Chapter 28

The Beach as a Liminal Space

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Introduction

The beach is a place of strong magic. As a material space it is a boundary zone where the hint of celestial forces is whispered by the ebb and flow of tides, a space that is neither land nor sea, a zone of uncertainty that resonates with the sound of ever-changing seas, a setting that is, by turns, calm, tranquil, and soothing or agitated, unruly, and frightening. As a cultural space it is a borderland that allows both difference and hybridity while facilitating the tactile tug of land or sea to reveal for many, but not all, spaces of heightened sensibilities that are temporary, personal, and elusive – in short, liminal spaces.

Western scriptings of the beach through various forms of discourse or representation contribute to its popularity, and probably also toward a sense of disappointment when the text fails to meet expectations. In addition to these exchanges the beach does seem to contain liminal properties that sustain its allure for many visitors. These come in many forms. For some the simple act of stepping onto the sand may be accompanied by a feeling of upliftment, a frisson of awareness, and a holistic sensation in which action and consciousness are merged at the moment of crossing into what we can call a liminal space. According to Turner (1982: 56), Csikszentmihalyi (1974) calls this experience “flow” and describes it as “a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present and future.”

Liminality is an elusive concept. Some of the ways in which this notion has been incorporated into Western imagination are illustrated in the next section. Attention is then directed to the liminal properties of beaches. Drawn from a largely Western perspective, social, spiritual, surfing, and nudist beach spaces are offered as examples of spaces where liminality may be found and experienced in various ways. Visitors may seek, but not necessarily find, on these beaches a space where the stress of normal working lives is temporarily suspended, cultures merge, egalitarianism flourishes, and bonds of friendship are forged. The reliance on Western
viewpoints and the paucity of empirical exploration in the literature is, however, a recognized weakness.

Czikszentmihalyi’s notion of liminality as “flow” may be a useful starting point to support or deepen our understanding of how liminal beach spaces are perceived and experienced. The lack of distinction between self and environment in his description echoes the call for a more symmetrical view of human and nonhuman “actors” by actor-network theorists such as Callon (1986), Latour (1987), and Law (1994), while the combination of “past, present and future” is reflected in Harvey’s claim that “space and time . . . are not realities but relations derived from processes and events” (Harvey 1997: 258). The implication of these issues is addressed in the concluding section, where actor-network theory is proposed as an approach that may be employed to explore the nature of liminal beach experiences empirically and across cultural divides.

Notions of Liminality

Van Gennep (1960) first used this concept in 1909 in his work *Les Rites de passage* to describe the intermediate stage in the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Liminal, from the Latin word *limen*, meaning boundary or threshold, seemed to be an appropriate word to describe the transitional stage in the initiation process. This is the boundary that lies between the separation of adolescents from their social environment and their incorporation into adult life. It is also a liminal space with “the ritual subject passing through a period and an area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few (though sometimes these are most crucial) of the attributes of either the proceeding or subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states” (Turner 1982: 24).

Since its introduction, the notion of liminality has been employed in many diverse cultural and social contexts. Temporal markers such as religious festivals, birthdays, and holidays are associated with prescribed rituals and symbols. While the arrival of each such event is customarily prescribed by calendar days, it is sensed as an enchanted period between the past and the present, between before and after. Each event is experienced differently in accordance with social and cultural demands or by the imagination of individuals. For example, while some may be conditioned to the choice of midnight as a boundary between days, for others dusk may be a more meaningful borderline time to relax and contemplate this transition.

The notion of liminality is employed here as a metaphor to facilitate “a way of proceeding from the known to the unknown” (Nisbet 1969: 4), from the accepted symbols of the profane to the blurred, ambiguous, and powerful symbols of the sacred. Liminal spaces are intangible, elusive, and obscure. They lie in a limbo-like space often beyond normal social and cultural constraints. In these spaces can be found brief moments of freedom and an escape from the daily grind of social responsibilities. As a place of desire they offer a “dreamtime” that resonates with spiritual rebirth, transformation, and recuperation. However, transitional states are also places of anxiety replete with darker images of threat and danger. Images of the no man’s land of First World War trench warfare, the perception of crossroads as magical places, and pilgrim’s reactions to sacred places are some examples of “in-between” spaces that evoke responses to an imagined geography (Trubshaw 2002).
In each case the liminal experience involves crossing some form of imagined threshold. While this transition from the known to the unknown may be accompanied by unease in some cases, it may also produce a feeling of heightened sensitivity or a deeper awareness of the special qualities of the place. Novelists such as William Golding (1954) and Alex Garland (1997) use the setting of the beach to great effect in capturing these feelings in their novels. For example, in Alex Garland’s (1997) novel *The Beach*, the main character, Richard, endures the dangers of both land and sea to find a secret and secluded beach community living a supposedly utopian existence on a remote island off the coast of Thailand. Initially the ambience of the beach meets their expectations. In seemingly timeless space amongst the beach community, Richard reflects: “You fish, swim, eat, laze around, and everyone’s so friendly. It’s such simple stuff but... if I could stop the world and restart life, put the clock back, I think I’d restart it like this. For everyone” (Garland 1997: 133).

