

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233714392>

Fearless Trembling: A Leap of Faith into the Devil's Frying Pan

Article in *The Senses and Society* · November 2009

DOI: 10.2752/174589209X12464528171897

CITATIONS

9

READS

149

1 author:



Patrick LAVIOLETTE

Masaryk University

87 PUBLICATIONS 277 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Raymond FIRTH (Intellectual Biography) [View project](#)



'The Hithiking Diaries' [View project](#)

Fearless Trembling: A Leap of Faith into the Devil's Frying Pan

Patrick Laviolette

Patrick Laviolette teaches in the School of Visual & Material Culture at Massey University where he is Director of Postgraduate Studies. He has published a dozen journal articles and presented 45 papers in 15 different countries. This piece is an extended précis of his forthcoming book, 'Not a Hap-Hazardous Sport'.
p.laviolette@massey.ac.nz

ABSTRACT Phenomenologically and reflexively influenced, this paper investigates an experiential conception of the imagination through an exploration of an extreme bodily act. Foremost, it sets the scene for a conceptual consideration of dangerous practices such as cliff jumping. This potentially pushes the level in which we can reflect upon such a thing as an existential or embodied imagination. Here modernity's leveling of the docile body is challenged. Hence, in focusing on those sub-cultural practices that involve the extreme use of landscape, I propose an alternative scenario in which to consider the creativity of the body. Such a framework situates hazardous activities beyond the level of much contemporary thinking within the anthropology of sport or the sociology of risk, to a more far-reaching – perhaps “extremist” position – where they come

across as existentially poignant, performative acts of the social imagination.

KEYWORDS: embodied imagination, cliff jumping, extreme landscapes, existential anthropology

*long live the dance in the whirl of the infinite;
long live the wave that hides me in the abyss;
long live the wave that hurls me up above the stars.*

(Kierkegaard [1843] 1983)



This passage by Søren Kierkegaard provides an apt introduction to a paper on the relationship between the imagination and extreme acts such as cliff jumping, especially since it is taken from his book *Fear and Trembling*. Fitting because the sensations of fear and trembling are important parts of the experience of staring down at the waves that crash against the rocks while contemplating, from high above the cliff face, the idea of leaping into the sea. But this is a different type of “landscape of fear” to that which the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan had in mind in his volume of the same name. Rather, it is one where his concept of “topophilia” – of a deep empathy with the environment – equally applies (1980; 1974).

The notion of fear and trembling that I consider here is therefore part of a sensuous reflexivity. As the present article reveals, the ethnographic game can indeed be taken to several extremes. These not only involve imaginary and genuine risks for informants and researchers alike, but, equally, an existential challenge to the notion of performance, the nature of the imagination and even the character of ethnographic research. Hence, through the practice of cliff jumping in Cornwall UK, this paper explores the conceptual link between a prospective anthropology of the imagination and a reflexively based existential phenomenology (Jackson 2005; Karl and Hamalian [1963] 1973; Tilley 1994). In reflecting upon an embodied imagination, I suggest that engaging with the very practices of research in the social sciences, in all their forms, is in itself part of taking a figurative – and as this article demonstrates – sometimes also a literal “leap of faith.”

The Devil’s Fryng-Pan is a locally famous cove in Cornwall where young people engage with such leaps on a regular basis. This site is owned by the National Trust and is located near the village of Cadgwith on the east side of the most southern tip of the Lizard peninsula. For my informants in the village of Mullion, roughly 6 miles away, it is perhaps the quintessential cliff jump in the area, to which most new-coming practitioners are eventually introduced once they have gained a bit of experience and developed a certain bravado

from easier jumps. “Trust me, ya need to build up to this one. It’s not called the Devil’s Frying-Pan for nothing,” states Ally (aged twenty-seven), who boasts having made the jump twice in her “youth” but would not dream of doing it again now. She continues,

I think it gets its name from the actual shape of the cove and the way the water actually swells up and bubbles like oil in a frying-pan . . . that’s the worst part of this jump ’cause even if it’s a safeish jump, it’s still a really eerie and sinister kinda place, no fooling.

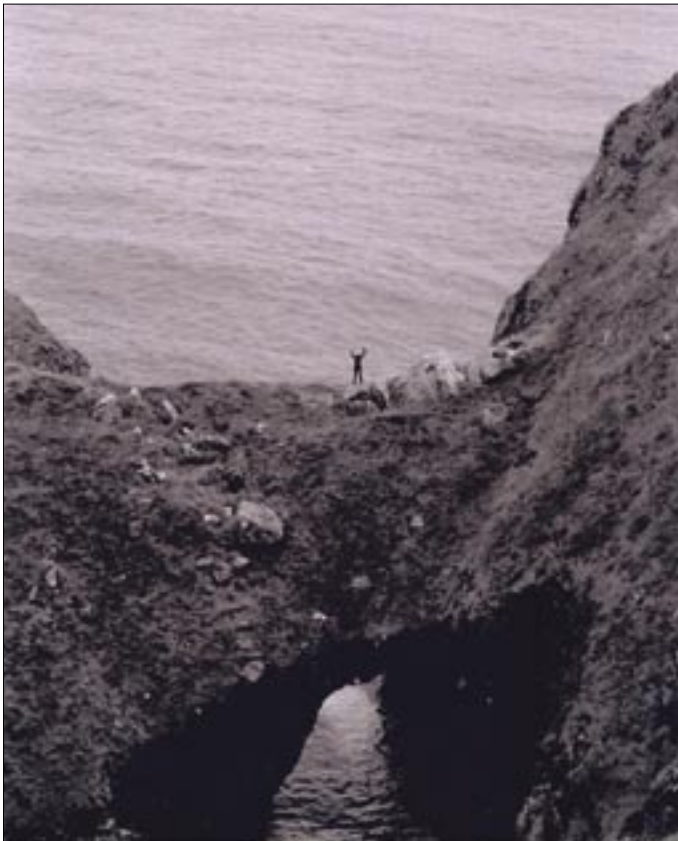


Figure 1
The Devil's Frying-Pan,
Cadgwith, Lizard Peninsula.

