

“Wild” Generosity: The Role of Trail Angels in Shaping Community on America’s Long-Distance Hiking Trails

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Abstract: Similar to forms of hospitality given to pilgrims on Spain’s Camino de Santiago or Japan’s Shikoku pilgrimage, trail magic is a phenomenon spoken of fondly by long-distance hikers on America’s National Scenic Trails. In fact, many say that the kindness bestowed upon them by total strangers, commonly referred to as trail angels, has restored their faith in humanity. To better understand “wild” generosity on America’s long-distance hiking trails, I examine the role(s) that trail angels play in building a larger hiker/pilgrim community. I focus on relationships between trail users, specifically long-distance hikers or backpackers, and trail angels, those who provide resources and services to long-distance hikers. I draw from fieldwork including participant observation on three of America’s eleven National Scenic Trails: the Appalachian Trail, the Pacific Crest Trail, and the Arizona Trail between April 2021 and June 2023. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with forty-one individuals who identified as trail angels. This study gives voice to trail angels, a group largely ignored in both academic and popular literature, and underscores the need to for more research exploring practices of giving and receiving trail magic and the extent to which place mediates this social practice.

Keywords: Trail magic, trail angels, hospitality, pilgrimage, long-distance hiking, Appalachian Trail, Pacific Crest Trail, Arizona Trail.

Generosidad “salvaje”: el papel de los Trail Angels en la configuración de la comunidad en las rutas de senderismo de larga distancia de los Estados Unidos

Resumen: Similar a las formas de hospitalidad brindadas a los peregrinos en el Camino de Santiago en España o la peregrinación de Shikoku en Japón, la magia de los senderos es un fenómeno del que hablan con cariño los excursionistas

de larga distancia en los Itinerarios Escénicos Nacionales de Estados Unidos. De hecho, muchos dicen que la amabilidad que les han brindado desconocidos, comúnmente conocidos como trail angels (ángeles de la ruta), les ha devuelto la fe en la humanidad. Para comprender mejor la generosidad “salvaje” en las rutas de senderismo de larga distancia de Estados Unidos, examino el papel que desempeñan los ángeles de los senderos en la construcción de una comunidad mayor de senderistas/peregrinos. Me concentro en las relaciones entre los usuarios de las rutas, específicamente los senderistas o mochileros de larga distancia, y los ángeles de la ruta, aquellos que brindan recursos y servicios a los senderistas de larga distancia. Me baso en el trabajo de campo que incluye la observación participativa en tres de los once itinerarios escénicos nacionales de los Estados Unidos: la ruta de los Apalaches, la ruta de la Cresta del Pacífico y la ruta de Arizona, entre abril de 2021 y junio de 2023. También realicé entrevistas semiestructuradas con cuarenta y una personas que se identificaron como ángeles de la ruta.

Este estudio ofrece voz a los ángeles de la ruta, un grupo en buena medida ignorado tanto en la literatura académica como popular, y subraya la necesidad de realizar más investigaciones que exploren las prácticas de dar y recibir magia en senderos y en qué medida se sitúa esta práctica social.

Palabras clave: Ruta mágica, ángeles de la ruta, hospitalidad, peregrinación, caminatas de larga distancia, ruta de los Apalaches, ruta de la Cresta del Pacífico, ruta de Arizona.

Xenerosidade “salvaxe”: o papel dos *Trail Angels* na configuración da comunidade nas rutas de sendeirismo de longa distancia dos Estados Unidos

Resumo: Similar ás formas de hospitalidade brindadas aos peregrinos no Camiño de Santiago en España ou á peregrinación de Shikoku en Xapón, a maxia dos sendeiros é un fenómeno do que falan con agarimo os excursionistas de longa distancia nos Itinerarios Escénicos Nacionais dos Estados Unidos. De feito, moitos din que a amabilidade que lles brindaron descoñecidos, comunmente coñecidos como *trail angels* (anxos da ruta), devolveulles a fe na humanidade. Para comprender mellor a xenerosidade “salvaxe” nas rutas de sendeirismo de longa distancia dos Estados Unidos, examino o papel que desenvolven os anxos dos sendeiros na construción dunha comunidade maior de sendeiristas/peregrinos. Concéntrome nas relacións entre os usuarios das rutas, especificamente os sendeiristas ou mochileiros de longa distancia, e os anxos da ruta, aqueles que brindan recursos e servizos aos sendeiristas de longa distancia. Baséome no traballo de campo que inclúe a observación participativa en tres dos once itinerarios escénicos nacionais dos Estados Unidos: a ruta dos Apalaches, a ruta da Crista do Pacífico e a ruta de Arizona, entre abril de 2021 e xuño de 2023. Tamén realice entrevistas semiestruturadas con corenta e unha persoas que se identificaron como anxos da ruta.

Este estudo ofrécelles voz aos anxos da ruta, un grupo en boa medida ignorado tanto na literatura académica como popular, e subliña a necesidade de realizar máis investigacións que exploren as prácticas de dar e recibir maxia en sendeiros e en que medida se sitúa esta práctica social.

Palabras clave: Ruta máxica, anxos da ruta, hospitalidade, peregrinación, camiñadas de longa distancia, ruta dos Apalaches, ruta da Crista do Pacífico, ruta de Arizona.

Introduction

The United States is home to eleven congressionally recognized National Scenic Trails – the Appalachian Trail, the Pacific Crest Trail, the Continental Divide Trail, the North Country Trail, the Ice Age Trail, the Potomac Heritage Trail, the Natchez Trace Trail, the Florida Trail, the Arizona Trail, the New England Trail, and the Pacific Northwest Trail. To be considered for designation, routes must be a minimum of one hundred miles, continuous, and primarily non-motorized.¹ These trails highlight the beauty of the country’s natural resources and recreational opportunities while connecting communities to landmarks and public lands. Foot travel along each of these routes has increased, but the most traversed and well-known remain the “triple crown” or the Appalachian (AT), Pacific Crest (PCT), and Continental Divide Trails (CDT), followed closely by the Arizona Trail (AZT).

A larger long-distance hiking community or subculture has emerged that connects travelers across National Scenic Trails.² In Fondren and Brinkman’s comparison of the Appalachian and Pacific Crest Trails,³ they conclude that while each provides place-specific experiences, the AT and PCT subcultures are nested within a larger hiking subculture where shared language and ritual practices create a larger long-distance hiking community.⁴ Lum, Keith, and Scott,⁵ using a social world framework, identify two major subworlds that contribute to the larger hiking culture of the PCT. One they describe as “the herd” comprised of purists (e.g., those who assert there is a “right” way to hike the trail) and social hikers, and the other, “shepherds” or trail angels (those who provide resources and services) and veteran hikers who assist hikers along the way, most commonly in the form of “trail magic.”

Trail magic, a phenomenon spoken of fondly by long-distance hikers, refers to unexpected serendipities or magical moments that occur on trail. The Pacific Crest Trail Association (PCTA)⁶ refers to these as moments “of extreme beauty, feelings of connectedness or a remarkable wildlife experience that becomes trail magic when a

1 National Park Service, *National Park Service: National Scenic Trails*, 2021. Retrieved on January 19, 2024 from <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationaltrailssystem/national-scenic-trails.htm>

2 Amerson, Kensey; Rose, Jeff; Lepp, Andrew and Dustin, Daniel, “Time on the trail, smartphone use, and place attachment among pacific crest trail thru-hikers”, *Journal of Leisure Research*, 51, 3 (2020), pp. 308-324. Fondren, Kristi M., *Walking on the wild side: Long-distance hiking on the Appalachian Trail*, New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2016. Fondren, Kristi M. and Brinkman, Richard, “A comparison of hiking communities on the Appalachian and Pacific Crest trails”, *Leisure Sciences*, 44, 4 (2019), pp. 403-420. MacLennan, J. and Moore, R.L., “Conflicts between recreation subworlds: The case of Appalachian trail long-distance hikers”, *The Cyber Journal of Applied Leisure and Recreation Research*, 13, 1 (2011), pp. 1-17.

