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Leisurely Death and Dying?

Body, Place, and the Limits to Leisure—a Prologue

JANE C. DESMOND

In a world of few universals, death is one. Yet the meanings crafted through engagements with death are, as every anthropologist knows, specific to times, places, and communities. From the anguished to the ghoulish and on to the death-defying risk taking that seems to laugh at inevitability, ethnographic studies of death-related practices reveal a wide variety of engagements, some of which fall into the category of “leisure.” Yet even within that range, death itself is rarely regarded as a leisure practice, at least for the one dying. In this book, the nexus of death and leisure—uncovered, speculated on, and even embraced as play—is an illuminating node, a confluence of the unexpected that helps us see anew both ends of the knot: “death” and “leisure.”

What happens, the authors and editors of this volume ask, when individuals or groups insert the practices of leisure into the realm of death, so often associated with fear and grief (e.g., by taking photographic “selfies” with the deceased at a funeral), and vice versa—when people insert death or death-defying risk into the realm of leisure, so often associated with carefree pleasure, joy, play, and recreation, perhaps by searching for “zombies” while on holiday in Indonesia? By focusing on this leisure-death pairing, can we understand more deeply either of those terms and the associated social practices they refer to? What conceptual frames might we use?

In the last two decades, academic discussions of “dark tourism” have, as Kaul and Skinner note in their robust introduction to this book, been a key avenue to explore the nexus of death and leisure practices. Tours to sites of carnage, like those

associated with the Holocaust, or to sites of murder, like the Texas Book Depository in Dallas, from which President John F. Kennedy's fateful assassination shot was taken, have generated a growing sector of contemporary tourism focused on trauma.

The concepts associated with "dark tourism" and the debates surrounding it have generated insights about how tourists use their leisure time to, as some have argued, "enliven" their daily lives through an encounter with the dead. But this book demonstrates that, as fecund as those investigations may have been, they do not go far enough in helping us understand the contours and limits of leisurely encounters with death. Those contours, Kaul and Skinner argue, extend far beyond the tourist realm. They write: "Through the lens of leisure we are intentionally attaching the study of death to a new, burgeoning set of sub-disciplines in anthropology that cross over into adjacent fields, including the anthropologies of tourism, food, sport, heritage, and religion" (19). At times, they note, these arenas slip over into dark tourism, but they also diverge strongly from it. Therefore, we see that death is not always "dark," and leisurely engagement with death and sites associated with it—as spectator—is not always tourism.

As the reader plumbs the four parts of this book for their shared themes and resonances and then reads across those divisions for bulges and ragged catches of productive mismatch and nonalignment, the very category of "leisure" itself comes under pressure.

CONSIDERING "LEISURE"

Kaul and Skinner point toward the limitations of earlier Marxist interpretations of leisure as nonproductive bourgeois privilege and linger instead on Huizinga's leisurely notion of "play" as an arena of potential imaginings. The book's chapters show that "leisure" can range from death-defying cliff dives ("tombstoning" at the Devil's Frying Pan in Cornwall, UK) to picnicking in a forested field of graves. It can mean inserting remembrance of past death and violence into the sensual pleasures of beach strolling in Palau or the musical mayhem of parades in Northern Ireland. It can mean the disciplined daily walking of pilgrimage (whether in the religious or secularly spiritual sense) traversing the nearly 800 kilometer Camino de Santiago in northwestern Spain to its ending point at the sepulcher of Saint James in Santiago de Compostela, where solemn commitment mixes with the hedonistic pleasures of end-of-day tongue-satisfying wines.

What this range of practices has in common is that somewhere in each experience is an encounter with the dead or with the notion of dying. This can come imaginatively, through historical resonance of the place or through encountering the material presence of the dead—for example, standing among the clean and artfully

arranged skulls and bones of 20,000 long dead on a tour to a centuries' old ossuary in Oppenheim, Germany, seeking what many tourists there call "transcendence."

What can we gain by calling all of these disparate practices "leisure?" Is this term serviceable just because we lack another category? The implicit (residual) dividing line here is still between "work" and non-work, it seems, or "required" and "optional" behaviors. Immediately, exceptions flood in to smudge those divisions, as recent discussions of leisure reveal. We can understand walking the Camino toward the relics of a dead saint as "working" on our spirituality, deepening our capacity for self-knowledge. Should we reconfigure the nexus? What if we turn the focus onto the questions "what is gained, by whom, and why" from these practices?

One of the questions the book pushes us to consider is this: if the designation "postmodern" is, in fact, a useful marker of (and moniker for) a substantial historical shift, does it also point to a rezoning of how we categorize aspects of our lives? What are the hallmarks of "leisure" in various communities across the globe today? If a wealthy New York stock broker is making deals on the phone while sitting on a beach in Phuket, is she on "vacation"? If a father is kicking a soccer ball with his five-year-old son on the local pitch in his neighborhood in San Salvador, is he "playing" or "parenting"? Or does this questioning of the category "leisure" simply underline the polysemic nature of so many categories of sociality, a proliferation of possible meanings that our very acts of conceptual categorization—"leisure," "mourning," "play," and so on—by the very act of naming, necessarily tamp down and mask?