My first face-to-face encounter with the Devil's Frying-Pan really was a leap of faith on many levels. Firstly, because it was a complete ordeal just to rally the enthusiasm to be taken by my friends. It was like pulling teeth. In May of 2003, I had tried to convince the “Mullion Crew” to take me to the Frying-Pan but they were simply not interested. They kept saying I was too old to be engaging in these types of crazy teenager activities. “The advantage of reaching your thirties is that you don’t have to do stupid things like that anymore . . . you clearly don’t want to get any older do you? Mid-life crisis already

old boy?" These were the types of comments that Ally's partner Mike kept making.

So I never made it that time, but I was determined to go during a later visit at the end of July 2003. Upon leaving the pub one night, I thought I had convinced Mike to go on Thursday afternoon, after his work. I rang him after lunch and got more banter about being insane. He then said that he had scheduled a band rehearsal. I was beginning to think that this Devil's Frying-Pan thing was cursed. But somehow I eventually convinced him to go the following day. Five of us – plus baby and dog in tow – set off from Mullion on Friday at midday. They were Ally, Mike, and their dog with their friends Ron, Julie, and their daughter Coral (who is the only person in this article not to appear under a pseudonym).

The Pan would not give up its secrets that easily, however. This notorious jump also became a leap of faith because once we arrived, we had considerable problems in physically accessing the site. There was overgrowth of gorse, nettles, and thorns all around. It was sheer determination and even obsessiveness which allowed me to reach it, driven by my conviction that I had to do this jump and protected by a wetsuit which allowed me to pile through the otherwise impenetrable thicket of bushes. The Frying-Pan seems to be such an important and symbolic jump partly because of its many barriers. Conquering the physical obstacles made the experience quite significant in my own limited biography of jumping. But the barriers were also social. Indeed, not being easily put off by the reticence of my informants was important. It is worth noting that all of them stipulated that the site had changed considerably over the past decade since they were last there, perhaps, one of them even suggested, as a National Trust deterrent to the practice of cliff jumping.

Not only was this jump a leap of faith for me because the others were themselves not prepared to participate but also because, given the difficulty of access, they were not even able to spectate either. In fact, no one saw me jump. So one has to take it on good faith that I actually did. Though if you ask any of my four companions, I am sure that there is no doubt in their minds to the contrary. For one thing, they would testify, as they did to me, that they clearly heard the incredibly loud splashes when I hit the water. Given that I was upwind from them, they also explained how they distinctly heard my screams of terror, particularly on my second jump, which I felt I should mark out by yelling something. Since I could not think of anything clever I simply shouted, leaving them slightly worried, especially when I did not hear, and thus did not reply to, their inquiries as to my well being. My point here is that even though they never saw my jumps, the other senses have provided indications of the validity of my claim.

Given that there was no one present to witness this jump or capture it on film, I was clearly doing it as a challenge to myself – for the pure experience factor. This was highlighted to me by Ron once we arrived on site. He jested that it was surely enough that I

had now seen the place and had taken some photos: "So you don't actually have to go through with it, we won't tell anyone, no one will know the difference right? Let's go then." He was of course being facetious. But he was also touching on the importance that I needed to overcome the access barriers if I really wanted to understand what this was all about. The gauntlet was down.

Similarly, the jump was again a leap of faith because my friends were not immediately present to reassure me, and be reassured, that everything was going well. Nor were they able to encourage me or share any strategic information about the site. Not having anyone there to "spot me," jumping blind as it were, was rather stressful. Hence it was much more part of an existential rather than an un-reflexive experience. There is a definite feeling that more things can go wrong when jumping alone, but also that it is a more individualistic, even liminal, moment. In a sense, then, even if it was not my initiation into jumping, I nonetheless felt that this was a type of ritual process.

In the end, all my jumps lasted a few seconds in total, a quarter of an hour with the climbing. Nevertheless, the event itself lasted several hours. It is worth noting that this type of solo jumping means nobody is there to share the actual experience with you on the day. Consequently, I could not find out from anyone else other than myself what the experience was like *in situ*. Ethnographically this is a strange turn of events. I was participating in something in which my informants were not. But actually this did not matter so much because I now had their "respect," and had potentially achieved a level of embodied empathy. I had done something that was once a significant part of their lives. And, maybe more importantly, the afternoon's jumping provided a good means of accessing certain social memories as well as soliciting loads of jumping stories afterwards. The vignette above demonstrates certain methodological aspects in studying cliff jumping from a phenomenological perspective. You can always contrive a situation to talk with and interview people about this activity, but it is not until it becomes a natural topic of conversation based on the day's events that you really arrive at a level of understanding of how the imagination exists in and through this fleeting embodied experience (Hunter and Csikszentmihalyi 2000).

Sensuous Leisure

Cornwall is the most south-westerly peninsula of mainland Britain. With over 240 miles of coastline, tourism, fishing, and other seaside activities are central to this territory's socioeconomic identities (Busby and Laviolette 2006; Ireland 1989). Despite a rich and diverse social history – which are sources of distinction for many – this constituency is still one of Europe's poorest, having received European Objective 1 level funding in 1999. To an extent, this economic impoverishment results from the area's rapid de-industrialization, sociopolitical marginality, and dependence on a fluctuating and seasonal tourist

trade. Perceptions thus clash as to whether Cornwall exists as a land apart or as a quintessentially British periphery.

