



The liminal coastline in the life of a whale: Transition, identity, and food-production in the Eastern Caribbean

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines ways in which a coastline, specifically the swash zone on a particular Caribbean beach, serves to inform our understanding of liminal spaces. At the precise place where the landscape transitions from sea to land with each wave's ebb and flow, artisanal whalers from the island of St. Vincent unload their day's catch and begin the process of turning animals into food products. The shoreline can be seen as a space to which the marine mammals are brought for the purpose of a multifaceted transition, in which their identities, physical forms, and even status as living organisms are changed. By examining the specific transitions that occur in this space, and by questioning why these transitions do not occur elsewhere, this paper sheds light on concepts of land and sea, life and death, and the gendering of space—all of which undergo a defined transition at the water's edge on this particular coastline.

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Introduction

Almost every morning on the island of St. Vincent in the eastern Caribbean (Fig. 1), artisanal whalers leave the port village of Barro-uallie (pronounced *BARE-ah-lee*, Fig. 2) in open, wooden boats to hunt short-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala macrorhynchus*) and other small, toothed cetaceans. In the evening, they bring their catch to a particular stretch of coastline for processing. This whaling operation began in earnest over a century ago but was based upon a tradition of occasional whaling that the ancestors of today's Vincentians learned during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from American whalers who came to their waters in pursuit of the humpback whale (*Megaptera nodosa*) and sperm whale (*Physeter catodon*). The main products of the operation are whale meat and blubber, which are processed and sold as food for human consumption. Oil is a secondary product, used for cooking and as a folk medicine.

The species taken by Vincentian whalers are not protected by the International Whaling Commission (IWC), which concerns itself primarily with large, baleen whales rather than these so-called small cetaceans (Gillespie, 2001). The hunt is legal under Vincentian law, if only by omission: the country's published fisheries regulations include no mention of any marine mammals (SVG, 2001, 2006). While this whaling operation remains relatively unknown to the millions of North American and European tourists who visit the Caribbean each year (Hoyt and Hvenegaard, 2002), it has been

described in the scientific literature for at least half a century (Rack, 1952; Adams, 1970, 1973; Caldwell and Caldwell, 1971; Scott, 1995; Fielding, 2010).

Animals that are captured, killed, and processed for food necessarily undergo multiple important transitions: from life to death, from animal to food product, from whole to divided, raw to cooked, unsanitary to clean, specific to general. To explain profound changes such as these and the spaces in which they occur, geographers have borrowed the concept of *liminality* from our colleagues in ethnography (van Gennep, 1909) and anthropology (Turner, 1967, 1969). Liminality is the state of transition from one form or status to another. The term not only describes the state of being in between, but also provides a temporary definition while neither the pre-transition nor post-transition state is tenable. Like Schrödinger's cat—being neither alive nor dead, and therefore equally alive and dead—people, nonhuman animals, and objects in a state of liminality are neither what they were before nor what they are becoming. Liminality itself has come to define them. Liminal spaces are where these transitions happen. They are places of change, of uncertainty and hybridity. Within a liminal space, people, nonhuman animals, and objects experience the transitional definition of liminality.

The beach—and more precisely, the swash zone—offers a physical point of reference to the study of liminal spaces. Owing to its dynamic nature and constant ebb and flow, the swash zone is more than a simple boundary between land and sea. Neither land nor sea, it is equally land and sea. At the same time, it is something wholly different. It is fitting to view the swash zone, then, as a

