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Tourism and COVID-19

Intimacy Transformed or Intimacy Interrupted?

Hazel Andrews

ABSTRACT: This article is a rumination on the ramifications of COVID-19 on practices of intimacy. In first exploring what intimacy is, the article notes that what it means and how it is practised varies depending on the socio-cultural context and the protagonists involved. Taking the tourist as a central figure in a search for intimacy, the article argues that this is predominantly seen in relation to sexual encounters. These occur in both tourists' encounters with otherness as well as in tourism settings where there is little interest in other cultures. Magaluf, Mallorca, is one such example. In the light of lockdown and social distancing due to the global pandemic, the article asks to what extent touristic practices of intimacy will be transformed.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, Magaluf, Mallorca, practices of intimacy, sex, tourism, tourists

In the opening of Ziyad Marar's book entitled *Intimacy*, he makes the somewhat generalised claim that 'contemporary society discourages intimacy' (2012: 1). Yet, although not that prolifically rehearsed in the literature, the figure of the tourist is shown to be often in search of intimacy, and in some cases the practice of intimacy, or practices associated with intimacy, are an integral part of tourists' experiences. This article is a rumination on travel and intimacy in the setting of touristic practices. It examines the importance of intimacy to constructions of tourism experiences and reflects on how the COVID-19 global pandemic of 2020 has the potential to transform those experiences. I begin by briefly exploring the complexity of what intimacy means.

What Is Intimacy?

Lisa Register and Tracy Henley in their article 'The Phenomenology of Intimacy' note that at least 20 different definitions of intimacy can be found in academic writing, with no consensus about its meaning. They comment: 'While much has been written on the topic of intimacy in a variety of contexts by both aca-

dem and "popular" authors, paradoxically, there exists less research (and even less concurrence) on essential matters such as the definition of intimacy' (1992: 467). In trying to comprehend how people understand what intimacy means to them, Register and Henley focussed on its practice, identifying that intimacy is not necessarily understood in terms of sexual practice or as being exclusively between people, but that ideas of bonding between people outside of a sexual relationship, and between people and pets, for example, might also be understood as examples of intimacy.

That the meaning of intimacy is neither straightforward nor unanimously agreed is recognised by sociologist Lynn Jamieson (2011). Acknowledging the different understandings linked to the concept, she nevertheless argues that

intimacy refers to the quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality. Although there may be no universal definition, intimate relationships are a type of personal relationships that are subjectively experienced and may also be socially recognized as close. (Jamieson 2011: 151)

Jamieson goes on to argue that closeness can be manifest in different ways and, similar to Register



and Henley's contention, she places emphasis on the 'practices of intimacy' that become a way of 'doing', a way of being in and expressive of, a certain kind of relationship. By way of illustration, Veena Das notes in her discussion of Clara Han's 2012 research about from who and how help was given between neighbours in poor areas of post-Pinochet Chile, the boundaries of intimacy between friends is related to how close or far one's social relations are: 'With your kin and friends you can share intimacy; with neighbors, much depends on their ability to maintain a pretence of ordinariness as help is offered' (2013: 219). This suggests that there are conditions attached to intimacy in the crossing of boundaries between self and other.

To become close to or keep apart from, to invite intimacy or maintain distance, is a way of negotiating the world, of sorting the familiar from the strange. For Michael Herzfeld, the borders between the 'us' and 'them' of national identity become manifest in 'cultural intimacy', which he defines as 'the recognition of those aspects of an officially shared identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality' (2016: 7).

Although Jamieson (2005) notes the complexity of boundaries relating to intimacy, many practices of intimacy are linked to crossing divides between one another, creating and expressing a bond that involves embodied practices and experiences. However, in the same way that there is no fixed definition of intimacy, practices of intimacy are also not static but subject to change based on the values which are brought to bear on them. Intimacy, then, is adaptable.

Intimacy Transformed

The idea that intimacy is malleable throws into sharp relief the notion that it is through the ways in which it is practised that its meaning arises. For example, in Anthony Giddens' (1992) book *The Transformation of Intimacy*, he argues that changes in social life brought about by modernisation transformed intimacy. It was the 'sexual revolution' which, he argued, removed procreation as the main purpose of sexual relationships that underlay this change. At the same time, sex became a subject of public fascination with a greater presence in public life, leading to its increased commodification.