It is not unusual for people to appropriate marginalized landmarks by personifying them with vernacular names and therefore associating them with their own particular causes. This gives special relevance to a site and the issue. By ascribing their own experiences to such locales, they are projecting onto them a stylized sense of the region as they think it should be (Cragg 1997). As Setha Low and Denise Lawrence-Zuniga (2003) remind us, place becomes an agent, an embodied surrogate for values, desires, and dreams. The imagination is a crucial factor for understanding these processes. Yet it is still usually seen as images and dreams engendered in the mind through cognitive and cerebral processes. This article challenges such a conception, perhaps even turns it on its head in a way reminiscent of the recent work of Fernandez and Huber (2001). Thinking along these lines, the aim here is to emphasize the embodied nature of imaginative events.

Gaston Bachelard is an obvious point of reference for any concern with the anthropology of the imagination. Given the basis of the present research, as well as the phenomenological and reflexive caveat that I have outlined above, we particularly need to consider his groundbreaking exploration of the material imagination through his reflections on the elemental substances of fire, water, air, and earth ([1938] 1987; [1942] 1983; [1943] 1988; [1947] 1988). Indeed, Bachelard bears witness to the imaginative human freedom whereby we are asked to lay aside or suspend preconceptions. Instead we are encouraged to cultivate a capacity for awe and wonder. But he nonetheless falls into a Husserlian phenomenological perspective which prefaces the transcendence of our cognitive faculties (Husserl 1931). That is, Bachelard still views the originality of the poetic imagination as an opening up of ourselves to the revelations of the image as opposed to an opening up to experience. Or even more radically, where the image or experience would open up the potential for the imagination itself to be possible. Consequently, Bachelard suggests that our experience of the world does not guide our imagination but rather is guided by it.

Significant though his contributions are, and indeed heavily relied upon in what follows, I nevertheless want to open up some of these normative Bachelardian perspectives concerning the cognitive imagination. Conversely, I propose that the interaction of body, landscape, and danger is an experiential and existential arena in which the imagination can be acted out. The practice of stretching the mind and body to the limits – and of playing with life and death – establishes an ontological basis for an embodied creativity, for a creativity of the body.

Before addressing such theoretical issues explicitly, it is important to describe ethnographically the situation of cliff jumping in Cornwall. Also sometimes referred to as tombstoning, coasteering, and deep

water soloing, cliff jumping is becoming increasingly popular as an extreme practice in Cornwall and in the UK generally. Although the activity is not unique to Cornwall most of my informants very strongly believe that it is enshrouded in the Cornish peninsula's own particular seaside and surf culture. In relation to the materiality of waves in the context of this aspect of Cornish culture, I have elsewhere examined the relationships between sewage and surfing, protest and pleasure (Laviolette 2006b).

Despite being among the most unregulated of extreme sports, cliff jumping now seems to be crossing over into a more formal and accepted public arena through competitions and corporate advertising. The basic premise is simple: to dive, or most often, jump feet first into the sea from as many different places and heights as possible. According to many avid enthusiasts, the Cornish coast provides an ideal scenario for jumping. It is scenic, with hundreds of isolated coves, bays, and steep rock faces that line a shore of relatively clean water, kept fairly warm by the area's characteristically mild and "Riviera-esque" climate (Thornton 1993). Equally important to them, this coastline is relatively accessible, both in its physical proximity as well as because it is not particularly residential or industrial – that is, not built up or overcrowded and access is not restricted.

As far as the social profile of those who jump is concerned, it ranges from those with a privileged upbringing to those from family backgrounds with much lower levels of economic, social, and cultural capital. As regards gender, I would estimate that even though women do figure less prominently than men, the ratio is more balanced than might be expected, perhaps 3:1. The most common inhibitory factor is age. Indeed, for some jumping starts when they are children (ten or twelve years of age) and drops dramatically after the teen years. In some cases people continue to jump into their thirties and forties, although this is less usual.

Part of the corporal significance of this activity is perhaps not so much that it permits an intense adrenaline rush as that it allows for the engagement and exploration of all the physical senses. Touch (to a great degree, but filtered through the wetsuit), sight, sound, smell, and the taste of salt water are all essential to the safe and successful enjoyment of the experience. Jumping is therefore in part about enhancing the potential for a full synesthetic experience, in which one can merge the sensation of free falling with an endearing encounter of body, air, land, and sea.

There is, therefore, an intermingling of our physical senses. More interestingly, however, it is not the phenomena of synesthesia as such that is most importantly at work here. Instead we should talk of some anomalous form of aesthesia – a combination or hybridisation of dysesthesia and kinesthesia. In other words, take into account the distortion, transformation, and acceleration of the senses rather than their blurring or blending (Bell and Lyall 2001). Indeed, particularly underwater, the experiences of touch, smell, taste, sound, and sight

Figure 2

Piskie Cove, Praa Sands.



are not what we normally perceive them to be. Water as a medium actually alters our physical perceptions. It gives us a different type of experiential exposure. Furthermore, the activity of cliff jumping distorts our conventional notions of time and spatial perception. Events are rushed up or slowed in a disproportional way so that our sensation of time shifts temporarily. Schutz refers to this empathic and mimetic inversion of experience as a type of “reciprocity of perspectives” (1970: 183).

This sensorial confusion and overdrive is a significant justification put forward by many participants. Moreover, it is frequently this distorted modality of experience that is excessively sought by those participants who seek to engage in extreme sports during moments where they have altered their states of mind through drug or alcohol use (Lyng 1990). The words of one informant in his early forties sums up this “work hard play harder” ethos, commenting on his own lifestyle motto: “Contrary to popular belief I don’t live on the edge, I live on the ledge over the edge”.