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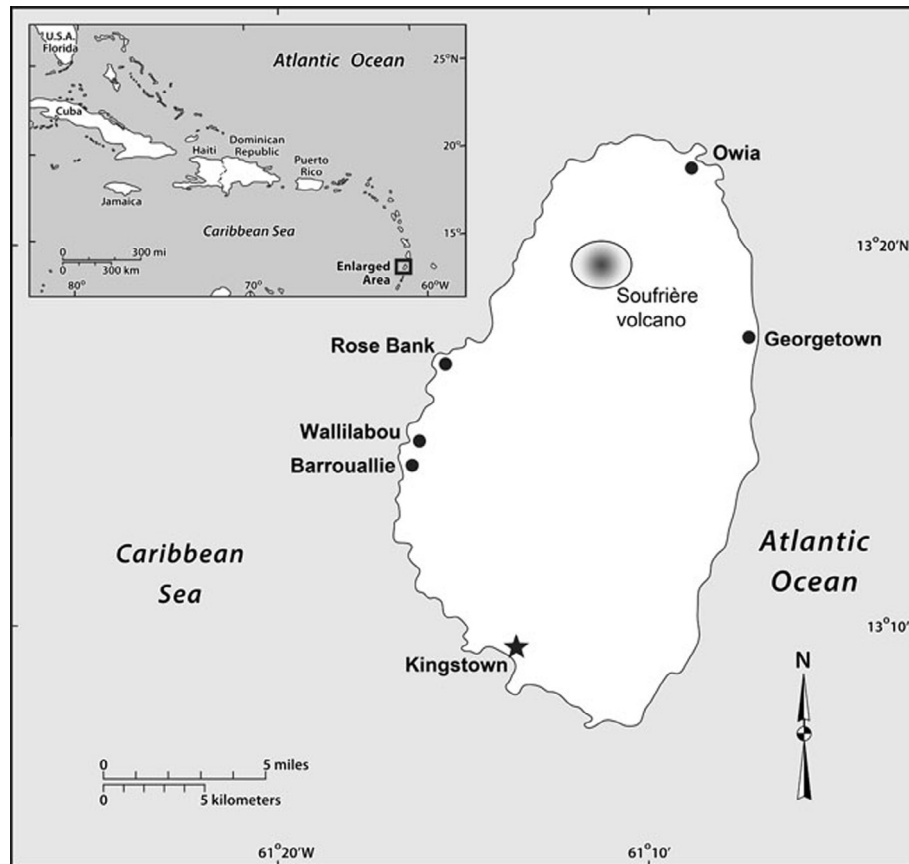


Fig. 1. Map of the island of St. Vincent. Cartography by C. Duplechin, Louisiana State University.



Fig. 2. The town of Barrouallie.

space where liminality can occur. Even more, one might even come to expect liminality to be the dominant state in a space so rife with transition. Culturally, island populations have sometimes come to view their beaches as thresholds, spaces that must be crossed in order to transition from the outer to the inner (Denning, 1980).

Most researchers have approached analyses of the beach as liminal space through the lens of tourism and recreation (e.g. Webb, 2003; Preston-Whyte, 2004; Azaryahu, 2005; Andrews, 2012). This trend is appropriate, given the heavy influence of tourism on our conceptualization of beach spaces. However, not all shorelines are given over to leisure. Following a small line of geographers and other scientists who have studied coastlines of industry and development (e.g. DeFilippis, 1997; Nordstrom, 1997; Davidson and Entrikin, 2005; Keeling, 2005), this paper looks at a working beach where sunbathers or swimmers are rarely found, but where

daily effort is made to produce products for sale and subsistence in a traditional manner.

In the context of Vincentian whaling, liminality is apparent in the transition of wild cetaceans from living marine mammals to commodities to be sold as food and other products. The space in which these changes take place can be precisely identified: the swash zone of a particular stretch of beach by the village of Barrouallie.

In this paper, I examine several of the transitions that occur among cetaceans that have been caught for food by Vincentian whalers. Special attention is paid to the spaces in which these transitions occur and the significance of these spaces within Vincentian (or, more precisely, Barrouallie) culture: reasons why these spaces are used to the exclusion of others and the political-ecological situations that have led to complicated, nuanced, and resisted attempts to relocate this liminal space further down the coastline from its original location.

