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Memento Mori and Tourist Encounters with Authentic Death in European Ossuaries

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In a world that offers tourists simulated experiences of cremation (Chow 2015), it appears that an increasing number of individuals are pursuing a remarkably diverse array of encounters with mortality.[1] Indeed, much of the contemporary dark tourism literature echoes current trends in popular death discourse that accentuates an emerging openness and honesty surrounding death. Drawing on the work of authors such as Gorer (1965), Becker (1973), and Aries (1974), who noted that twentieth-century death was denied, sequestered, or taboo, this discourse acclaims an emerging societal shift that confronts rather than conceals human mortality (Staudt 2008). While the accuracy and analytical value of the death-denial thesis have been problematized (Kellehear 1984; Lee 2008; Zimmermann and Rodin 2004), this putative shift has been represented as an enlightened approach to death, inextricably linked to notions of "healthy," "natural," and "authentic" engagement with mortality (Schäfer 2014).

The trope of confrontation has become a recurring theme in the dark tourism discourse. Discussions of demand and visitor motivation, for example, have repeatedly emphasized that death and dying are sequestered in modern life and that dark tourism provides individuals with one significant way of engaging with fundamental questions of mortality. The rise of dark tourism has been explicitly linked to Western society's privatization, medicalization, and professionalization of death, with some authors declaring that this form of tourism has contributed to a contemporary revival of death in the public sphere (Stone 2009). Dark tourism

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sites not only provide spaces that mediate contemplations of mortality (Sharpley and Stone 2012; Stone and Sharpley 2008; Stone 2009, 2011) but also allow visitors to construct ontological frameworks in secular society (Stone 2012; Stone and Sharpley 2014). Authors such as Seaton (2009) have augmented these assessments, arguing that interpretations of dark tourism that privilege a sequestration thesis neglect the prevalence of death and dying in contemporary society. Rather than constituting a distinctly modern phenomenon that emerged in response to a societal denial of death, dark tourism (or what Seaton [2009] describes as thanatourism) can also be located in a historical tradition of thanatopsis (contemplation of death) that has evolved since the Middle Ages and the Christian cult of the dead (Seaton 1996, 240). Other authors, such as Walter (2009), have extended this debate by arguing that dark tourism sites are rarely spaces that promote prosaic encounters with mortality, tending to instead accentuate certain forms of human suffering and death.

This chapter specifically examines one form of dark tourism that centers on the display of skeletal remains in ossuaries or charnel houses. Stone and Sharpley (2014, 56) argue that sites that display the dead have long been associated with societal taboos but that these proscribed spaces are increasingly translucent in late modern society. A number of authors have similarly asserted that displays of the dead provide one of the few available means for people to explore their own death and broader meaning frameworks. Sayer (2010), for example, has argued that funerary archaeology is one of the ways people can encounter a corpse and ponder their own demise. Another form of display that has received significant academic scrutiny has been Günther von Hagen's *Body Worlds* exhibition featuring plastinated bodies. Some authors have argued that these de-personalized bodies privilege a scientific gaze (Walter 2004; Moore and Brown 2007), presenting a purified form of death that eliminated physical signs of putrefaction and posed no risk of contamination or decay (Desmond 2008). Others have argued that such exhibits also raise existential questions about life and death (Jagger, Dubek, and Pedretti 2012) and the transience of human life (Leiberich et al. 2006). At a popular level, charnel houses themselves have been the subject of recent non-fiction writing that reiterates the significance of confronting death through encounters with skeletal remains (Inge 2014).

By drawing on participant observation at ossuaries in Germany and the Czech Republic over a three-month period (January–March 2015), this chapter explicates some of these themes to examine a disconnect between organizers' and visitors' ways of seeking engagements with death that inform these encounters. On close inspection, this disconnect suggests a more complex and multilayered engagement than a simple shift from sequestering to confronting death.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHARNEL HOUSES

In Europe, charnel houses or ossuaries have been repositories for the remains of the dead since at least the twelfth century (Kenzler 2014, 12–13). Limited cemetery space and the Catholic belief in resurrection[2] (Walker Bynum, 1995) were two significant factors that contributed to the proliferation of double burial (Hertz 1960), where skeletons were exhumed after the decomposition of the flesh and placed in consecrated and dedicated buildings close to churchyards. The linked practices of double burial and constructing charnel houses meant that these constructions were not only "associated with an intense reverence for the dead" (Goody and Poppi 1994, 147) but also provided waiting places for souls and "a space where the living could engage in a dialogue with the dead" (Höpfl 1989, 27–28). This combined materiality and symbolism and early descriptions indicate that the sites became important Christian *memento mori* (remember you are mortal).

While *memento mori* provide visible reminders of human mortality and are not specific to Christianity (Inge 2014, 84), they are seen as core Christian eschatological emblems because *memento mori* "remind the beholder of death and urge him [*sic*] to behave morally" (Cohen 1973, 3). More often than not, these charnel houses contained gathered skulls and femurs arranged in no particular order. As the most durable bones in the human body, skulls and femurs (or crossbones) were the least likely to decay in the first burial. This physical phenomenon is also linked to their symbolic status as highly potent death symbols, in particular their association with Christian resurrection; "common tradition has it that a femur and a skull were prerequisite for a resurrection, and to this day you will see many more femurs and skulls than anything else preserved in charnel houses and ossuaries" (Inge 2014, 87).

Although charnel houses may initially have been little more than storage spaces for bones exhumed to make more room in consecrated burial ground, especially in times of increased mortality such as the plague, they became a contextually specific form of *memento mori*, providing "tangibly present instances of disappearance" (Hallam 2010, 471). This form, in line with contemporary understandings of the Resurrection, "erased unique individuality and imposed anonymity on human remains waiting for Judgement Day" (Koudounaris 2011, 101).

