence of the pilgrim-tourist debate and keen focus on belief and physical practice overshadow any attempt at material investigation. One possible exception to this is Cristina Sánchez-Carretero’s brief reference to the pilgrim practice of symbolically burning old boots, items of clothing, or postcards upon completing the Camino at Finisterre as a kind of “purification ritual” (Sánchez-Carretero 2015, 7). That said, Sánchez-Carretero offers this anecdote as the reason
for the 2011 fire ban along the coast and example of heritage conflict between pilgrims and Finisterre locals. While ethnographers readily address pilgrim motivations (Lois-González and Santos 2015) and identity (Lois-González and Santos 2013), the mundane and material practicalities rest within the domain of guidebooks (Brierley 2013, 21-25). In light of this recurrent oversight, the purpose of this thesis is to formally apply a distinctly material lens so as to more deeply explore the linkages between materiality and individual pilgrim experiences.

In terms of applying material theory, I have decided to apply Igor Kopytoff’s “biographical approach” to the careers of Camino objects (Kopytoff 1989, 66). In addition to the multiple uses and shifting meanings of these items, I will also address the movement of objects within the Camino “sphere of exchange” (ibid, 71). Likewise, I have drawn upon Daniel Miller’s ethnography The Comfort of Things in which he addresses how Londoners “express themselves through their possessions” (Miller 2008, 1). While Miller focuses on the meanings and relationships inherent within household material objects, my work echoes his in a smaller scale in that I have restricted my focus to carried items and the contents of pilgrims’ backpacks. In his conclusion, Miller finds that the curation and daily experience of household material culture “may express an order” or “social cosmology,” albeit a very small and personal one (ibid, 294). The aim of my research is to reveal these expressions of order and pilgrim identity by way of objects carried along the Way.

This thesis builds on the ideas of Kopytoff and Miller that possessions have distinct narratives and meaning to the people who bear them. By applying these principles, I have attempted to address the specific ways in which individual
pilgrimage experiences and perspectives might be manifested by carried items. I hope that this method might shed new light on the way Camino-walkers themselves identify and negotiate the pilgrim-tourist categories as they understand them to be.
Methods

I employed a variety of qualitative methods in my study of material culture along the Camino. Firstly, I became a participant and observer of pilgrim culture by walking the full 790km of the *Camino Francés* over a five-week period. During this time I collected my thoughts, experiences, and conversations in a journal. I also recorded my own material journey along the Way by noting the things I lost, acquired, purchased, gave away, and left behind.

Secondly, while traveling along the Camino I conducted unstructured interviews with other pilgrims. At the start I feared that people would not want to discuss the contents of their backpacks and that my questions would raise suspicion. However, rapport did not pose a problem due to the high level of sociability on the Camino. For the most part I found that pilgrims enjoyed talking about their experiences and sharing the contents of their bags with me.

Finally, to supplement my participant observation and interviews I took over 1500 photos of “Camino objects” I encountered along the way. I found this to be the best way to document the physical and material features of my results. Initially I expected to ask pilgrims to display the entire contents of their bags, but soon found this request both cumbersome and uninteresting given that everyone carried many of the same items, like dirty underwear, a quick dry towel, and a water bottle. Instead I began asking pilgrims to show me their “favorite” or “most meaningful” or “most valuable” Camino possession. Indeed this method proved far more interesting and variable.
While my research did engage human participants, my questions were neither overly sensitive nor did I interview any minors. For this reason I did not require that participants sign a consent form. However, I did expressly inform others of my status as a researcher in addition to being a pilgrim. I also always asked permission before recording stories or photographing objects.

I conducted this fieldwork over a six-week period in 2017, spanning the months of June and July. Practically speaking I selected these months because I was not enrolled in classes and because the summer is the Camino high season. During this time the weather is warm and many younger pilgrims find themselves freed from the confines of the academic year. As a result I had a wealth of pilgrims to observe, speak to, and walk with.

Upon my arrival in Santiago, I spent my sixth week reflecting on my findings and conducting interviews with several academics and pilgrimage experts based in the city. In addition to Santiago’s Museum of Pilgrimage, I also visited the Cathedral on multiple occasions to observe pilgrims arriving at their destination. On my last day I took a bus tour to the coastal pilgrimage sites of Finisterre and Muxía. This capstone tour proved particularly interesting because the participants incorporated a mix of tourists (self-identified) and pilgrims who walked to Santiago and received their Compostela. These individuals lacked the time or energy to walk the extra 90km to the coast. This additional experience reset my impression of pilgrimage in opposition to tourism and allowed me to reflect upon any biases I had developed over six weeks of fieldwork.
1. Backpacks

I begin my analysis with the backpack because it represents the most singular unit of pilgrim material culture. Not only does the backpack hold all of the objects and possessions of a pilgrim, but it also serves as a constant and integral feature of the lived experience of pilgrimage. Indeed, so many of the material processes a pilgrim engages with throughout the day - packing, unpacking, caring for themselves and their possessions – revolve around the backpack. In this way, I find that the backpack forms the axis around which a pilgrim’s material experience of the Camino revolved.

I begin by addressing the status of a backpack as a central “investment piece” in a pilgrim’s process of preparing for departure. In the following section I employ an ethnographic account to illustrate the ways in which pilgrims are fundamentally entangled with their backpacks. Next I explore the meaning of this relationship by way of different material metaphors applied to backpacks. Here I consider the paradox of balancing comfort with struggle. Finally, I summarize the implications of these material experiences and perceptions in terms of individual pilgrim identity.

Preparing For Departure

A pilgrim’s material journey often begins with selecting and acquiring a backpack. Even if a pilgrim is on a budget, Camino guidebooks and online forums typically recommend buying the best walking shoes and backpack he or she can manage. Given that these also tend to be the most expensive items, many of the
pilgrims I spoke to reported that they purchased these first. The recommended bag is a small to mid-sized hiking backpack, complete with hip-straps to relieve weight from one’s shoulders. Brand new, these cost roughly between 100 and 200 USD. My backpack was 36 liters and free because it was a hand-me-down from my mother. I encountered a few pilgrims carrying significantly larger packs, but they all disclosed this was because they already owned them. For example, my friend Adam carried the same 60-liter bag he uses for backpacking in upstate New York. “The danger of course is over packing,” he said, “but I just do my best to be sensible.”

This correlation between packing well and being sensible is a theme among contemporary pilgrims walking the Camino. Prior to my own departure I did a substantial amount of online research on what to bring and how best to pack. I encountered a great number of packing tutorials on YouTube and aerial-shot photos of “inside out bags” depicting their total contents. Pilgrimage blogs and online forums are full of chirpy Camino veterans offering advice on the most necessary, extraneous, or un-obvious items that will reduce overall discomfort and generally enhance one’s Camino experience. This observation foreshadowed the level of material anxiety I would encounter along the Camino and the overwhelming cultural value placed on efficient packing.
The first thing I noticed when I entered the Pilgrim Office in St. Jean Pied de Port was the enormous bag scale hanging on the back wall. The office is located at the top of a long, steep cobbled street in the old-town of St. Jean. Each day, new pilgrims arriving in the small French-Basque town by bus or train would pay a visit to the office in order to collect their essential pilgrim documents. These included a pilgrim passport, an elevation map, and a comprehensive list of all the albergues along the Way. What interested me, however, was the large grocer-style scale designed to weigh a backpack by securing the top strap to the dangling hook and
allowing the whole unit to hang freely. The volunteers working at the pilgrim office recommend that a bag weigh no more than 10-15% of a pilgrim’s body weight. I observed a group of pilgrims try it out and noted that their bags were quite a bit larger than mine. When it was my turn, I was exceedingly pleased to find that my bag was right on the mark. I exited the building twenty minutes later, equipped with my pilgrim passport and the satisfaction of having an expertly light bag.

I spent the next two days in St. Jean to give myself a chance to rest, observe pilgrims arriving, and begin composing my notes before embarking on my journey ahead. I had originally planned to spend several additional days there, but my own anxiety about crossing the Pyrenees prompted me to begin more abruptly. This proved a constant fixture of my Camino experience. It did not matter how many relaxed pilgrims I encountered, I never quite got out of the rushed mindset that characterizes my normal life.

The morning of my second day in St. Jean, I visited the Pilgrim Office first thing before the rush of pilgrims arrived on the afternoon train. The office was empty apart from three, elderly volunteers preparing Camino-style scallop shells for the incoming hordes of pilgrims. They worked over an enormous wooden box that contained hundreds of large shells, each with a pre-drilled hole at the base. The women chatted in French as they looped bits of twine through each hole before tossing the final product into a deep basket. These would be offered to pilgrims when they checked in as a token to commemorate the start of their journey.

I entered and introduced myself to the three women who in turn introduced me to the young Chinese woman seated at the end of the table. I joined the four of
them in their work, and quickly learned that the fourth woman had been staying in St. Jean for several days because the airline she had flown from China had lost her backpack. "I am not sure when it will be delivered, but I cannot start walking without it," she lamented. I offer this example to demonstrate how a pilgrim without a backpack is effectively paralyzed. Given that one cannot physically continue without the other illustrates the extent to which pilgrims and their backpacks are entangled. While the physical and emotional hardship of the Camino render it a socially liminal space, the lack of a backpack poses a new kind of liminality – a limbo that traps the pilgrim in a given location until they can rectify their material situation.

The following day I began my walk, and I actually re-encountered the young woman on the trail towards Roncesvalles. Her bag had been delivered, at which point she could begin her journey.
Fig. Pilgrims walking with shells attached to their backpacks.
Backpacks As Metaphor

It is not enough to say that pilgrims are merely functionally or economically invested in their backpacks. Rather, backpacks and the idea of “weight” are commonly incorporated into metaphors surrounding the Camino. Indeed, metaphors serve to fundamentally frame our conceptual system and thus play “a central role in defining our everyday realities” (Lakoff and Johnsen 2003, 4). In this way, examining the imagined symbolism of “weight” reveals an essential layer of material experience along the Camino.