These discussions are based upon research conducted during four field seasons in St. Vincent between 2007 and 2012, each ranging from a few weeks to several months. During my research I spent nearly every day with the whalers and their onshore counterparts in the whaling operation—processors, vendors, consumers.

Upon departure in their nineteen-foot boat, the three-man¹ crew immediately begins watching for signs of whales and dolphins: dorsal fins breaking the surface, the spray from a blowhole, or collections of seabirds that may indicate schools of fish, upon which toothed cetaceans feed. The harpooner stands at an elevated platform in the bow and directs the boat's course through hand

¹ Because gender roles in Vincentian whaling are clearly defined and rarely altered, this paper uses gendered language intentionally and correctly.

signals. When a crewmember sights a cetacean, and the boat approaches within harpooning range, the harpooner throws a hand-harpoon or fires a shorter gun-harpoon from a modified shotgun mounted on a stand. Whales and dolphins that are struck are hauled close, tied alongside the gunwales of the boat or, if small enough, are brought onboard. Whaling continues until nightfall, or until an abundance of cetaceans have been caught, or until the harpooner decides that the day is not going to be a productive one. At the harpooner's signal, the boat turns toward Barrouallie for its return to port.

As the boat approaches the shore, a crowd gathered on the dock peers anxiously to see what was caught. The boat owner, if not onboard, has usually been alerted by mobile telephone as to what the day's catch has been. He, in turn, has usually already made arrangements with one or more of Barrouallie's local vendors for the wholesale of the catch. Often, prices are agreed upon before the whaleboat has even been tied at the dock and vendors are eagerly sharpening their knives on the dock's concrete pilings as the boat appears on the horizon.

My day-to-day research could best be described as participant observation, with an emphasis on the term *participant*. While I never actually killed a whale, I contributed to the work aboard the whaling boat by watching for whales, passing equipment from the boat's hold to the harpooner in the bow, hauling lines after whales had been harpooned, and removing and straightening harpoons from caught whales. Upon returning to shore with the day's catch, I assisted in lifting the whales and dolphins onto the dock or dragging them ashore. When the transitions upon which this paper focuses began, my role—as did the role of all the whalers—became decidedly hands-off. I observed the transfer of control from the whalers to the vendors and their processing crews, watched as the cetaceans were eviscerated and then butchered into smaller, more manageable-sized pieces. I watched the processors cook the blubber and hang the meat in the sun to dry. In the days to come, I would follow the vendors throughout the island as they peddled their products for sale. In my association with the whalers I was necessarily not associated with the onshore workers. Upon stepping from the boat to the dock or the shore I stepped out of “my” element and into a place where whalers (and all “sea people”) take a subordinate role. However, my transition from participant to observer was minor in comparison to the transitions through which the whales or dolphins undergo at the shoreline.

Transitions

One could divide the transitions undergone by marine mammals when they are brought to the beach for processing into any number of categories. Here I analyze the transitions within a framework of two broad types: transitions of identity and transitions of control. The first deals with changes that take place to, or within, the animal itself. These are of primary concern to the stakeholders in the whaling operation: they hunt for food, and to make food one must process the catch. The second category that I will discuss relates to changes that take place within the human organizational structure, by which ownership, control, and power are effected with regard to the animals. The acquisition of the animals is rather straightforward: the whalers go to sea and harpoon whales or dolphins. However, at the beach, rules of ownership and hierarchy come into play and are enacted as the animals—or their carcasses—are passed through the liminal zone of the Barrouallie shoreline.

Transitions of identity

The starkest transition undergone by the marine mammals is from life to death. However, the most prominent among the



Fig. 3. Harpoon heads, in various stages of completion.

whaler's tools, the harpoon, is rarely the cause of this transition. By design, harpoons are not intended to kill. Vincentian whalers use locally crafted harpoons based on the style perfected by American whalers of the 18th and 19th centuries. At the end of a long, wooden shaft is a metal rod with a sharp, toggling head (Fig. 3). The head is tied loosely in place with a knot that is intended to give way when the harpoon strikes. Upon entering the whale or dolphin, the head pivots to a 90° angle and holds fast within the blubber or muscle of the animal. This is only meant to secure the whale or dolphin to the boat, by way of a harpoon line. The animal, still very much alive, is then hauled on board or tied alongside while the hunt continues.