**Beach Spaces**

From a Western perspective, beach spaces incorporate the space of leisure activities in the material environment, provide measures of difference between them, and integrate the symbolic values socially and culturally attached to them. The social construction of these spaces (Giddens 1984; Harvey 1989; Soja 1989; Lefebvre 1991; Shields 1991; Gregory 1994; Massey 1994; Simonsen 1996; Young 1999) is the product of processes and practices that define their use on the basis of specific leisure activities. They include spaces for bathing, surfboarding, yachting, sunbathing, fishing, and promenading as well as spaces for those who seek enjoyment of beach environments in wild and lonely places. While social constructions of space are likely to differ between individuals, Golledge (1978, 1981) suggests that general agreement over their identification produces sufficient congruence to provide common ground for their effective definition and partition. People make decisions on their choice of beach space and periods of use by employing constructivist thought that draws on the desired activities to be experienced as well as romanticized a priori knowledge of the space.

The attraction of the beach with its many activity spaces turns it into a space of culture–nature interface between land and sea (Jeans 1990). It becomes a place where the cultural tastes and preferences of visitors leave their indelible imprint (Hugill 1975; Shields 1990; Tunstall and Penning-Rowsell 1998; Preston-Whyte 2001), and where changes in carrying capacities (Pearce and Kirk 1986), structure and morphology (Stansfield 1969; Pigram 1977; Pearce 1978; Franz 1985) and development history (Urry 1990; Haywood 1992; Ioannides 1992; Smith 1992; Agarwal 1997) impact on the socioeconomic, political, and natural environment.

The elusive quality of liminality does not seem to fit easily with either the social construction approach or the revelation of how development and use may change the beach. What is needed is an approach that expands our understanding of the nature of liminal spaces in places that range from wild, deserted, and remote beaches to those along settled coastlines. How and where is liminality experienced in association with beach activities such as fishing, surfing, and boardsailing? Do scuba divers become immersed in a placeless place between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the known and the unknown, beneath the waves? Do bathers and surfers
experience a temporary suspension of time as they confront the raw energy unleashed by breaking waves? In what sense do piers built into and beyond the surf zone create a space suspended between land and sea, a connective tissue between two worlds? Can one assume that for some people liminal spaces may even be found in seaside resorts where paved promenades adjacent to the sand provide spaces of relaxation where, singly or in groups, they may move into a space of heightened sensitivity as they walk, run, cycle, or rollerblade? These questions need to be answered by employing appropriate epistemological, ontological, and methodological tools to discover why, where, and how people perceive and experience liminal beach spaces.

An approach that seeks to understand the notion of liminality must also accommodate factors that are thought to inhibit the experience. It is assumed, for example, that visitor recognition of the ugliness of overdeveloped, overcrowded, noisy, and polluted seaside resorts leads to disappointment and the frustration of their efforts to find the liminality they seek. In his novel, Alex Garland (1997) vividly captures this reaction through the eyes of Richard when he is sent to collect supplies for the secret beach community at Hat Rin, a nearby island resort:

Before I’d been looking at Hat Rin with detached curiosity, and now I was looking at it with hatred… Most of all, I could pick up the scent of decay. It hung over Hat Rin like the sandflies that hung over the sunbathers, zoning in on the smell of sweat and sweet tanning lotion. The serious travelers had already moved on to the next island in the chain, the intermediate travelers were wondering where all the life had gone, and the tourist hordes were ready to descend on their freshly beaten track. (Garland 1997: 177)

It is also assumed that those who are engaged in their everyday duties such as lifeguards, rubbish collectors, and law enforcement officers, do not perceive the beach with the same enthusiasm as its visitors. The existence of these officials is also a sign that beaches can be a place of danger. Unpredictable currents are a threat to weak swimmers, and, where they occur, tsunamis and storm surges are a threat to all. Human waste and marine disturbances such as red tide threaten both visitors and sea creatures. The possibility of social and criminal violence threatens the viability of the beach as a space of relaxation. Despite this there is the ongoing transformation of many beaches to an environment in which Western cultural values signpost activities devoted to the consumption of pleasure and recreation. As Lencek and Bosker (1999: xix) note, “Nature’s most potent antidepressant, the beach moves us with the power of a drug, the rhythm of its tides and shifting margins reorienting our sense of space and time, its aphrodisiacal cocktail of sun and water firing our slumbering hedonism.”