One of the things used to distinguish cliff jumping from many other extreme practices is that this activity has a minimal reliance on equipment, especially safety gear. This is a significant factor in the relative lack of regulation of tombstoning in comparison to similar dangerous games: “cliff jumping is unique in that it’s a mish-mash of many sports. At the end of the day though, I’d say it was most like sky diving with a big watery crash matt instead of a chute” states Rick (aged twenty-seven) from Porthleven. This minimal use of equipment demonstrates that jumping from cliffs is often about reducing restrictions and maximizing the potential for a fully embodied euphoria. As Rick claims,

there's something quite primeval, primitive, even animalistic at work. Of course you have to have all your wits about you but really jumping is one of those acts where your instincts take over almost completely ... it's about letting loose and relying on gut reactions.

A more radical seasoned jumper recounts,

I myself have been cliff jumping now for almost four years. My opinions vary to other jumpers as far as equipment goes. I am more the traditional jumper, wearing only a pair of shorts and a vest. This, I find, is much more natural and the pain is more intense.

Cliff jumpers have much difficulty in describing the feeling they get from this practice. They claim that it is beyond the sensation of most adrenaline rushes. In Sharky's words, "It's just a euphoric feeling when you're in mid-air, knowing there's no guaranteed safety mechanism to help you and no way back." Nonetheless, here is a passage from my field notes on the sensation of my first jump:

June 6, 2003

My thoughts on this first jump is that it feels quite unnatural. This is not a normal or regular thing to be experiencing or feeling. So it's an interesting juxtaposition to be having this "exploration of nature" element as a significant part of the experience and discourse when really this physical sensation is completely at odds with what one would actually find as natural. I've never fallen from such a height before. Even as a youngster I never jumped from the 10 meter diving board in our local pool. I would not describe cliff jumping as anything close to a near death experience and yet this type of free fall was one of the most unusual and unnatural sensations I've ever had. Perhaps this is because it was so contrived from the outset. I was studying cliff jumping months before ever actually doing it. Or perhaps this is because it was my first initiation to jumping. But I'm assuming at this stage that one would have to jump almost every day for quite some time before one felt it was a natural sensation. Free falling is not socially mundane. Surely most people don't experience this sensation with much frequency or on a regular basis.

My jumping mates began doubling the number of jumps that I was doing. I was trying to absorb it all, take it all in. Also, to be honest, I was rather bewildered by the whole thing. I started showing obvious reserve and even felt myself shaking somewhat even though it wasn't out of fear as such. More like I started over-analyzing things. Some water from our wetsuits had accumulated on the run up to the take off point and I

started worrying that without shoes or booties like those that the others were wearing, I might slip on take off.

Maybe the reason I started worrying was that I had been introduced to cliff jumping through narratives about it. Stories like this one:

There was this one time, on a big(ish) jump, where I slipped just before take off and so went hurtling, almost head-over-heels, downwards . . . I hit the water with almighty force; jamming my jaw, chipping a tooth and spraining almost every muscle in my back. That was the most frightening experience of my life, but even with many less dramatic near-death experiences like that; I'm not put off. People love to hear these stories and the feeling of success is too great for me to stop, even though I know I'm going to feel pain every time I pull on my wetsuit.

This passage by Dom (aged twenty-four) one of Rick's mates from Helston highlights a significant relationship between performance, pleasure, and pain. Indeed, if you knew him and read between the lines, you would realize that he means "girls love to hear these stories." An interesting facet of the physicality and embodiment of the Cornish coast is the relation of place to the body, risk, and sexuality. The extreme sports circles are very much related to the club, rave, and art scenes. During the 1960s and 1970s, St Ives artists generated numerous links between the human figure and the hazards or sexuality of the Cornish landscape. This has reinforced a hedonistic conception of leisure that especially marks the mood of the Cornish seaside as a place where adventure and reinvigoration as well as sexual promiscuity and fornication have become holiday sub-themes. Surfing hotspots like Fistral beach and the Watergate Bay in Newquay, or the nudist coves near Porthcurno and at St Austell's Carlyon Bay allow for these types of celebrations of the body, so that they have become synonymous with both risk and the *risqué*.

This is perhaps not all that surprising, especially when we consider that such relationships are reflected in a lot of the contemporary literature on bodily risk which is often related to the threats and dangers associated with certain sexual practices and behavior (Douglas 1992; Caplan 2000). Hence, John Fiske has produced a model of the beach that defines it as an ambivalent and unpredictable zone that encompasses "a physically anomalous category between land and sea . . . Nature/Culture" (1989: 44–5). As I have commented elsewhere, extreme sports provide an erstwhile poorly explored example about the relationships between the search for freedom, risk taking, the celebration of the body, and feelings of local pride and community (Laviolette 2007). The following quotation from Ben (aged twenty-six), from Harlyn, supports this when he describes this activity as

not for the faint-at-heart, but if done “safely”, not naively by some (mostly tourists), then there is no other feeling like it that I have encountered yet . . . I have heard stories of those who have ripped open their skin on entry . . . Maybe this is a myth set up by a group of mates to keep others away from what they like doing.

Cliff jumping is thus related at some level to a feeling of local identity and belonging. Participants are often very protective of jumping spots and the local knowledge associated with the practice. Cliff jumping also suggests that extreme sport enthusiasts are not bound to place in some static sense. Even if they might in reality regularly be returning to the same coves and shorelines these beach loiterers strongly associate such activities with freedom and movement. Additionally, they are playing in what the sociologist Tim Dant (1998) calls a transitory surf zone that emphasizes fluidity, change, danger, and ecstasy. Besides, the majority of these participants rarely restrict themselves to specific spots. They share a general feeling of wanderlust and hunt the coast for the best conditions or the least crowded beaches.