Sometimes the whales or dolphins die during the hunt. This would most often be due to blood loss, or because of being crushed or suffocated under their own weight and the weight of other cetaceans piled on top in the boat's hold. Whales or dolphins that lie still in the hold are left alive, or perhaps to die of the aforementioned causes. Those whose excessive movements present a risk of escape—by flopping out of the boat—or of damage to the boat or its contents may be intentionally killed at sea—usually with a quick knife-cut to the arteries behind the blowhole of a particularly hard-to-handle individual. Vendors and customers on shore believe that the meat will taste fresher if the animals are kept alive as long as possible.

Occasionally an animal will remain alive for the duration of the voyage, only to be dispatched on shore: the first of many profound transitions that it is to undergo in this liminal space. The killing of whales and dolphins that have survived the day's voyage takes place either on the pier or in the swash zone of the beach, depending upon the wishes of the particular vendor who is to buy the carcass. Both of these killing-places are liminal spaces that are between land and sea: the pier by virtue of its position and composition—solid concrete, immovable by the tides, yet extending away from the land and over the water—and the swash zone because of its alternating elemental status—as land or as sea—with the ebb and flow of each successive wave.

While it lies still within its liminal space a whale cannot be identified as fully alive or dead. The harpoon injury and the sometimes hours-long voyage in the hold of the boat have certainly taken their toll. The whale may or may not be breathing. If, by some benevolent fiat the whale were released at this point, pushed back to sea as though it had beached itself unexpectedly on a crowded tourist beach, its survival would be doubtful. The bucketfuls of blood that were lost en route to shore will have been bailed out of the docked boat like water from the bilge. This blood reddens the watery foam that washes over the dying whale as it lies in the swash zone, awaiting the completion of its transition. Still, as unviable as the whale remains at this time, it is not yet in the state that the vendor demands. She does not purchase animals; she deals in carcasses. This pitiable thing lying on the sand, being washed in its own blood is neither an animal nor a carcass. At the same time, it is both.

The whaler approaches with a machete (locally called a *cutlass*, a charming anachronism used throughout much of the English-speaking Caribbean), delivers the *coup de grâce*—a firm chop about a handbreadth behind the blowhole—then rolls the whale over and eviscerates it. The organs that are removed and not consumed are thrown into the sea. These parts—among them the intestines, heart, and lungs—which had only recently performed vital functions to make the whale a whale, are now free to reenter the food web being of no further use to the transitional being whence they came. The whale is then carried—or dragged if it is large—to the vendor's station just landward of the swash zone, in the shade of the Indian almond trees (*Terminalia catappa*) growing at the water's edge, where it is presented for sale as a carcass, the raw material to be processed, commoditized, and distributed for sale.

Another profound change that occurs at the shoreline is the loss of species identity. As with most cases of communities that hold traditional ecological knowledge related to wildlife (Berlin, 1992), there exist myriad local names for the various species that whale-boat crews may encounter. The names used in this “folk taxonomy” (Conklin, 1962; Berlin, 1973)—which approach, but do not precisely correspond to the species delineations described by the Linnnean system—are descriptors of living animals and of whole carcasses, used almost exclusively at sea and by “sea people.”