In closing their introduction, Kaul and Skinner hint at the challenges of rethinking "leisure" as a category. They note that for some theorists like Simon Coleman and Tamara Kohn (2007), Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1981), and Victor Turner (1982), respectively, leisure is a form of disciplined freedom, a state of psychological flow, or a liminal period. For Kaul and Skinner, while any of these aspects may be present, the unexpected union of leisure and death is especially powerful because it is "when self and sociality are remade, reproduced, remarked upon" (30). Extending the implications of this book farther, we can take this idea of analyzing the unexpected interpenetrations of seemingly distinct zones (in this case, death and leisure) as a model. In what other arenas of social practice do we find unexpected mixes of behaviors and desires?

Taken together, these chapters challenge us to ask whether and how the term *leisure* itself still has analytical purchase or—to redeploy Kaul and Skinner's evocative phrase—whether our concepts of "leisure" now also need to be remade, reproduced, and remarked upon. If leisure as a category is still useful in denoting a special zone of behavior, actions, and meanings in specific communities, what are its limits? Its defining characteristics? What does the constitution of such an imagined zone enable, permit, or foreclose; and how does that contribute to or articulate changes in social

relations? Ray Casserley's chapter in this book, on parading in Northern Ireland, is a great example of how an event might simply be categorized as "public leisure," but that it in fact is "leisure and" and "leisure as"—as the performance of politics, rioting, remembrance, urban geographic reinscription, and of masculinity and working-class status along with religious affiliation, all rendered with the sonic and gustatory pleasures of marching bands and festive foods. What are the limits of "leisure" as an analytic? How does it relate to other analytics, like "place" and "kinesthesia"?

CONSIDERING PLACE AND KINESTHESIA

If this book convincingly demonstrates that even "leisure" embraces aspects of death and the dead, then we must reconfigure our notions of leisure into a more complex realm of joyful or grief-stricken, playful or solemn, enjoyable or excruciating sought-after *experiences*. The gossiping funeral attendees in Greece, the gastronomic tourists eating heritage hogs in Italy, the hikers on the Camino, the beach-strolling Japanese commemorative tourists in war-marked Palau, the rambling walkers in a UK "green" cemetery . . . each of these is moving through land turned to landscape and space turned to place by the inscription of memories and meanings over time, by multiple communities. Reading across the grain of the chapters in this book, we find that a key analytic is the kinesthetic—the actions of embodied participants in specific places.

"Space" becomes a socially significant "place" when it is inscribed with meanings, and motion becomes action when it is purposefully enacted in those places. A jump into the air is just a leap off the ground, unless that jump is performed cliffside, as Kaul describes in his chapter, at the Irish Cliffs of Moher, site of numerous suicides. That leap is staged by young visitors, ironically and for the camera, to supposedly show the last moment of levitation before the inevitable hand of gravity pulls the body over the cliffs and into eternity. A playful wink at the performance of suicide, this action unites kinesthetic rendition with implied affective commentary—"Ha ha! I'm not jumping, but it looks like I am. Here's me—not dying!" A playful staging of one's own death, a simulacrum of suicide suitable for posting on social media, has to be carefully calibrated on the cliffs—too close to the edge and it could become real, too far away and it doesn't look like it could be suicidal. In that act of calibration—the stepping near and away, the "how does this look" interaction with the cameraman—is the "edgework" Kaul analyzes. It is the delight of simulated risk, crafted through the union of movement, body, place, and affect.

If "affect" refers to the physical experiences of emotion—the rushing of blood, the tightness in our chests, the shortness of breath, or its long, slow escape in a sigh—then we see the importance of keeping the body center stage in so many of

these analyses. All but one of these chapters (which discusses the Web) involve the physical presence of the actant in a specific place and time. The detailed ethnographies that give us such rich, particular, empathic renderings of these experiences make clear the absolute centrality of that physical presence to how meanings emerge. The experiences under analysis here are deeply embodied and sharply felt—uniting body and emotion in moments of heightened experiential awareness.

Authors gesture toward this experiential realm and how it yields meaning by drawing on several different analytic frames—from the notion of the dead as the “ultimate other” that marks the “real” as an antidote for the mundanity of daily life, to the idea of “fantastic realism,” invoked by Kathleen Adams in this volume, following Jørgen Ole Bærenholdt and Michael Haldrup (2004, 86) to suggest that “physically encountered reality” reinforces “imaginative geography,” enabling tourists to make these experiences “part of their lives and identities.”