In line with the increasingly prominent place of the church in late medieval life and its focus on organizing people's lives, charnel houses became prominent symbolic structures that accentuated the visibility of human transience; their role was increasingly associated with "a range of sacred functions" (Koudounaris 2011, 22–23). During these times the hierarchy of senses associated with spiritual significance shifted from touch (as in being able to touch religious relics that may confer spiritual connection) to sight; being able to see a religious object became the dominant organizing principle for people's engagement with religious artifacts (Hallam

and Hockey 2001, 47–48). By the end of the fourteenth century, they became exhibits or literal reminders of the need for piety, with skeletal remains "arranged around the courtyard of the church so as to form a backdrop for the daily life of those sensual times" (Aries 1981, 61).

Ossuaries have undergone significant change over the past centuries. A number of historical factors, including changing relationships between the living and the dead, "contributed to the eventual disappearance of these ossuaries" (Guerrini, 2015, 100–101). For instance, many "charnels were probably cleared at the Reformation, when the notion of bones as sacred relics and an encouragement to intercessory prayer was suppressed, and the practice of respectfully storing them was discontinued" (Harding 2002, 64). Although the Counter-Reformation initiated an escalation in the elaborate display of the dead, many but not all of the ossuaries were abandoned in the increasingly modern eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some charnels were lost, only to be discovered in more recent times; others, such as at Sedlec, were maintained through recent centuries. Those that remained, like the one at Sedlec, entered a new phase of display in the nineteenth century. These ossuaries were rearranged in ways that not only characterized a "Romantic sensibility" that increasingly recognized individuality but also marked a more general shift from sacred meaning to secular attitudes and popular culture as Europe moved toward the Enlightenment (Koudounaris 2011, 93). Rearrangements toward individualization included, for instance, the boxed skulls at the ossuary of St. Hilaire Cemetery in Marville, France, that "record the name and date of death and sometimes also list names of spouses, as well as inscribing the names and date of death on the deceased's skull," as in the Chapel of S. Michael Hallstatt, Austria" (Koudounaris 2011, 125, 126). These ossuaries are now significant tourist sites (Seaton 2002; Tanaś 2008).

OSSUARIES AS AUTHENTIC TOURIST EXPERIENCES OF THANATOPSIS: THE RESEARCH SITES

Fieldwork was conducted in five ossuaries across Czechoslovakia and Germany during the northern winter of 2013–14. The primary site included in the study was the cemetery of the Church of All Saints in Sedlec, Czechoslovakia. Following the foundation of a Cistercian monastery in Sedlec in 1142 and a cemetery in the thirteenth century, the site became a particularly desirable burial space after an abbot returned from his pilgrimage to the Holy Land and scattered soil from Golgotha in the graveyard. The popularity of this site throughout central Europe—augmented by fables, plagues, and, later, wars—contributed to a profusion of burials and the construction of a charnel house in 1400.

A folktale tells of a belief held around Europe that the ground at Sedlec could "rot the body swiftly, thus releasing the soul to Paradise. This theory spawned a myth that burial at Sedlec would guarantee a place in heaven within three days of death" (Inge 2014, 71). Accorded great popularity, the cemetery filled many times over, and bones were piled up in local churches. The bones of the dead were removed after primary burial, deposited in the chapel, and later transferred to the charnel house on the lower level of the cemetery chapel (Kratzke 2009, 201; Hornya 2001, 36).

While a fable recalls that it was a half-blind monk who first piled the bones into pyramids in 1512 to make order from the chaos, the chapel was redesigned a number of times in the ensuing centuries, including Baroque modifications completed in the eighteenth century by Jan Santini Aichl. The monastery was dissolved by Josef II in 1784 and sold to the Schwarzenberg family, which hired artist Frantisek Rint to remodel the chapel in the 1860s. In addition to four of the earlier pyramids, Rint added bone chandeliers, chalices, monstrances (an open or transparent receptacle in which the consecrated Host is displayed for veneration), a series of garlands, and four spires lined with skulls in the center of the ossuary. His bone creations also included the Schwarzenberg coat of arms and so reflected the ossuary's shift from religious to secular times, from medieval to modern hands. More recently, the ossuary's proximity to Prague "contributed to the increasing popularity of this site as a tourist attraction after the fall of communism, becoming the focus of numerous films and documentaries" (Koudounaris 2011, 100).

The other sites included in this study are perhaps less well-known than Sedlec but are nevertheless important tourist attractions in Germany. St. Martin's Basilica in Greding in Bavaria, Germany, features a chapel and charnel constructed in the fourteenth century to accommodate the growing population in the region. The ossuary underwent a number of reconstructions, including Romantic and Baroque additions, before renovations in 1905 re-created the style and character of the medieval charnel. Constituting the skulls and femurs of approximately 2,500 bodies, "the bones at St. Martin's Basilica were reorganised at this time into their present arrangement" (Braun 1999–2000, 219–20). A similar charnel and cemetery chapel can be found in the church of St. Michael in the Franconian town of Iphofen. The ossuary (*beinhaus* in German) was used to store the skeletal remains of people who had been buried in the constrained cemetery spaces from the fourteenth century until 1690, when the graveyard was abandoned for nearly 300 years. In 1960 the bones in the ossuary were removed to a local burial site, and it was not until 1998 that the buried remains were transferred back to the ossuary and the charnel was reconstructed using historical photographs (fig. 7.1).

URE 7.1. Ossuary Q30, Iphofen, Germany. Image by Cyril Schäfer.

Two further ossuaries in this ethnographic study include the charnel houses in Chammünster and Oppenheim, both in Germany. The small ossuary in Chammünster is located in the cemetery at St. Mary's church. Established in the thirteenth century, the charnel was abandoned after the Reformation and only rediscovered in 1820. In response to community concerns about groundwater contamination and damage to the bones from groundwater seepage, a new floor was made when the ossuary was repaired and reorganized in 1902 by a local teacher, who separated the skulls and bones into their present arrangement.

