



## 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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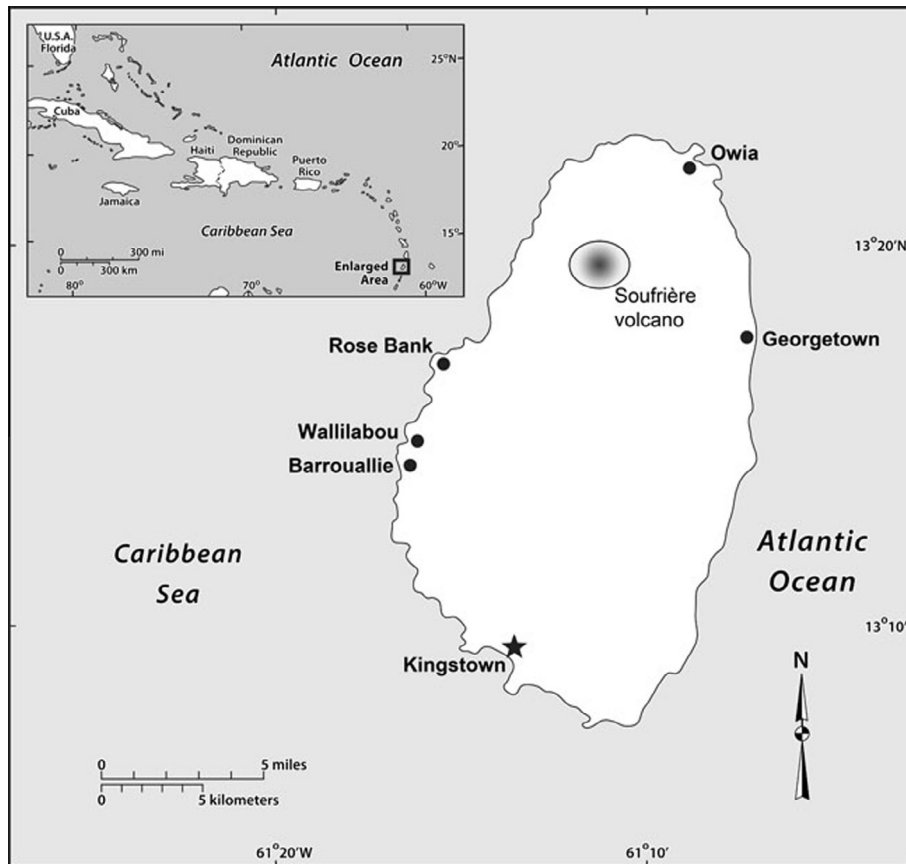


Fig. 1. Map of the island of St. Vincent. Cartography by C. Duplechin, Louisiana State University.



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 (Denig, 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-man<sup>1</sup> 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

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

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