This is exemplified in a story recounted to me by Maja, a Swedish pilgrim in her mid thirties. At a communal albergue dinner Maja disclosed that she had heard this account from someone (who probably heard it from someone else, and so on). The story begins with a very unfit and overweight woman carrying an enormous backpack through the Pyrenees on her first day of walking the Camino Francés. The woman in question walked slowly, struggling under the weight of the bag when another, more seasoned pilgrim with a tiny pack caught up to pass her on the trail. The first woman exclaimed to the fast moving pilgrim, “How are you carrying so little?” to which the second pilgrim replied, “You are carrying your fears.”

I love this story because it gets at the heart of the first material paradox of the Camino, or what I call the “backpack paradox.” Simply put this is the idea that less is more and that an effective pilgrim is one who carries the bare minimum to get by. The paradox is embedded in the question of comfort, which engages a host of pilgrim identity politics over perceived discord between pilgrimage and luxury. In essence “carrying ones fears” is the practice of shielding oneself from every possible
discomfort by accruing ever more material things. While this instinct is natural in the context of a consumer capitalist world, it is neither possible nor socially accepted along the Camino.

The Politics of Luxury

Pilgrimage is difficult and often wretched given the physical challenge posed by the terrain coupled with infinitely variable weather. I crossed the Pyrenees in driving rain, followed by a two-week heat wave, followed by additional mist and rain. In light of these challenges, many of the pilgrims I interviewed about their “most important Camino item” identified something small and significant that brought them great comfort on the trails or in the albergues.

One of the oddest “most important” items I encountered in my survey of pilgrims was a purple hot water bottle carried by Agatha, pilgrim from Germany. For context I should acknowledge that we met in an unheated albergue at the end of a cold, rainy day on the trail. I told her about my project and at once she launched enthusiastically into telling me about the hot water bottle. Hugging it to her chest for emphasis she concluded: “It’s just so cozy!”

The quest for comfort along the Camino poses a theoretical quandary. Daniel Miller emphasizes the profound importance of people’s relationships with “things” as “expressions of themselves” and their connections to other people (Miller 2008, 1). However, seeking comfort along the Way might appear to conflict with pilgrimage. In the classic sense, pilgrimage constitutes a journey or challenge to mark devotion (Turner and Turner 1978, Morinis 1992). Meanwhile a
contemporary definition of pilgrimage epitomizes asceticism in terms of physical struggle and voluntary exile (Voyé 2002) – such as a temporary rejection of capitalist materialism. While this contradiction was rarely commented on in relation to objects as small as hot water bottles, I heard it regularly cited in the broader context of having one’s bag transported.

Fig. Agatha’s hot water bottle.
The politics of bag carrying are deeply conflicted and pose an essential part of how Camino-walkers themselves define and negotiate the question of pilgrimage versus tourism. Nancy Frey alludes to this in her analysis of the correlation between authenticity and physicality in pilgrimage (Frey 2004, 89). Indeed, there is a clear and palpable judgment ascribed to those who do not carry their bags, expressed even by those individuals who take advantage of such services. I noted this based on my conversations with Madeleine, a Catholic American college student who by all counts fit the bill as the most classic of contemporary pilgrims. The depth of her religious motivations are evidenced by the fact that upon completing the full length of the Camino Francés to Santiago she continued walking to Finisterre and beyond to the Portuguese town of Fátima so as to pay homage to the Cathedral there. Despite these feats, she expressed sincere guilt at having her bag carried on a few occasions because of painful tendonitis in her knees. “I haven’t come this far to take it easy, you know?” From this I observed that what constitutes a pilgrimage is the physicality of it – and in this case that includes carrying all of one’s things.

In addition to the social stigma and accompanying shame in having one’s bag carried, there is an economic factor that cannot be ignored. The cost of having one’s bag transported to the albergue one plans to sleep at that night is around 10 euros per day. This factored into Madeleine’s guilt. “It’s kind of a luxury,” she said, “I didn’t really count on doing it so I never factored it into my daily budget of albergues and food and the rest.”

This perception of having one’s bag transported as a luxury is reflected in the discourse surrounding guided Camino tour packages. Many of the pilgrims walking
in the manner I did, which is to say loosely following a guidebook from town to town without prior reservations, were decidedly critical of guided tours. When I finally did encounter a guided tour, I found that the group constituted of older Australian women. In stark contrast to the judgment I had gathered on their behalf, they seemed not at all bothered by the fact that their journey had been pre-organized by a company and that their bags were being carried to private albergues. In hearing their perspective I concluded two things. The first was the recognition that these services help make the Camino more manageable for older, less fit individuals who still want the experience. The second was the observation that they were still staying in much nicer albergues than I was.

The highest luxury offence in relation to luxury along the Camino were those groups who rode buses from albergue to albergue, collecting stamps in their pilgrim passports so they could collect a Compostela in Santiago. Dubbed “tourgrinos,” these individuals are rumored to walk almost no portion of the Way and for this are deeply judged by walking pilgrims. “There’s no way what they do counts as pilgrimage,” Madeleine concluded, “anyone can ride a bus it’s no better than cheating.” As far as I know I never witnessed a group of tourgrinos as described. However, whenever I broached the subject to another pilgrim walking the trail I observed the same reactions of disgust accompanied by accusations of fraudulence.

In illustrating these examples, I have attempted to represent the ways in which physical struggle, underpinned by material objects, are intrinsic to the on-the-ground discussion of identity and what constitutes a pilgrim in relation to a tourist. The tourgrino phenomenon serves as an extreme example of how luxury is
perceived as in conflict with pilgrim experience and ideals. Once again, pilgrimage is characterized by its physical and material components to the degree that pilgrims are identified on the basis of the walking and carrying they perform.

**Small Discards and Smaller Comforts**

While certain luxuries are highly contested, smaller sources of material comfort were usually considered acceptable, if not ingenious. I found this at the end of my first day of the trail, widely considered to be the most physically demanding. The trek begins in St. Jean, takes pilgrims through the Pyrenees Mountains and across the French-Spanish border with a total elevation gain of 1390m over a distance of 25.1km. There is only one *albergue* between St. Jean and Roncesvalles, but it is very small and located a mere third of the way into the stage. As such, most pilgrims elect to soldier on towards Roncesvalles.

I arrived at the enormous and impersonal purpose-built *albergue* at Roncesvalles cold, wet, and miserable. It had rained throughout the entire day, and while the trail was busy with pilgrims I had spent much of the day feeling quite alone because the fog prevented me from seeing more than a few meters ahead or behind me. I had stopped at one point to unlace by waterproof boots, pour the water out of them and ring out my socks. Upon my arrival I had checked in, located my bunk, and immediately located the showers, which proved lukewarm and deeply disappointing after which I felt quite a lot colder.

Shivering in my bunk I took an inventory of my possessions. Thinking back at the pride I had felt at the pilgrim office the day before when my bag had proved so
light I wondered to myself if I had brought enough warm clothes. I picked up the
skinny book of maps that I had purchased to accompany my copy of John Brierley's
myself, making up my mind to ditch it before tomorrow's walk deciding that I would
not carry a single thing I did not absolutely need.

I wandered down to the sparse, echoing kitchen-dining area where other
pilgrims were socializing. I sat at table with a few student-aged pilgrims that I
recognized from the trail and began chatting with a French girl named Margot. I
complained to her about the rain and the cold shower when out of nowhere she
pulled an individual tea bag from a clear plastic Ziploc bag and offered it to me one. I
was so surprised and grateful and overwhelmed in that moment that I burst into
tears. The following day I purchased tea bags at the first open *tienda* I could find.

This instance presents an opposing view to the notion that we carry our
fears. Backpacks and the weight of their contents are a source of pain and suffering,
but at the right moments they also provide enormous amounts of comfort. Indeed,
physical pain constitutes only a part of the challenge posed by the Camino. Despair,
loneliness, homesickness, and other personal or spiritual crises are inevitable. When
I recounted my tea anecdote to Fiona, a young Irish pilgrim several weeks later. She
smiled and said, “Tea is like a hug.” In this way, small material comforts like tea and
hot water bottles go a long way along the Camino.
The Care and Keeping of One’s Backpack

One thing I found comforting along the Camino was the constant presence of my backpack. Indeed, through this as well as the routine processes of packing, unpacking, and generally maintaining one’s bag, pilgrims develop a kind of reciprocal relationship with their backpacks where each provides care and maintenance for the other.

Anyone who has travelled to Europe has been warned to keep an eye on his or her possessions to protect them from petty theft. However, I can attest that a lot of the Camino is not like that. Pilgrims routinely dump their backpacks and walking poles in chairs outside terraces or beside doorways before entering a café for breakfast. People plug cellphones and tablets in outlets to charge around albergues and walk away from them. I once walked into a café bathroom to find a Fitbit dangling from an outlet by the sink – pilgrims are exceedingly laissez faire about their possessions. These instances demonstrate two points: first how desperate people are for outlets to charge their electronics along the Camino, and second how the liminality of the Camino space breeds trust.
Fig. Eating breakfast “with” my backpack.
By the same token, this liminal space of trust ends where the Camino ends. This is best exemplified by a story I heard from Mark, a three-time Camino veteran and seasoned volunteer at the American Pilgrim House in Santiago. He told me of a time when he observed three young men drop their bags outside of a restaurant in Santiago before going in. He chased after them to warn them that they were “in the city now” and therefore “no longer on the Camino.” Because of this it was not safe for them to go on acting as they had for the last five weeks and continue leaving their bags outside of cafés and restaurants. This story exemplifies the distinction between Camino and non-Camino spaces.