These sensations of the seashore inspire social, spiritual, surfing, and nudist beach spaces, all of which have liminal potential. In each of these examples it is worth considering the extent to which natural and social elements of the beach environment are woven together in a framework of heterogeneous associations that may contribute toward the creation of a timeless space suspended between land and sea. In general attention is drawn only to the positive features of liminal beach spaces since it is these that attract those in search of such spaces. This does not mean, however, that tensions between individuals cannot develop within these spaces or
that threats caused by social or natural elements cannot suddenly disrupt liminal states.

**Social spaces**

Beaches are generally perceived to present a smiling face to humanity. This makes them desirable places to socialize and relax (Shields 1990). So strongly do such spaces shape the lives of some that, “my great-uncle Arturo Manzoni was reputed to have said: ‘there are three phases of life: birth, **beach** and death’” (Lencek and Bosker 1999: xix). However, whether or not the regeneration, relaxation, and recreation associated with beaches induce a sense of liminality in social settings is likely to depend on the nature of the conditions conducive to releasing the magic of the place.

There is no single imperative that sets out the conditions that shape the nature of liminal social spaces on beaches. Instead a variety of forms exist that may be as changeable as the beach itself. Alex Garland (1997) provides one setting in his novel that highlights a sense of belonging, and an unquestioned acceptance by a multicultural society, when Richard comments, “Assimilation: from day one we were working, everyone knew our names, we had beds allocated in the longhouse. I felt like I’d been living there all my life” (Garland 1997: 115). While this image of the beach may be portrayed as a “third space” (Bhabha 1994; Soja 1996) where hybridity is encouraged, such social conditions may be fragile and temporary. This too is vividly portrayed in Garland’s novel when the social harmony of the beach community with its illusion of liminality is shattered by food poisoning and the death of two of its members through shark bites.

If hybridity is a feature of some beach spaces, difference may shape the social conditions in others as notions of group identity, formed on the basis of social and cultural attitudes, enhance the “We” of shared identity and exacerbate the perception and definition of “Others” as outsiders (Crang 1998). Preston-Whyte (2001) shows how such reasoning can lead to beach spaces that are socially and culturally identified, constructed, and contested. Garland (1997: 144) also portrays a fear of intrusion by uninvited visitors through his characters’ belief that “The world is everything outside the beach.” In this case the imaginary boundaries that people erect to reduce fear of the “Other” are symbolized by the cliffs and reef that protected the sanctuary of the secluded beach space.

**Spiritual spaces**

The beach provides a fascination for many religious sects that see the interface between land and sea as an auspicious environment in which seek intercession with their deity. The symbolism attached to dawn, and the cleansing act of immersion that takes place during religious ceremonies on beaches, are probably ages old. These actions seem to induce in believers a feeling of religious passion that imbues the beach with special meaning. It becomes a liminal space in which normal statuses are temporarily suspended: it becomes a sacred place.

The beach is recognized, symbolized, and used in different ways in different places as a meeting ground with the sacred. An internet search for “beach worship” reveals a startling number of religious groups that see the beach as a locale where its
members can experience spiritual solace and support. However, the manner in which this activity takes place is likely to exhibit cultural variation.

Religious meetings of mainly black South Africans on the beaches of Durban, South Africa are regularly witnessed by the author and are offered as an example within a cultural context. On some weekends the sound of drums accompanied by singing heralds the start of a pre-dawn ceremony. The rising sun reveals a group of worshipers, most clad in white robes. Lighted candles may be arranged in a circle or semi-circle behind them. The officiant, identified by a blue sash or some other form of differentiating clothing, leads the prayers and singing. At some stage worshipers move to the sea and are ceremonially dowsed in the waves.

Throughout the ceremony the eye is drawn to the officiant, who orchestrates the vibrant singing, the spiritual engagement with the deity, and the pulsating thrrob of drums. The worshipers appear lost in a world of exaltation, a liminal space where faith and religious fervor create a sense of community, identity, and forged bonds. Bystanders gaze from a respectful distance, excluded from the experience and left to wonder and comment from their various cultural perspectives.