Exposing sexual intimacy, as Giddens suggests, to a wider public gaze than before also implies that it is less attached to ideas of privacy, to which being intimate alludes. As Levent Soysal (2010) argues, in a world that seems saturated with increased media

spectacles and the willingness of people to publicly share that which was once only private, the emergence of public intimacy has recast intimacy in social life: 'This is the world of amplified sociality, virtual intimacy, and simulacra' (2010: 392). Indeed, in a world full of social media technologies one need never leave the comfort of one's armchair to engage with intimacy. Nevertheless, technology cannot necessarily replace the physicality of intimacy whether that be the need for touch or the ability to accept help from another human being in the form of a shared meal. Perhaps the virtual intimacy that Soysal alludes to is a form of distant intimacy that cannot replace the near intimacy of physical proximity, of atmospheres and emotions created between one another in the fleshy tangibility associated with unmediated face-to-face encounters. For these meetings, people are willing to travel, to cross national frontiers and to traverse the divides that technology creates in its ability to keep us apart. The increased use of computer-aided technology during the COVID-19 pandemic is testament to it as a dividing force, even though it is advertised as a uniting force. This can be seen in the numbers of family and friends who meet online rather than in person, and those who have remained employed by remote working at home, their ability to be kept apart from others facilitated by access to relevant knowledge and equipment.

COVID-19, then, has inhibited free movement and the shared practices of social life that often signal intimacy. For example, as the disease started to spread common courtesies and signals of relationships such as greeting someone with a handshake or kiss on the cheek were replaced with greetings that required no physical interaction. As Lenore Manderson and Susan Levine comment, in their writing on the Global South, what occurred was a 'retraction of social engagement, shifting from the joking "Are we still kissing?" to maintaining "social distance" without remark' (2020: 367).

As the above discussion suggests, practices of intimacy find expression in different relationships and through different articulations. One way in which intimacy is practised is through travel and tourism, which has the negotiating of boundaries at its base, whether that is the crossing of the threshold to a home, traversing an international frontier or trying to overcome perceived distances between the self and other through meaningful encounters.

The Search for Intimacy

People travel for intimacy, physically and metaphorically. This was something that performance artists

Ulay and Marina Abramović understood when they undertook a journey of some length to seal the intimacy of their relationship. Conceived of in 1983, their project entitled *The Lovers* involved each walking from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China to meet in the middle, having overcome the separation as a confirmation of their love for one another. Beset with problems from the start, the project did not go according to plan. The final blow to the couple's intentions came when, after they walked a total of about four thousand kilometres, their reunion saw an end to their relationship (Bramwell 2020).

The Ulay-Abramović project is atypical of most tourism activity. Encounters between people in tourism are frequently seen as ephemeral, fleeting and meaningless largely because of the time restrictions that usually accompany most holidays. The relationships that do emerge are often characterised as commercial transactions which have the potential to be exploitative of the people who service tourists' desires. An early example of the commodification of tourism relationships is mentioned in Ulla Wagner's (1977) work on Gambia in which she identified that the charter tourism that had developed between Sweden and Gambia facilitated relationships between female tourists, looking for romance and sexual relationships, and the young, local men hoping to earn money from the visitors to their country. Although at times such relationships would develop into something more, they were, for the most part, based on commercial transactions.

Despite some of the negativity associated with tourism, it is nevertheless for many a practice of sociality. For example, Julia Harrison (2003) highlights the relationship between sociability and intimacy in her discussion of the motivations of middle-class Canadian tourists who explored their travel experiences with her during post-trip interviews. For Harrison, 'touristic intimacy' arises between the self and the other (as in other tourists and people from the destination) based on a sociability, a desire to connect with others infused often, although not exclusively, with the erotic. She attests: 'I believe that the sociability impulse, the desire to have some association with others, lay near the root of what many of my tourists suggested gave meaning to their touristic experiences' (2003: 46). Harrison further suggests that her tourists were searching 'not necessarily consciously or exclusively, for a way "to do intimacy"' (2003: 49).

One of the main ways in which tourists doing intimacy is discussed is in relation to ideas of erotic or sexual intimacy, for example Susan Frohlick's (2007) discussion of women tourists' encounters and rela-

tionships with local men in Puerto Viejo, Costa Rica, and/or Valerio Simoni's work about tourism in Cuba (2014, 2015). In both cases, as noted in Wagner's (1977) earlier work, intimacy was commodified. The emphasis on intimacy in connection to sexual practices in tourism is perhaps not surprising, given what might be described as the Western world's fascination with an exotic, eroticised other (Said 1978) that sits along, or astride, the notion that tourists are concerned with a search for cultural differences and otherness.