3 Fondren, Kristi M. and Brinkman, Richard, “A comparison of hiking communities on the Appalachian...”, *op. cit.*

4 Fondren, Kristi M., *Walking on the wild side...*, *op. cit.* Fondren, Kristi M. and Brinkman, Richard, “A comparison of hiking communities on the Appalachian...”, *op. cit.*

5 Lum, C.S.; Keith, Samuel J. and Scott, David, “The long-distance hiking social world along the Pacific Crest Trail”, *Journal of Leisure Research*, 51, 2 (2020), pp. 165-182.

6 Pacific Crest Trail Association (PCTA), *Trail magic and trail angels*. Retrieved on January 23, 2024 from <https://www.pcta.org/discover-the-trail/thru-hiking-long-distance-hiking/trail-magic-and-trail-angels/>

hiker really needs it to continue.” Trail magic can also be reconnecting with someone unexpectedly on trail, being offered a job, finding a life partner, or stumbling upon a packet of coffee in the middle of the trail just when you needed it most. When trail users encounter these instances, the belief that “the trail provides” is reinforced. In this paper, I explore trail magic primarily in the form of “direct kindness and generosity,”⁷ the “planned acts of kindness offered to hikers and horseback riders,”⁸ or the acts “of generosity, goodwill, and kindness” given by volunteers to trail users.⁹ Such acts of kindness are often met with gratitude by long-distance hikers who have said that the kindness bestowed upon them by total strangers has “restored their faith in humanity.”¹⁰ In these instances, the goods or services received become imbued with intrinsic value, viewed as gifts of unconditional hospitality. Scholars have argued that such acts of unconditional hospitality inspire former hikers to return to trail year after year to pay the kindness forward.¹¹

According to Seryczynnska, Roszak, and Duda,¹² hospitality, or selfless kindness shown to strangers, is regarded across cultures as one of the most valuable of human attributes, and one associated with the oldest devotional practice of walking or traveling – pilgrimage. While the Appalachian Trail Conservancy claims that trail magic originated on the AT nearly 90 years ago,¹³ there are similar practices of religious hospitality shown to travelers, more specifically pilgrims, that date back centuries. Two of the most studied pilgrimage routes where hospitality and generosity have been offered to pilgrim travelers are the Shikoku pilgrimage and the Camino de Santiago.

The beginnings of Japan’s Shikoku pilgrimage or *henro* go as far back as the 9th century when Buddhist priest Kukai, later canonized as Kobo Daishi, journeyed around Shikoku Island searching for enlightenment.¹⁴ Though there are several words for charitable giving in Japanese – *segyo*, *fuse*, *kanjin*, *kisha*, and *hosha*¹⁵ – the act of offering free goods or sustenance to pilgrim travelers in Shikoku is *settai/osettai/o-settai* (*settai*). This form of religious hospitality is one of the most distinguishing features of Shikoku

7 Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), *What is trail magic? What are trail angels?* Retrieved on January 23, 2024, from <https://appalachiantrail.org/explore/hike-the-a-t/thru-hiking/trail-magic/>

8 PCTA, *Trail magic and trail angels*, *op. cit.*

9 Arizona Trail Association (ATA), *Explore the trail: Trail angels*. Retrieved on January 23, 2024, from <https://aztrail.org/explore/trail-angels/>

10 Glover, T. D. and Filep, S. “Examining kindness of strangers in tourism: Trail magic on the Appalachian Trail”, *Positive tourism* (2016), pp. 149-161. Routledge.

11 MacLennan, J., *Solitude and sociability: Social processes among Appalachian Trail long-distance hikers*, Dissertation at Rutgers University, 2005. Glover, T. D. and Filep, S. “Examining kindness of strangers in tourism”, *op. cit.*

12 Seryczynnska, Berenika; Roszak, Piotr and Duda, Tomasz, “Hospitality on the Camino de Santiago: Clues from interviews with hospitaleros during the pandemic”, *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 9, 6 (2022), article 13.

13 ATC, *What is trail magic? What are trail angels?*, *op. cit.*

14 Ghimire, Him Lal, “Shikoku: Japan’s authentic buddhist pilgrimage circuit”, *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 1, 1 (2022), pp. 377-420.

15 *Ibidem*. Moreton, D., *The History of Charitable Giving Along the Shikoku Pilgrimage Route* (Unpublished master’s thesis), The University of British Columbia, 2001.

and one of the few places where this charitable practice occurs.¹⁶ As pilgrims make their way along the Shikoku paths, the *settai* offering is a fundamental encounter.¹⁷ Local residents may offer pilgrims snacks, cups of tea, ritual items such as incense, or even free lodging referred to as *zenkon-yado*. According to Kuaome, by accepting *settai*, pilgrims are participating in an act of reciprocity and karmic potential. If they refuse the goodwill expressions of *settai*, they deny the giver the karmic potential or merit they seek. Pilgrims, in a sense, are symbolic to the giver, an intermediary if you will.

In his work on “doing pilgrimage,” Reader¹⁸ ventures beyond the structure of pilgrimage and focuses on the continuous, active, aspect of walking. He discusses *settai* provided for pilgrims through free favors extended by local residents, particularly *zenkon-yado* or free lodging. He notes that these offers are not without occasional tension between giver and receiver. Similarly, Yanata and Doering¹⁹ suggest that the increasing popularity of Shikoku has intensified interaction and exchange between pilgrims and local residents. Tourism has altered practices of religious hospitality: rather than offering *settai* in return for intangible rewards, some now offer monetary assistance. Still, Ghimire²⁰ suggests that empathy for others remains a reason residents offer *settai*, which in turn sets the stage for pilgrims assisting one another. When the only material possessions they have is what they can carry on their backs, gifts and services offered by and received from others, be they local residents or fellow pilgrims, have a profound influence on the pilgrimage experience.

Similar to Shikoku pilgrimage, The Way of St. James or the Camino de Santiago (the Camino) dates back to the 9th century. For over one thousand years, though with increased popularity beginning in the 1990s, travelers have walked this pilgrimage route to what is believed to be the final resting place of the Apostle James the Greater. Individuals who voluntarily host and manage low-cost lodging for pilgrims on the Camino are known as *hospitaleros*; pilgrim hostels or refuges are also known as *albergues*.²¹ Serycznska and colleagues²² identify three types of *hospitaleros*: those who own their own *albergues*, those who are employed as workers in an *albergue*, and *hospitaleros voluntarios* who perform maintenance tasks without compensation. They correspond to three types of *albergues*: those privately owned, government or state-owned, and

16 Ghimire, Him Lal, “Shikoku: Japan’s authentic buddhist...”, *op. cit.* Reader, Ian, “Review: Local Histories, anthropological Interpretations, and the Study of Japanese Pilgrimage”, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 30, (2003), pp. 119-132. Reader, Ian, *Making Pilgrimages: Meaning and Practice in Shikoku*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii’s Press, 2005.

17 Reader, Ian, “Review: Local Histories, anthropological Interpretations, and the Study of Japanese Pilgrimage”, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 30 (2003), pp. 119-132.

18 Reader, Ian, *Making Pilgrimages: Meaning and Practice in Shikoku*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii’s Press, 2005.

19 Yanata, Kaori and Doering, Adam, “Tourism and the transformation of religious hospitality: An ethnography of osettai along the Choishi-michi pilgrimage route, Japan”, *Hospitality & Society*, 12, 3 (2022), pp. 319-342.