All in all, I found the Camino to be incredibly safe. The only story of theft I heard involved a female pilgrim getting mugged at the side of the road by a man in a car. It had happened a few years prior, and he had taken her backpack as well as everything in it. Following the event she immediately went home without completing her journey but returned last summer to finish the Camino and arrive in Santiago.

While I did not meet this woman or hear her version of the story, I did get to observe the reactions of the other pilgrims I was with when we heard about it and I noted how everyone was visibly shaken. This terrible story reminded me of the young woman from China I had met in the pilgrim office in St. Jean whose bag had been lost by the airline. While she had not endured the terror or invasion that go along with being mugged, the two women prompt the same empirical question: what is a pilgrim without his or her backpack? Based on my observations I say that
perhaps we do carry our fears, but not unlike tortoises our backpacks served as our homes and protection.

**Backpacks as Expressions of Identity**

Pilgrims are immediately recognizable as associated with the Camino by virtue of the backpack they carry. In this way backpacks serve as a signs that prompt feelings of trust and kinship between individuals. The result of this is greater ease in striking up a conversation or asking for directions.

In addition to identifying an individual as a pilgrim, backpacks also served as canvases for expressing nationality or personal flair. Many pilgrims affix small flags, patches, and pins to their packs as a reflection of their national or organizational identity. “I want to show people that I am from Japan,” a pilgrim replied when I asked about his flag. “Most of the people out here are from Europe or America but I too have come a long way to be here.”

While many pilgrims advertise their national identity along the Camino, the pilgrim establishment makes conscious efforts to undermine nationalist sentiments within the Camino sphere. This is most clearly evident in the “pilgrim passport” system. Not only is this document necessary for staying in Camino sanctioned *albergues*, but also pilgrims can receive stamps at museums, churches, and cafés along the route. I have even heard of pilgrims being asked to present their pilgrim passport along with their state-issued passport at police stations. The result of this passport practice is a strong pilgrim identity and loyalty to a kind of substitute “Camino nation state.”
Fig. National flags for sale in a Caminotec store.

Other backpack decorations are less group oriented and more a reflection of the individual pilgrim’s style or personality. My favorite of these was a life-sized silk yellow sunflower carried by Emma, a young Australian pilgrim. She had fitted the plastic stem into the water-bottle holder of her pack such that the blossom stood above her head like a flag. When I asked her about it she replied that her mother had died of cancer several years ago and had loved sunflowers. “I had hoped to see a lot of sunflowers on the trail, but they’re not in season right now. This way I have my own... even though it’s fake.” When I told her that I recognized her bag from seeing it ahead of me the day before she laughed. Apparently I was not the first to tell her this. She relayed to me that another pilgrim had recently said the same, and that the
woman in question was “having a really bad time of it.” Something about watching the sunflower “bobbing in the distance” heartened the pilgrim enough to keep walking. “She caught up to me in our albergue the next day to thank me,” she recounted, smiling.

These examples illustrate how the decorations affixed to a pilgrim’s backpack reveal a component of their identity or personal motivation. We also observe how this communication of character can serve in closing the social distance between pilgrims and building communitas on the trail – either between people of the same national origin or simply others who require some cheering up.

Fig. Emma the “sunflower pilgrim” walking with her companions.
Conclusion: Backpack Beginnings

This chapter has explored the ways pilgrim material culture is fundamentally underpinned by their relationship with their backpack. I began my analysis with how pilgrims acquire and prepare their backpacks for their journey, and examined how backpacks and their carrying take on metaphorical and moral meaning. Using ethnographic examples I illustrated the processes by which pilgrims develop essential material relationships with their backpacks along the Way. Finally, my findings reveal multiple ways in which backpacks and their decorations serve as expressions of pilgrim identity and, consequently, communicate kinship towards building *communitas* on the trail.
2. Walking poles

Expanding outwards from the previous chapter’s analysis of backpacks and the individual pilgrim, the goal of this chapter is to consider systems of material exchange along the Camino and examine how these systems influence pilgrim experience and identity. I have chosen to focus on walking poles because they are integral, albeit optional, material element to the embodied experience of many pilgrims moving along the Camino. Indeed, not all pilgrims walk with poles and thus I find that the ones that do have engaged in a conscious consumer choice.

I begin this chapter with an ethnographic vignette depicting how I engaged with two different kinds of exchange to acquire my own walking poles. In the following section I go on to consider how different kinds of walking poles can serve as signs representing individual pilgrim values and Camino meta-narratives. In the final two segments I explore formal and informal systems of exchange. The former focuses on consumer culture and identity that takes place in Caminotec walking supplies stores. The later considers the social nuances of donation or donativo within the framework of gift exchange and obligation. I conclude with a regard to the material footprint a pilgrim leaves behind on his or her Way to Santiago.

Ethnography of Walking Poles

Before departing for the Camino, I had been advised by a family friend to hold off on purchasing walking poles until my arrival. He had walked the Way a few years prior, and recounted to me how he had conveniently “picked up a pair at an
“albergue” after a few days of walking. Having flown to Spain from Oregon, he was not able to bring sharp-tipped poles in his carry-on bag. Fearing that his backpack would get lost in the luggage hold (quite like the Chinese woman I encountered in St. Jean) he simply arrived at the start of the Camino expecting to “figure it out.” On his third day of walking without poles, he asked the hospitaleiro at his albergue if anyone had left any behind. The hospitaleiro revealed a supply cupboard filled with left and forgotten walking materials, including a pair of poles that she gave him.

Armed with this account, I set out to do the same. Not only had I carried my bag on the plane, but I also did not want to purchase a set of walking poles from an outdoors store in London where they would surely cost a small fortune. Furthermore, I noted during my first days in St. Jean that not all pilgrims walked with poles and decided there was a chance I might not even have need of them. To provide some economic context, I should add that many of the individuals I encountered along the Way were students, recent graduates, or people between jobs. This is not surprising given that the entire Camino Francés takes approximately five weeks to complete, a timeframe that excludes many working adults. The result is that nearly everyone on the Camino is travelling on a budget. When I asked Andrew, an Australian retiree walking his fifth Camino how he decided what to bring, he replied: “anything that is about to wear out because then I don’t feel bad about binning it in Santiago.”

On my second day of walking, I encountered a pilgrim named Erik. He taught English abroad in Santiago and joked that, like Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz, his Camino journey was one that would bring him home. If pilgrim scruffiness were a
spectrum, Erik was the most outfitted and glossiest pilgrim I met. Clad head to toe in dry-fit moisture wicking clothes, his tiny ultra-light backpack confounded me. The long, shiny aluminum walking poles matched his orange backpack and stretched out from his hands like extensions of himself.

For several days Erik and I walked in the same cohort, which is to say we stayed in the same guidebook recommended towns and albergues. Throughout the day we would catch and pass one another, occasionally walking together or stopping to chat. Erik became a fixture in my first week of walking, and I began to recognize the sound of his approach behind me on the trail based on the telltale tic tic tic tic of his poles. On our second day of walking, I mentioned to him in passing that I had delayed my acquisition of poles in favor of “weighing my options” to which he exclaimed, “Oh, you really must get some, they are absolutely necessary!”

That evening, my conversation with Erik and the beginnings of a dull ache in my ankle inspired me to go pole hunting in the small town of Zubiri. I asked the hospitaleiro at my albergue without success, no one had left anything behind. So I ventured across the street to a private albergue that by all counts appeared much nicer than the cheap, bare bones municipal one I was staying at. I walked in behind a pair of pilgrims and waited patiently while the middle aged, female hospitaleiro checked them in, stamped their Camino passports, and showed them to their bunks upstairs. When she returned to the foyer where I stood, I asked in my broken and limited Spanish if anyone had left any walking poles behind. She was genuinely confused, and I worried that I had conveyed the wrong message, or worse yet, committed a faux pas by asking at a hostel I was not residing in. I tried again and she
disappeared into a back room. A minute later she emerged with a single red, white, and blue walking pole. “Three euro donativo” she said, extending an open hand for the money before handing me the pole with the other. I fumbled with my change, thanked her, and joyfully crossed the street to my albergue with my new walking accessory.

I showed my new three-euro walking pole to Erik the following day and he was shocked by the method by which I had acquired it. I did not ask him how much his had cost, but his surprise suggested that he had paid a lot more than three euros. For the next ten days I made do with just the one pole. Some pilgrims walk the entire Camino with one pole if they struggle with a single bum knee or ankle. However, after a week I began to feel lop-sided so I made up my mind to complete my set. On a rest day in the city of Burgos, I visited a Caminotec store and by chance found the matching left pole to my right for 16.95 euros. The store had a huge range of walking gear, including several poles that cost less than the one I had selected. Given that all walking poles provide relatively the same ergonomic service, if price were the only factor in my choice I probably would have settled for a mismatched pair. Instead I elected to pay a few extra euros for the sake of aesthetic and irony.
Fig. Me standing on a summit with my *donativo* walking pole.
A Dichotomy of Walking Poles

The story of my matching-mismatched walking poles serves in introducing the two main systems of exchange along the Camino. Despite the fact that I had acquired one by way of donativo and the other in a formal Caminotec store, I could hardly tell the two apart after a few days on the dusty trail. This section considers walking poles more broadly in terms of the specific values and history they signify, as well as what contextual implications these images have in defining and acting out individual pilgrim identity.