Regarding volunteer tourism and trekking in Thailand, Mary Conran (2006, 2011) argues that intimacy was a highly significant issue for tourists. In the case of trekking, she opines that the degree to which the trekkers felt their experiences to be authentic was based on 'their ability to procure an intimate encounter with the toured Karen people' (2006: 274). Conran's discussion of tourism intimacies differs from that of Frohlick (2007) and Simoni (2014, 2015) because it is not based around sexual relations. Indeed, Conran (2011) notes that, for one tourist, being able to hold the hand of the children in the village where she was volunteering was a sensuous experience that allowed her to begin to feel at home in Thailand.

The discussion of intimacy and tourism has mainly focussed on Western tourists' encounters with cultural others. However, it is of no less importance to tourists for which the cultural other is not sought but is rather eschewed in favour of expressions of intimacy in a form of sexualised, effervescent nationalism (e.g. Andrews 2011). I conducted research in the form of participant observation with British tourists in the late 1990s in the party tourist destination of Magaluf on the Mediterranean island of Mallorca. It soon became apparent why the resort had earned the nickname 'Shagaluf'. For many of the tourists, the ability to drink copious amounts of alcohol and/or engage in numerous casual sexual relations were amongst the resort's attractions. The reputation of Magaluf was in part premised on its representation in tourist brochures, which emphasised the party atmosphere and alluded to the possibility of sexual encounters. Expectations and fantasies were thus created, so as to be acted out in person once the tourists were *in situ*. Often encouraged by those who attempted to mediate tourists' experiences in practices such as sexual position games as part of hotel entertainment, or tour-operator-organised bar crawls, invitations from strangers to return to hotel or apartment rooms 'so we can have sex' or 'be part of a sandwich'¹ were not uncommon. The highly charged sexual atmosphere of Magaluf took on a greater notoriety than it had ever taken on before in

2014 with the widely reported ‘maming’ incident. This refers to an event that took place in a bar in Magaluf in which a young British woman, believing she was going to win a free holiday for her efforts, was videoed (without her consent) by one of the bar’s workers giving oral sex to 24 different men. The sharing of the video on Facebook drew much media attention from around the world. Given the moral panic that ensued and the overwhelmingly negative media headlines that resulted from the incident, the local municipality of Calvià, in which Magaluf is situated, introduced by-laws that were designed to reposition the resort with a different kind of reputation (Andrews 2017). The outrage that accompanied the reporting of the 2014 event in the British press and what it says about ideas of sexuality, intimacy and privacy is worthy of much further probing than it is possible to push here, but I would suggest that Herzfeld’s ideas on cultural intimacy and Soysal’s ideas on public intimacy would prove useful starting points for future exploration.

The fact that COVID-19 has, at the time of writing, changed social interactions in terms of being able to touch others and, also, reduced the ability to read some facial expressions because of the increased wearing of face masks suggests that the practices of intimacy that extend outside of one’s immediate home environment are likely to be impacted. Even with the easing of lockdown restrictions, there is still a requirement for social distancing, which of course, has ramifications for the sorts of touristic intimacies that are described in the above discussion. This leads to questions of how and in what ways touristic intimacy has been and will be transformed by COVID-19. I reflect on these questions in the next section.

Intimacy Transformed or Intimacy Interrupted?

This section has a caveat: at the time of writing, the world was experiencing a pandemic; it was not a static situation, and it is not yet over. We inhabit a liminal state, and until we emerge from this we cannot fully comprehend or assess what the post-liminal world will look and feel like. Therefore, any suggestions about the ways COVID-19 has transformed touristic practices and, therefore, practices of intimacy in tourism must be approached with caution. However, tourism is a force of change, and there is a long history of assessing its development in terms

of costs and benefits to the people and places of tourism destinations. The pandemic is not the first time that tourism has been highlighted as a harbinger of adjustments to intimacy.