20 Ghimire, Him Lal, “Shikoku: Japan’s authentic buddhist...”, *op. cit.*

21 Schrire, Dani, “The Camino de Santiago”, *Ethnologia Europaea*, 36, 2 (2006), pp. 69-86. Seryczynska, Berenika; Roszak, Piotr and Duda, Tomasz, “Hospitality on the Camino de Santiago...”, *op. cit.*

22 Seryczynska, Berenika; Roszak, Piotr and Duda, Tomasz, “Hospitality on the Camino de Santiago...”, *op. cit.*

those run by religious or simply charitable entities. Religious *albergues* are often free or operated with the support of *donativos*, freewill offerings given by pilgrims in lieu of set fees. Any of these may be staffed by owners, employees, or volunteers.

As noted by Snavelly,²³ *hospitaleros* have the ability through amenities and activities to shape the social space for pilgrims who otherwise would not have met each other. In municipal or privately run *albergues*, people more generally keep to themselves. Seryczynska and colleagues²⁴ found a similar pattern between pilgrims and *hospitaleros* such that when the cost increased with the standard of service provided, so did the distance between them. They found that those who cherished interactions with pilgrim guests were more likely to expand their welcome to everyone, regardless of perceived wealth, so that every pilgrim would be able to rest and feel at home before heading out again. Religious *albergues* by contrast tried to facilitate shared experiences and a sense of community.²⁵ Occasionally, when only a night's shelter was provided, communal meals emerged organically.²⁶ Through these collective relationships and shared efforts, pilgrims and their hosts become like family.²⁷

In many instances, the relationship between pilgrims and *hospitaleros* is more than a business transaction. It is multi-faceted and mutually beneficial.²⁸ Some who host pilgrims become inspired to make the pilgrimage themselves. Similar to veteran hikers turned trail angels on the AT, *hospitaleros* may also be former pilgrims who return to host pilgrim guests because of their desire to give back. They know what the pilgrim needs and how to support them during difficult times, so that former hikers and *hospitaleros* continue to be part of the shared experience of those they receive as pilgrim guests. Relationships between pilgrims and *hospitaleros* have the potential to become deeply personal and even therapeutic.

While few scholars have focused specifically on trail magic using participant observation and in-depth interviewing, some have captured motivations and understandings through analysis of digital documents and survey approach. For example, Glover and Filep²⁹ drew from blog entries to explore trail magic, acts of generosity, and a culture of kindness on the AT.

23 Snavelly, Hannah, “The global encounter as communitas: Inter-pilgrim musicking along the contemporary Camino de Santiago.” *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 9, 6 (2022), article 6.

24 Seryczynska, Berenika; Roszak, Piotr and Duda, Tomasz, “Hospitality on the Camino de Santiago...”, *op. cit.*

25 Schrire, Dani, “The Camino de Santiago”, *op. cit.* Snavelly, Hannah, “The global encounter as communitas...”, *op. cit.*

26 Seryczynska, Berenika; Roszak, Piotr and Duda, Tomasz, “Hospitality on the Camino de Santiago...”, *op. cit.*

27 Moulin, Claude and Boniface, Priscilla, “Routeing heritage for tourism: Making heritage and cultural tourism networks for socio-economic development”. *International Journal for Heritage Studies*, 7, 3 (2021), pp. 237-248. Schrire, Dani, “The Camino de Santiago”, *op. cit.* Snavelly, Hannah, “The global encounter as communitas...”, *op. cit.*

28 Seryczynska, Berenika; Roszak, Piotr and Duda, Tomasz, “Hospitality on the Camino de Santiago...”, *op. cit.*

29 Glover, T. D. and Filep, S. “Examining kindness of strangers in tourism”, *op. cit.*

Schwab, Goldenberg, and Dustin³⁰ explore the motives behind trail angels’ desire to assist long-distance hikers on their journey to thru-hike the PCT. Through a survey administered via Facebook, they find that trail angels assisted hikers because of the simple joy found in helping others and meeting new people as well as the desire to be part of a unique community and trail experience. In her research on thru-hiking blogs, Lee³¹ argues that the generosity provided by trail angels is a key feature of community-building and helps form the backbone of socio-emotional life on trail.

Trail magic may be planned and organized by trail angels or occur spontaneously on the part of the giver. Other than gifts of time and attention that connect people to nature, to trail towns, and to each other,³² the most common forms of trail magic include rides/shuttles, laundry and shower facilities, food/meals, lodging/accommodations, and water caching. Some trail angels may also offer advice or provide information regarding trail closures or nearby shuttle services. For the most part, “wild” generosity in the form of trail magic is given freely by trail angels, though in some cases, like for rides or lodging, trail angels may accept a monetary donation or require a fee. It is also important to note that not all encounters between hikers and trail angels are positive. The sheer increase in numbers, and perceived hiker entitlement, have alienated some trail angels causing them to stop providing hikers with these “expected” goods or services.³³

For the ATC and PCTA, the generosity given to trail users by trail angels is an informal system and one that is not organized by either trail association. This is less the case for the Arizona Trail Association (ATA) which has a more formal process for becoming a trail angel. One must submit an application to register as a trail angel; and, due to commercial use regulations on public lands, they must provide what they offer free of charge. They also have to follow a trail angel code of conduct (see Appendix A). Although the ATA requires an application and registration to be listed as a trail angel on the ATA website, they do not formally vet or conduct background checks on potential trail angels, nor do the other trail associations for that matter. As such, trail users are reminded to practice safety, to be aware of their surroundings, and to report questionable behavior or negative interactions to local law enforcement.³⁴

A few scholars have considered the connection between long-distance hiking and religious pilgrimage. For example, in *Walking on the Wild Side: Long-Distance Hiking on the Appalachian Trail*, Fondren³⁵ examined the spiritual character of long-distance

30 Schwab, Keri A.; Goldenberg, Marni and Dustin, Daniel L., “Angels along the Pacific Crest Trail”, *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership*, 11, 2 (2019), pp. 89-100.

31 Lee, Mary, *Angels and echoes: An analysis of human connection and altruism on the trail*, Honors Thesis at State University New York, 2022.

32 PCTA, *Trail magic and trail angels*, op. cit.

33 MacLennan, J. and Moore, R.L., “Conflicts between recreation subworlds...”, op. cit.

34 Arizona Trail Association (ATA), *Explore the trail: Trail angels*, op. cit.

35 Fondren, Kristi M., *Walking on the wild side...*, op. cit.

hiking. She suggests that when long-distance hikers first step foot on the AT, they find themselves in the liminal phase of pilgrimage – a space or moment where one is suddenly marginal or decentered. In the early stages of the journey, a majority of hikers go through a renaming or conversion process whereby they adopt a trail name, one that for many is symbolic of their reasons for hiking the trail. For both AT hikers and pilgrims, the act of walking a great distance ends with a final, climatic goal – for hikers, this means reaching the northern terminus, Maine’s Mt. Katahdin. Guiding their journey, long-distance hikers often carry sacred texts or books of instruction, which also offer guidelines for behavior, to help them navigate the trail. Along the way, long-distance hikers stay in hostels and are celebrated by former hikers and trail angels who assist them on their walking journey. More recently, Redick³⁶ further examined the relationship between long-distance hiking the AT and spiritual pilgrimage in *American Camino: Walking as Spiritual Practice on the Appalachian Trail*, referring to hikers as contemporary pilgrims. In this phenomenological approach, Redick illustrates ways the AT solidifies connections between hikers’ spiritual experiences and relationships with fellow hikers and local residents, and with the physical environment or aesthetics of the wilderness.