Along the Camino you will spot two different kinds of walking poles: aluminum and wooden. The aluminum variety can be purchased in an outdoors or Caminotec store (or acquired second hand as I found). They are marketed as highly efficient and technical, and thus perceived as “modern” tools of pilgrimage. Meanwhile, wooden walking sticks can be acquired one of two ways: either by finding or fashioning one using a branch found along the trail, or otherwise by purchasing a ready-made one at a Caminotec store. Aesthetically speaking, wooden poles represent an entirely different kind of Camino identity and history. They evoke a “traditional” or “historical” Camino, reinforced by the images of St. James holding a similar, long wooden staff.
Fig. “Modern” aluminum and “traditional” wooden walking poles for sale outside of a Caminotec storefront.
Fig. Display depicting a “modern” pilgrim at the Museum of Pilgrimage and Santiago in the old city center of Santiago. Note the aluminum walking poles.
While a handful of pilgrims I encountered found an appropriately sized walking stick along their Way, most of them purchased these aesthetically charged “traditional” poles in a Caminotec store. They often come adorned with a shepherd’s hook, leather hand strap, and occasionally a signature Camino scallop shell or water gourd hanging from the top. On the other hand, “modern” aluminum walking poles are equipped with an extendable and sharp tip and adorned with ergonomic hand straps. These are the ones Erik and I carried, and come in a variety of sizes, weights, and colors.

In the words of Edward Brunner, “Authenticity is a struggle” (2005, 155). Writing in the context of Colonial Williamsburg historical reenactments, Brunner finds that “authenticity” can be describe an original artifact as well as a convincing copy and thus the question of an authenticating authority must be considered (ibid, 149-151). Throughout my Camino journey, I strived in vain to wrap my head around the wooden poles. At best they seem a bit silly and over the top, at worst they come off affected and contrived. I have since reconsidered my own prejudice to find that both “modern” and “traditional” walking poles evoke individual ideas of authenticity. Metal poles epitomize the physical expedition of the Camino, evidenced by the emphasis with which Erik articulated my fundamental need for them. Meanwhile, “traditional” wooden poles simulate a historic past. I noted an increase in wooden poles in the last 100km, often carried by French and Spanish youths walking in organized school and church groups. I expect they will have collectively been taught the legend of St. James and their material preferences reflect that.
In this way, I cannot ignore the fact that both kinds of walking poles are instrumental in the individual pilgrim's process of experiencing and performing their own interpretation of the Camino. This dichotomy of walking poles serves to illustrate the modern-traditional politics of the Camino. In addition to their functional purpose of physically supporting a pilgrim on their journey, they pose an aesthetic and consumer performance that aids in orienting and representing an individual pilgrim within this discourse of modernity and tradition.

_Caminotec Economy_

In light of the contemporary globalization and commodification of the Camino (Nilsson and Tesfahuney 2016), I will begin my analysis of formal exchange and identity by focusing on “Caminotec” outfitters that sell walking gear intended for pilgrim travel.

Indeed, consumption has already been essentially connected to anthropological studies of identity. Much of the contemporary theory on consumption is based in the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who famously contended that consumer taste is not passive but rather socially conditioned to reflect a symbolic hierarchy (Longhurst and Savage 1996). Bourdieu’s work connecting consumer tendencies with class has introduced an inherent element of identity. This has prompted further work on the politics and social construction of identity, closely focusing on the matter of individual narrative (Somers 1994). Given that the Camino embodies the kind of European heritage tourism that is already associated with socially conscious cultural consumption (Richards 1996), it is
possible to apply these frameworks towards my own analysis of the formal, or
*Caminotec* economy.

Fig. Sign outside of a *Caminotec* store in Pamplona.
The photo above was taken outside of one of these Caminotec stores. The A-frame sign reads “TODO PARA PEREGRINOS” which translates to “Everything for pilgrims,” implying that all pilgrim material needs can be met at that store. Indeed, the outfitter had sleeping bags, backpacks, dry-fit clothing, rain-covers, camping stoves, and everything else that could physically accommodate or prepare a pilgrim for their journey. It was here that I splurged on a quick-dry towel because my small, cotton hand towel was not doing the trick.

Of course, as we have observed with walking poles, material objects along the Camino possess meaning beyond their practical uses. Practices of daily use and consumption do more than shelter a pilgrim but serve in essentially manifesting identity. Anything small, lightweight, or travel size epitomizes principles and values associated with movement, efficiency, and optimization in the form of doing more with less. These stores also sell items that support pilgrim’s national or spiritual identity, including historical and spiritual Camino guides, as well as the pins, flags, and patches for the purpose of adorning backpacks that I mentioned in the previous chapter. Finally, Camino-themed items promote a pilgrim’s connection with the industry itself – such as painted Camino-style scallop shells and limited edition “Buff” headbands (pictured below).
Fig. Travel guidebook display inside a Camino store.
There is a distinct air of glossiness to these stores, where everything is factory-new and comes in a variety of colors. They provide essential gear-stocking points for pilgrims encountering any material issues. However, given the physical limitations of what a pilgrim can carry, the expansive *donativo* recycle culture, and the fact that most pilgrims are on a daily food, lodging, and recreational budget, shopping visits to *Caminotec* are occasional and needs-based. While excellent for replacing bad boots or ineffective towel, they are too bespoke and expensive to utilize every day.

Another factor that makes visiting the *Caminotec* a special occasion is the fact that every town along the Way is not equipped with one. Indeed, the best-stocked outfitters are found in larger towns and cities. This contributes to their tacit association with modernity and economic development. The middle *Meseta* segment between Burgos and Leon is infamous for small, backwater towns and less variety in shopping and eating. In this way, I can attest that *Caminotec* stores visually contribute to the escalating globalizing and commodifying landscape of the Camino.

*The Varied Meanings of “Donativo”*

A discussion of exchange along the Camino would not be complete without addressing informal economic practices employed by churches, *albergues*, and pilgrims. From the days of Marcel Mauss’ *The Gift* (1925), anthropologists have pondered the social meanings and practices inherent within gift-based mechanisms of exchange. Indeed, I embarked on the Camino with a certain definition of *donativo* or “donation” only to find that I was much mistaken given the social and economic
context of the Way. This confusion in turn constructed the second material paradox of the Camino – that the discourse surrounding donativo rarely matches the practice of requesting or collecting them.

At the start of my Camino journey, I had naively though of “donation” as an optional gift, determined by one’s situation and ability to give. As such, I was surprised time and time again when I encountered churches and small, municipal museums that charged a small donativo for entry. In my mind, there was something incongruent about instituting an unambiguous fee, presenting it as mandatory by funneling visitors past an admissions desk, and then refer to the practice as a “donation.” To draw a parallel to the interaction that yielded me my first walking pole, how could something be considered a three-euro “donation” when an expectant hand extends towards you as a direct accompaniment to the request?

It was only once I had arrived in Santiago that I received some context around my donativo confusion. During an interview with American college professor and Camino scholar, George Greenia, I learned that by calling an entrance fee a “donativo” churches are not required to pay state taxes on that revenue. Indeed, presenting prices as a “donation” is common tax evasive strategy employed by religious organizations. This act of subversion illustrates a notable way in which the Camino’s economic sphere is distinct from Spain’s national economy and formal modes of exchange. This analysis supports the “Camino nation state” theory that I introduced in the previous chapter in conjunction with the “pilgrim passport” strategy for dismantling pre-existing national identities. Finally, in laying bare the
informal economy of the Camino we might more easily consider the rules of exchange and reciprocity, including how these are socially enforced.

The most awkward incident of a failed attempt at donativo involved my walking companion, Erik. It was a hot day in the Rioja region and most of the trail consisted of dusty agricultural roads flanked by fields of grapes. When we summited a large hill, Erik and I encountered a makeshift roadside stand where a young Spanish man was selling drinks and snacks. In addition to the regular fare of apples and oranges, his foldout table was lined with cups of grapes and sliced watermelon. As I thirstily reached for a cup of watermelon, I noted the Erik had taken a soda from the ice-chest full of cans and bottled water. In the same move he deposited a few coins that he had pulled from his pocket into the bowl of change on the table marked "DONATIVO." As soon as it had happened, the man reached across the table and grabbed the can out of Erik's hand, replacing it with the coins Erik had just put into the bowl. Erik was stunned and I averted my eyes out of embarrassment. It was apparent that the amount Erik had paid was not sufficient in the vendor’s opinion, and the penalty for that was to rescind the trade. I surreptitiously paid four times the amount I had intended for my cup of sliced watermelon and we went on our way.

Erik and I proceeded not to talk about the embarrassing incident. This silence and looming awkwardness led me to conclude that there is something almost taboo about stinginess or a perceived lack of generosity along the Camino. In this way, generosity and charitableness are especially valued qualities that make up the
image of a pilgrim. Broadly speaking, to be accused of greed is a slight against a pilgrim’s pride and sense of self.

In an *albergue* setting, there is a similar amount of social pressure affiliated with *donativo*, as presented in guidebooks (Brierley 2013, 19) as well by other pilgrims via online forums. Small parish-based and municipal *albergues* often operate on a *donativo* basis, with the underlying Christian philosophy “leav[ing] us what you can and if that is only your prayers that will be sufficient” (ibid). The recommended amount is five euros at the very least. In practice, I noted that this procedure is often accompanied by a generous performance of ignorance on the part of *hospitaleiros*, who would often indicate the *donativo* box when a pilgrim checks in and then plainly walk away from it. In a small municipal *albergue* in Los Arcos, I observed a pilgrim attempt to directly give the *hospitaleiro* his *donativo* while checking in, only to have his money blatantly waved away. I soon learned that the practice is to discretely place the money in the small collection box after the communal meal, upon departure, or otherwise whenever no one is looking.

Finally, no discussion of *donativo* culture would be complete without addressing the phenomenon of left behind gear. There is a box of cast-off pilgrim possessions at every *albergue* along the Camino. Unlike the other examples of *donativo*, there is no policy or social pressure to leave something behind in exchange for taking an item. In this way the situation most closely resembles what I had initially considered “donation.” While the items tend not to be valuable, in the right circumstances a specific object has the capacity to fulfill a pilgrim’s need beyond compare. For example, in the town of Reliegos I discovered that I had bedbugs and
thus everything I was wearing and carrying needed to be thoroughly washed a dried on the possible hottest setting. The *hospitaleiro* kindly offered me a clean set of left-behind clothes to wear while my own were being treated. Shaken and shivering, I have never in my life been so grateful.