Although many religious groups are structured to accommodate communal worship, the beach is also a place to retreat from the turmoil of life in order to establish contact with one’s inner self. In solitude the symbolic act of meditation is about entering a liminal space for the purpose of “setting aside time to attend to the hearth of your inner life” (Louden 2002: 1).

Surfing spaces

Surfing on waves that form and break along a shelving shore is a popular leisure activity on many beaches. For many surfers it becomes a compulsive pursuit that draws on a range of emotions. Augustin (1998: 589) notes “a changed relationship between body and nature that enhances spontaneity, imagination, and a need to be free,” and draws attention to the attractive prospect of escaping institutional constraints for those who participate in sport libre (footloose sports) such as surfing. Entry into the sea to confront breaking waves induces a sense of well-being, a suspension of time, and a communion with self.

Surfers focus their attention on riding a board across the face of a building wave that is steep, smooth, high, and about to break. To the uninitiated this robust activity seems distant from the introspective spaces of religious groups and individuals. Yet the compulsive enthusiasm with which surfers daily confront waves suggest that surfing spaces provide a liminal experience that is equally intense. The short-lived adrenaline rush of a ride on or within a breaking wave is a place where time and space are concentrated. It is a moment of exhilaration in a liminal space before the collapse of a wave in a tumult of sound and fury. The desire to relive the experience is like an addictive drug.

The need to satisfy this addiction leads to a search for the best surfing spaces. Preston-Whyte (2002) shows that surfers gather in spaces where the wave shape is most suitable for surfing. This has two major outcomes. Firstly, surfers become socialized into a “subculture” that is companionable, competitive, and exclusive. Secondly, as the surfing population increases surfing space becomes a scarce resource. The issue of space and its control then becomes centered on notions of territoriality (Wesemann 1998) and identity. Territorial surfing groups possess a
strong sense of identity honed through displays of skill and knowledge in coping with formidable waves, reinforced by their dedication and commitment to surfing and expressed through the use of “insider” vocabulary (Preston-Whyte 2002).

Under these conditions, access to prized and often scarce surfing space may require newcomers to participate in a rite of passage that is reminiscent of the transition discussed by van Gennep (1960). Before being accepted by exclusive groups newcomers must demonstrate their dedication and commitment to the sport, their surfing skill, knowledge about waves and currents, and respect for the rules and etiquette of the sport. The reward gained by the successful transition from newcomer to group member is the joy of riding the waves in the most liminal of surfing spaces.

**Nudist spaces**
The signs and symbols assigned to the wearing of clothes are associated with indicators of power, status, and gender in most Western societies. In these societies, public nudity commonly carries with it a level of social opprobrium, largely shaped by religious dogma, which tends to be articulated through expressions of disgust, disapproval, and suspicion. If the subject of nudist beaches is raised in social gatherings there are likely to be three responses. The first is a stern rebuke for even considering such aberrant sinful behavior. The second is a shifty-eyed denial of any interest in the practice of nudism. The third is enthusiastic acknowledgment of support for nudist beaches.

The third group of respondents appears to be growing in number. An exploration of the internet reveals a large number of nudist beaches on the continent of Europe, North America, and Australia. More relaxed attitudes on the part of local administrators and the police have accompanied the growing popularity of “clothing optional” public beaches. Many such beaches now have tacit recognition from local authorities and some have even progressed to the next stage of acquiring legal status. Morfa beach at Dyffryn Ardudwy near Barmouth in Wales is an example where 30 years of disrobing has finally received official recognition. Morfa beach is acclaimed to be the nation’s first official nudist beach (BBC News 2002). What is the attraction of these beaches?

It would be naive to expect a simple answer to this question. There is little doubt, however, that “nudists” are attracted by the liminal nature of these beaches. The discourse of nature emphasizes tolerance, and a passive sensuality is tamed by individual self-regulation (Evans 2000). There is also a sense of liberation that comes with disrobing. “Nudity,” according to Skye Delaney (2002), “is in fact a metaphor for peeling off false layers of the self. The many masks we wear in life, the many layers of falsehood that get us from one place to the next, can sometimes result in exhaustion.” This suggests that nudist beaches are spaces of relaxation where the atmosphere of liminality allows the stressed and largely educated “free-thinkers” to relax and release the tensions of life. Evans (2000: 17) draws on Stam’s (1988) critique of Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of Carnival in a searching analysis of motivation to suggest that

Eros and nudity; the doffing of symbols of class and the mixing of distinct social groups; the ambiguity of a semiotics without clothes; communal rites of disrobing; and the background
discourses of utopian freedom; all these phenomena at Wreck Beach combine with its ideational and geographical marginality to produce a Carnival atmosphere in Bakhtin’s sense. The ease of access, liberation and sense of community that characterize the timeless atmosphere of nudist beaches is admirably captured by Evans (2000: 19):

The cost of entry is small – a willingness to dispense with normative ideals of modesty and propriety. Once naked, people, no matter what their class, gender, or ethnic origins, are bona fide members of the community. In their nudity, they share a bond, a trans-personal sense of belonging. In their ritualized participation in the timeless space of sun-worship, they mutually step outside the tyranny of the clock and the tyranny of “normal” surveillance. They are, in a sense, united in a timeless space of ludic pleasure and sensual recuperation; they belong to a place out of time and out of normalcy.