Most cliff jumpers therefore feel that they are part of the same euphoria-seeking subculture – similar to, but also very different from, that inhabited by skateboarders and BASE jumpers. As is the case with frozen waterfall climbers (Ferrell 2001), each community of jumpers has a lexicon of names given to specific places or those people who have jumped in a remarkable way. For example, we have Andy's Arse Flop, Lad Cove, Point X, Sharky's Echo, Dominic's Seal Squisher, Seagull Gully, the Beth Style Streaker, Piskies Cove, and so forth.

Hence, cliff jumping is significantly about creating sociality (Abramson and Laviolette 2007). One interesting aspect of this sociality and conviviality, which seems to push even further the level of danger involved, is when people jump together as pairs or even three or four at a time. The sharing of fun and fear, as well as the increased potential for collision with each other, reinforces the trust between cliff jumpers. Further, it binds them together in more than just a shared experience, it unites them through a socially constructed group narrative – a mutual experience that embodies the imagination – and where the imagination is embodied.

Disembodied Free Fall: Death and the Politics of Jumping

But what about the disembodied free fall of the imagination? The importance of the sea for Cornwall's economy is extensive. But the sea has also been the taker of life through the perils of fishing and ship wrecks. Further, it has been the vehicle by which emigration was made possible in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hundreds of boats carried thousands of people to Australia, California, Canada,

Figure 3

Group of quay-side jumpers, Newquay.



New Zealand, and South Africa. Cousin Jack and cousin Jane were taken away by the sea. Elsewhere I have discussed at more length the links between death and Cornish identity through the material metaphors concerning emigration, immigration, heritage tourism, and the hazards of Cornwall's industries (Laviolette 2003; 2006a). Indeed, the Cornish peninsula has often been seen as one informant states: "as a place where places end but never begin." Britishness, Englishness, and Cornishness reach their final destination in many of the duchy's places, no less at Land's End, the most western point of the "nation." As Alfred Tennyson says in his personal travel journal, "Funeral. Land's End and Life's End" (Tennyson, in 1949, quoted in Martin 1980: 320).

Given these linkages and my focus on existential anthropology, I want to elaborate on the associations between danger, death, and jumping. One informant I spoke to about cliff jumping told me that at least one death per year is caused by the sport. He said it was the most hazardous activity practiced by the young people in the region. Indeed, on June 22, 2003, while I was doing fieldwork on this very topic, a twenty-four-year-old youth did not resurface from jumping into a flooded mine quarry at Kit Hill, Callington.

My first exposure to jumping was also at a flooded mining site, on Carn Marth near Redruth, during the total eclipse of the sun on August 11, 1999. From 11:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m., three men stripped down to their shorts and started jumping into the quarry. This eclipse provides a telling example of the confusion of appropriation by different groups within the Duchy, most specifically a confusion between commodified leisure pursuits and the cultivation of a local

aura of mystery. The esoteric nature of the eclipse meant that an emphasis on creativity, rusticity, prehistory, and folklore took shape. By highlighting these themes, the promoters of and participants in the eclipse event were often unwittingly and sometimes consciously involved in a process of producing a regional aura of distinction – reinforcing the creation of social difference – elevating Cornwall to an otherworldly status. Jeff, an informant in his late thirties who was raised on the outskirts of Newquay and visits regularly from London, spoke for many when he said, “The eclipse is all about dying and being reborn. Unlike other artificial occasions, it’s a natural form of emptying the old and bringing in the new. Time to start again, a once in a lifetime chance at self-purification.”

The eclipse presented a chance to see something extraordinary and to be seen in extraordinary circumstances. Cornwall thus entered a quasi-liminal state for several days. If a pattern emerges from this disjointed discourse, it is perhaps that the eclipse helped reinforce the relationships between healing, death, society, and place. Indeed, the themes that conveyed themselves most coherently at the time orbited around how the moon’s shadow over Cornwall for two minutes would provide the opportunity for a turning point at both personal and social levels. Considering this existential tension between death and rebirth, one could argue that these jumps were ceremonial – maybe even part of a pseudo-ritual. Partially at least, it seems that the jumps on this day were undertaken as a kind of symbolic social offering – or, as Stebbins (2007) would say, a form of leisure that is far from frivolous but is instead absolutely serious.

Of course, an alternative scenario could be proposed: that people jump off cliffs for little reason, simply because they are bored. In other words, that it is a meaningless act. The reply is itself simple – is not boredom a condition of existential angst that people strive to overcome? If people are lead to jump off cliffs because of their ennui, are they not engaging their social imaginations in some kind of ultimate search for a freedom from boredom? This brings up the idea of seeking “freedom” as in the term “free fall.” Indeed, Bachelard’s description of accession dreams and oneiric flight indicates the emancipatory potential of liberating oneself from earthly constraints: “A human being in his youth, in his taking off, in his fecundity, wants to rise up from the earth. The leap is a basic joy” (Bachelard [1943] 1988: 63).

Conversely, in *The Fall* Albert Camus (1956) points out how the action of falling is metaphorically entangled with many fundamental anxieties. For instance, the phenomenologist Mike Jackson (1996) illustrates how such idioms as “to lose one’s footing,” or “to be up in the air” figuratively convey insecurity and instability. We are thus led to question the kind of freedom the jumper is seeking. To a degree, I suspect that they are searching for the sensation of ultimate liberation of which such authors also speak. Hence, the goal of the cliff jumper can be seen to fit with the philosopher Bertrand Russell’s maxim

of living without certainty while avoiding the paralysis of hesitation (Russell in Slater 1997).