*Fig. Donativo box in Reliegos.*
Indeed, *donativo* is a complex phenomenon with paradoxical meanings and varied applications depending on the context of use. As such, the discourse and processes encapsulated by this system effectively demonstrates the diverse nature of informal exchange along the Camino. Furthermore, the values of generosity and hospitality are implicated in these practices, which can have direct ramifications on pilgrim image and identity.

**Conclusion: Material Footprints**

This chapter has investigated the ways pilgrim acquire material objects along the Camino as well as the material footprint they leave behind them. I have examined different systems and rules of exchange, and considered how consumer choices reflect individual pilgrim identity.

Indeed, the Camino affords a wealth of time and space to meditate and reflect on one's journey and final destination. In my final days on the trail the question I could not get off my mind was, "What happens to all of the walking poles in Santiago?" Visions of gear bonfires and ritual sacrifices of tread-bare boots flitted through my mind. I knew I could not take my poles home on the plane without a checked bag, and guessed that many other pilgrims found themselves in a similar position. Despite the fact that they had literally supported me throughout my journey, I also knew that I would have no need for them in my regular life. Furthermore, in light of the fact that I had acquired the right one as a kind of fortuitous gift from another unknown pilgrim I thought it would be fitting to somehow give back to the Camino community. After asking around I deposited my
matching-mismatched poles in the *donativo* box at the American Pilgrim Office in Santiago. According to the *hospitaleiro*, these are occasionally transported to different spots along the Camino for other pilgrims to use. I imagined a rotating Kula ring of walking poles carried by a long line of different pilgrims and wondered how many times some objects make the journey.
Building on the previous chapter’s discussion of exchange, this chapter centers on the Camino’s sharing economy and community ethic. While religious interpretations of pilgrimage recognize the meditative and solitary elements of the journey, in practice I find that the collective social aspect of the Way is what underpins the idealized experience. This conflict between different ideas of what makes a “good” versus “bad” or ineffective pilgrim underpins the paradox presented by this chapter. My analysis builds off of the theory put forward by Victor and Edith Turner, who together coined the term *communitas* to describe the “commonness of feeling” that results from liminal experiences (Turner and Turner 1978, 34). Indeed, pilgrims share so much on the Camino – space, stories, experiences, as well as carried objects. The material item this chapter highlights is food on the basis that pilgrim-sharing culture in *albergues* is frequently expressed by collectively cooking a meal.

I begin my analysis of food with an ethnographic account that demonstrates how the events of group cooking and meal sharing functions as a process by which pilgrims build *communitas*. I go on to argue how this practice simultaneously enables the performance of an idealized pilgrim ethic and social identity. This is made increasingly evident in the following section where I analyze specific reactions towards a perceived lack of openness and generosity on the part of another pilgrim. Following this, I shift my analysis beyond the matter of food to discuss some of the practical limitations and drawbacks to sharing space in *albergues* along the Camino.
In the final section I consider verbal and emotional sharing as a means of alleviating pain and mechanism for pilgrims to begin reflecting and making sense of their journey.

**Cooking Up *Communitas***

The Camino is a deafeningly social space. While many pilgrims embark on their journeys alone, finding companions along the trail and in *albergues* was a key reported theme among the pilgrims I observed and interviewed. Generally speaking, pilgrims meet one another in two distinct ways: either spontaneously by way of an initiated interaction, or else they meet as a result of an introduction made by a common acquaintance.

While the first few interactions pilgrims engage in tend to be relatively casual, the best way to advance an acquaintanceship to becoming a bona fide friendship is to prepare and share a meal. Indeed, pilgrims meet other pilgrims all day long and thus an introduction and a few conversations do not serve the same purpose in building intimacy. In this way the process of cooking a collective meal acts as a kind of social ritual based in cooperation, trust, and divided effort.

The process of cooking such a meal begins with an initial agreement among pilgrims to undertake the shared task. This can be implicit if pilgrims are travelling together, either formally if they have a relationship that precedes the Camino or informally if they have simply walked together. Otherwise, the agreement might necessitate a more explicit suggestion for a group meal or invitation to join.
After forming a loose alliance, pilgrims will agree upon the meal. Sometimes the recipe is predetermined by a pilgrim who wishes to take on the lions' share of the meal's preparation. Other times, pilgrims will embark on a group-shopping excursion for ingredients and inspiration. In smaller towns with limited food buying options this is a necessary step to determining the meal. This outing takes place in the late afternoon, after siesta when the tiendas have opened again. By this time most pilgrims have showered and rested and as such the general mood is much uplifted. In a small group, pilgrims may split the cost of ingredients by purchasing roughly equal amounts. The case of a larger group may necessitate one pilgrim purchasing everything and request a small contribution of a few euros from those who intend to share the food. In my experience these meals tend to be pasta-based with an obligatory side of bread. Tuna is a popular source of protein because it is so cheap. Vegetables are a desirable addition for their color and freshness, however these are not always easy to find in bodega tiendas in small Spanish villages and are easily eliminated from a recipe on the basis of one pilgrim's pickiness.

Collective cooking has practical benefits as well as social ones. First of all, purchasing raw ingredients to make a meal in an albergue kitchen will always be less expensive than going out to eat at a café or restaurant. This is particularly true if the cost of ingredients is shared among multiple pilgrims. In this way, cooking in albergues is socially inclusive because everyone can afford to do it. Not all pilgrims can afford to go out to eat, but pretty much everyone can contribute a few euros towards making a group meal. I addition to the economies of scale achieved by collective cooking, albergue kitchens are generally not set up to accommodate thirty
or so pilgrims preparing individual meals. Indeed, coordination for pans and stove-space is frequently necessary across different cooking groups.

Fig. Pilgrims eating at a shared table in an *albergue* communal kitchen.
Fig. Taco night with friends in Burgos.
The social time afforded by preparing and eating a group meal is unparalleled. While a pilgrim’s breakfast and lunch tend to be on-the-go affairs, dinner is a time for relaxation, socializing, and celebrating a completed day of walking. With the introduction of wine and music, these evenings become increasingly raucous and convivial affairs. Indeed, the best way to make friends along the Camino is to carry a musical instrument. Not only do others admire these individuals’ heroic and artistic addition to the weight of their packs, but they are also the most popular pilgrims in an albergue kitchen-dining room for providing entertainment. When Albert, a companion of mine from Denmark, pulled out his violin after dinner in the small parochial albergue in the tiny town of Estella the congregation of dining pilgrims cheered. The entire albergue listened in rapture to the brief classical concert he performed, after which he was met with applause and offered glass after glass of wine for his efforts.

Indeed, cooking and sharing food is an essential process in forging closer, more intimate relationships among pilgrims. Despite the fact that I met countless people along the way, I only really got to know those I cooked and ate with. Teddy, an American pilgrim I got to know through some mutual friends, illustrates this. He had lost track of my then-walking companions for a few days, but upon entering our albergue and seeing them again he at once exclaimed, “Oh YEAH we are cooking TONIGHT!” His evident excitement and the fact that his mind immediately went to group cooking serves to demonstrate how fundamental this practice is to building and performing communitas among pilgrims.
A “Good” Pilgrim Shares

The social paradox exhibited by sharing is that the achievements of a pilgrim are not defined by his or her spiritual motivation or capacity for reflection, but rather in collective social terms. Given the essential nature of food sharing and the social ritual of collective cooking, these practices serve in defining an idealized
“pilgrim ethic” of sociability, openness, and generosity. In turn, performing actions that embody this ethic – such as cooking together and participating in the social atmosphere of an albergue – fundamentally contribute to a pilgrim’s Camino identity. While I got a sense for the social determinants that exemplify a “true” or “good” pilgrim over my first few weeks of walking, these became infinitely apparent to me late in my journey on an occasion when another pilgrim was accused of acting in a contrary manner.

The trail to the small town of La Faba, located near the border of León and Galicia, is unduly difficult. The terrain is rocky and follows switchbacks uphill for several kilometers. I had heard talk among pilgrims that day that La Faba had two albergues – a standard parish albergue with around 60 beds and a small vegetarian albergue with 12 beds that advertised herbal teas and massages. Given the dearth of vegetables along the Camino, vegetarian albergues are renowned for having excellent meals. They also often boast highly sought after intimate, bohemian environments. It was nearing 1pm, and I knew my chances of getting a bed would depend on how many pilgrims were ahead of me on the trail. I quickened my pace and passed as many hikers on the incline path as I could.

Upon reaching the albergue, I saw a tanned, middle-aged male pilgrim seated reclined on the front porch. He waved to me as another pilgrim walking away from the house passed me. She whispered under her breath, “There aren’t any more beds, that guy just reserved the entire place for his friends who are still walking.” “Seriously? They’re not even here?” I asked, aching and angry that I had lost my
bohemian bunk and vegetarian meal to pilgrims who, in my mind, were leisurely strolling up the hill. It just did not seem fair.

When I arrived at the alternative albergue, I met other pilgrims that supported me in my initial frustration. “Getting in early and buying out an entire albergue for your friends isn’t very pilgrim-like ... certainly not in the spirit of the Camino,” commented Fiona, a friend of mine from Ireland. Indeed, others perceived what the pilgrim in question had done as exclusionary and improper. I consciously noted that albergues are intended to be inclusive places that a pilgrim earns a right to by virtue of their arrival and not their ability to pay. Furthermore, a “good” pilgrim is open to sharing with everyone – not just his or her friends.

Another identifying quality of a “good” pilgrim is knowing a lot of other pilgrims. In this way, social capital is accrued by collecting as many acquaintances and stories as possible and performed by discussing and comparing commonalities. “You know Anna from Germany? Yeah I met her all the way back in Roncesvalles!” or “Joe and I walked on the Meseta together from Sahagun to Leon – did you know he quit the trail because of his knee?” On the surface these interactions are just introductory pleasantries. However, given the social value attached to openness and sociability I argue that these practices of name-dropping and story collecting also function as a demonstration of a pilgrim’s achievement and status as a “good” pilgrim.