In his earlier research, Redick³⁷ explored the connection between liminal places and hospitality in manifesting pilgrim values and identity. Influenced by Jacques Derrida³⁸ and his conceptualization of unconditional hospitality, Redick discusses the interplay of both conditional and unconditional hospitality in the context of long-distance hiking and pilgrimage. For tourists, the borders are fluid, but not marginal spaces. For the pilgrim, or hiker, the spaces remain marginal, a sacred place, an in-between world separating them into their own ritual practices, i.e., the giving and receiving of trail names and trail magic. In contrast to contemporary tourists engaged in travel, who are in control of their experience, pilgrims/hikers can be thought of as homeless and in need of unconditional hospitality or grace.

While the long-distance hiking community has been the subject of many popular books, memoirs, and research publications, other than stories of appreciation, very little scholarly attention has been given to trail angels. As Georg Simmel³⁹ suggests with his social type, The Stranger, strangers (i.e., trail angels, local residents) can and do play a role in shaping social interaction and cultural dynamics even if not fully integrated into a society or community. Similar to scholarly research on long-distance hiking, which primarily focuses on the social world of long-distance hikers and

36 Redick, Kip., *American Camino: Walking as Spiritual Practice on the Appalachian Trail*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2023.

37 Redick, Kip., “The connection between liminal places and hospitality in manifesting pilgrim values and identity”, in *Pilgrims: values and identities*, Wallingford UK, CABI, pp. 35-47, 2021.

38 Derrida, Jacques, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond* (trans. Rachel Bowlby), Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000.

39 Simmel, Georg, *The sociology of George Simmel*, vol. 92892, Simon and Schuster, 1950.

relegates trail angels to the background, research on pilgrimage places greater emphasis on pilgrims and pilgrim behavior or the structure of pilgrimage, considering local residents part of the backdrop for the “essence” of pilgrimage.⁴⁰ I argue, as does Reader, that the attitudes of local people and communities can be equally important in the construction and shaping of pilgrimage routes and trail culture. In providing trail magic to hikers, trail angels are not only restoring hikers’ faith in humanity but are also inspiring a deeper practical commitment to the long-distance hiking community. This study aims to explore the “wild” generosity or the giving and receiving of trail magic, the extent to which place mediates this social practice, and to give voice to trail angels, a group largely ignored in both academic and popular literature. These findings will generate more research examining boundary work and identity development in “wild” spaces and focus on a side of tourism capitalism, i.e., hospitality and compassion, that has yet to be fully explored.

Methods

Data collection activities for this project (i.e., fieldwork, participant observation, and semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews) took place on three of America’s National Scenic Trails: The Appalachian, Pacific Crest, and Arizona Trails.

Data Collection Procedures

Ethnographic Fieldnotes and Participant Observation. During the spring and summer of 2021, I spent three and a half months on the PCT spanning 1,750 miles from the southern terminus on the Mexico-California border to southern Oregon. During May of 2022, two weeks were spent on the AT hiking 70 miles in Georgia, followed by two months hiking 850 miles on the PCT from southern Oregon to the Canadian border in July and August. In the spring of 2023, I spent five weeks hiking 200 miles of the AZT in March and April. As I immersed myself into the ongoing social activities of the long-distance hiking community, I recorded my interpretation of recurring themes or patterns in behavior (e.g., hiker expectations, services rendered) between trail angels and hikers. I was also conscious of the boundaries and distinctions some trail angels made between themselves and other givers of trail magic. My daily observations were recorded in two handwritten journals and approximately 98 double-spaced pages of typed field notes.

In-Depth Interviews. Semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted between April 2021 and June 2023, both on and off trail, with 41 individuals who identified as trail angels. Sixteen interviews were conducted between April 2021 and September 2022 with PCT trail angels; fourteen were conducted between

40 Reader, Ian, “Review: Local Histories, anthropological Interpretations...”, *op. cit.*

May 2022 and May 2023 with AT trail angels; and, eleven were conducted between March and May 2023 with trail angels on or near the AZT. An equal number of men and women were interviewed, with a few couples being interviewed together. Names are used here with permission.

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion, meaning each respondent had the opportunity to answer every question. Interview questions were designed to cover a range of topics. For example, I asked what it means to be a trail angel, reasons for becoming a trail angel, types and frequency of trail magic given, interactions with hikers and other trail users, hiker or traveler expectations regarding trail magic, hiker feeds and trail catering, and compensation for services provided. Unanticipated topics that surfaced during the interview were pursued further through follow-up questions. Each interview was audio recorded and lasted anywhere from forty-five to ninety minutes.

Data Analysis Procedures

Interview transcripts and fieldnotes were analyzed with a range of topics in mind, including Derrida's notion of unconditional hospitality, traditional forms of hospitality offered to pilgrims on religious routes, definitions of trail magic offered by trail associations, and the role of the stranger in shaping cultural dynamics. Once evidence was found, these sensitizing concepts became definitive concepts. When analyzing fieldnotes and interview transcripts, I also employed an emergent themes technique to capture other issues that surfaced apart from those mentioned above. Additionally, I identified narratives, including storylines, images, and metaphors used by trail angels to engage hikers and distinguish themselves from relevant reference groups.

Consistent with ethnographic convention, my goal was “to place specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context.”⁴¹ For example, in-depth interviews allowed trail angels to share their experiences of providing hospitality to hikers. Ethnographic fieldwork allowed me to examine and understand the giving and receiving of trail magic firsthand and to experience trail angel culture.

Results

Three main themes have been identified regarding the role that trail angels play in shaping the long-distance hiking community and relationships among long-distance hikers. Whether the trail magic is planned or spontaneous, offered at a financial cost to hikers or free of charge, trail angels assist in building community (1) through gifts of food, (2) through offers of service, i.e., roadside assistance, and (3) through offers of shared

41 Denzin, Norman K., and Lincoln, Yvonna S., *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, second edition, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage Publications, Inc., 2000, p. 455.

accommodations. These themes are not exclusive and can combine at times in ways that strengthen hiker relationships and reinforce a culture of assistance and kindness.

Building Community through Gifts of Food

The first theme regarding the role trail angels play in building or shaping community for long-distance hikers is through gifts of food, one of the most common types of trail magic given. These gifts may occur at larger, pre-planned events like the annual Appalachian Trail Days Festival (Trail Days) held in Damascus, Virginia each year or more spontaneously along the trail. Shared meals may also develop more organically within a trail angel’s home. Offerings of food provided by trail angels can invite hikers to come together and share fellowship.

Every year around Mother’s Day, the small town of Damascus, Virginia is descended upon by roughly 10,000 current and former hikers. During Trail Days, ten to twelve churches also gather to work together on a hiking ministry whose main purpose, according to Linda, the founder and organizer, is to serve hikers and “love on them.” One way they serve is through food. While they provide snacks and smaller meals throughout each day, their biggest food event is the Thursday evening meal. Linda told me that the event started in 2001 with about one hundred hotdogs but has now become a complete spread with fried chicken, pasta salads, garden salads, vegetarian options, homemade desserts, and much, much more (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Hikers lining up for large pre-planned hiker feed hosted by trail ministry. Appalachian Trail Days, Damascus, Virginia, May 2022. Photo by author.

I had the opportunity to enjoy this meal and talk with Linda in May 2022. When I asked if she considered herself a trail angel, Linda, without hesitation, said yes. When asked what makes a person a trail angel, Linda offered the following:

Meeting the needs. Doing relational ministry. Having conversations. Feeding people. Washing their feet, literally. Doing their laundry. Providing showers. Providing a fun, safe, drug-free place to dance and have fun and hang out. Meeting those needs gives us the opportunity to have those meaningful conversations.