This is where Bachelard comes in again because it is not air that is dangerous to the jumper but the cliffs and the water. In another of Bachelard's influential works, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* ([1942] 1983), he provides a psychoanalytic/phenomenological framework for the understanding of water as a mediating substance between many things like life and death, surface and depth, the known and the unknown. The anthropologist Stuart McLean's (2003) recent work on bog mires in Ireland draws out some interesting ethnographic descriptions about the symbolism of water, some of which is reminiscent of Bachelard's observations. Indeed, in the present context, I am particularly compelled to elaborate on how they describe water as ubiquitous. If, as Bachelard suggests, the admixture of water and earth is one of the fundamental schemes of matter and materiality, is this not precisely because everything is in a fluid-like flux? Indeed, for Merleau-Ponty, the world and our bodies as perceived through the senses are also creative, shape shifting entities (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). We can thus perceive water through its metaphorical potential. Consequently, in the context that I have described in this article, it might be relevant to replace Merleau-Ponty's analogous connection that links the flesh of the body with "the flesh of the world," to an analogy in which our body as fluids connects with the fluids and the fluidity of the world.

Does this not point to a relationship with the healing properties of water? (Anderson 2002). Least we forget, of course, its possibilities for harm. Clearly these issues are important here. The fact that water surrounds most of Cornwall's borders alludes to a powerful visual metaphor about the role of crossing over water to reach the end of life. In this sense, many elderly migrants who take their retirement in Cornwall are often anticipating and preparing for death, crossing a threshold and embarking on a pilgrimage to the great beyond. Alternatively, what might be at work here is the fighting off of death.

Since the confrontation with death is an ultimate condition of existence, the relationship that cliff jumping has with death marks it out as a true existential act. In this sense, some people might be reminded of the act of jumping to intentionally end life. In both the case of jumping to live and jumping to die, the jumper is taking a risk of failure – the extreme sports enthusiast runs the risk of failing to execute the jump properly. Suicidal individuals also run the risk of failing to kill themselves. On a simple level, then, there could be two strands of jumps. In the first you have the young person who wants to feel life at its extreme, that is, jumping off a cliff for the pure rush and exhilaration. Some of the exhilaration comes once the jumper realizes that he or she has survived and they have proved to themselves that they are alive in the extreme. The antipode is the person for whom life itself has become too extreme. So much so that he or she can no longer stand to be alive; that is, no longer wants

anything to do with the “extremity of life.” Interestingly, reports of failed suicide attempts nevertheless suggest that a kind of euphoria comes over the person, perhaps given the knowledge or through the sensation that life is ending. Consequently, at the heart of each individual action there is a meeting point – existential extremity.

In both cases, a lot of planning can be involved. Yet spontaneity and a blurring of the distinction between accidents, jumping to live and jumping to die are frequently involved. Of particular relevance here is the engraving “The Suicide” by Thomas Rowlandson in the volume *The English Dance of Death* (1814–16). Brown (2001) describes this aquatint as an allegorical depiction. In it, Death sits passively and relishes the fact that his victims are doing his work for him – a man drowned in his attempt to save someone while his lover hurls herself into the turbulent sea to join him in death. Indeed, she chooses to kill herself but this choice is thrust upon her.

Jumping off high bridges or high structures in order to commit suicide or “show off” is an activity that has a rich history. Brown mentions the famous case of a daredevil in the nineteenth century who jumped off the Tower Bridge in London as a stunt and did not survive. More recently, the documentary *The Bridge* (2006) by Eric Steel also depicts the “popularity” of jumping as a means of attempting suicide. The filming at San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge during 2004 reports an average of one person every fortnight jumping off the 220-foot-high suspension span with the intention of killing themselves. The Golden Gate remains the most frequent site for suicides in America, and thus ranks among the most prominent in the world, along with such places as the Aokigahara Forest at the base of Mount Fuji, Niagara Falls on the US/Canadian border, Paris’s famous Eiffel Tower, the cliffs of Beachy Head in Sussex, and Brunel’s Clifton Suspension Bridge in Bristol (the site of the first modern bungy jump on April 1, 1979 by the Dangerous Sports Club).

The public imagination was also caught by the well-known tragedy of “the falling man,” whose image was depicted time and again. Hundreds of people jumped or were blown out of the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. Of course, in these circumstances, we are no longer talking of suicide. Rather, it is a clear example of being pushed by circumstance. Some might even say that when faced with the inevitability of death, these jumpers were making a type of leap of faith, either for the unlikely chance of survival, or to catch one last breath, to live one last moment. This level of the absurd perhaps illustrates part of what Camus in *The Fall* ([1956] 1957) and Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (1956) are addressing in their own way. Given that at least one person was killed by being hit by such a falling victim during 9/11, we see an ironic paradox in the actual result of the jumps, not that I am suggesting the possibility of foresight in this case. Also, interestingly, we encounter some people’s rejection of the possibility that their loved ones could have given up hope and actually “deliberately” leapt.