This is something I struggled with on a personal and professional level. On multiple occasions I literally felt like a “bad” pilgrim for being too shy or tired to spend my evenings cooking with others. Without even recognizing it, my own
identity as a pilgrim was directly correlated with how outgoing and social I could be. I was not the only person affected in this way. Madeleine, my Catholic-American friend struggled with finding other pilgrims who would talk to her about God. “When I bring Him up people think I’m a Jesus-freak, so I just pray to myself while I walk.” Her experience is ironic given the Christian heritage of the Camino and exemplifies the social paradox presented in this context. Indeed, the model habits and values of a “good” pilgrim are not what one might expect.

The Darker Side of Sharing

The physical and material intimacy produced along the Camino has a dark side in the form of bedbugs. I have included this in my analysis as an example of the practical disadvantage of sharing, as well as to illustrate how the pilgrim values of inclusion and openness are affected by social stigma.

I spent the first four weeks of walking the Camino terrified of bed bugs. When I finally did get them, I learned that the fear of bedbugs is social as much as it is mental and physical. That is to say, the fear of stigma is entangled with the obvious ick and itch factors. I found out that I was carrying bedbugs soon after checking into my albergue in the tiny town of Hospital del Orbigo, about sixteen kilometers away from the city of Astorga. I noticed an Australian girl folding clothes whose bag contents were strewed across a large dining table. I asked what she was doing, and she said she had gotten bedbugs for the third time. I was immediately put off, but had also spent the bulk of the last four weeks asking people about their bag contents and as such did not want to give up a research opportunity. I asked her how she
knew, and she pointed to a line of itchy red bumps on her arm. I gulped, looked at my own arms and saw the same pattern.

Fig. Pilgrim repacking her bag after treating the contents for bedbugs.
Two feelings swept over me. The first was an overwhelming disgust followed by uncontrollable itchiness. This was quickly followed by a paralyzing fear of not knowing what to do. Would I be kicked out of the albergue? Had I already infected my bunk by unrolling my sleeping bag? Will my new friends think I am gross and abandon me? My fear of becoming a social pariah and lack of knowledge on how to confront this issue prompted me to briefly wondered how I might conceal my situation. Instead I decided to inform the hospitaleiro. A look of concern crossed her face before she professionally followed the protocol of washing and drying all of my belongings on the highest heat imaginable, including my backpack. She offered me clean clothes to wear and a blanket for my new bunk.

As it turns out, bedbugs are ubiquitous along the Camino. I only understood this the following day when I informed the hospitaleiro at my albergue in Astorga who pulled out a long checklist of all the surrounding albergues that had reported them. Practically speaking, this is not surprising given that a new pilgrim sleeps in any given bunk each night.

Despite the prevalence of bedbugs in albergues, the fear and stigma remain. When I told my walking companions from that day their expressions of concern were accompanied by obvious awkwardness and dissociation. I ate with them, but felt isolated and marked by my red bumps and borrowed clothes. Their reserve towards me gradually passed, but I could not deny that our rapport had been stunted as a result of the event. I offer this example to demonstrate the undeniable limitations to the pilgrim ethic of openness in the context of the social disease posed by bedbugs.
Fig. Day two of washing my clothes after getting bedbugs.
Sharing Is Healing

The aim of this section is to consider verbal and emotional sharing as a means of alleviating pain and mechanism for pilgrims. In turn, I find that the emotional catharsis that results from sharing experiences of suffering allow pilgrims to begin healing and the process of reflection.

The first and most obvious example of this is the practice of “food chat.” This is the term I apply to the constant discussion among pilgrims of boots, socks, blisters, and hot spots. To some extent, all pilgrims suffer foot problems on the Camino. For this very reason it is enormously beneficial to commiserate with someone who understands the pain and unavoidable discomfort.

In addition to the physical aches that occur along the Way, the range of emotional struggles range from homesickness to deeper forms of loss and despair. The liminal space and community atmosphere of the Camino provides a facilitated platform upon which pilgrims might recount experiences of illness, trauma, and death. “I share so much more here than I normally do,” commented a female pilgrim who had embarked on the journey as a part of her effort to overcome an eating disorder. “But everyone is out here for a reason so I don’t feel weird about sharing mine.” Another woman revealed to me that she had struggled with depression since her mother had died. “Something about walking makes it easier to talk about hard things. When the words come out of your mouth they’re already behind you and you can just keep moving forward.” In this way, the act of walking and practice of sharing are linked to essential processes of healing and reflection.
Fig. One pilgrim lances another pilgrim’s blister.
Fig. Backs of walking pilgrims.
Conclusion: A Communitas of Identity

Functionally speaking, the varied means of sharing that I have illustrated in this chapter aid in building *communitas* in the socially liminal space of the Camino. I have also found that sharing is more than kindness, but also a process of performing an idealized pilgrim ethic of sociability and benevolence. Indeed, the politics of sharing are especially evident when a pilgrim is found lacking in terms of openness and generosity. This ethical framework of how to be a “good” or “bad” pilgrim informs individual identity practices, but is also limited by extreme instances of social stigma. Despite these the overall physical and emotional pain of the Camino is alleviated by companionship. In this way of this emotional sharing among pilgrims provides a means for resolving internal conflict and achieving individual reflection.
4. Phones

Cell phones and their applications effectively bring together the three other themes I have illustrated throughout this thesis, including material anxiety, authenticity, and communitas. Smartphones were the most commonly cited “most important Camino item” among the pilgrims I interviewed. This is largely because phones are used as multi-tools and as such come in handy along the Camino in a variety of ways. They act as cameras, flashlights, notepads, newspapers, entertainment devices, Wi-Fi hotspots, and occasionally are even used to call another person.

I begin this chapter with an account of a “digital day in the life” of a pilgrim to show the various ways pilgrims engage with phones. Following this I explore the digital paradox of connection along the Way, whereby pilgrims embark on the journey hoping to detach themselves from their ordinary lives – but find themselves more connected than ever. I consider different ways pilgrims connect across space, both within the Camino network and with the world “outside” the trail. The next section details the politics of Wi-Fi, followed by an analysis of the ways in which social media serve to construct and perform pilgrim identity. These analyses culminate in my conclusion that phones and their applications are essential tools for documenting, broadcasting, and constructing pilgrim experiences and identities along the Camino.
Fig. Pilgrims and visitors taking pictures of the Botafumeiro’s flight in the Cathedral in Santiago.
Fig. Pilgrim photographing another pilgrim blowing bubbles.
A Digital Day in the Life of a Pilgrim

The field notes that follow mirror the “day in the life” account I provide in my introductory chapter. However, this time I have highlighted the digital interactions and technological processes an average contemporary pilgrim engages with throughout the day.

5am. Wake up in your albergue bunk to the alarm from your – or another pilgrims’ – phone. You stumble down from your bunk to locate your device from the pile of other smartphones plugged into a power strip across the dormitory. You use the flashlight function to ensure that you have not left anything around your bunk area.

8am. When stop for breakfast at a café you take a moment to plug your phone into a free outlet at the bar. You connect to the Wi-Fi and update your applications. You take advantage of this time to scroll through Instagram and download a new podcast. When you resume your walk you plug in your headphones and listen to some music to pass the time.

11am. You pass through a small town center with a lovely church. You peek inside for a quick look around and take a few quick pictures using your phone. After filling your water bottle from an old water pump in the center of the square you take a photo of that as well. You find a café and connect to their Wi-Fi using the password advertised behind the bar. Before departing you share your location to your friends using Facebook Messenger because you plan to meet up with them later.
12:30 pm. You sit down at a café for lunch and connect to the Wi-Fi. After refreshing your applications you look up some Spanish menu items using Google Translate. When your food arrives you take pictures of your meal, your friends, and the café’s cat. If you are concerned about limited space in your desired albergue you might consider calling them using the number printed in your guidebook. Check in usually begins around 1 pm and if you call ahead you might be able to reserve a bunk.

3 pm. Upon checking into your albergue you are immediately provided with a Wi-Fi name and password. You connect and proceed with checking your email, the news, your Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and any other applications. After locating your bunk, you begin looking for an outlet so as to stake your claim before other pilgrims arrive.

5 pm. After siesta time, you do your food shopping and explore the town. Before leaving the comforting Wi-Fi of the albergue you quickly look up the nearest shops using Google Maps. On your way back from the tienda you take more photos of churches, views, roman bridges, and interesting graffiti.

8 pm. After dinner you retire to your bunk to write an email, blog or Facebook post. If the connection is good you might Skype your family or stream a TV show using Netflix or HBO Go. However, it is more likely that the connection is not that great. Perhaps you go hunting in town for a café with a better connection. If so you will find plenty of other pilgrims doing the same.

10 pm. You set your 5 am wake up alarm. If you have the luxury of an outlet by your bunk, you can listen to music while you fall asleep or place your
phone under your pillow in a considerate effort to muffle the impending alarm. If not, your phone will spend the night across the room, plugged into a power strip, in a messy pile of cords and other pilgrim’s phones.

Fig. Pilgrim taking a picture of a monument depicting El Cid in Burgos.
Phones and their applications are central to the daily life of a contemporary pilgrim. Apart from one homeless man from the UK, every pilgrim I encountered along the way had a phone. The vast majority were smartphones, with iPhones being the most popular. I was taken by the fact that phones were cited most commonly as the single most important carried item along the Camino, even more so than passports. However, this finding is less bewildering in light of the sheer frequency of phone-use throughout the day. By carrying a smartphone, pilgrims have at their disposal a flashlight, alarm clock, notebook, map, music library, voice recorder, and digital camera. A pilgrim is also equipped with a portal through which to post said photos, make calls, message friends, watch TV, and surf the web. These multiple uses connect with the theme of Chapter 1, in which I discuss the material anxiety of the Camino and the high value of packing efficiently. Moving beyond their use value, the analysis that follows will delve deeper into the varied meanings and identities encapsulated by these small and highly valued items.