Figure 7.2. Michaelskapelle ossuary, Oppenheim, Germany, contains the skeletal remains of over 20,000 people. Image by Cyril Schäfer.

Finally, the largest remaining ossuary in Germany, containing the bones of an estimated 20,000 people, can be found in the Rhineland-Palatinate town of Oppenheim (fig. 7.2). Located next to the church of St. Catherine, the chapel of St. Michael (Michaelskapelle) was first used in the early fifteenth century and was continually used for secondary burials until 1750 (Wieser 2006). The "current arrangement of bones appears to date from the latter 19th century" (Koudounaris 2011, 36), although local villagers renovated the ossuary in the 1950s and at that time erected the gate that now separates visitors from the skeletal remains.

These ossuaries are predominantly filled with skulls and femurs. This is partly due because of the likely disintegration of small bones during first burial but also because they embody the Christian symbolism that underpinned their existence; keeping these particular bones was linked to pervading Resurrection beliefs that they would suffice on Judgment Day. Linked to the desire of the living for the salvation of the souls of the dead on Resurrection Day, "the living engaged with these sites as places to encounter the bones as powerful relics to whom they pray for intercessionary help both for the dead and for the living" (Cohen 1973, 70).

AUTHENTICATING ENCOUNTER: CHARNEL HOUSE RULES

Using an ethnographic approach, this project includes observation, informal interviews, and discourse analysis in an attempt to elucidate contemporary tourist experiences of these four ossuaries and their displays of skeletal remains. Drawing on the interdisciplinary work of dark tourism scholars and anthropological studies of authenticity, tourist encounters with displays of the dead are assessed by contextualizing these responses with the discourses of site administrators and affiliated tourist services.

The analytical approach was to draw on Bruner's tactic of examining authenticity "only when the tourists, the locals, or the producers themselves use the term" (Bruner 2005, 5) and Kaul's strategy of employing the notion of credibility as a means to conceptually examine the use of authenticity so as to "leave room for the existentially authentic experiences of any actor with any level of knowledge about a performance," or in this case bone exhibit, while also recognizing that some actors "have a deeper epistemological ability to assess a particular performance [exhibit] in relation to its quality and its historical continuity" (Kaul 2009,161).

Authenticity emerged as a fundamental term employed by both site administrators and tourists in their attempts to emphasize the significance of encounters with skeletal remains. The manner in which each group framed authenticity is revealing. Both groups juxtaposed themselves against a jointly perceived modernist superficiality and a concomitant disengagement with death, from which both groups sought to distance themselves. This distancing is akin to what Bruner calls the deprecation of tourists by other tourists. This deprecation of others' superficiality sets "them apart from those other travellers, who, they said, were mere tourists" (Bruner 2005, 7). Anthropologically, this distancing from perceived superficiality reveals pervading Western narratives about not only social hierarchy but also the complexity of equivocation over perceived anxieties of modern society as death denying. Both groups underscored the importance of identifying and extracting meanings that transcended the materiality of the bones. They did this through recourse to diverse discourses of authenticity. Both managers and visitors sought "authentic encounters"; however, each group approached its understandings of authenticity through distinctive and at times competing logics. Managers discussed authenticity in terms of transparency, while visitors talked about it in terms of veracity, trying to suspend their disbelief that the bones were real. Yet despite these aspirations of authentic encounters and in line with Rapport (2009) in the challenge of attaining the desired connection, both expressed doubts about their ability to achieve the authentic encounters they sought. The manner of their doubts is revealed through problematic engagements with the materiality of the bones. Managers struggled with the limits of transparency, while visitors wrestled with limits to their capacity to believe in the veracity of the bones. Such aspirations and doubts suggest a partial

and complex acceptance of death in which death as an event is no longer denied but the material putrefaction associated with death remains taboo.

Fieldwork involved meeting with various ossuary officials—people involved with the ossuary in some capacity or another as tour guide, administrator, working archaeologist, retired sexton, or manager. Meeting at the sites and walking around the exhibits with them elicited impromptu commentaries that were supplemented by more formalized interviews where they were asked about their opinions on and, if relevant, how they were involved in managing tourist experiences of the ossuaries. Tourists were approached after their visit to the ossuary; approximately a dozen who were willing were interviewed onsite about their experiences.

READING BONES: TRANSPARENCY AND REVERENCE

The discourse generated by the dark site managers prioritized transparency about death as well as educational objectives to demonstrate requisite levels of respect and dignity for the dead as a means to generate the context for authentic encounters, or a full emotional engagement with death for visitors. In addition to providing access to socially sequestered spaces, managers and administrators emphasized the need for visitors to be guided to move beyond perfunctory perusals of the bones and engage with substantive existential or ontological themes, and they planned the spaces and tours to achieve that goal.

One of the salient themes in the responses of ossuary administrators and tour guides was the significance of *memento mori* in late modern society. *Memento mori*, or reminders of mortality, found expression in a variety of artistic forms in the late medieval and early modern periods. These historic versions included the *danse macabre*, a medieval allegorical concept of the all-conquering and equalizing power of death expressed in the drama, poetry, and visual arts of Western Europe. It is a "literal or pictoral representation of a procession or dance of both living and dead figures, the living arranged in order of their rank, from pope and emperor to child, clerk, and hermit, and the dead leading them to the grave" (Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed February 9, 2016, https://www.britannica.com/art/dance-of-death-art-motif). The *danse macabre* represented the frailty and vanity of earthly things, as well as the universality and unpredictability of human death (Huizinga 1999 [1924]). Other well-known *memento mori* included the legend of the Three Living and Three Dead, which illustrated the human embodiment of decay, and the *transi* (cadaver tombs), which featured the effigy of a decomposing corpse (Binski 1997, 134–52). These *memento mori* "contained observations on the mortality of man, and . . . used [the following] device for appealing directly to the spectator: the words 'I was like you and you will be like me.' In the *memento mori* inscriptions

these words were followed by admonitory phrases such as 'Do good to all while you can' or 'Only good works will count' . . . stressing the need for good behavior" (Cohen 1973, 44).