The concept of a special vocabulary to be used at sea is well attested in other contexts (e.g. Hurgonje, 1906; Flom, 1925; Elmendorf, 1951; Lockwood, 1955; Knooihuizen, 2008) but has rarely been connected with the concept of liminality as is apparent in the case of St. Vincent whaling. For example, a Risso's dolphin (*Grampus griseus*) is known to whalers as an *Americano* while it is alive and retains this distinction when its carcass is delivered to the shore. However, after processing, the meat is known in

Vincentian Creole English simply as *papas* (derived from *porpoise*)—the same name given to meat from any number of small cetacean species. Likewise, short-finned pilot whales, orcas (*Orcinus orca*), and melon-headed whales (*Peponocephala electra*), are distinguished from one another with descriptive local names while at sea (“blackfish,” “whitefish,” and “black hard-knocks,” respectively) but the processed meat of all three is sold as *blackfish* (Table 1).

While it would be tempting to associate these linguistic transitions with other cases of the development of euphemistic vocabularies, used to avoid the supposed negative results of speaking forbidden words during periods of transition (van Genneep, 1909), while hunting (Bulmer, 1967), regarding animals in general (Emeneau, 1948; Smal-Stocki, 1950), or especially while at sea (Hurgonje, 1906; Flom, 1925; Elmendorf, 1951; Lockwood, 1955; Knooihuizen, 2008), in this case the specific-to-generic transition is primarily due to simple marketing: Vincentian consumers are used to buying *papas* or *blackfish* in the market or from mobile vendors. Any more specific identification of the animal origin for the food products would be superfluous. Imagine, for example, if the specific breed of chicken, pig, or cow were named on the labels in the butcher's section at an American supermarket. Identifying the particular species of cetacean is valuable at sea, for each behaves differently and calls for a modified approach to the hunt. Anatomical differences among cetacean species are mostly erased by the process of turning the animals to meat. As the skin, fins, teeth, and other identifiable parts are discarded in favor of the meat and blubber, so are the names that identified the species from which those food products came.

Such nuanced folk taxonomies—differentiated by the life stages and cultural roles of the various people who use them—has been observed in other field settings and is corroborated here (Drew, 2005). Novel to this research is the identification of the liminal space through which the organisms pass as they transition from one identity to another. The liminal space is where the specific whale or dolphin, the “black hard-knocks,” the “gamin fish,” or the “Americano,” slowly attains its new name: “blackfish” or “papas.” The space itself is destabilizing. Tellingly, as the whale is passing through the liminal space—lying temporarily atop the pier or within the swash zone—and the whalers are haggling with the vendors to set a price, a hybrid vocabulary is used with distinctions from both land and sea being used tentatively to identify this object in transition.

The transition from specific to generic is therefore dependent upon the next transition to be discussed: that from whole animal carcass to manageable parts. With remarkable efficiency, the on-shore vendor and her staff quickly reduce whole cetacean carcasses

Table 1

Common and scientific names of thirteen commonly observed cetacean species off St. Vincent. The two right columns show the local names given to the living animals and food products obtained from those species. Notes: St. Vincent whalers do not hunt the sperm whale or humpback. Humpbacks are hunted, in a limited amount strictly regulated by the IWC, from the neighboring island of Bequia.

Common name (Standard English)	Scientific name	St. Vincent Creole (living animal)	St. Vincent Creole (food products)
Short-finned pilot whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>	Blackfish	Blackfish
Killer whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>	Whitefish	
Melon-headed whale	<i>Peponocephala electra</i>	Black hard-knocks	
Risso's dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>	Americano	Papas
Dwarf sperm whale	<i>Kogia sima</i>	Rat papas	
Atlantic spotted dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>	Gamin fish	
Spinner dolphin	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>	Rollover papas	
False killer whale	<i>Pseudorca crassidens</i>	Mongoose	
Fraser's dolphin	<i>Lagenodelphis hosei</i>	Skipjack papas	
Rough-toothed dolphin	<i>Steno bredanensis</i>	Petty det	
Various beaked whales	<i>Mesoplodon spp.</i>	Grampus	
Sperm whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>	Sea guap	Whale
Humpback whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	Hunchback	



