

Workshop Robert Desjarlais

Proposed outline of dialogue sessions and readings for workshop at CAS-E

Robert Desjarlais

10 May 2023, 10:00 am to 4:00 pm

Big seminar room, D1

Dialogues

1. Presence

Illness, healing, and bodily sensibilities in the Nepal Himalayas

Reading:

Robert Desjarlais. 1996. "Presence." In *The Performance of Healing*, edited by Carol Laderman and Marina Roseman, pp. 143-164. New York: Routledge Press.

Relevant publications:

Robert Desjarlais. 1992. *Body and Emotion: The Aesthetics of Illness and Healing in the Nepal Himalayas*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Robert Desjarlais. 1991. "Poetic Transformations of Yolmo 'Sadness'." *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 15:" 387-420.

2. Struggling along

Critical Phenomenology of homelessness and experience in Boston, Massachusetts

Reading:

Robert Desjarlais. 1994. "Struggling Along: The Possibilities for Experience among the Homeless Mentally Ill." *American Anthropologist* 96:886-901.

Relevant publications:

Robert Desjarlais. 1997. *Shelter Blues: Sanity and Selfhood among the Homeless*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Robert Desjarlais. 2004. "Movement, Stillness: On the Sensory World of a Shelter for the Homeless Mentally Ill." In *Empire of the Senses*, edited by David Howes, pp. 369-379. Oxford: Berg.

Robert Desjarlais and C. Jason Throop. 2011. "Phenomenological Approaches in Anthropology," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40:87-102.

3. Poesis

Life, loss, dying and death among Nepal's Yolmo Buddhists

Reading:

Robert Desjarlais. 2023. "Anthropology in a Mode of Dying" *Arc of Interference: Medical Anthropology for Worlds on Edge*, eds. João Biehl and Vincanne Adams, pp. 239-256. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. [pdf of page proofs – for book to be published in March 2023].

Relevant publications:

Robert Desjarlais. 2000. "Echoes of a Yolmo Buddhist's Life, in Death." *Cultural Anthropology* 15:260-293.

Robert Desjarlais. 2022. "So: Ragged Woman: The Aesthetics and Ethics of Skilled Action among Nepal's Yolmo Buddhists." *Ethnography* 3:149-175.

Robert Desjarlais. 2002. *Sensory Biographies: Lives and Deaths among Nepal's Yolmo Buddhists*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Robert Desjarlais. 2016. *Subject to Death: Life and Loss in a Buddhist World*. University of Chicago Press.

4. Phantasms

Photography, images, spectrality and phantasmography in Paris, France

Reading:

Robert Desjarlais. 2016. "Phantasmography." *American Anthropologist* 118:400-407.

Relevant publications:

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Robert Desjarlais. 2019. *The Blind Man: A Phantasmography*. Fordham University Press.

Robert Desjarlais and Khalil Habrih. 2022. *Traces of Violence: Writings on the Disaster in Paris, France*.

“Book Forum: *The Blind Man*.” Society for Cultural Anthropology, Visual and New Media Review.
<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/series/book-forum-the-blind-man>

Relevant videos:

“Traces of Violence: Writings on the Disaster in Paris, France - Part I.” Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxRv_MFrhw&t=316s

“Traces of Violence: Writings on the Disaster in Paris, France - Part II.” Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d34uwgacNoc&t=852s>

Supplemental descriptions of some of the readings noted above:

Robert Desjarlais. 1992. *Body and Emotion: The Aesthetics of Illness and Healing in the Nepal Himalayas*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

This in-depth ethnography of the forms of spiritual-physical malaise, "soul loss," illness, and ritual healing among Nepal's Hyolmo people, an ethnically Tibetan Buddhist people, draws on sustained ethnographic research – including the author's participatory, embodied engagements while living amongst Hyolmo people - in order to document the experiential, sensorial, aesthetic, and sociocultural dimensions of illness and healing Hyolmo people. This research articulates ways of thinking about the cultural and experiential dimensions of emotions, bodiliness, illness, and healing, and how they might be studied through incisive ethnographic and phenomenological research methods. This book helps to advance, in significant ways: (1) the anthropological study of the senses; (2) the anthropology of experience; (3) studies of illness and ritual and shamanic healing; and (4) phenomenological approaches in anthropology.