Memento mori differ from mementos, as mementos are keepsakes associated with specific individuals or events; they hold private memories rather than social messages. The skulls, bones, and decaying flesh that featured in these representations accentuated the brevity of earthly life and the salvation of the soul, encouraging viewers to contemplate their own mortality. Such reflection emphasized the significance of piety and reminded the living of the sin inextricably linked with salvation (Oosterwijk 2004, 64), demonstrating that the relations of the living and the dead were intrinsically embedded in religious cultures (Gordon and Marshall 2000, 3). Although the style and emphasis of *memento mori* evolved in the ensuing centuries, certain images such as skulls remained popular on jewelry and memorial headstones. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the macabre images were superseded by a new variant of *memento mori* that expressed increasing interest in anatomical knowledge and eventually incorporated increasingly secularized representations that combined playful and romantic images with skeletal crania in the nineteenth century (Kearl 2014, 4; Guerrini 2015, 94).

These historical expressions varied significantly from contemporary understandings proffered by participants. The site administrators and tour guides included in this study linked *memento mori* with changing attitudes toward death in late modern society. Instead of understanding these displays as reminders of one's earthly moral responsibilities, as in their original medieval intent, site administrators and tour guides across all sites saw these ossuaries as indicative of increasing death acceptance. Their point of reference for this claim was a disavowal of what they saw as the superficiality of modern life. Frequently alluding to the taboo nature of death in modern life, informants argued that life and death were inextricably linked but that the processes of individualization, medicalization, and secularization in the twentieth century had created a superficial and detrimental separation. Participants emphasized the importance of transparency and honesty in discussions of death, noting that modern life was pervaded by impediments to "openness," understanding "their" ossuaries as part of that edification. They asserted that displays of the dead were one significant way of proliferating transparency surrounding death, echoing Birchall's (2011, 8) contention that transparency has become a virtue: "the secular version of a born-again cleanliness that few can fail to praise."

Showing Cyril around the exhibits, administrators specifically noted that ossuaries had a clear educational role in transforming attitudes of denial and promoting a greater openness around death and dying by providing tourists with access to skeletal remains. Transparency in this context was associated with the visual display of

the bones, with site managers and administrators emphasizing that modern secrecy surrounding death had been replaced with late modern pellucidity (allowing maximum passage of undistorted light). This emphasis "reflects the cultural importance of sight within western epistemology" and its intrinsic link to transparency and knowledge (Classen 1997, 402). Concerned that tourists may leave the exhibits without fully engaging with theirs' and others' mortality, site managers, administrators, and guides were ambivalent about what strategies contributed most effectively to this educational objective. This ambivalence can be linked to critiques of "the tourist gaze," in that the sense of sight is similarly associated with a "superficial form of engagement that neglected other sensory experiences and the time required for adequate immersion and cognizance" (Urry and Larsen 2011, 18).

This ambivalence can be found in the differing ways those involved in the organization and management of the ossuaries approached the displays of bones. On the one hand, administrators felt the dramatic bone displays enforced the universality of death and accentuated the superficiality of socially constructed categories such as ethnicity, religion, and gender. Two German guides, for example, stressed that the ossuaries in Oppenheim and Greding contained the remains of former political and religious enemies from past centuries that now lay undifferentiated in the charnel houses, providing a potent reminder of the physical homogeneity of human remains. An archaeologist involved in a reconstruction of the Sedlec ossuary, on the other hand, explained that historically, the large number of bones would have had an impact on visitors but that few contemporary visitors would engage with these remains at a "deeper level." Together with the manager of the site, he articulated the need to provide more contextual information for tourists and to make the anonymous bones more familiar. Skulls and bones created a very "flat history of the dead" (Mark, archaeologist) and did little to engage the sustained interest of the visitor. One way to instill more respect and comprehension, according to this informant, was to re-personalize the remains. Archaeological attempts to re-create some of the physical features of the face and body, in addition to the provision of more detailed information about the dead, would contribute to the construction of a biography and counter the culture of "selfies" that eroded any respect for the dead.

Selfies (photographs taken of oneself with a smartphone and shared through social media) (see Kohn et al., this volume) were frequently described by the resident archaeologist at Sedlec as an exemplar of triviality that epitomized narcissism, conceit, and a lack of respect for, in this case, death and the dead. Authors such as Hornya (2001, 46–48), when describing a similar ambivalence about tourist behavior, have further argued that the tourist gaze is itself indicative of an unhealthy relationship with death and that contemporary visitor motivations associated with unrestricted access to human remains are a conspicuous component of the

banalization of death and dying. Recent research has critically assessed the significance of these images, arguing that debates over the meaning and import of taking such selfies is an aspect of the "heightened public discourse" that brings disparagement of the perceived modern eschewal of death together with moral panic narratives "associated with young people and their use of digital media" (Meese et al. 2015, 1818–19). Nevertheless, managers of charnel houses stipulated that this form of representation rarely progressed beyond what they called "a surface reading," or superficial engagement with the bones.

Although selfies were described disparagingly as shallow and perfunctory, there was considerable disagreement about the control and restriction of photography. While some sites, such as the Polish Kaplica Czazek, strictly precluded all forms of photography, others felt such restrictions simply contributed to the aforementioned sequestration of death. Currently Sedlec, for example, allows unrestricted amateur photography, as do the ossuaries visited in southern Germany. Although the parish at Sedlec had previously considered restricting the use of cameras, when interviewed, the director emphasized that it was extremely difficult to monitor all forms of photography and that photographs were a very productive way of promoting the site—as the thousands of micro-blogging, social networking, and photo-sharing websites appear to confirm.[3]

Related to concerns about photography at the sites were discussions about the requisite respect and reverence "paid" to the dead by managers and tourists. Brochures produced by a number of sites, including Sedlec, emphasized that ossuaries were linked to notions of piety. Piety was described by managers as incompatible with "tourist attraction," which they felt was itself the nomenclature of banality. In the ephemeral literature produced, such as tour pamphlets and tourist website pages, ossuaries were frequently defined as places that retained some connection to Christian-meaning frameworks and that an element of veneration for the dead was ideally a component of visitor motivations. Some managers maintained, however, that such expectations were increasingly unrealistic in a secular age and that these frameworks had been superseded by a profusion of spiritual forms. This spirituality provided an opportunity for "implanting in people the meaning of the place" (Michael, site manager) and for visitors to derive meaning that transcended a cursory perusal of the physical remains.