For Linda and the two hundred volunteers involved in the hiking ministry, forming relationships through conversation, or meeting hikers’ “emotional needs,” come first. Relationships are personal. In doing so, they are influencing the dynamics of the community. I asked if hikers seemed to appreciate their kindness, and Linda replied, “...we probably fed about six hundred people last night. Honestly, I thought at one point I probably said, ‘You’re welcome,’ about three or four hundred times. But, yes, they are very appreciative, very appreciative, and that makes this easy to do.”

On the PCT, occasions for hikers to come together and share in community over food are not associated with large festival events but at random waypoints along the trail. For example, my hiking partner and I were delayed three days at Kennedy Meadows in May 2021 waiting on our food resupply boxes and bear canisters that we had mailed to ourselves. We met Legend, a well-known trail angel on the PCT. Legend refers to himself as a “traveling trail angel” because each year he travels “all the way up the trail helping people to Canada.” In addition to rides, Legend is known for the community meals he provides, most commonly spaghetti dinners and pancake breakfasts.

Dinner is served at a designated time, and Legend usually hosts two dinners a night, each with up to 15 hikers. Upon arriving for dinner, everyone is given a number. The number holds your seat for dinner and corresponds with your job at dinner such as passing out plates, plating the spaghetti, passing the cheese, cleaning up, and the like. Once everyone is seated and the food is served, Legend creates community and conversation. For example, he asked everyone to introduce themselves and say three words that captured how they felt about heading into the next trail section, the Sierra. He then shared trail stories and offered advice for climbing the snowy mountain passes.

The experience Legend creates is important. The Sierra can be one of the most difficult sections of the PCT because of the mountain passes. It is important to time your ascent and descent of the passes to avoid dangerous frozen snowpack in the morning or softening snowpack in the afternoon. It is not uncommon for people at this point to adopt or create a “tramily,” a trail family, if they do not have one, and hike through the Sierra together. My hiking partner and I hiked through the Sierra with six others we met at Kennedy Meadows, three of whom we shared in fellowship with over dinner that night at Legend’s community meal. I interviewed him over a pancake breakfast the next morning. (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2: Legend cooking pancakes for hungry hikers. Kennedy Meadows General Store, California, May 2021. Photo by author.

One of the first questions I asked Legend was what makes a person a trail angel. His response was “somebody who cares, has the ability to help, is willing to help, has the knowledge of what needs to be done, and may or may not have high resources but they care.” He defined trail angel “in the long term” because that is who he is and who he knows, distinguishing himself from those who do trail magic for a day. I then asked if being a trail angel for him then was a lifestyle to which he replied:

Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week...Like [the pancake breakfast and spaghetti dinners], this is kid’s play. This is nothing...there are twenty core people on the trail that are my friends. None of us believe that it’s a morning job or an afternoon job. If you guys wanted to sit here and talk about something, we’ll talk ‘til I’m tired and then we’ll talk some more because you guys are the most important people in our lives right now. Most trail angels don’t have kids, so they have an adopted family. A lot of them are older. They used to travel but now they want the kids, the hikers, to come tell them the stories, but then they also want to duplicate with a nice conversation in the morning with four or five elderly people, trail angels, over coffee and talk about what can we do as trail angels together to help the community as a whole going forward and what changes can we make. That’s the level that I play at... some of these older people, they have been doing it for twenty years because they love it.

For Legend and his friends, their level of commitment is what makes providing for hikers personal. They seek conversation like members of the AT hiking ministry. There is no economic gain, it is the value found in relationships, in fellowship, and through conversation that matters most.

Because the number of people hiking long-distance trails is increasing and many of them return to “give back” to the next year of hikers, I wondered if Legend felt hikers appreciated his kindness or had come to expect or demand trail magic. He put emphasis on the size of the group:

Two, three, or four people, that gives us a chance to sit down and talk. They appreciate it tremendously because there is a conversation besides the magic. When the group gets to be twenty, it's more of a party. There's no individual appreciation, no accountability. I saw it today. For one trail angel to make dinner for forty people, for one trail angel to make breakfast for sixty people, it has to be his way [and on his time]. When people start coming in from all directions, they just get the pancake and they go sit over there, that's when it's unappreciative. For that, I could make a stack of pancakes here and I could leave. Most trail angels don't do it to feed you, they do it to meet you...So I think when people just take six beers out of the cooler and go sit in the corner with three friends, that makes trail angels want to quit.

Given Legend's long-time experience and commitment to PCT hikers, a lack of appreciation for what trail angels do is disheartening to him. However, Linda did not feel this way at Trail Days. The difference in perception could be that many people who decide to hike long-distance begin with the AT. This is their first experience encountering trail angels and trail magic. Group size matters less here because the experience is new; for veteran hikers who move on to the PCT, there are fewer hikers in general and the day is generally spent alone. When they experience trail magic, which may now be expected or anticipated, the experience, though appreciated, may be second to reconnecting with fellow hikers when given the opportunity.

The AT and PCT are two of the most popular, and oldest, long-distance hiking trails in the United States. The 800-mile AZT, on the other hand, is one of the youngest, just completed in 2011. Thus, when trail angels offer a homecooked meal to groups of hikers on the AZT, it tends to be in their homes. When my friend and I hiked a 200-mile section of the AZT in March and April of 2023, we met a trail angel by the name of MJ in Superior, Arizona. A hiker by the name of McFungi had told us of his experience there: “You must stay with MJ in Superior. If you do not, what are you even doing with your life?”

The first night we stayed in MJ's home, there were a total of seven hikers. She announced that she was starting to make dinner and that any of us could help. She prepared the pizza dough. While I was making the pizzas, she began the vegetable stir fry, and then we both worked on the salad. We all ate together sharing stories of the trail and walking plans. Since MJ and I did the cooking, the six guys took care of the dishes and cleaned the kitchen. Everyone contributed in some way without being asked. The next morning MJ made blueberry pancakes for all. When I interviewed her,

I asked if the meals were something that she normally provided or only occasionally. She laughed and said that it was “an abnormal thing” and that we just “got really lucky,” though if hikers will give her notice that they are coming, “Saturday pizza night is a thing” if she can get pizza dough from “Burt the Baker.”

The second morning we were there, MJ had to leave early to drive a couple of hikers to Phoenix. She apologized that she did not have time to make us breakfast; but, as she was leaving, MJ instructed the four of us to make ourselves at home. One of our new friends made an egg scramble and breakfast potatoes that we all sat down and shared together. Unfortunately, because she asks hikers up front for a twenty-dollar donation so that she can continue to provide for hikers, the ATA has removed her from the list of trail angels on their website. Hikers who have met MJ have a problem with this, as do other trail angels who know her. Even when MJ is not physically present, this trail angel with the purple hair and the purple house with an image of an angel on the outside of it, plays a role in shaping community through gifts of food. (Fig. 3)



Fig. 3: Angel image on side of MJ's home. Superior, Arizona, March 2023. Photo courtesy of Stumbleweed.

Gifts of Service

A second theme regarding the role that trail angels play in shaping the long-distance hiking community is through offering roadside assistance. Roadside assistance can be preplanned or occur spontaneously and generally involves a variety of foods and beverages, advice, medicine and general hiker supplies, or rides into town, most all of which are given freely. Through these gifts of assistance offered at road crossings, trail angels create a reason for hikers to come together in a spirit of community, even if only for a little while.

King Tut, a well-known trail angel on the AT and part of the large hiking ministry at Trail Days, described his annual trail magic in southern Georgia at Tesnatee Gap:

So here's the approach I use. Basically, they are coming down the trail... and I have two or three tables completely full. I have at least thirteen chairs. Depending on the day, one or two 10x10 canopies. If it's raining, they've got shelter. If it's hot and it's gotten sunny then they've got that. I have a generator...I welcome them. The very first thing I do is that I've got to break the ice with these people because they don't know who I am or anything, so I just go up and say, "I'm King Tut, welcome to trail magic." ...You see everything here on the table, it's free so go and put your pack down and come on over...Then I go through and say I am here to help you have a great hike, so I want to give you a bunch of information that will help you. And I want to give you a bunch of free things so here's what you need to know.