The development of tourism is firmly, although not exclusively, linked to technological change, particularly in relation to transport. With the introduction of rail travel, the ability to move across landscapes more quickly than before not only made the world smaller and faster to traverse but changed how people interacted with it. According to Wolfgang Schivelbusch (2008), travelling by train resulted in a loss of intimacy with our surroundings. He argued that ‘the speed and mathematical directness with which the railroad proceeds through the terrain destroy the close relationship between the traveler and the traveled space’ (2008: 287). COVID-19, however, has not increased the speed of travel, but halted it and with that some practices of intimacy.

You Can’t Get a Sandwich in Magaluf Anymore

Prior to the global pandemic, the global yearly international tourist arrivals were put, by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), at 1.5 billion, with a forecasted predicted growth of 4 per cent in 2020 (UNWTO 2020a). However, by April 2020, according to the UNWTO, 72 per cent of destinations world-wide had closed their doors to international tourism, and COVID-19 has since stymied its continued growth (UNWTO 2020b).

As the global reach of the virus spread and greater numbers of people became infected, touristic activity became a focus of attention. For example, in early February 2020 the Diamond Princess Cruise Ship was under the spotlight when, having reported an outbreak of virus infections on board, it was held in quarantine off the coast of Japan. In another example, journalist Angela Giuffrida (2020) said: ‘We knew COVID-19 had made it to Italy in late January, when two Chinese tourists in Rome were confirmed to have contracted it’. The list of such examples could be extended, but what was becoming apparent was that tourism and the spread of COVID-19 were intertwined.

With social-distancing measures that require people to keep two metres apart (although in some places, the distance is less) and the compulsory wearing of face masks,² it is hard to imagine how party games that rely on intimate bodily contact will be enacted. In relation to the tourism activities outlined by Wagner (1977), Frohlick (2007) and Simoni (2014, 2015), how will relationships between tourists gener-

ated in the Western world in search of an authentic other (as represented by the people of the destinations visited) and meaningful encounters based on romance, sex and love find fruition in a world that prohibits physical contact?

As lockdown restrictions brought the inevitable lack of free movement, holidays were cancelled, and, as noted above, many tourist destinations were closed. The British daily newspaper *The Mirror* reported on Magaluf in May 2020, noting that the resort's normally busy and infamous party drag of Punta Ballena was deserted. Without Magaluf being open, the likes of sexual position games and mamading for a free holiday are less likely to take place. As observed above, the licentious behaviour of some of the tourists in prior years had already caused measures to be introduced that sought to change how tourism is practised in Magaluf. COVID-19 has provided the opportunity to make these processes more concrete. Indeed, the Director General of Tourism for Calvià has remarked:

Magaluf is going to be a very different place this year. . . . It was always going to be more difficult for British holidaymakers to come here this summer and commit the sort of excesses we've seen all too often in the past because of by-law modifications and the new regional government drunken tourism decree. I truly believe COVID-19 could deal a mortal blow to the type of tourism we have seen in Magaluf and especially Punta Ballena. (Rudd and Couzens 2020)

An analogous scenario is unfolding across the Bay of Palma in the German-dominated resort of S'Arenal, which has a similar party scene to that of Magaluf with the infamous Ballermann (the name given to the main party place of S'Arenal). Although German tourists have started to return to the resort, the limited opening of facilities that encourage excessive alcohol consumption has not yet seen a return of the party tourist. As Julia Macher notes (2020), drawing from a report in the German newspaper *Bild*, the tourists 'Ela and Jörg Hauser from Cologne sipped their first beers while reclining in physically distanced hammocks'.

Rather than transforming touristic practices of intimacy, then, it seems that COVID-19 in the immediate term, certainly for places like Magaluf, has obliterated it. However, the degree to which this will be a long-term scenario (notwithstanding the laws enacted to inhibit the type of hedonism found in the resort) is already in question, given reports in July 2020 of drunken British tourists in Magaluf flouting local social-distancing rules (Burgen 2020).

Crossing Boundaries

Returning to performance artists Ulay and Marina Abramović. Once *The Lovers* ended, they did not meet for over 20 years. Their next encounter was part of Marina Abramović's 2010 retrospective *The Artist is Present* in the New York Museum of Modern Art. In retrospect, the project seems to pre-empt the social distancing strictures put in place in response to COVID-19 because the installation involved Marina sitting at a table, two metres opposite an empty chair. Audience members could occupy the seat and stare at the artist. On the opening night, Ulay went to sit opposite Marina, and they looked into each other's eyes for the first time in two decades. Both artists are visibly moved, and despite all the animosity that had previously passed between them Marina reached out across the divide of the table to clasp hands with her former lover in a public display of intimacy (Mazz 2012). In the United Kingdom, one of the government's advisers on lockdown restrictions resigned because he was willing to overcome the boundaries of social distancing to continue seeing his lover (Cowburn 2020).