**The Paradox of Connection**

Phone use poses an important irony within the context of the Camino given the fact that many of the pilgrims I interviewed confirmed that they hoped to become less technologically connected during their journey. This introduces the fourth and final material paradox of the Camino, namely that pilgrims embark on the Way seeking distance from their “regular life” through disengagement with technology, only to find themselves more connected than ever before. This sentiment was epitomized by Matthew, a middle aged physician from England: “I
came on the Camino wanting to get away from screens and stuff, but now that I’m here I read books on my iPad and I FaceTime my wife and kids every day and I find that I’m on my phone more than I’ve ever been!”

This proved a common situation among many of the pilgrims I spoke with, although some regretted their condition more than others. Like Matthew, those who were clearly disappointed by their own dependence on technology suggested a sense of incongruence between technology and the “authentic” Camino experience. This harkens back to Chapter 2 and the question of authentic walking poles. However, I maintain that phones and social media play an essential role in documenting and disseminating images that convey a pilgrim’s optimized vision of their own experience. In this way, phones serve a fundamental purpose in performing authenticity and thus manifesting a pilgrim’s Camino identity.

**Ways of Connecting**

While phones and their applications provide a variety of functions, it is not surprising that their primary operation along the Camino is to connect. Pilgrims connect with other pilgrims through text and other forms of social media messaging, such as iMessage, WhatsApp, and Facebook Messenger. Pilgrims also connect with their friends and family members from home using messaging applications as well as Skype or FaceTime. Finally, I encountered several pilgrims that connected with wider, more universal audiences by posting regularly on Facebook or personal Blogs.
Erik, one of my first walking companions, pushed himself to post an update on Facebook every day. His posts were more than a basic check in or photo dump, but usually began with a lengthy description of a scene or meaningful interaction he had had that day. “I’ve never done any creative writing or journaling before,” he told me, “but this seemed like a great and inspiring time to practice.” Rather than practicing these skills in a personal journal, he opted instead to display them to his friends and followers. His daily posts always included photos, and he took care to tag all the people he met that day. This process necessitated that he locate those people’s profiles on Facebook and send them a Friend Request. In this way, Erik’s daily posts served as more than a public journal, but also a digital means of curating all of the people he encountered with along the Way.

In the previous chapter I discuss how making connections and collecting stories builds a pilgrim’s social capital as a “good pilgrim.” By digitally connecting with other pilgrims, Erik ensured he would be able to contact them along the Way as well as in the future beyond the Camino. At the same time, by publically documenting his interactions and experiences he managed to promote himself as a connected and therefore “good” pilgrim. This external demonstration of social capital allows him to construct and act out his public pilgrim identity.

While phones are used to connect with other pilgrims as well as loved ones back home, they are also tools for consuming content and information from the world “outside” of the Camino. The importance of this in a Camino context is the commonly stated distinction between those two realms of “inside” and “outside.” For instance, I continued to receive breaking news headlines from the New York
Times all along the Way to keep up to date with what was going on in the world “outside.” In my experience politics were not a common topic of conversation on the trail, and without these news blasts I might have avoided many current events altogether.

TV streaming is another common example of pilgrims consuming “outside” media. Amelia, a Swedish pilgrim in her 30s, is my favorite example of this trend. We met in an *albergue* in Hornillos, roughly 20km past the large city of Burgos and at the start of the *Meseta*. This segment between Burgos and Leon is known for its flat landscape and uninteresting towns. To make matters worse, a savage heat wave forced pilgrims to begin walking as early as 4am so they might finish and be out of the heat before noon. This resulted in long stretches in the middle of the day without sights or activities to fill the time. Because of this, Amelia resorted to watching episodes of the popular HBO series “Game of Thrones” during *siesta* time. “I had never seen it before this week, and it’s too hot to do anything else,” she reported. According to her she watched five to six one-hour long episodes per day. “I’ve just started season three,” she announced at dinner to a table of shocked pilgrims.

While many pilgrims take advantage of Wi-Fi to watch Netflix, Amelia’s commitment to “finishing Game of Thrones” on the Camino is the most exaggerated instance of this that I encountered. Two weeks later I met another pilgrim who had run into Amelia more recently. She reported to me that Amelia had indeed finished all seven seasons of Game of Thrones and had begun watching *House of Cards*. 
“Tienes Wi-Fi?”

The rates of data consumption I observed along the Camino would not be possible without extensive access to Wi-Fi. Indeed, I found Wi-Fi to be ubiquitous along the Camino. Nearly all albergues are equipped, and if they are not they will direct you to the nearest café with a router. Passwords are typically prominently posted in a communal area or behind the bar. An albergue or café that lacks Wi-Fi makes one of two statements. Either the institution is making a conscious performance of disengaging from technology, or else the business is legitimately austere.

The very first albergue I stayed in in St. Jean fell into the first category. It was a vegetarian, community oriented albergue that quite consciously did not have Wi-Fi. According to the posted sign (pictured below) this was because they preferred “FDC” or “Family-Direct-Contact.” In other words, they wanted pilgrims to talk to one another rather than spend time on their phones. If a pilgrim needed Wi-Fi, he or she was directed across the small, cobbled pedestrian street to the Pilgrim Office. It seemed strange to me that the albergue did not have Wi-Fi given that I had expressly chosen it because I was able to make a reservation online.

That evening before the communal meal, the hospitaleiro led the group of tired, hungry travellers in a series of name games. He made us all go around the circle of twenty or so pilgrims to introduce ourselves, and then “quizzed” us by tossing around a ball such that we had to call out the name of the people in the circle. The game was visibly forced among the participants who were clearly tired and hungry. After the meal, I retired across the street seeking Wi-Fi to FaceTime
with my parents. I found more than half of the pilgrims staying at the hostel already there. The Office was closed, but the Wi-Fi was strong enough to reach a few yards from the front door. There was a single small wooden bench, but many of the pilgrims were seated or crouched on cobblestones and along the gutter. I sat with the bulk of my dinner companions as we silently stared at our individual devices and wondered if the albergue had really achieved anything.

The idea of “Family Direct Contact” is a specific, anti-technology form of connection. Based on my research, I have found that pilgrims are exceedingly connected, both in person and through devices. Thus I find that my albergue in St. Jean was engaged a conscious performance of what they considered to be an authentic pilgrim experience of connection. In this way, not providing Wi-Fi constructed their image and manifested their mission. Ultimately their efforts fell short, evidenced by the fact that pilgrims resorted to locating their own Wi-Fi at substantial cost to their comfort.

To contrast with this, some businesses along the Camino are not Wi-Fi equipped for reasons of austerity as opposed to any anti-technology bias. For example, all of the “Xunto” or government-run albergues in Galicia lack such comforting embellishments. This is less a political or moral decision about the “right” kind of pilgrim contact, but rather because they are cheap, bare-bones accommodations.
Fig. “FDC” poster displayed in the albergue in St. Jean.
Fig. Pilgrims making use of the strongest Wi-Fi signal available in their *albergue* – located in the convent’s entryway.
Fig. Posted Wi-Fi password at the front desk of an *albergue* in Nájera.
Documenting One’s Own Camino

Photography plays an enormous role in allowing pilgrims to document and broadcast their Camino experience. This was most evident at the Cruz de Fer, a tall iron cross, erected at the top of a hill at the border of the Léon and Galicia regions and notable site along the Way. When I arrived at the Cruz de Fer I found dozens of pilgrims taking pictures of their stones before depositing them at the base. There is a tradition whereby a pilgrim carries a stone the length of their journey, and deposits said stone at the base of the Cruz de Fer as a symbolic release of some emotional or spiritual weight. Once the stone is deposited, the pilgrim can carry on with his or her journey unfettered, into Galicia and on to Santiago. Given that so many pilgrims walk the Way in search of meditation, closure, or healing, this culminating event is widely considered the emotional climax of the journey.

I sat in the grass for a long while, a few yards from the base of the enormous pile of stones supporting the tall, iron cross. I watched as pilgrim after pilgrim arrived, retrieved their stones from their bag, scrambled up the stone pile, placed their stone, took a few pictures, and went on their way. One pilgrim photographed the stone in his hand, photographed his hand placing the stone, and then photographed the deposited stone. At one point, a group of four cyclists arrived on the scene. They dismounted, carried their bikes a few yards up from the base of the mountain of stones, and held their bikes aloft in celebration while a friend of theirs snapped a picture. I smiled at this, remembering the steep incline of the trail that morning, knowing they must have come a long way.
At that moment I saw Andrew, a middle-aged Australian pilgrim I had met on my first day in St. Jean. I had not seen him in weeks so I ran excitedly to greet him. He was clearly distressed, and when I asked why he frowned at me and replied: “This is a sacred place and these people have no right to be snapping pictures, don’t they have any idea how disrespectful that is?” I did not know what to say. I knew from the conversation we had had in St. Jean that Andrew had walked the Camino before and this time he was carrying a stone for a friend of his who had lost her daughter in an accident. His somber mood clashed with the jubilation expressed by the cyclists only moments before. I mumbled something about everyone walking “his or her own” Camino and he stormed off.
Fig. Cycling pilgrims raising their bicycles above their heads in triumph at the 

*Cruz de Fer.*
The saying: “everyone walks his or her own Camino” is a statement commonly used to express and accept the diversity in motivations, meanings, methods, and destinations of different pilgrims. To this end, the saying is usually deployed as a way of suspending judgment for another pilgrim’s actions. I felt deeply sorry for Andrew, who was clearly offended by the hoards of pilgrims photographing, laughing, and celebrating in a place that he felt should command solemnity and respect. However, this event serves to represent the effect of conflicting ideas and images of the Camino. In this way it supports outmoded theories that support the pilgrim-tourist dichotomy and different typologies of pilgrimage (MacCannell 1973, Turner and Turner 1978, Morinis 1992). For example, the “valued ideal” proposed by Alan Morinis (1992, 4) can be generously applied to both religious and secular journeys. We can assume that the cyclists attribute value to their efforts and the photographed result while Andrew clearly values the sacredness of this place. While I still find the “types” (ibid, 1) of pilgrims and “planes” (ibid, 24-25) of pilgrimage overly restrictive and difficult to apply, the distinctions these embody are visible in this clash between Andrew and the cyclists.