Fig. 4. Whale and dolphin processing station, Barrouallie.

to small, saleable sized pieces of meat and blubber. When the time to butcher the animals has arrived the vendor sets up a temporary processing facility on the beach (Fig. 4). This facility consists of three stations: the dividing station where large pieces of meat and blubber are cut from the carcasses, the meat station where large pieces of meat are cut into thin sheets for drying, and the blubber station where sheets of blubber are cut into small cubes for frying (Fig. 5). All of the work is done with cutlasses and smaller, handheld knives. These facilities are gendered spaces with men operating the first and third stations and women operating the second. The vendor, almost always a woman, directs the entire operation. After the workers have cut the meat and blubber down to manageable sizes, they process these materials for sale and consumption. Meat is hung on bamboo racks to dry in the sun and blubber is fried in its own oil.

In 1999 the government of Japan provided funds for the construction of a fisheries center in Barrouallie that was intended to be used as a processing facility for marine mammals but is spurned by the majority of Barrouallie's whalers and vendors. The center consists of two buildings: one that is currently used by the much-maligned Barrouallie Fisheries Cooperative (Jentoft and Sandersen, 1996; Fielding, 2010), and another that is primarily used—contrary to its intended purpose—as a laundry facility by local women. Vendors connected to the local whaling operation prefer almost exclusively to use temporary processing stations set up on the beach.

Why would the cooperative facility be rejected? Perhaps the move to a solid, permanent, concrete structure would undermine the liminal nature of the activities that it was intended to house. Perhaps the vendors and their processing crews are averse to moving the yet-unprocessed carcasses too far from their point of origin—the sea—before their transition to food products is complete. Rather than enter a building with a carcass that has not yet completed its transition into food products, the vendor and her staff remain on the beach, a few landward steps from the swash zone—still close enough to drop scraps into the waves and watch them be pulled back to sea. In doing so they acknowledge, perhaps subconsciously, that the liminal space of the beach is still where the whale—or the hybridized liminal being that it has become—belongs. The next, and final transition also takes place on the beach and it is only after its completion that the food products are taken inside to be packaged, sold, and consumed.

The final transition of identity that will be mentioned is the transfer from animal to commodity. The meat and blubber of marine mammals are popular foods throughout the island of St. Vincent. However, in a recent study only 27% of surveyed postsecondary students who consumed marine mammal food products had ever seen the whole animals—alive or dead (Fielding, 2012). Even fewer—17%—had witnessed the process by which these animals are turned into food, supporting Turner's (1967) use of *liminality* to describe not only a state of transition, but also one that is removed from day-to-day society. Most people are familiar with the food products, but not with the animals from which they are



Fig. 5. A vendor's assistant processing blubber.

derived. In informal discussions with Vincentians during my fieldwork, I discovered several prevailing misconceptions about marine mammals. The most common misunderstanding is that the meat and blubber for sale in the market and available from mobile vendors comes from a fish, not a marine mammal. This is due in part to the taxonomically confusing term, *blackfish*, but speaks to the lack of conceptual continuity between food products and their sources within Vincentian popular thought and to the completeness of the transition that occurs at the Barrouallie shoreline.

To turn raw muscle and blubber into food products palatable to Vincentian tastes, the majority of the water and oil, respectively, must be removed from the tissues. The meat is dehydrated in the sun. Strips of raw whale meat can be seen hanging on temporary bamboo poles, erected on the beach, in the days following a successful catch. The scent carries throughout Barrouallie. Blubber must be cooked down so that its oil extrudes. This is usually accomplished by a member of the vendor's staff who stirs a large cauldron (made from a cut-off oil drum) over a fire fueled by wood and whale oil.