King Tut continued to tell me that he sets up during the first two weeks in March each year and is at that particular gap every Tuesday and Thursday through the end of April. He sets up at 8:30 in the morning and stays until 5:30-6:30 in the evening. In 2022, he had 613 hikers come through and sign his register. At the time I interviewed him, King Tut was on his 19th year. In addition to the food and unsolicited advice, King Tut supplies interested hikers with hand-knitted hats, first aid supplies, and two towels – one for them and one for drying their tent or hammock.

Not all trail angels have the same level of commitment as King Tut. Regardless of hiking trail, most trail angels only have the time and resources to provide trail magic for a few days or a few hours. For example, my hiking partner and I met Mister Ed on the PCT in 2022 in Mount Ranier National Park. Mister Ed typed a message on the FarOut app letting hikers know that he would be providing trail magic at Chinook Pass beginning on a Friday morning through the weekend or until the food and supplies ran out. (Figs. 4 and 5)

We were there that Friday morning along with several other hikers, some of whom we had been leap-frogging with the past few days. We spent at least three hours at this roadside parking area visiting with everyone. I also interviewed Mister Ed. I learned that he was hiking the PCT in sections and had recently finished



Figs. 4, 5: Mister Ed’s trail magic set up. Mister Ed and hikers from his AZT hike there to help. Chinook Pass, Mount Ranier National Park, August 2022. Photos by author.

a section at Chinook Pass and thought that it would be a great place to give trail magic to hikers:

It's a major road, but there's nothing here except a pit toilet. The powers that be [PCTA] tell ya not to go into the backwoods [to set up trail magic] where you'll interrupt the backwoods serenity. Go to something like this [remote parking area in the middle of nowhere]. Here, there's nothing and people don't expect it. Last year I said don't thank me, thank the people in the desert that had those water caches north of Tehachapi. This is just payback really. This year I dedicated it to the people that helped me. I got sick in Arizona, and they got me off the trail. That sort of thing. So, it's all just what goes around comes around.

Mister Ed thru-hiked the AZT the previous year. The kindness shown to him by trail angels on the AZT prompted him to pay it forward to PCT hikers near where he lived in Washington. This is not unlike former pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago who become hospitaleros to give back and remain part of the community. As a hiker himself, Mister Ed “knows what hikers need” and he “has spares.” In addition to food, Mister Ed supplied refills for those in need of toothpaste from something like a caulk gun. He had Ziploc bags, single coffee and powdered drink mixes, over the counter pain medicine, and chairs for sitting and fellowship. Because he stays for a couple of days, he particularly enjoys the hikers who arrive later in the day with only a couple miles left to hike. From his experience, those are the ones who stay and visit into the evening:

What was the funnest last year was the people getting here late. They were only planning to go two more miles and camp. It was dark and there was a lot of people who knew each other. They had no deadline where someone in the middle of the day risks getting vortexed for ten hours. But the later ones? Eat what you want, drink what you want, take a drink for in the morning if it's only two miles. It's like they had a free pass to waste time.

As Mister Ed noted, opportunities to sit and fellowship puts hikers at a risk of “getting vortexed” or unexpectedly having your hike interrupted for a few hours. On the PCT there are no shelters or three-wall lean-tos in the woods with a nearby water source or spots for camping like you find on the AT. Thus, these opportunities provided by trail angels at road crossings that allow hikers to come together are welcomed by nearly all given that most of the day is spent alone.

It is not only food and supplies that are provided at road-crossings. On the AZT, Gary, a trail angel from Kearny, Arizona, offers rides to and from town to the nearby trailhead. When he picks you up, he generally wants to know if you are hungry or looking for somewhere to stay and typically drops hikers off at the local pizza joint or at Q and Jeff's house, the two popular hiker hangouts in this small town. (Fig. 6)

My hiking partner and I, along with several others, stayed in Kearny for two days waiting out a storm. I was able to interview Gary about why he became a trail angel:



Fig. 6: AZT hikers hanging out in Kearny, Arizona, March 2023. Photo courtesy of Stranded.

Before the trail was complete, there was strange looking people walking down the street. They are usually dirty and they have something on their back and I started talking to them. What are you doing? “Well, we’re thru-hiking.” Okay. Need a ride back out there? “Well, yeah.” So we just started doing that and it blossomed into something that has really become quite overwhelming [laughs]. I’ve got a list here somewhere of about four other trail angels in town for when I can’t do things or when there are so many [hikers in town].

Because of trail angels like Gary, who drive back and forth all day long for a few months out of the year, simply meeting another hiker and realizing you both spent time with Gary creates a shared experience. Through his free rides into town, Gary indirectly plays a huge role in building community for the 16-17 hikers who stay with Q and Jeff each night or for those whose only shared experience was their ride with Gary. It is no wonder that Scratch, a hiker I met on the PCT in 2022, said that Kearny was the friendliest little town on the AZT.

While Gary offers rides free of charge to hikers, there are others who operate a shuttle business with a fee. Starr, who thru-hiked the AT in 2022, started shuttling AT hikers after she finished. During our interview, I asked how long she had considered herself a trail angel as a shuttle driver. She said she wasn’t sure if she had “earned that rank yet.” For Starr, a true trail angel has “years of service, gives their whole life to it, and doesn’t have a conventional ‘real’ job...and they never ask for a fee. They only accept donations.” Starr offers the example of Miss Janet whose efforts are supported by donations from former hikers: “she can ride that bounce box up and down the east coast helping hikers...because these hikers can’t make



Fig. 7: Miss Janet's "bounce box." Trail Days, Damascus, Virginia, May 2022. Photo by author.

it to Katahdin [end of AT] without the community helping them. I wouldn't have, hands down. Not without trail angel help." Starr speaks to the importance of help provided by trail angels like Gary and Miss Janet as they build community through various forms of roadside assistance. (Fig. 7)

Offers of Lodging or Shared Accommodations

A third theme, and arguably the most significant way that trail angels shape the long-distance hiking community, is through offers of lodging or accommodations, particularly those shared with large numbers of hikers. Shared meals and rides are often provided by those who offer lodging – an all-inclusive package of sorts. Thus, I argue that this theme reflects a significant form of hospitality, overlapping with other forms of assistance that can work to build a long-distance hiking community and relationships among hikers.

On the AT there are hundreds of hostels available to hikers, some free, some donation-based, and some with set rates. Spidy operates The Barn AT Hiker Hostel, a big metal building down the driveway from his home in Franklin, North Carolina. Spidy also considers himself a trail angel, defining one as someone “who helps out the hikers regardless of what it is, whether it's for a fee or if they expect nothing at all. Just anyone willing to help out hikers along their journey and help them make their journey successful.” As a former hiker himself, Spidy wanted “to be back involved in the hiking community of the AT.” While he and his wife do not expect anything from hikers for their stay, they will accept donations if offered. The Barn AT Hiker Hostel is designed to accommodate several hikers and has “a full living room set up with a TV and movies, a washer and dryer, shower, bathroom,

microwave, toaster oven, and small refrigerator.” Each hiker gets their own mattress, pillow, and blanket, and is invited to the main house for breakfast the next morning. He has plans in 2024 to build a bunkhouse to separate the living and sleeping quarters.