The former sexton at St. Catherine's church in Oppenheim felt that one of his crucial tasks was to guide people to the appropriate interpretation of the bones in the ossuary. His concern was that contemporary visitors rarely had the relevant knowledge or background to comprehend the intended significance of these skeletal remains. He explained that people from former communist countries, for example, were unfamiliar with religious frameworks that would allow them to extract

the meanings the sexton was familiar with from their encounter with the bones. According to this former sexton, these people's ignorance of Christian doctrine was conspicuous and contributed to a presumed superficial engagement that involved very limited contemplation of mortality. One of his roles was therefore to mediate between the living and the dead; he saw himself balancing decorum and respect with the appropriate interest and information so that tourists would extract some personal meaning from the remains in ways that could in some way resonate with the "domestic" and thus, according to this sexton, create an authentic engagement with the ossuary. This mirrors Bruner's point that while they may be articulated through essentializing discourses, as is the case with this sexton, "sites themselves are not passive for they are given meaning and are constituted by the narratives that envelope them" (Bruner 2005, 12).

Site managers and administrators discussed the significance of the physical ossuary space and how the condition of the ossuary contributed to visitor experiences. Although all of the ossuaries were hundreds of years old—and some in serious disrepair after decades and often centuries of neglect—managers noted that this was not the form of authenticity desired by tourists. The Sedlec manager, for example, explained that restoration of the deteriorating ossuary might itself create a less "distracting" space that would avoid any possible Disneyified displays. For Sedlec's manager, "Disneyified" meant displays that were too peculiar and acted as curios that would distract visitors from the desired experience of reverence and respect rather than referring to the process of vulgarization of the presented cultural content (Bryman 1999). Supporting Taussig's (2006, 198) assessment that the ossuary at Sedlec goes beyond art and converts the bone displays into "pure kitsch, draining the bones of whatever reverential and religious potential they might have," the manager reiterated the need to create a deeper engagement with the skeletal remains through the elimination of extraneous factors. These factors included tourists getting in the way of each other's engagement with the exhibits, for example, jostling for position to take photographs, which was believed to be incongruous with the managers' expectation that visitors would engage with the ossuary with dignity and understanding.

One further concern for some site managers was the condition of the skeletal remains. Discussions of the bones typically shifted to their presentation, color, and arrangement, with participants emphasizing the need for ordered displays that reflected the requisite reverence and dignity:

> "As an anthropologist you will want to see the bones more closely," the administrator [at the diocese office] remarked as she led me to the Totenkappelle [chapel for the dead]. Behind the imposing church tower, she shuffled to the iron gate that protected the dead from the living and carefully descended the small stairs into the ossuary with

> ancient vaulted ceilings. She closed the gate, declaring that some of her colleagues were extremely uncomfortable in the presence of death as she did so. She glanced at the carefully arranged strata of skulls and femurs that lined the ossuary wall before motioning to a chaotic accumulation of bones in the far corner of the ossuary. Unlike the gray edentate skulls so deliberately arranged to peer benignly at any visitors, these bones lay in disarray on the floor, perfectly hidden from the tourists standing at the gate. The bones had not been cleaned and displayed the unmistakable signs of burial and decomposition, while the tufts of orange and brown hair provided potent signs of personhood. "Those unsavory remains," she remarked, "do not need to be seen." (Field notes, February 11, 2015)

The bones she was describing referred to the remains that had been uncovered in more recent excavation and building projects and not been incorporated into the historical ossuary display. As with a number of smaller ossuaries in surrounding areas that were not publicly accessible, it was clear that certain forms of disposal and burial were not appropriate forms of *memento mori* or suitable for public display. This sense of appropriate or inappropriate displays is a theme explored in Kathleen Adams's chapter in this volume on "zombie" mortuary tourism. It also underpins Desmond's (2008) study of taxidermied animals and plastinated corpses. As several site managers and tour guides noted, clean bones made people feel safe while any reference to the process of decay generated distress and potential fear. As one tour guide in Greding articulated, the absence of any recognizable forms of personhood contributed to the creation of a space that paradoxically allowed visitors to contemplate death without being overwhelmed by the physical signs of corporeal deterioration. Unlike the historical *memento mori* outlined above, managerial participants in the project felt that decomposition and decay constituted an element of death that needed to be extricated from displays, as they got in the way of the exhibits' transparency and authenticity because such processes disrupted the desired level of engagement with mortality. While these participant responses accentuated transparency, it became clear that this shift to openness had contours that privileged a reading of the bones that avoided some obvious features of death and encouraged tourists to move beyond a focus on the physical. In sum, professional participants were ambivalent about what precisely constituted engagement with the displays but articulated the significance of religious frameworks, spirituality, and reverence for the dead.

READING BONES: "MACABRE BUT DELICIOUSLY CREEPY"

Tourists, in contrast, proffered accounts that centered on a desire to identify elements of "real" death. Their logic for achieving an authentic encounter was embedded in close examination and recording (through photos) the physical displays of bone.