The extent to which COVID-19 will impact practices of physical intimacy in the long term will not only depend, in resorts such as Magaluf,³ on how tourism is managed, but also on individuals' desires to take risks. This not only applies to the willingness to begin international travel again, but also if the intimacy tourists search for is worth the risk of crossing the divide of social distancing. Lockdown restriction in England began to be lifted in May 2020. On the first weekend that followed, there was a surge in visitor numbers to many beaches around the country. One beach – Botany Bay on the Kent coast – was described as being 'as busy as Notting Hill carnival', with large groups of people gathering during the day and some remaining to camp overnight (Pidd 2020). Further, during the weekend of 13 June 2020 an estimated six thousand people attended illegal raves around the English city of Manchester (Halliday 2020). By the end of June, and the further lessening of restrictions, the *Daily Mail* reported of Essex's Southend-on-Sea 'Human tide swamps the beach' (BBC 2020).

Conclusion

As a seeker of intimacy, the tourist, prior to the advent of COVID-19, is a testament against Marar's (2012) claim that contemporary society inhibits in-

timacy. COVID-19 has prohibited many practices of intimacy, but just as we adapted to new ways of social interaction we might as readily adapt back again. As places where lockdown has ended demonstrate, people soon return to hugging and handshakes (Menon 2020).

As a business, tourism tends to be resilient in the face of natural and anthropogenic crises, having weathered wars, terrorism and natural disasters. These events tend, however, to be localised – for example, the 2010 Eyjafjallajökull volcanic eruption in Iceland that grounded many aircraft in Europe over several weeks – and have not caused the widespread disruption to global travel and touristic practices that COVID-19 has. In addition, the response to recover from such disruptions to travel has not involved arresting touristic practice in the form of the social distancing demanded to try to inhibit the spread of COVID-19. Touristic practice is embodied, and therefore any measures that impact on how we use our bodies will inevitably impact what tourists' bodies do. However, this will not be for all scenarios – for example, the family that lives and holidays together will continue their practices of intimacy, albeit in potentially restricted settings. However, it is precisely the acts of sexual intimacy practised in the contexts outlined in the above discussion that will initially be affected. Sex will not be stopped by COVID-19, and as such sexual practices on holiday will not be stopped by COVID-19. Rather, as people begin to be tourists again social distancing and fears of contracting the virus are likely to hold the sexual practices of resorts such as Magaluf in abeyance, although it is unlikely to stop them altogether. As the above discussion has outlined, people are willing to break the rules, even in their own art installation, for physical expressions of intimacy. In places where sex and tourism are intertwined, and where they serve as the basis to earn a living, it is likely that such practices, where they exist outside of the formal economy, will be driven further into the informal economy. In the Magalufs of the world, the resumption of mamading will most likely be as dependent on local management practices as on the willingness of the tourists themselves to engage in such activities.

As we inhabit this liminal time of lockdown / easing of lockdown, we must wait to emerge completely from the process to fully understand the true ramifications of COVID-19 on practices of tourism intimacies, but it is likely to provide a rich future research seam to mine. That said, Magaluf is witnessing a return of the hedonistic tourist behaviour that the resort is known for, and in England the apparent de-

sire to enjoy a holiday atmosphere, as demonstrated in the visits to beaches and raves, and the desire, of some, to continue to see their non-cohabiting sexual partners regardless of the risks involved, suggests that the impact of COVID-19 on practices of intimacy may be a case of intimacy interrupted rather than of intimacy transformed.

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Notes

1. The reference here is to a sex sandwich which involves, in the case of the hyper-heteronormative environment of Magaluf in 1998, usually two men having sex with one woman as she is 'sandwiched' between them.
2. For example, at the end of May 2020 the Leaning Tower of Pisa was re-opened to visitors. The new opening saw only 15 people at a time allowed to climb the tower, and all were required to wear face masks and electronic devices that would signal if they failed to keep apart from each other by the required distance (BBC News Europe 2020).
3. Not all destinations can reposition themselves in the market, and many may have to continue 'business as usual' to earn a living.

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