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The Art of Life and Death is the second book in HAU's series of Malinowski Monographs which are aimed at constructing innovative, ethnographically-inspired theory. Drawing upon twenty years of fieldwork in New York City, Andrew Irving traces the imaginative lifeworlds of persons living with HIV/AIDS as they try to make sense of, and make the most of, what remains of their lives. Interestingly, through the advent of antiretroviral medications, many of those whom Irving worked with in the late 1990s went on to live a future which they had not expected to see and which some had severed in anticipation of an early demise – from vast financial loans to drug addictions. While a book review could equally examine the themes of urban, visual, or medical anthropology, I here focus on the existential and phenomenological contributions. It is ironic to find such vivacity in a book concerned with (premature) mortality – yet that is the author's very point: life and death, like many dualisms, give meaning to each other. Attitudes towards death are shown to vary "within and between situations: during times of illness, when drunk, when playing music, when walking, when looking at the ocean, or when laughing" (p.11). It is inferred that such elasticity in outlook – to whatever subject matter – is in some ways the case for us all. Irving underlines how the course of a single day can entail dramatic undulations in mood, and how equally, the human life course is perpetually subject to the alterity of the future.

The book's most central themes regard the contingency, situatedness, and dynamism of human experience, and the subsequent utility of non-static, phenomenological ethnography. Through six theoretically-driven data chapters, framed by a gripping introduction and a politicized conclusion, we are introduced to a series of brave characters whom Irving has worked with independently over many years. Through an ethnographic-near "face-to-face" methodology we see how the variables affecting individual lives oscillate and intersect, from rhythms of income to fluctuations of health. Elsewhere, the anthropological gaze has been oriented towards ever-emergent futures as much as any traditions of the past (Appadurai, 2013; Salazar, Pink, Irving, and Sjöberg, 2017), and we here see how chance, luck (good or bad), the unforeseeable, and the uncertain distinctively shape life trajectories. From irrevocable events such as contracting a disease to the implications of which way one turns down the road, each refraction of potentiality in these New Yorkers' lives is at the expense of alternative outcomes and the cascades of different consequences these might have produced. In this way, the ethnography aims to partially convey the universal human condition: a mortal life course that is born out of arbitrariness, elaborated through endless overlapping contingencies, and strewn with the counter-factual conditional tense of 'what if' various scenarios had panned out a different way.

The subheading of the book, "radical aesthetics," represents the nuances in people's senses and perceptions which may – dependent on body, health, and context – combine, disaggregate, decline, or disappear. The membrane of the self may be permeated differently, moment-by-moment:

“Depending on the person, it might be a certain quality of light, turn in the weather, shade of green, or shape of a building that calls to mind his or her regret over a particular word spoken out of turn, a failed dream, or an unfinished conversation” (p. 127).

Such a sensitivity to what may trigger certain streams of consciousness appears particularly apt in the context of working with the elderly. This point has ethical implications, reminding us that the questions that we ask in the field may recall unwanted fears, repressed memories, or things best left unsaid. Yet equally, an attunement to how people react to visual and sensory stimuli can open doors for creative methods magnifying people’s attachments to times and places beyond their immediacies; for instance, in my own work with young people, using a world map to discuss diasporic geographies and perceptions of travel (Loewenthal and Broughton, 2018). A concomitant dimension of “radical aesthetics” concerns the many striking artworks which feature in color across the text. Irving’s participants are artists whose varied compositions provide compelling insights into people’s responses to mortality, reclaimed life, and the meanings that mediate the two. Nonetheless, their occupations and abilities do create a bias in the findings towards the ‘radically aesthetic,’ such as might be different for less artistically inclined sufferers. Further to Irving’s eloquence and empathy describing the relationship between the artists and their work, there is boundless innovation, such as repeatedly bringing artworks from New York to his other field site in Uganda to be cross-culturally interpreted.