Conclusion: A Leap of the Imagination

In thinking about how Bachelard informs us on an anthropology of the imagination, I am much more in accord with his position on the dynamic imagination. With regard to the materiality of the elements, he shows a greater concern for the potential of an imagination that is embodied and embodying. Given the focus of this article on free-fall jumping into water from cliff faces, I am especially drawn to his evocations of verticality:

it is in the *act itself*, lived as a unified whole, that dynamic imagination must be able to experience the double human destiny of depth and height. Dynamic imagination unites the two poles. It allows us to understand that something within us rises up when some action penetrates deeper – and that, conversely, something penetrates deeper when something else rises ... to stay closer to pure imagination – we are the strongest link between earth and air ... the earth and the air are, for a dynamized being, indissolubly linked. (1988: 108–9)

I would, of course, add, given the present context, that “the earth and air *and water* are, for the dynamized being, indissolubly linked.” In terms of Merleau-Ponty’s use of metaphorical embodiment, cliff jumping is thus a bodily metaphor for existence and identity. It provides a fleeting resolution of an existential struggle between locality and the global, freedom and constraint, modernity and nature (Lewis 2001). The body is rarely more unregulated than during these few moments of free-fall. So it is both the most natural and unnatural sensation since being truly free is unnatural.

As an event related to the creation and contention of identity and sociality, cliff jumping is clearly about performance. The dynamics governing cliff jumping are far more complex than that, however, since it is also about an intentional search for freedom through danger. There is a deliberate juxtaposition of a double reflexivity in the approach I have described. Hence, it is the study, writing, and narrating of the event that pushes cliff jumping beyond performance, to the level where it is a creative and imaginative act. An extreme practice of ontological and existential awareness.

No longer is jumping simply seen to be about performing identity or because it is just fun. Now jumping takes on relevance in relation to overcoming life’s absurdities. It gives meaning and subverts the abstraction of the body. Additionally, given that it is dismissed by passed practitioners, jumping is a type of rite of passage, from youth to maturity, from insecurities to being settled. If, as Freud (1919) points out, the liberation of sexual repression is to die a little, then so too is the existential act of moving from adolescence to adulthood through the practice of cliff jumping. That is, jumping is also to die a little – to engage in a gradual process of sacrificing one’s youth – one’s adolescence.

In addition to the obvious relation to Merleau-Ponty's work on the phenomenology of the body, the practice of cliff jumping fits in nicely with the context of what Marcel Mauss calls "techniques of the body" ([1934] 1992) – corporal ways of being that become natural or normativized, but are also contingent, malleable, and allow for a creative physicality. Jumping is thus a material, symbolic, and imaginative act, a means of liberation and freedom, a search for the unknown. This brings forth the idea of appearance and aesthetics in jumping and falling. Here we can recall the television broadcast of "Jump London" on Channel 4 on September 9, 2003.

The processes of incorporating these techniques may be experienced as disciplining or punishing, as in Michel Foucault's (1977) description of the body: "they . . . mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs." Indeed, the modern body is one that recent scholarship often portrays as mechanized, surveyed, patrolled, and unintentionally subjected to risk thus never more regulated. Nevertheless, such techniques of the body can also be seen as therapeutic and emancipatory – vehicles for transporting the imagination. Hence, we need to ask whether corporeal regimentation is the only result of modernity, the only framework in which to consider risk taking? Or is there something else that is possible here? An alternative scenario that ethnography – perhaps inspired by multi-sited, postmodern, or phenomenological approaches – can pursue. A scenario in which the hazardous use of landscape when linked to positive encounters with danger, allows extreme acts to be interpreted beyond even the notions concerning performance, to a more far-reaching – perhaps "extremist" – position where some of them can be understood as existential acts of the social imagination (Lavolette forthcoming).

So, to come back to Kierkegaard, then, who has suggested that, when reason or poetics reach their logical extreme or creative end – when we are confronted with an intellectual impasse or an thwart of the imagination – a complete and all encompassing existential insecurity, we are forced into making some type of "leap of faith." That is, of devising an ontological means of continuing ([1843] 1983). The act of cliff jumping, as it exists in the realm of an embodied imagination, provides such a platform from which to take such creative leaps of faith.

Social scientists should thus be stretching the leaps of faith that we take in our interpretations, theorizing, and methodological approaches, especially with regard to the uncharted terrain of the role of the imagination in formulating our social and bodily identities. This means truly accepting that ethnographic practices are themselves inherently grounded in reflexivity, educated guesses, and calculated risks that allow us and our disciplines to survive, both in the perilous arenas of academia and in the hazardous world out there. In dealing with the interviewing, participation, and observation of such fleeting moments of euphoria that extreme activities provide,

the researcher has necessarily reached a new methodological frontier. One of the most established ways we have of exploring this horizon is by the ethnographic practice of repeated participation, as well as the phenomenological process of detailed experiential description. These are indeed part of a more existentially based anthropological process of taking a fateful leap. In this case, such a leap is into the realm whereby landscape and nature, identity, the body, and the imagination come together through the cultural act of jumping off cliffs into water.

Acknowledgments

Earlier versions of this paper were presented on three occasions: at the Engaging Imagination conference on June 21, 2003 at DBS University College Dublin; at the Social Anthropology and Material Culture Seminar Series on December 3, 2003, University College London; and at the Sport and Anthropology Seminar, December 4, 2004, De Montfort University, Leicester. Thanks to the participants of these events for their suggestions. For their comments on earlier drafts, I am also grateful to Allen Abramson and Jean-Sébastien Marcoux.