Publisher's book description:

Body and Emotion is a study of the relationship between culture and emotional distress, an examination of the cultural forces that influence, make sense of, and heal severe pain and malaise. In order to investigate this relationship, Robert Desjarlais served as an apprentice healer among the Yolmo Sherpa, a Tibetan Buddhist people who reside in the Helambu region of north-central Nepal.

Robert Desjarlais. 1994. "Struggling Along: The Possibilities for Experience among the Homeless Mentally Ill." *American Anthropologist* 96:886-901.

This research article, on forms of life in a shelter for people considered homeless and mentally ill in Boston, Massachusetts, opens up ways of thinking about the category of experience in anthropological and philosophical thought, while detailing the ways in which this category is constituted through complicated cultural, linguistic, and philosophical patterns of thought and meaning. It also advances the conceptual frameworks of a critical phenomenological approach to questions of homelessness, mental illness, and sensate experience in contemporary urban life.

Abstract: An ethnographic study of a shelter in downtown Boston for people considered homeless and mentally ill documents the way in which the category of "experience," which many have taken to be universal and natural, is culturally and historically constituted. The residents of the shelter tend not to experience - defined here as an inwardly reflexive process that proceeds, coheres, and transforms through temporally integrative forms - but rather "struggle along" by way of an acutely tactile mode of perception that attends to episodic, temporally finite encounters. The fact that experience in the shelter is only a possibility, not a given, points to the need for a critical phenomenology that would help us to consider how this

and other ways of being come about through specific social, cultural, political, and material forces.

Robert Desjarlais. 2002. *Sensory Biographies: Lives and Deaths among Nepal's Yolmo Buddhists*. University of California Press.

This work portrays, in anthropologically comprehensive ways, the life histories of two elders within the Hyolmo community in Nepal, namely, an elderly Buddhist "lama" known as Ghang Lama, and an elderly woman known as Kisang Omu. In drawing from numerous engagements and in-depth interviews with these two elders, as well as extensive ethnographic research among Hyolmo people, the research considers various formations of their lives, including the sensory and intersubjective dimensions of their complex lifeworlds, the moral and intersubjective dynamics of family and community relations, and their understandings and expectations of what dying and death would entail for them. (Both of these respected elders in fact died soon after the research for the project was completed). This work has augmented theoretical reflections on and efforts in life history research methods in anthropology, as well as advanced our understanding of the sensorial, cultural, and gendered dimensions of life and death in particular sociocultural settings. The concept of "sensory biographies" has since been taken up by other anthropologists and scholars in related fields. The book also offers contributions to the fields of Buddhist studies and Tibetan Buddhist studies, particularly for the ways it shows how Buddhist ethics and religious principles and Buddhist understandings of the world inform the singular lives of Buddhist peoples.

Publisher's book description.

Robert Desjarlais's graceful ethnography explores the life histories of two Yolmo elders, focusing on how particular sensory orientations and modalities have contributed to the making and the telling of their lives. These two are a woman in her late eighties known as Kisang Omu and a Buddhist priest in his mid-eighties known as Ghang Lama, members of an ethnically Tibetan Buddhist people whose ancestors have lived for three centuries or so along the upper ridges of the Yolmo valley in north central Nepal.

It was clear through their many conversations that both individuals perceived themselves as nearing death, and both were quite willing to share their thoughts about death and dying. The difference between the two was remarkable, however, in that Ghang Lama's life had been dominated by motifs of vision, whereas Kisang Omu's accounts of her life largely involved a "theatre of voices." Desjarlais offers a fresh and readable inquiry into how people's ways of sensing the world contribute to how they live and how they recollect their lives.