These activities, the final steps in the transition from animal to food product, take place on the beach, very near to the temporary processing facility. Here in this liminal space, tissue can neither be said to be raw or processed. No one would countenance its consumption until it is deemed ready. At the same time, its resemblance to its unprocessed state grows more tenuous by the minute. These in-between products, hybridizations of life and death, animal and food, trace a short route from the sea to the land, stopping every so often to pass through another transition. Their liminality is moveable, though the distance is not far. From the swash zone to the drying racks is perhaps a distance of five meters. In this span, however, a whale has lost its identity, its shape, and its life.

Transitions of control

The first thing that happens when the whales or dolphins are unloaded onto the shore (after the animals are killed, if necessary) is the evisceration. This is the only form of processing that takes place at the hands of the whalers and is accomplished by use of



Fig. 6. Two dolphins hung from the pier in Barrouallie, to be processed later.

the cutlass. After the removal of the internal organs, the carcass—for it is now a carcass and not an animal—is ready to be processed. At this point the sale is made and the carcass changes ownership. The boat owner and the vendor decide on a price for all or some of the catch. Large catches can be divided among more than one vendor. Small catches are often supplemented by fish that have been caught by a line that the whalers troll behind the boat and check occasionally, between catches of whales or dolphins. After a quick payment, made in cash, the transaction is complete.

Before the payment, the boat owner is sovereign. He is free to accept any offer he chooses, or to accept none. If recent catches had been large and the market flooded with meat and blubber, he may choose to store his catch—eviscerated but otherwise still whole—until prices rise. *Storage* could entail any number of methods: from the temperature- and humidity-controlled facility at the Japanese-built complex, to a dark and hot closet attached to a beachside shack. One common, if risky, method of marine mammal carcass storage is to tie the tail to the dock and leave the animal bobbing head-down in the tide (Fig. 6). This method, as susceptible as it may be to theft by humans or sharks, best exemplifies the ongoing control claimed by the whalers before the sale: the carcass is not yet brought ashore, through the liminal space of the beach, and thus does not yet belong to any vendor.

The transition of control entails a transition from male space to female space. At sea, over water, the harpooner is in charge. Officially he answers to the boat owner, but the two are often the same, that is, boat owners often serve as harpooners on their own boats. If the boat owner is not onboard, the harpooner acts as his proxy, making decisions without consultation. His is the role of captain of the whaleboat and the crew must obey his directions. On shore, the vendor is in charge. She gives orders to her staff and decides what will become of the meat she processes. Indeed, she owns the catch having purchased it whole from the boat owner. Harpooners are always men; vendors are almost always women. At the time of my fieldwork there were ten vendors in Barrouallie; nine were women. According to older informants and historical texts, the gendering of these roles has always been rigidly divided (Adams, 1973; Scott, 1995). In fact, the sole male vendor who

I encountered did not set out to become a vendor but had taken over his mother's business when she died.

Conclusions: The liminality of whaling

The liminal space of the Barrouallie shoreline then becomes the place where animals lose their species identity, where they become commodities, and where the control over their fate changes hands from male to female, from sea to land, and from hunter to provider. If the animals have had the misfortune to survive the harpooning and the transportation by boat to shore, the liminal space is also where the whales and dolphins transition from life to death.

While the blood and death associated with the Barrouallie shoreline may call into question Thomassen's (2012, 21) assertion that "[l]iminal spaces are attractive," it does exhibit most of the classical attributes of liminal spaces. Van Gennep (1909, 11) identified the middle stage of a rite of passage as a "liminal period." When Turner (1967) expanded this concept to apply to a variety of transitions, he opened the door to further interpretation of both the temporal and spatial aspects of liminality (Thomassen, 2012). It is important to note, though, that—at least in this use of the concept—liminality is not to be equated with hybridity (Bhaba, 1994; Kwan, 2004). The hybrid condition can allow for permanence, while the liminal owes its existence to the promise of transition.