The tolerance and lack of barriers of exclusion on nudist beaches also provide access to those who seem unable to tame their sexuality. A recurrent theme on these beaches worldwide appears to be the irritation of the masculine gaze by dressed men who persist in regarding women as objects of sexual consumption. This, and other forms of inappropriate behavior, can diminish the magic of the spaces that nudists seek. However, social opprobrium that could produce “a public politics of shame” (Evans 2000: 28), tends to be inhibited by the tolerant culture of nudist beaches.

A Way Forward?

The discussion on beaches as liminal spaces needs to be deepened. The dominance of a Western perspective that assumes liminality to be linked with heightened sensibilities associated with the temporary suspension of normal states, coupled with a paucity of empirical exploration of the nature of the symbolism of these threshold spaces, needs to be addressed by appropriate research strategies. Epistemologically and ontologically two main issues seem to be important in the choice of a suitable approach. First, the human actors, with their cultural discourse and symbols to conceptualize and tame the beach, and the non-human actors that constitute the material conditions of the beach itself with its attractions and dangers, must be dealt with on equal terms. Secondly, dualisms, such as nature/culture, that feature so strongly in socio-spatial analysis, need to be addressed (Demeritt 1996; Murdock 1997a; Watmore 1998, 2000).

Actor-network theory is one approach that may provide a way of extending our comprehension of liminality. Developed by Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, and John Law in their attempt to understand the construction of knowledge in science (e.g., Callon 1986; Latour 1987; Law 1994), actor-network theory has attracted considerable attention, not least because of the development of a philosophy focused on a unified theoretical perspective that promises a non-dualistic standpoint that combines the social and the material. Murdock (1997b) provides a good review.

Actor-network theorists maintain that the stability and durability of society is based on a network of interactions and associations that include non-human actors. Emphasis is placed on the symmetrical analysis of humans and non-humans, as they
strive to build networks along the chain of associations that comprise them. Instead of agency being associated solely with human activity, in actor-network theory,

agents (both human and non-human) emerge from a series of trials in which they are continually striving to become actors with powers; it is only at the end of the period of network stabilization that the actors/agents/actants can be distinguished from the lesser entities which by now are simple intermediaries, that is links in a network. (Murdock 1997a: 330)

The network ontology is concerned with the heterogeneity of networks in which subjects, objects, and the relations between them (social and material) are “seamlessly entwined within complex sets of association” (Murdock 1998: 359).

The use of actor-network theory as a philosophical discourse to deepen our understanding of liminal beach spaces will require epistemological and ontological shifts for many researchers. In particular it requires the incorporation of nonhuman actors in philosophical perspective. The study of social networks informed by social constructions would need to be replaced by networks that

draw together materials, which have their own space-times, into new configurations which, to some extent, reflect the type of relations established in the network (that is networks and spaces are generated together). Thus each network traces its own particular space-time which reflects both the variety of the materials used in construction and the relations established between the combined elements. (Murdock 1998: 361)

The notion of liminal space as a transition between ways of being may also need revision or at least restructuring to reflect the manner in which the relations between actors, entities, and places are negotiated and represented in a process called translation (Callon 1986; Latour 1987). Networks may turn out to be stable or unstable depending upon the success of the translation process. A network becomes stabilized when the translation process allows successful integration of the component parts “thereby allowing the enrolling actor (the ‘center’) to ‘speak’ for all” (Murdock 1998: 362). It is through tracing networks along the path to the point of network stabilization (or destabilization) that actors/actants/agents may reveal the enigma of liminal spaces. A research agenda employing actor-network theory may be a useful approach to reveal cross-cultural views on the same beach as well as on different beaches across the world. We might then be in a better position to make sense of the cryptic comment made by Richard in Alex Garland’s novel: “It doesn’t matter why I found it so easy to assimilate myself into beach life. The question is why the beach life found it so easy to assimilate me” (Garland 1997: 116).

REFERENCES