Social Media As Constructing the Camino

While pilgrims employ phones and their applications towards documenting and constructing their own experiences, social media plays such a significant role on the Camino today that its effects can be observed along the trail itself. One way this occurs is through online forums and Camino applications that guide pilgrims to certain albergues, cafés, and locations along the Way. Not at all unlike the
quintessential yellow arrows that have in their own right become a symbol of the Camino, online directories play a significant role in guiding pilgrims along designated paths. These often conveniently parade walkers past places they should see or spend money at.

Fig. Photo of an old, abandoned boot adorned with dried flowers on an arrow signpost.
Another way social media is inscribed upon the Camino is through graffiti and other items pilgrims leave behind them. These traces and messages from past pilgrims reinforce the sense that one has undertaken something long established and collective. My favorite left-behind item that I happened upon was a silver stiletto heel left on a stone kilometer marker in the hills of eastern Galicia (pictured below). Old hiking boots (pictured above) are a commonly left-behind item as a symbol of the foot struggles so many pilgrims go through on their journey. The high-heeled shoe, however, contrasted humorously with the typical dirty hiking boot and was more than a little out of place in the rough and rocky terrain. When I approached it I found a message inscribed on the insole: “Made you smile? 😊 Post a picture on fb @caminostory.” The shoe had evidently been planted on the trail to advertise a Camino Facebook group.

When I finally looked it up the Facebook group I found photos and posts dating back to 2017 from various pilgrims. These testimonies described their discovery of the shoe as well as experiences of joy, depression, and faith along the Camino. One contributor from July 2017 announced that her first act after receiving her “precious Compostela” was to buy a dress even though “unfortunately [her] feet don’t fit in any fancy shoes just now…” The case of the silver stiletto illustrates how social media serves as a platform for story sharing across space and time. Furthermore, it’s presence demonstrates the extent to which social media is physically stamped at points along the trail to support this digital extension of the Camino community.
Fig. Silver stiletto advertising the Facebook group, @caminostory.
Conclusion: The Rise of the Digital Camino

The context of phones and their applications has brought together the central material themes addressed in the three preceding chapters. The material anxiety I discuss in Chapter 1 is apparent in the multi-use value of cell phones, as flashlights, alarm clocks, notepads, music players, and communication devices. The question of
authenticity from Chapter 2 comes into question in terms of modern technological reliance in the context of a medieval pilgrimage tradition. Finally, the theme of *communitas* addressed in Chapter 3 is apparent in the ways that phones are used to curate and maintain a vast web of connection across space.

While many pilgrims embarked on their Camino journey hoping to “unplug,” I have found that phones play an essential role in quotidian pilgrim practices while being instrumental in manifesting a pilgrim’s identity as tools for chronicling individual experience. In turn, these processes constitute a kind of techno-transcendence through performative acts of self-promotion. The pervasiveness of technology and its effects suggests a rise of a “digital Camino,” one that exists alongside the original, physical Camino. The result of this is an emergence of techno-identity and modernity politics that affect pilgrim and Camino businesses alike. We see this in the disagreement among Camino community members over the appropriate presence of Wi-Fi or use of phones in certain spaces or contexts. Finally, the rise of social media has resulted in it’s become an integral organizing elements of the physical, social, and technological spheres of the Camino. In this way the trend of phone use and digitization of the Camino acts in ways that fundamentally change the socio-physical landscape of the route itself.
Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated the extent to which the story of pilgrimage can be told through carried objects. I have focused on the seemingly mundane objects of backpacks, walking poles, food, and cellphones in an attempt to illustrate the varied processes by which these become symbols of a pilgrim’s journey.

When I began this research, I hoped to discover whether the pilgrim-tourist dichotomy could be observed based on carried objects. Prior to my fieldwork, my initial impression of pilgrimage was that it essentially constituted a spiritual act. To this end I imagined pilgrims carrying rosary beads and tourists snapping photos. I have found in the literature – as well as in practice – that this division is at once conflicted and political. “Conflicted” because distinctions are difficult to identify and nearly impossible to impose universally. I say “political” because of the discursive power and connotations the categories pose in contrast with one another. Contemporary literature has reached the point of the “new tourist” – a third term to describe an individual who embodies a mix of classic pilgrim and tourist motives (Lois-González and Santos 2015, 149). Meanwhile, in practice pilgrims themselves continue to employ the terms “pilgrim” and “tourist” to self-identify and to draw distinctions between different material and social practices along the Camino.

Indeed, judgment is a key aspect of speculating and acting out the supposed division between pilgrimage and tourism. Some essential characteristics towards defining a pilgrim that I have observed include: “properly” packing and carrying one’s bag, having the “correct” gear, a total willingness to socialize and share, and
documenting “essential” experience in the “right” ways. In these contexts, I often found that pilgrim’s determine their status on the basis of opposition to tourists, or the “other.” As such this thesis has exhibited how materiality is essential to this process of categorical inclusion and exclusion.

In addition to social determinants of a pilgrim’s status, this thesis has explored more official modes of authorization. In the eyes of the Camino establishment, during a pilgrim’s travels he or she is defined as such by virtue of his or her “pilgrim passport.” This document verifies their participation or “citizenship” in a kind of temporary Camino nation-state whose economy and social standards of behavior are notably distinct from the world “outside.” However, when a pilgrim reaches Santiago he or she is expected to retire from this liminal space and resume with “normal” life. A small few of pilgrims fail to leave the Camino. For example I have met at least one homeless individual who has “lived” along the trail for the last five years. In most cases, however, a pilgrim’s journey is authenticated upon receiving the Compostela at which point his or her journey has come to an end in official terms. The Pilgrim Office documents the individual and he or she becomes another data point in the official Camino records.

There is a need for further research on the material and physical elements of pilgrimage. Much of the literature continues to focus on a pilgrim’s internal motives, when in reality pilgrimage has been found to be something one does as well as feels (Morinis 1992; Adler 2002; Frey 2004). While I have focused on the way in which objects and material practice affect identity along the Camino, other social consequences of material culture might similarly be studied. For example, additional
interesting ethnography could be done on the political economy of homelessness or forms of globalization along the Camino.

Another intriguing area of research related to pilgrim backpack-culture is the digital sphere encompassing YouTube videos and online packing guides. Indeed, this phenomenon is what initially inspired my own research. These videos, blogs, and forums present a fascinating portrait of the material anxieties and social value of efficiency that I examine in my chapter on backpacks. Furthermore, these online testimonies demonstrate the kinds of conscious consumption practices and digital performances that I address in Chapters Two and Four.

That being said, I would not recommend conducting any kind of social research in a vacuum. An ethnographer studying the Camino (or any pilgrimage for that matter) would do well to first walk in the footsteps of the people they study. Indeed, the only way to fully understand the symbols and stories that result from pilgrimage is through an appreciation of the many triumphs and challenges a pilgrim experiences along his or her Way.
Appendix

Albergue – A hostel exclusively available to pilgrims. Common amenities include: twin bunk beds, gender-specific wash facilities, basins for doing one’s laundry by hand, and a semi-equipped kitchen. Many have Wi-Fi and some offer an evening meal or breakfast included in the price or for an additional fee. Large purpose-built albergues can have as many as 200 bunks while parochial or private institutions can have as few as 8 beds. Reservations are usually not necessary, although calling ahead is a good idea when nearing Santiago during the summer season.

Caminotec – A supply store specializing in Camino items such as walking boots, dry-fit clothing, sleeping bags, backpacks, etc. Other items such as guidebooks and Camino souvenirs can also be purchased here. Items are factory new and sold at market price.

Compostela – A kind of certificate of completion a pilgrim receives for completing the last 100km of the Camino on foot or 200km by bike. The document can only be picked up at the Pilgrim Office in Santiago. A pilgrim will be asked a series of demographic questions about their age, nationality, point of departure, and motives (spiritual/historical/cultural/sports). The pilgrim will then be offered a Compostela written in Spanish – or Latin if they cited spiritual motivations. The Compostela is free, but a pilgrim may purchase a protective tube for 5 euros or a special display frame for upwards of 20 euros.
Hospitaleiro – A man or woman who operates an albergue along the Camino. Their responsibilities include checking pilgrims in, maintaining the dwelling, washing used sheets, and occasionally cooking meals. Individuals tend to be religious, retired and have at one point walked the Way of St. James. Most are volunteers and only hold their post for a few weeks out of the year.

Meseta – The central segment of the Camino Francés, extending from Burgos to Léon. This six-day stretch is incredibly flat and surrounded by wheat fields. There are substantially fewer towns, cafés, stores, and businesses here than on other parts of the Camino. Without shade this section of trail can be unbearably hot during the summer months. The segment is much less popular among short-distance pilgrims who prefer the impressive mountains in the Pyrenees or the misty hills of Galicia towards Santiago.

Pilgrim Passport – A designated booklet in which pilgrims collect stamps along the Camino at albergues, cafés, churches, and museums. Each albergue has an individualized stamp emblem. This document verifies a pilgrim’s travel record when he or she retrieves their Compostela in Santiago.

Siesta – A mid-afternoon nap during the hottest part of the day, popular throughout Spain. Many stores and restaurants will close between 2pm and 5pm for siesta, especially during the summer months when the daily high can exceed 90 degrees Fahrenheit.
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