When I asked Spidy why he and his wife decided to become trail angels, he said it was because of his own experiences staying with other hikers in hostels during his thru-hike. For Spidy, that was “a huge part of the AT” and he “just loved it” so decided to start his own. His efforts serve as an example of how the hospitality given to hikers by trail angels shapes community, serving as an inspiration for hikers to give back and become trail angels themselves. Like Spidy, they may pay it forward to those on the same trail they hiked, or they may be inspired to pass on the same magic elsewhere, as did Pair of Aces, a 2011 AT hiker who I met in 2022 at the Washington Alpine Club (WAC) at Snoqualmie Pass near the PCT. Her shared experiences on the AT, and all the people, including trail angels, who were good to her while she was hiking, is the reason she volunteers as a host greeting hikers at the WAC. In this way trail angels play a role in shaping community across several long-distance hiking trails.

Because there are fewer hostels on the PCT and places like the WAC are limited, PCT hikers may be invited into someone’s home. One of the earliest instances of this I experienced on the PCT was with Ted and Cheryl in Tehachapi, California. In addition to the shared meals, Ted and Cheryl allowed hikers to shower, launder their clothes, provided bathrobes for us until our clothes were clean and dry, and then shuttled us around town to anywhere we needed to go. When I interviewed them, I asked if they had ever been hesitant to invite a hiker into their home or their car:

Ted: I can’t say that I’ve met anyone that made me apprehensive, but we normally invite ones into the home only if they have requested it and even then, we’ve usually limited the numbers, with that one exception where we met a group and they all wanted to spend the night and we had plenty of floor space and they were happy with that.

Kristi: Is this the eleven that you told me about?

Ted: Yes (laughs). And I think six of those were all in one group and then the one last one was the woman that came back to us after spraining her knee...

Ted: And we do not charge anybody anything. There have been a number of hikers who were very generous with their donations. They recognize that, especially with the preparation of meals and the laundry and the shower, those services are very valuable and we do not collect nearly as much as a hotel and a restaurant. And the miles we put on the cars, if we were a business we would be in the hole.

Cheryl: And I don't have a problem with that. If a hiker gets in the car and they don't offer any gas money, I have no problem with that. We were shocked the first time they gave us money and insisted that we take it. I go, they want to give us money for this?

Kristi: You've also talked about this a little bit. Do you have a most positive experience with hikers that comes to mind?

Ted: I would have to say especially the groups we've had in the home. I can remember on my birthday that six or seven of us were gathered out by the hammock drinking beer and having a great ol' time and that was very much a highlight for me but there have been so many great people that we have welcomed either in the home or taking to and from the trailheads to hotels in town.

Because there are fewer hostels along the PCT, the fact that people like Ted and Cheryl open their home to dirty, smelly hikers, is very kind, accommodating, and mutually beneficial. For Ted and Cheryl, their involvement in the hiking community was intentional. They saw a notice in the local paper about trail angels and responded. Because they were already volunteers in their community, assisting hikers seemed like a natural fit.

Coming across a hostel on the AZT is similar to the PCT, not likely. One big difference between the AZT and the other trails is that the ATA was able to get the communities on board at the outset. They have a map highlighting the “gateway communities” along the AZT. Though she does not necessarily consider herself a trail angel, even though hikers call her one, Mary, who operates Terra Sol in Patagonia, Arizona was just as intentional as Ted and Cheryl, and even more so in bringing the hiking community together. Because she runs a business and charges a small fee of twenty-five dollars, the ATA does not consider Mary a trail angel.

My hiking partner and I stayed with Mary our first night before setting out to hike a 200-mile section of the AZT. One of the first questions I asked her, over avocado toast, a smoothie, and coffee, was how she came to be involved in the hiking community:

I'd been thinking about van people as guests and my friends. I didn't even know the trail existed let alone that it walked right by my house. So I started learning about that and the next fall, after I'd done some clean up, I started hosting a little bit. But very basic. Very rudimentary services. Barely got that bathroom working...I realized I had to be careful how I did all of this. I want to be a townsperson. I don't want to be just the lady who serves the hikers. I want to be a resident. But, hikers are already here. They are coming through, so if we can make them a little more comfortable, give them a little more of a rest, help them stay

a little longer and have an extra meal or two, or stay an extra night or two, then the whole town benefits because people need the town and their resupply. So, prior to this place, there really wasn't a place for tent camping in town. You could stay on the trail. Some tried to stay in the park, which the town was not real excited about...so they now have a tent camping place. So it's worked out really well for everybody. I purposefully provide a place to stay they can't get anywhere else. I'm not doing food service or doing other things, so go support our stores and restaurants.

In addition to providing tent camping, Mary shuttles people to and from the trailhead, provides showers, and has an outdoor kitchen that hikers can use. Some staples, like coffee, are free whereas others, like fuel, are at a cost to hikers but paid for on an honor system. I asked Mary why she started her business in the first place:

I really do want people to have a place to come together, to relax, tell stories, have a group experience beyond the individual experience. So, that's why there is a common fire circle, not a bunch of little ones scattered all around, and a camp kitchen. I just think there is real power in people coming together as a group and having a common experience. It just reinforces everything. Society is so individualized, atomized, and I've long held ever since I was a teenager and had those experiences in the mountains, I've seen the power of a group, of people coming together and doing things together and accomplishing things. (Figs. 8 and 9)

What Mary has created at Terra Sol is a shared space for people – hikers, pilgrims, bikers, van travelers – to come together. When I spoke with Condiments, a trail angel in Arizona who had hiked the AT the year before, I pondered if there was a larger long-distance hiking community, one comprised of section and thru-hikers, and trail angels, that perhaps was born on the AT but had now been transmitted across all long-trails because of shared encounters and experiences. Condiments suggested that “it just started from travelers needing help, not necessarily on these long trails. People were traveling, came to a place, and someone said, ‘Hey, can I help you or do you need a place to stay? We don't have lodging in this town,’ so they took them in and helped them out.” I argue that Mary at Terra Sol, as well as the others, exemplify this level of hospitality. Condiments continued to suggest that “aiding travelers has a long history beyond any of these trails” and imagined that “there were trail angels on the Silk Road with the same intentions” as him. The assistance provided by Condiments and the other trail angels I interviewed and encountered during my fieldwork suggests that their actions are grounded in showing kindness to others.



Figs. 8, 9: Camp kitchen. Tent camping area and community firepit at Terra Sol. Patagonia, Arizona, March 2023. Photos by author.

Discussion and Conclusions

The scholarship on pilgrimage and long-distance hiking has primarily addressed pilgrim behavior, the structure of pilgrimage, and the social world of long-distance hikers. This focus relegates the assistance of local residents, *hospitaleros*, and trail angels to the background. Missing from research in pilgrimage studies is a serious exploration of how the attitudes and behaviors of strangers, local people, and communities can be equally important in the construction and shaping of pilgrimage routes, identity, and trail culture. The overarching goal of this study was to add to the literature by examining the role(s) that trail angels play in building a larger hiker/pilgrim community by focusing on relationships between trail users, specifically long-distance hikers or backpackers, and trail angels, and to explore the extent to which place mediates this social practice.

The popularity of a hiking trail, its terrain, the weather, proximity to local towns, the remoteness of a trail, and the governing agency or organization can all influence the giving and receiving of trail magic; however, as Simmel⁴² suggested, strangers, i.e., trail angels, play a significant role in shaping social interaction and the cultural dynamics of the long-distance hiking community. Such acts of “wild” generosity on long-distance hiking trails have much in common with hospitality, both conditional and unconditional, offered to pilgrims on Shikoku pilgrimage and the Camino de Santiago. Similar to *settai* in Japan, some trail angels are motivated for religious reasons, like Linda and King Tut, who are able to offer unconditional hospitality in the form of food, service, and conversation to hikers on the AT as part of a hiking ministry. There are other trail angels, like Spidy, Mister Ed, Ted and Cheryl, Gary, and Q and Jeff, who have the financial means to offer their services, i.e., rides, lodging, meals, and supplies, free of charge to hikers as well. Other trail angels, for a variety of reasons, may not be able to offer unconditional trail magic to trail users and so ask for a fee to cover hospitality expenses. While she decided to become a trail angel to help hikers, had the space and the time, and there were no other trail angels in Superior when she started, MJ lives on a fixed income and needs some financial assistance if she is going to continue to assist hikers.