Robert Desjarlais. 2016. *Subject to Death: Life and Loss in a Buddhist World*. University of Chicago Press.

Subject to Death draws from the author's long-term anthropology engagements in Nepal in portraying understandings and experiences of life, death, aging, and dying among Hyolmo people. The work offers a comprehensive account of forms of life and death among this

ethnically Tibetan Buddhist people. This work adds to our understanding of the cultural, social, and experiential formations of life and death in the world. The main conceptual framework of the book builds on the concept of “human poiesis,” the faculty for “generative fashioning” and creative effort and striving in the world, and how such poiesis patterns forms of life, death, and dying among Hyolmo people, including the “creative dissolution” involved in processes of dying and the transformative funeral rites that follow in the wake of a death. These concepts have held particular salience for scholars similarly interested in processes of life, aging, dying, and death in various settings in contemporary life.

Publisher’s book description.

If any anthropologist living today can illuminate our dim understanding of death’s enigma, it is Robert Desjarlais. With Subject to Death, Desjarlais provides an intimate, philosophical account of death and mourning practices among Hyolmo Buddhists, an ethnically Tibetan Buddhist people from Nepal. He studies the death preparations of the Hyolmo, their specific rituals of grieving, and the practices they use to heal the psychological trauma of loss. Desjarlais’s research marks a major advance in the ethnographic study of death, dying, and grief, one with broad implications. Ethnologically nuanced, beautifully written, and twenty-five years in the making, Subject to Death is an insightful study of how fundamental aspects of human existence—identity, memory, agency, longing, bodiliness—are enacted and eventually dissolved through social and communicative practices.

Robert Desjarlais. 2019. *The Blind Man: A Phantasmography*. Fordham University Press.

Publisher’s book description.

The Blind Man: A Phantasmography examines the complicated forces of perception, imagination, and phantasms of encounter in the contemporary world. In considering photographs he took while he was traveling in France, anthropologist and writer Robert Desjarlais reflects on a few pictures that show the features of a man, apparently blind, who begs for money at a religious site in Paris, frequented by tourists. In perceiving this stranger and the images his appearance projects, he begins to imagine what this man’s life is like and how he perceives the world around him.

Written in journal form, the book narrates Desjarlais’s pursuit of the man portrayed in the photographs. He travels to Paris and tries to meet with him. Eventually, Desjarlais becomes unsure as to what he sees, hears, or remembers. Through these interpretive dilemmas he senses the complexities of perception, where all is multiple, shifting, spectral, a surge of phantasms in which the actual and the imagined are endlessly blurred and intertwined. His mind shifts from thinking about photographs and images to being fixed on the visceral force of apparitions. His own vision is affected in a troubling way.

Composed of an intricate weave of text and image, The Blind Man attends to pressing issues in contemporary life: the fraught dimensions of photographic capture; encounters with others and alterity; the politics of looking; media images of violence and abjection; and the nature of

fantasy and imaginative construal. Through a wide-ranging inquiry into histories of imagination, Desjarlais inscribes the need for a “phantasmography”—a writing of phantasms, a graphic inscription of the flows and currents of fantasy and fabulation.

Robert Desjarlais and Khalil Habrih. 2022. *Traces of Violence: Writings on the Disaster in Paris, France*. University of California Press.

Publisher’s book description.

*In this highly original work, Robert Desjarlais and Khalil Habrih present a dialogic account of the lingering effects of the terroristic attacks that occurred in Paris in November 2015. Situating the events within broader histories of state violence in metropolitan France and its colonial geographies, the authors interweave narrative accounts and photographs to explore a range of related phenomena: governmental and journalistic discourses on terrorism, the political work of archives, police and military apparatuses of control and anti-terror deterrence, the histories of wounds, and the haunting reverberations of violence in a plurality of lives and deaths. *Traces of Violence* is a moving work that aids our understanding of the afterlife of violence and offers an innovative example of collaborative writing across anthropology and sociology.*