References

- Abramson, A. and P. Laviolette 2007. "Cliff-Jumping, World-Shifting and Value-Production: The Genesis and Cultural Transformation of a Dangerous New Game." *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society*, 32(2): 5–28.
- Anderson, S.C. 2002. "Introduction: The pleasure of taking the waters." In Anderson, S.C. and B.H. Tabb. *Water, Leisure and Culture: European Historical Perspectives*. Oxford: Berg.
- Bachelard, G. [1938] 1987. [La Psychanalyse du feu.] *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*. Translated by N. Frye. Dallas, TX: The Dallas Institute Publications.
- Bachelard, G. [1942] 1983. [L'Eau et les rêves: essai sur l'imagination de la matière.] *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. Translated by E.R. Farrell. Dallas, TX: Pegasus Foundation.
- Bachelard, G. [1943] 1988. [L'Air et les songes, essai sur l'imagination du mouvement.] *Air and dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*. Translated by E.R. Farrell. Dallas, TX: The Dallas Institute Publications.
- Bachelard, G. [1947] 1988. [La Terre et les reveries de la volonté, essai sur l'imagination de la matière.] *Earth and Reveries of Will: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. (K. Haltman). Dallas, TX: The Dallas Institute Publications.
- Bell, C. and J. Lyall 2001. *The Accelerated Sublime: Landscape, Tourism and Identity*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Brown, R. 2001. *The Art of Suicide*. London: Reaktion Books.

- Busby, G. and P. Lavolette 2006. "Narratives in the Net: Fiction and Cornish Tourism." *Cornish Studies*. 14: 142–63.
- Camus, A. [1956] 1957. *The Fall*. Translated by J. O'Brien. London: H. Hamilton.
- Caplan, P. (ed.). 2000. *Risk Revisited*. London: Pluto Press.
- Crang, P. 1997. "Regional Imaginations: An Afterword." In E. Westland (ed.), *Cornwall: The Cultural Construction of Place*. Penzance: Patten Press.
- Dant, T. 1998. "Playing with Things: Objects And Subjects in Windsurfing." *Journal of Material Culture*. 3(1): 77–95.
- Douglas, M. 1992. *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge.
- Ferrell, D. 2001. "Climbing Frozen Waterfalls." In D. Wimmer (ed.), *The Extreme Game: An Extreme Sports Anthology*. Short Hills, NJ: Burford Books.
- Fernandez, J. and Huber, M.T. (eds.) 2001. *Irony in Action: Anthropology, Practice, and the Moral Imagination*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Fiske, J. 1989. *Reading the Popular*. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Foucault, M. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by A. Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books.
- Freud, S. 1919. *Totem and Taboo*. London: Penguin.
- Hunter, J. and M. Csikszentmihalyi 2000. "The Phenomenology of Body-Mind: The Contrasting Cases of Flow in Sports and Contemplation." *Anthropology of Consciousness*. 11(3/4): 5–25.
- Husserl, E. 1931. *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. Translated by W.R. Boyce-Gibson). London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.
- Ireland, M.J. 1989. "Tourism in Cornwall: An Anthropological Case Study." PhD dissertation. University of Swansea.
- Jackson, M. (ed.). 1996. *Things as They Are: New Directions in Phenomenological Anthropology*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Jackson, M. 2005. *Existential Anthropology: Events, Exigencies and Effects*. Oxford: Berghahn Publishers.
- Johnson, M. 1987. "Toward a Theory of Imagination." In *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Karl F.R. and L. Hamalian (eds) [1963] 1973. Introduction. *The Existential Imagination*. London: Picador.
- Kierkegaard, S. [1843] 1983. *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*. Edited and translated by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Lakoff, G. and M. Johnson 1999. *Philosophy in the Flesh*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lavolette, P. 2003. "Landscaping Death: Resting Places for Cornish Identity." *Journal of Material Culture*. 8(2): 215–40.

- Lavolette, P. 2006a. "Ships of Relations: Navigating through Local Cornish Maritime Art." *International Journal of Heritage Studies*. 12(1): 69–92.
- Lavolette, P. 2006b. "Green and Extreme: Free-Flowing through Seascape and Sewer." *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion*. 10(2): 178–204.
- Lavolette, P. 2007. Guest editorial: "Hazardous Sport?" *Anthropology Today*. 23(6): 1–2.
- Lavolette, P. forthcoming. *Not a Hap-Hazardous Sport: Extreme Landscapes of Leisure*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Lewis, N. 2001. "The Climbing Body, Nature and the Experience of Modernity." In Macnaghten, P. and J. Urry (eds), *Bodies of Nature*. London: Sage Publications.
- Lyng, S. 1990. Edgework: "A Socio Psychological Analysis of Voluntary Risk Taking." *American Journal of Sociology*. 95(4): 851–86.
- Low, S. and D. Lawrence-Zuniga 2003. *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- McLean, S. 2003. "Buried Landscapes of Childhood." In Strathern, A. and P.J. Stewart (eds). *Landscape, Memory and Identity*. London: Pluto Press.
- Marcus, G. E. 1995. "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography." *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 24: 95–117.
- Martin, R.B. 1980. *Tennyson, the Unquiet Heart: A Biography*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Mauss, M. [1934] 1992. "Techniques of the Body." In Cray J. and S. Kwinter (eds). *Incorporations*. New York: Zone Books.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge.
- Slater, J. 1997. *Last Philosophical Testament, 1943–68 Volume 11*. London: Routledge.
- Sartre, J-P. 1956. *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*. (Trans. Barnes H. E.): Paris: Gallimard.
- Schutz, A. 1970. *Alfred Schutz on Phenomenology and Social Relations*. Edited by H.R. Wagner. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Stebbins, R.A. 2007. *Serious Leisure: A Perspective for Our Time*. New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine/Transaction.
- Steel, E. 2006. *The Bridge*. New York: Koch-Lorber Films.
- Thornton, P. 1993. "Cornwall and Changes in the 'Tourist Gaze'." *Cornish Studies*. 1: 80–96.
- Tilley, C. 1994. *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths, Monuments*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- Tuan, Y-F. 1974. *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perceptions, Attitudes, and Values*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Tuan, Y-F. 1980. *Landscapes of Fear*. Oxford: Blackwell.