There are two central critiques of traditional anthropology in the book. The first, which there is little space to discuss here, regards the primacy so often ascribed to collective structures and cultural or national frameworks in conceptualizing people’s lives. Similar to arguments made by Nigel Rapport (2012), Irving shows how the tendency to compartmentalize people according to their shared upbringing, ethnic group, sexuality, or so on can mask the idiosyncrasies of their biographies, fantasies, and bodies. His second critique concerns the epistemological propensity towards exteriority and observable symbols as forms of evidence. In response, he experiments with collaborative methods to render audible people’s inner speech as they contemplate life situations within everyday settings. In one moving example, a participant re-walks his journey to and from the clinic where he received his HIV+ diagnosis while recounting into a microphone the chronological thoughts that had passed through his head on that day. This journey is repeated three times with modifications to the visual, aural, and interactive methodology. The strengths of such methods regard the elicitation of memory, affect, and experience *in situ* and through action. Limitations include the consciousness of participants towards an imagined audience, and the need to ‘stage’ such encounters – although a similar critique can be levelled at most structured methods.

Readers interested in the role of space in mediating age and aging will benefit from Irving’s critical use of Merleau-Ponty. Throughout the ethnography, human experiences of landscape are shown to be contingent upon people’s unique situations and the associated thoughts which occupy their minds. For instance, Manhattan is described as:

“... a grid of straight-edged, commerce-lined streets and avenues that continuously enable citizens to look far into the future and work toward an economically productive life and retirement. After diagnosis those same commerce-lined avenues, brandishing their assorted messages of pensions, retirement plans, and medicines promising a long and healthy life, ceased to have much meaning for Frank, Holly, Benjamin, and many others” (p. 64).

The meanings which even familiar spaces evoke are hence shown to be susceptible to change over time. The temporal versatility of meaning is further evidenced through senses of foreboding or retrospect ascribed to everyday dialogue. In the context of people living with terminal illness, simple remarks such as “see you later” (p. 53) may carry a mutual unspoken understanding of possibly *not* meeting again; meanwhile, a casual encounter that does turn out to be the last may only later be inscribed with significance.

A key strength of this remarkable ethnography comes from the intimate and longitudinal methodology. As people's circumstances and outlooks dialectically transform, the author's points about contingency and situated perception speak for themselves. The implications of this are that we should not overly theorize peoples' lives based upon singular static snapshots from one encounter. Indeed, these represent just a moment in time. The degree of rapport and collaboration in this study may, however, be difficult to attain in other contexts. In instances of vulnerability, sickness, and possible death researchers can feel a burden simply 'hanging around' or asking for an interview, never mind experimenting with ethnographic methods. A further issue in translating this ethnography elsewhere relates to the methodological individualism which here serves as a strength. Befriending singular persons and treating their lives case by case may be fitting for New York, though perhaps not in places where lives are not socially organized or culturally valued so individually. A final issue in extrapolating the theory and methods from this case study of persons living with HIV/AIDS to other contexts, such as I am suggesting, is that the framework is overly 'Heraclitan' – from Heraclitus, famed for stating that 'no man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.' Though lives are in motion, for many people around the world, the life course is constituted by consistency, ritual, and familiarity.

This book would be of interest to anyone looking to explore people's dynamic, perceptive, and reflective outlook on the world – whether looking to the future, contemplating death, or simply being alive. For those interested in the anthropology of art, illness, time, or urbanism it is also rich. While literature in cognitive or psychological anthropology is not particularly referenced, the work would also be of interest to scholars in those fields. Perhaps most of all, the text would be highly instructive to students for demonstrating the extent of complexity and fascination that can be unearthed through lines of inquiry rarely touched upon in traditional syllabuses. As an anthropology undergraduate, I was left alienated by early encounters with Lévy-Bruhl and Radcliffe-Brown and as a lecturer, I am still disappointed by the somewhat dated ethnographies that we are told to suggest. No curious anthropology student – or for that matter, person – would be left un-inspired or non-transformed by this text and I implore as wide a readership as possible.

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