Although few tourists in this study were specifically motivated to visit ossuaries to engage with mortality as suggested by Walter (2009), many described their experiences as gruesome, macabre, or creepy and an opportunity to encounter real death in an undomesticated setting. Despite their professed fascination, however, tourists also expressed a certain ambivalence about the purpose, function, and effect of the displays. Many tourist responses recalled the historical details produced by ossuary administrators and tour guides, with an emphasis on the establishment of the ossuary and the cultural significance of secondary burials. Tourists cited the religious importance of resurrection, with a specific interest in the causes of death and the number of bones contained in the ossuaries. Nevertheless, beyond these cursory assessments informed by the touristic literature, visitors provided varying interpretations of these dark sites that revealed how the concept of authenticity was mobilized to derive meaning from the displays. Authenticity was mobilized through seeking a sense of "realness" or veracity.

For some, ossuaries were an educational display that provided a form of prefatory, or introduction, to a scientific gaze, as also occurs in *Body Worlds* (Walter 2004). Of particular interest were the displayed bones that exhibited structural deformities, war injuries, or evidence of diseases (such as syphilis or arthritis), prompting a few tourists to consider the physical suffering associated with archaic ways of life. The trephination (drilling a hole in the skull while the individual was still alive) of a skull displayed at Sedlec was a particular source of fascination, with tourists emphasizing the crudeness and brutality of early medicine. Other tourists noted that the vast number of bones made profound statements about the universality of death and the fragility of human life. The assemblages of bones and the recurrent motifs created an apparent uniformity (Hallam 2010, 475–76) that encouraged some tourists to ponder the contemporary significance of a distinct individuality. A few visitors, in contrast, interpreted their exploration of dark tourist sites as abstruse encounters that contributed to their own biographical projects (commonly described as "bucket lists"), providing a tangible measure of biographical completeness in late modernity (see Jacobsen and Kearl 2013).

While some tourists felt that the impersonal and anonymized bones were a synecdoche of human mortality, others considered the de-personalized remains problematic, as they erased all features of an embodied presence and offered no biographical context to the objects before them. Objectifying the dead in this way eliminated all residues of individual biography and memory for a significant number of visitors. One of the frequent questions for tour guides focused on the appropriateness of publicly displaying the dead and, indeed, whether viewing the dead constituted a respectful practice. While some tourists acclaimed the artistic value of the bones—emphasizing the beauty and creativity of the

displays—others felt such representations were undignified and degraded the dead. Numerous comparisons were made with more contemporary ossuaries (viz. those in Cambodia), which tourists claimed exuded a reverence that was absent at sites such as Sedlec. A few visitors also noted that the uniform bone arrangements attempted to divest the dead of potency but that after they entered the ossuary they became aware of the presence of the dead housed in the charnel. For instance, one notably timorous tourist spent a considerable period hovering outside the ossuary entrance receiving insistent encouragement from her husband and the local tour guide, both asseverating that the chapel was decorated with "harmless bones." Upon tentatively entering the ossuary, she declared that she could "feel the dead" before abruptly turning and running out of the cemetery gates, her flustered husband announcing to the tour guide that her attitude was entirely "irrational and embarrassing."

Some tourists asserted that it was not the displays of the dead themselves that generated unease but the commodification of sites associated with death. These visitors noted that the entrance fees at some sites and the mass touristic appeal destroyed the requisite sanctity and solemnity of the site. For a few tourists, the souvenirs available at the affiliated gift shops vulgarized and depreciated the value of the site by prioritizing capitalist concerns and exploiting the dead.

Prolonged observation over several days also revealed other prominent themes that were not immediately evident in tourist explanations. One of the themes that emerged during the project was a desire for a degree of intimacy with the bones. While managers explained that the bones needed to be protected from the living and that enclosures provided necessary distance between the living and the dead, visitors frequently lamented the inaccessibility of bones in German ossuaries. Visitors would carefully maneuver their cameras through the iron bars to take photographs that provided an illusory proximity to the bones. These tourists explained that the displays were reminiscent of museum exhibits that only allowed for a very remote engagement with the remains. In the ossuary at Sedlec, in contrast, visitors deliberated on their accessibility to the skeletal remains and their ability to take unrestricted photographs. The skulls in particular were described by one tourist as "extremely photogenic," while another stated that it was exceedingly difficult to take a "bad photograph" in the ossuary. During most days of my research, the ossuary resonated with the monotonous sounds of digital cameras tirelessly capturing carefully orchestrated bone arrangements. In addition to eliminating extraneous elements (such as other tourists), visitors positioned their cameras to identify the surface features of the bones and to peer "deeply" into the apertures of the skulls. For some visitors this constituted an attempt to capture the essence of "real" bones and what they described as authentic representations of death.

Proximity and photography also contributed to a feeling of affinity with the dead. Some visitors described the beauty of the macabre, noting that initial anxieties about viewing the bones were often transformed into feelings of admiration or reverence. Associated with this perceived connection and a quest for the real was an express desire for an encounter that transcended the physicality of the remains and included elements of the spiritual, supernatural, or sacred. While a few tourists with religious backgrounds were familiar with prescribed rituals for the dead, many non-religious visitors felt that *wanted* to experience something that transcended the materiality of the bones and that they were receptive to spiritual possibilities. One tourist clearly stated that she felt a perpetual impulse to pray but had no idea what to pray for, while another noted that he was waiting for a sensory experience linked to the presence of so many dead: "I'm not the kind of person who goes to séances, but I thought there might have been something. I don't know. Like maybe a gust of wind or some type of energy or emotion. There are so many bones and so many dead people, but I didn't get any feeling."

Both of these participants specifically noted that the bones created a presumed level of intimacy with death but that there was something contrived about this relationship. In contrast to the majority of participants who referred to a disassociation between the bones and their own experiences of death, one participant explicitly noted that there were simply no frameworks to help her make sense of the display. Death is typically associated with prescribed mourning practices and emotional responses, which provide some context for these encounters. As this participant emphasized, however, the ossuaries were simply "piles of bones of people that died a long time ago." Along with other visitors who assessed the effect of the bones on any contemplation of mortality, this participant found herself asking particularly contemporary questions about the disposal of the bones in the hope of creating some connection to the dead: Was a charnel house their preferred method of disposal? What kinds of lives and personalities had been associated with the remains? Would the people mind that their bones were so intimately connected to other (potentially unrelated) bones? The temporal and spatial separation identified by administrators and tour guides as significant for contemplation of mortality were precisely the factors that contributed to a feeling of disassociation with the dead in this instance.