Each of these ideas leads us toward an understanding of how meaning making proceeds through action and embodied presence in specific places already inscribed with sediments of meaning, ready to be activated through new overlays with each encounter. The literal re-sculpting of muscles by the act of walking for days, weeks, along the Camino in Spain corresponds with the spiritual remodeling so many seek through this act of making a pilgrimage. The “doing” counts and is central to how meaning emerges.

The one chapter in this book that turns away from physical presence as a ground of meaning takes us into the virtual reality of Facebook, where bodily materiality evaporates and can be masked through avatars. Here the physical body of the Facebook person/persona can be decoupled by death, with the persona living on through continued interaction by the deceased’s “friends.” In what ways is this a new genre of memory and memorialization and in what ways simply the digital version of remembering through reminiscence face to face, among members of a community who knew the deceased? The key word is “deceased”—the ceasing to function of the person’s physical body—“death” if not “social death.”

ON “DEATH” WITHOUT “DYING”

If “death” permeates our leisure practices, dying does not. That consistent omission is as crucial as what is contained in the book’s case studies. What none of these chapters nor the specific practices they analyze focus on are actual leisure encounters with dead bodies or with the often messy, unaesthetic, sometimes excruciating *process* of dying. Clean remnants of the dead (ancient, un-individuated piles of ossuary bones, for example); sites where people died in the past; imagined and desired but never seen “walking dead” or “zombies”; and encounters with happy heritage

pigs, once admired grunting on the hoof, now magically transformed (offsite) to meat on the plate—all of these do not foster experiences that confront the facticity of dead bodies, their materiality in flesh and blood, in scent and substance. We encounter death without dying.

The one chapter in the book that does link tourism and an actual dead body is about the death of a tourist on holiday in Indonesia and sensitively explores the local community's complex response to this death of an outsider and its logistical, ethical, and social demands. But that chapter is about the aftermath of an unexpected death while on a leisure vacation, not about seeking leisurely encounters with the dead. The other counterexample, examining the enjoyment of gossiping at a Greek funeral with the recently deceased in place, reconfigures "mourning" to include a range of behaviors, including the subtly gleeful, under the imprimatur of funereal customs. But even here the body is "clean," prepared for display to insiders, community members, and family and not subject to inspection by casual leisure seekers or observed dying or putrefying. This type of display might fall in the realm of what Kathleen Adams calls in her chapter the "pornography of the macabre."

Let's push the entanglements of death and leisure farther. Can we imagine leisure practices inserted not only into the invocation of "death" but also into the process of dying? Can we imagine, for example, tours to the hospice-sponsored hospital rooms of the "authentically dying?" Perhaps as a way to raise expenses for end-of-life care? Unthinkable? Or perhaps we can imagine the development of niche tourism, focusing on tourism for the terminally ill. We are all dying, but only some of us know it is imminent. Does this knowledge create a new community with new leisure needs? New desires?

Pushing further still, is the suffering that is so often part of dying something that could conceivably be commodified and sold as a leisurely spectatorial experience, like going to the theater? Can we imagine an artist arranging to have put on display his or her own un-embalmed, un-plastinated, "natural" bodily remains so that people can observe decay—a public rendition of the FBI's forensic training site in North Carolina of decomposing bodies in situ called the Body Farm? These forms of leisure are unthinkable or nearly so. They are even hard to bring into the realm of the imagination because they cross, for many contemporary communities, an un-crossable line into an unseemly actual "pornography of death," to repurpose sociologist Geoffrey Gorer's still resonant term from more than half a century ago (Gorer 1955). They link up with unbearable spectacles (like snuff films, ISIS videos of beheadings, or earlier public executions). Perhaps there are communities where a witnessing of the dying process is a socially sanctioned public leisure zone—but for many communities around the world, the process of death is sutured to the medical and religious/spiritual realms. Based on the evidence in this book, we can

say that at the intersection of leisure and death, adrenalin is in, putrefaction is out. Remembering the historical dead is in, but actually seeing the dying is out.

Ultimately, the chapters in this book pose a challenge for us. Crafted with careful attention to cultural specificity; rendered with closely observed, empathic, and thoughtfully analyzed detail, the observations here provide us with numerous comparative opportunities. As capacious as it is, this book makes no claims to being “global” or all-comprehensive. No responsible ethnography could or would do so. Yet the variety here is substantial, in terms of locales and communities and events and practices under consideration. Given that variety, what is missing is striking and just as important as what is present.

If, as this volume suggests, death is everywhere in many people’s leisure practices, the realm of leisure, however we understand it in this book, does not encompass the dying or the decaying bodies of the newly dead. This remains—even in “postmodernity” with its CSI televisual embrace of postmortem visuals and even in the age of “selfies” at funerals—a sanctified realm, a physically intimate one, as yet off limits to the types of public practices investigated here. Ultimately “dying,” not “death,” may mark the limits of contemporary leisure.

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