This may be one of the major implications of the development of the "liminal space" or of "liminal geographies" more generally. A liminal space can be the long-term location of a short-term existence. In the case under investigation here, the shoreline remains fixed in space, the vagaries of waves, tides, and long-term sea-level change notwithstanding. At the same time, the marine mammals which pass through remain for only a short while, are changed both fundamentally and superficially, and move onto the spaces associated with their new identities: the vendor's stand or the seafood market. In this way, the present analysis of the liminal space at Barrouallie finds support in Thomassen's (2012, 31) assertion that "[l]iminality cannot and should not be considered an endpoint or a desirable state of being." By remaining a fixed place through which marine mammals transition to food products, this shoreline provides a counter example to the "temporal fixation of liminal conditions... paralleled by a spatial dynamic" of which Thomassen (2012, 30) is critical. Instead, we see in Barrouallie the spatial fixation of liminal conditions, paralleled by the temporal dynamic that results from the daily arrival of a successful whaling boat.

In St. Vincent, pilot whales and other small cetaceans become food products in liminal spaces. As whalers and processors work in and near the swash zone, the ebb and flow of ocean waves washes the blood back to sea: fitting, as blood is part of a living animal, not part of a commodity to be sold in markets and from mobile vendors' shops. Living whales and dolphins belong to the realm of the sea. Were the vendor's process stopped midway through and the ambiguous creatures that once had been marine mammals analyzed, one would find that they had ceased to be what they were but had not yet turned into what they were becoming. They would be unfit for sale as food, yet no longer capable of life in the sea. There is but one place where these hybrid, in-between creatures may rightly exist: the beach at Barrouallie.

As to the exclusivity of this particular shoreline, there is no intrinsic quality about Barrouallie that predisposes it to be "the blackfish town," as one newspaper article called it (Anonymous, 1999). In fact, pilot whales are most often sighted to the north and east of St. Vincent, far from Barrouallie and much closer to the fishing village of Owia and the population center of Georgetown. However, whaling operations that have arisen in other villages such as Rose Bank, Wallilabou and Cumberland did not last longer than a generation (Caldwell and Caldwell, 1971). With regard to Barrouallie's enduring exclusivity, an employee at

the Barrouallie Fisheries Cooperative simply remarked that, “the knowledge is only here.” Throughout St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and extending to the neighboring islands of St. Lucia and Grenada, Barrouallie is known for its whaling. While the operation itself is undergoing changes, most notably a shift from pilot whales to various dolphin species as the mainstay of the catch, the “cetaceousness” (Sakakibara, 2010) exhibited by the people of Barrouallie links their future to the future of the whales.

The day-to-day work of catching, killing, and processing whales is so common in Barrouallie that it verges on the mundane. Whalers, vendors, and their employees go through the tasks of bringing whales ashore and converting them into food products without necessarily stopping to think about the transitions, let alone the liminal space itself, they traverse. Perhaps it is exactly this lack of examination that makes the Barrouallie coastline such a salient example of a liminal space. Rather than predefining the state, time, and place of liminality as in the “rite of passage” examples that were so foundational to the development of this concept (e.g. van Gennep, 1909), those working the Barrouallie coastline show us that liminal spaces are all around us, even—or especially—in places where they are not so overt. This is not necessarily a concept that human societies have conjured; rather, it is present of its own accord.

Of course living animals must be killed before they can be processed for food; of course their bodies must be disassembled, their tissues transformed. But for all of these transitions, as well as the less-physical transitions of identity, gendered ownership, and control to occur within the five-or-so meters from the swash zone to the shade of the Indian almond trees indicates a uniqueness of this space. The vendors' rejection of the Japanese-built processing structure illustrates the tenacity of this shoreline's hold on local conceptualizations of where these transitions may properly occur. In Kingstown, St. Vincent's capital, I asked an exasperated officer at the government's Fisheries Division why the vendors in Barrouallie continued to use their temporary processing tables and bamboo drying racks instead of the hygienic new facility that the government was promoting. After an audible sigh and a pregnant pause she replied, “It's tradition. They just won't move off of that beach.”

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