These responses resonate with Linke's (2005, 13) assessment of displays of plastinated bodies that "presented anonymised, aestheticized corpses devoid of any emotional engagement." Participants in the present project felt that this paucity of affect applied to spirituality. As one visitor recounted her experience of visiting the ossuary, she emphasized that she had felt "sad and somber" but that there was nothing more substantive—even though "there *should* have been a moment that was vaguely spiritual." The sense that this visitor's personal symbolic landscape was

out of harmony with the ossuary manager's intended effect of the displays recalls Rapport's (2009, 37) discussion of the impossibility of reconciling gruesome historical happenings "with any notion of everyday life." While site managers accentuated the need to derive meaning that transcended superficial scrutiny, non-religious participants frequently stated that the sites did not "feel truly spiritual." Some participants explained that they had imagined that a site replete with so many physical remains of death would exude a "natural spirituality" but that the elaborate displays detracted from spiritual reflection and the disarticulated bones exhibited a disorder of identity that appeared incongruous with spirituality. Participants frequently described spirituality as a universal human essence located inside each individual (see Hornborg 2011; Knoblauch 2010 for a discussion of culturally specific articulations of universal spirituality), and this spirituality contributed to the authenticity and gravitas of death. These descriptions emphasize "the significance of contemporary containment and boundedness after death" (Krmpotich, Fontein, and Harries 2010, 377) and the fact that the loss of skeletal integrity was "associated with erasure of individual identity" (Hallam 2010, 475).

Other tourists indicated that their quest for authentic death was closely connected to a semblance of silence and solitude but that the large numbers of tourists dissipated any such emanation. Although many tourists arrived in tour groups, these individuals also explained that the site required solitude to create a feeling of something transcendental but that the tourists at sites such as Sedlec diluted the experience they were searching for. While this distaste for the presence of other tourists displays the irony of tourism, these visitors also noted that death was traditionally associated with silence and that the inevitable auditory elements accompanying mass tourism subverted any attempts to create a feeling of the supernatural that might transcend the materiality of the remains.

These assessments also indicated that a focus on the visual was perceived by some individuals to be inextricably connected to the sanitizing tendencies of Western death practices. Such evaluations were characterized by an ambivalence surrounding sensory experiences. Visitors expressed relief that the ossuaries themselves were not marked by visual or olfactory signs that accompanied the process of putrefaction, yet this itself detracted from the authenticity of the experience. While anthropological explorations have elucidated the boundary-transgressing nature of smell and its proclivity to evade linear classificatory schema (Lawton 1998), Edensor (2006) has also suggested that contemporary concerns for sensory security coexist with desires for certain transcendent experiences. He goes on to note that certain modes of tourism engage with these sensualities, suggesting that "delight is found in the contingent and opening up of the body to sensation" (Edensor 2006, 42). Such experiences are intrinsically linked to the pursuance of the authentic other, as

well as the desire for cultural capital and projects of the self. Smell in particular was identified as something that many expected to confront in their encounters, but the bones themselves were significantly "cleaner" than many had anticipated. Some visitors noted that this created a display that reduced the potency or intensity of the remains and made the experience less "real" than they had anticipated.

Tourists explained that there was a current trend to use bones—particularly crania—in popular culture but that this "did not mean anything" in contemporary contexts (Scott, tourist in Greding). As Kearl (2014) has argued, depictions of skulls have been transformed from potent symbols of danger or reminders of human mortality to meaningless skulls that diminish the presence of the dead. He goes on to suggest that such insignificant symbols preclude any reflection on mortality (Kearl 2014, 15). Other authors have proffered a similar assessment, noting that "skull style" is an indication of a paradoxical preoccupation with death in a culture where ordinary death is sequestered from view (Foltyn 2010). While these authors stress that contemporary representations of bones disregard rather than confront mortality, the tourists emphasized that they tried to extract meaning from their encounters but felt, on reflection, that the meanings were impenetrable or, to use Rapport's phrase, "unencompassable" (Rapport 2009, 37), equivocal, or ambivalent. Unable to elicit the desired meaning or uncover the imagined authenticity, tourists felt that photographs were at least one way to capture—although only partially—a remnant of their experience.

Some visitors also discovered that the displays were simply "not real" enough or that the reality they envisioned did not coincide with their preconceived visions of the ossuary. Visitor assessments repeatedly noted that the charnel houses were small physical spaces that did not exude the authenticity they had anticipated. As one tourist explicitly elaborated, the ossuary *should* have resembled an extensive subterranean cavern lit only by flickering candles and shafts of light filtering in through cracks in the dilapidated exterior. Others similarly noted that the images of the ossuaries on the internet, television, and cinema had created an expectation of charnels that was not evident at the physical site. Descriptions reiterated that the ossuaries felt like "elaborate Halloween displays, "haunted houses," or "film sets" that felt spurious and contrived. Perhaps in resonance with the insights of Baudrillard (1994, 2), who suggested that there is a blurring between reality and its representation in a world of layered reproductions ("a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real"), tourists emphasized that they had to remind themselves that the bones in the ossuaries were in fact not fake representations but "*real*" human remains.