As the number of hikers continues to increase exponentially on these trails, and the price of gasoline, utilities, and other goods increases, money relationships determine services offered for some trail angels. Just as *settai* has undergone a transformation because of the role tourism has played in Japan, so has the giving of trail magic on the AT, the PCT, and the AZT, particularly for those offering rides or hosting hikers in their home. Similar dynamics are found on the Camino de Santiago. Traditionally,

42 Simmel, Georg, *The sociology of George Simmel*, *op. cit.*

hospitality on the Camino was based on *donativo*.⁴³ Now, most *albergues* or pilgrim hostels ask for a certain amount of money per night and some are profit based. While many trail angels offer services for free or ask for a modest donation, some do own their own shuttle services and require compensation.

From a sociological perspective, the giving and receiving of trail magic on the surface appears to be an equal exchange, an economy of generosity where both the giver and receiver mutually benefit; however, in viewing this transaction through the lens of pilgrimage, I find this may be less the case and question if the term “magic” regarding trail angels’ efforts is even appropriate. As Redick⁴⁴ notes in his work on the connection between liminal places and hospitality in manifesting pilgrim values and identity, the term “trail magic” is ambiguous given that magic involves manipulation. For example, those who receive magic “are implicated in bringing it about and so enter into an economy of exchange, thus negating the gift of hospitality.”⁴⁵ Redick continues to suggest that as economic influences make their way onto long-distance hiking trails, hikers may begin to value the exchange of goods and services over gifts of unconditional hospitality, those that are freely given. Many trail angels admitted that part of why they assist long-distance hikers is selfish – it is because they want to see the smiles on hikers’ faces and seeing that makes them feel good, or because they are hoping for good karma on a future hike, or because it is a way for them to become part of the community. Perhaps “trail magicians” is a better term for these individuals who enter into the exchange with such reasons and the term “trail angel” is best reserved for those people who hikers encounter serendipitously, those special few who truly offer a gift freely given, the gift of grace. Some trail angels would agree with this assessment. For example, Ted and Cheryl identified as trail angels but were uncomfortable with hikers referring to what they provided as trail magic, even though that is what they would call it. Doug in Trout Lake, Washington referred to trail magic as “that little stuff you get on the side of the road.” In his mind, a trail angel is there “to meet a hiker’s need, whether that need is known to them at the time or not.”

Still, walking the Camino de Santiago, the Shikoku, or hiking long-distance, is not all about money relationships, though there are economic gains to be made. One of the biggest conclusions with respect to relationships between hikers and trail angels, regardless of which hiking trail I was on, is that most people are kind. The kindness of trail angels impacts everyone who observes it or even hears about it and helps to shape culture across trails. Trail angels are generous with their time, money, and attention. They enjoy conversation and fellowship and are looking for authentic connections with hikers. Trail angels may be veteran hikers looking to give back to the larger hiking community, regardless of hiking trail, as a way to pay the kindness forward. Many

43 Schrire, Dani, “The Camino de Santiago”, *op. cit.*

44 Redick, Kip, “The connection between liminal places...”, *op. cit.*

45 *Ibidem*, p. 52.

trail angels are already volunteers in their local communities and assisting hikers is an extension of their efforts. As AT trail angel Emoji stated: “Trail angels have a deep sense of loving people...there is grace in giving in a lot of people’s lives that creates a spirit of generosity in a person.” It feels good to bring kindness into the world, and for trail angels, their acts of kindness or “wild” generosity, go beyond the hiker for whom it was given. Kindness is like contagion with its multiplying effects.

The findings presented here on trail magic and trail angel culture are not only an important contribution to literature on long-distance hiking, but also to research on extended walking distances in multiple sites. Like religious pilgrimage sites, long-distance hiking trails and related spaces have multiple layers of social contact that involve labeling from both within and without. Deep complexities exist; therefore, it is important to include the voices of all players and forces that shape the social and cultural dynamics of these social practices and spaces. Future research should further explore the complexities of what constitutes trail magic, and the boundaries some trail angels draw between themselves and those who provide trail magic, i.e., trail magicians or trail helpers or supporters. Additionally, pilgrimage traditions like those mentioned above, and the giving and receiving of trail magic, are transmitted through face-to-face interaction among pilgrim travelers and local residents or *hospitaleros*, trail angels, and long-distance hikers. At the same time, through technology, books, and social media, these same traditions can be negotiated before a pilgrim traveler or long-distance hiker even steps foot on a walking path and even when they return home. Future research should consider the role that technology and text also play in shaping larger hiker/pilgrim communities.

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Appendix A

CODE OF CONDUCT

Trail Angels

The Arizona Trail Association's (ATA) mission is to protect, maintain, enhance, promote and sustain the Arizona Trail (AZT) as a unique encounter with the natural environment. As a trail angel on the AZT, it is your responsibility to uphold this mission. This Code of Conduct provides a guide to AZT angels so that they can support positive trail experiences and the ATA's mission. It is expected that all AZT angels adhere to this Code of Conduct while providing both on and off trail services.

Be a positive representative of the AZT-Provide services in a welcoming, inclusive, respectful manner.

*Cache water in designated AZT water cache boxes only-*Designated AZT water cache box locations are listed [here](#). Water left outside cache boxes can be harmful to consumers as sun exposure causes chemicals from plastic bottles to leak into the water. Also, wildlife may try to access water left outside cache boxes. These animals may bite, chew, kick, or smash water bottles in an effort to retrieve its contents. This is not only harmful to wildlife but also destroys water caches that trail users may be relying on. Additionally, empty bottles left outside cache boxes create litter which damages the

ecosystem, threatens wildlife, and takes away from the National Scenic Trail experience. For more information about properly caching water, visit our [Water Sources](#) page.

Cache ONLY water-Do not cache food, supplies, or anything else except water in water cache boxes or anywhere else. Leaving food and supplies anywhere along the trail is potentially harmful to the wildlife it attracts. Human food can be directly damaging to animals who ingest it and can also lead to habituation. Habituated wildlife are relatively unfearful of humans and this places them, and the humans they encounter, at risk. Additionally, leaving food, water, or supplies along the trail creates litter which damages the ecosystem, threatens wildlife, and takes away from the National Scenic Trail experience.

Pack out all waste-While most trail angel services are provided off trail, it is important to dispose of waste properly in the event you are on trail. Pack out all waste (including empty water bottles/jugs) accumulated while you are on the trail and encourage trail users to do the same. If you leave water in a cache box, go back at a later time to retrieve or refill the bottles.

Be considerate and respectful-Be mindful of and courteous to others. This includes trail users, trail angels, wildlife, and anyone else you may encounter. AZT users value the wildness of the trail. Trail angels should not inhibit this experience.

Offer services free of charge-It is prohibited for trail angels to require payment for the services they provide. You may accept voluntary donations at your discretion. It is acceptable to require reimbursement for gas costs when providing shuttle services. This requirement must be clearly indicated in your trail angel listing. If you would like to require gas reimbursement, please note this in the ‘comments’ section of your Trail Angel Submission Form.

Do not offer illegal or unsafe services-Do not offer/accept anything illegal to/from trail users. Using your discretion, keep services and interactions safe.

*****Always practice the 7 principles of Leave No Trace while interacting with the AZT and its community*****