A general point about their shared aim of experiencing an authentic encounter with death was that while both managers and visitors were willing participants in a "touristic border zone" (Bruner 2005,17), both groups were uncertain about the

genuineness and appropriateness of these displays and struggled to achieve their desired aim of an authentic experience. Both groups failed to achieve a seamless sense of authenticity as they struggled with the materiality of the bones. On the one hand, managers felt impelled to exclude from public view those bones that carried remnants of decomposition (such as hair and skin) that were also markers of individuality. On the other hand, visitors struggled with their inability to appreciate the bones as real because of the perceived lack of individuation in the displays. They resolved this through an invented individuality, attempting to fabricate a sense of connection with the dead through imagining what it would feel like emotionally to be jumbled up with strangers and put on show, given that they were prevented from viewing "less tidy" exhibits that would allow them to imagine the smells of putrefaction or the dried, wrinkled, and scarred skin and the remnants of brown, blond, black, or gray hair that testify to the singular struggles of that particular life and "our understanding of each human body as a unique subject" (Desmond 2008, 349).

THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTIC DEATH

This discussion highlights the importance of authenticity for site administrators and tourists, where this concept emerged as an overarching theme in discussions of ossuary displays. Authenticity has been problematized in the field of tourism studies since the formative work of MacCannell (1973), who explored the staged and commodified dimensions of this concept. Debates in the literature have shifted from objectivist, essentialist ideologies to subjective forms of authenticity, such as existential authenticity (Wang 1999; Chhabra 2005; Olsen 2002). These studies have also elucidated the limitations and validity of this term, with authors such as Cohen (2012, 261) asserting that simulacra in the postmodern age may supersede the "longing for the wholeness of the pre-modern other." The current findings in this chapter, however, can be contextualized by drawing on some of the classic and recent anthropological explorations of authenticity (see, for example, the seminal work of Trilling [1972] and the more recent analyses of Ferrara [2013], Bendix [1997], Fillitz and Saris [2013], and Vannini and Williams [2009]). Authors such as Bruner (2005), Theodossopoulos (2013), Carse (2014), and Schäfer (2014) have argued for studies of authenticity that explore the coexistence of varying forms of authenticity and the cultural contexts of its production. As Theodossopoulos (2013, 340–41) goes on to argue, this shift in anthropological inquiry is not simply an indication of academic verbalism but an attempt to understand the multiple vernacular uses of the term and the multiplicity of meanings under negotiation.

The current project has revealed that authenticity was used in a number of ways to assess meaning related to displays of the dead. Ossuary administrators and managers

emphasized that these sites had a significant role to play in making death more accessible and transparent in a society that had experienced professionalized and medicalized encounters with death and dying. The focus of transparency was therefore partially reliant on visual displays of the bones that provided visitors with authentic, "unmediated" representations of death. At the same time, however, professionals asserted that this focus was unsatisfactory and needed to be supplemented with meaning that included some supernatural or spiritual understanding and reverence.

Tourists also mobilized the concept of authenticity in their consideration of these sites, and it became evident that their gaze was structured by a desire to assess what constituted the "realness" of death. While some admired the artistic creativity of the displays or the profound quantities of bone, many emphasized that these skeletal remains were little more than curiosities, with limited applicability to contemporary contemplations of mortality. Although some visitors proposed that photography was a way of capturing the realness of death, others explained that the profusion of images already available on the internet failed to contribute anything more substantive to their interpretations. Despite a distinct *memento mori* theme in the touristic discourse, visitors asserted that the bones lacked agency because the disarticulated remains and the display setting provided no familiar means with which to access meaning; displayed bones lacked certain indicators of death, created limited affective response, or felt contrived and fixated on tourist consumption. Of particular significance for many tourists (and administrators) was the role of spirituality, which some argued constituted a fundamental form of authenticity. Visitors specifically asserted that sites such as ossuaries saturated with the remains of the dead should exude a form of spirituality and meaning that transcended the physical bones. For some of these visitors, authenticity became a "trope for transcendence" and a way for these individuals to articulate their quest for meaning (Lindholm 2013, 361).

While the death sequestration thesis outlined at the beginning of this chapter emphasized the importance of transparency and confronting death, this chapter went on to elucidate some of the contours of this engagement. Rather than demonstrating a developmental sequence indicating a fundamental shift in societal attitudes toward death (Goody and Poppi 1994), this project emphasized that dark sites such as ossuaries provided visitors with the opportunity to consider what constituted meaningful mortuary practices and their relationship with the dead. Rather than the existence of a universal *memento mori* that transcended spatial and temporal boundaries, the research highlighted the fact that contemporary encounters with bones—and the meaning derived from these encounters—were intrinsically related to contemporary concerns such as bodily integrity and personalized identity. Discussions with visitors regarding these experiences, in turn, revealed that authenticity not only provided an "extra-historical, endlessly renewable resource"

(Muir 2014, 491) for meaning making but that an examination of the "polysemy of authenticity" itself provides some understanding of this concept within the cultural context of its production (Theodossopoulos 2013, 341).

Ossuaries are sites where both visitors and managers seek authentic experiences of death. Yet ironically, in their quests to accept death for what it is, they shy away from deterioration and decay. Perhaps we have come around to rejecting the idea of "death denial," but we are certainly not ready for decay. Are we therefore in an age of "denial of decay," a denial of the process of death rather than the fact of it?

NOTES

1. Cyril Schäfer died suddenly of an aneurism while he was working on the final edits for this chapter in June 2015. His good friend and long-term research colleague Ruth McManus, with the help of editors Adam Kaul and Jonathan Skinner, completed the final edits in a way that, it is hoped, reflects Cyril's style of writing and ideas. *Poroporoaki hoa*.

2. As Gordon and Marshall (2000, 3) elaborate, the significance of the dead in late medieval Christianity was inextricably linked to a belief in Purgatory and the conviction that the living had a duty to ease the suffering of the dead.

3. See Cemetery Travel: Adventures in Graveyards around the World—Travelblog, accessed February 16, 2016, https://cemeterytravel.com/2011/10/27/the-ossuary-as-memento-mori/; also http://www.thebohemianblog.com/2014/09/bone-churches-of-bohemia-the-sedlec-ossuary-at-kutna-hora.html, accessed February 16, 2016.

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