

## COMMENTS ON: 'THE LITTORAL AND THE LIMINAL: CHALLENGES TO THE MANAGEMENT OF THE COASTAL AND MARINE COMMONS'

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### Defining the Coast

Benoit Mandelbrot, who developed the concept and application of fractals, was perhaps one of the first scientists to make us aware of the difficulties inherent in the task of defining and measuring the coast in a physical manner. **Always in motion**, the measurement of the profile of any coastal area requires a sophisticated algorithm to account for its complexity and variation. Bonnie McCay's essay is an attempt to encourage social scientists to come to grips with the complexity and fluidity of the coast, in a number of social and economic dimensions. Similar to Mandelbrot, McCay opens a theoretical and empirical Pandora's Box that none of us wanted to peak at. Arguably, social analysis of the coast will never be the same after this cogent reflection. I am writing this comment from the benefit of having reviewed an enlightening paper written by Érika Fontáñez Torres, an attorney and law professor from the University of Puerto Rico Law School, who differentiates between the legal definition of the coast (and more specifically, beaches) and the social descriptions and cultural appropriations of a highly contentious space in Puerto Rico (Torres-Fontáñez, forthcoming). In the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico (a us territory) the matter (of the definition and allocation of the coast) is not settled and a recent and highly publicized case reviewed by the Commonwealth's Supreme Court, ruling against the public interest, adds more uncertainty to the aim of defining the coast, and to clearly specify the rights of private owners, the Commonwealth, and the public who still believe that the coast, or more specifically, the shoreline and the beaches, belong to them (Fernós, 2008).

Since the nineteenth century the Puerto Rican coasts developed into a conflictive scenario, where different actors contended for its control and the transformation of the landscape. Early in the twentieth century, the U.S. based sugar companies, local farmers, colonial agencies developing health programs (for the eradication of mosquitoes), the us military, and the poor urban dwellers, fought for mangroves, swamps, beaches and coastal lands to live, gain a livelihood and to pursue their economic and geopolitical interests (Valdés-Pizzini, 2006). The us military controlled large amounts of coastal lands where it constructed military bases, altering and degrading coastal and marine ecosystems. The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico seldom contended the military occupation of the coast, but the pro-Independence parties and organizations did, and requested the devolution of the lands, mainly in the Eastern Island-municipalities of Vieques and Culebra,

used as target ranges for the Atlantic Fleet. As the lands are nowadays returned to the Commonwealth through the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process, government officials, ngos and the public learn about the details of a century old control of coastal lands that obliterated what Puerto Ricans though was 'theirs', or at least, the public rights to the littoral. In other words, the coast is construed in an array of meanings, forms and definitions, which evade, surpasses and oftentimes ignore the legal and political definitions, which are not, and should not be the definitive ones, when appraising the true character of the coast (Torres-Fontáñez, forthcoming).

### The Coast as a Liminal Space

McCay's contextualization of the coast as a liminal space is a critical contribution, and one that we should pursue diligently in future studies. Her provocative essay opens a door that leads to the dimension of identity, the sense of belonging and the construction and practice of citizenship. However, in my view, she did not travel far into that moveable and evanescent territory. My colleague David Griffith and I have argued that the coast is a sea-landscape, product of complex historical processes, which provides the substance for the identity of the fishers and their own particular representations of being a Puerto Rican (Griffith & Valdés-Pizzini, 2003). The shoreline, and fishing as a practice, are also a 'refuge' (an adjective that McCay employs in her essay) from the toils of industrial labor, migration and the authorities. Life on the coast has always been lived at the edge, in movement, fleeing and dodging local authorities, always trying to contain coastal peoples. It is the coastal milieu a zone of constant adjustments to national and global processes.

In that sense, the coast is indeed a liminal space that provides the means for important transitions, constructions and desires of identity. For the Dominicans traveling in frail boats to Puerto Rico, the coast is the door to become something else: illegal aliens (as defined by the us Immigration and Naturalization Service, INS, authorities), laborers in the San Juan informal sector, entrepreneurs in the Puerto Rican Diaspora, us citizens through marriage, illegal travelers to Washington Heights in New York, or workers in the informal sector of the Puerto Rican. The coast is hope, if traversed safely beyond the line of scrimmage of the INS. On the other hand, for Cubans departing from the Dominican Republic (or anywhere else) touching the coast of Puerto Rico allows them to pursue their rights to request political asylum, and to become a us citizen, under the dry-foot, wet-foot rule enforced by the Coast Guard and the INS.

As post-modernity transforms the coast, its liminal character also produces the transition of social classes, ethnic groups and political organizations that have created a new sea-landscape. At the expense of being superficial, I will only mention that in many countries, the local population of poor coastal dwellers are being displaced by the sheer force of gentrification; a process that is creating a new breed of coastal dwellers who prowl around marinas, old fish-houses, boat ramps, condominiums and restaurants. The sea-landscape is completed by visitors and

tourist who gives the final touch to a geography of revitalized, gentrified and leisure oriented coastal communities.

In the history of the Caribbean the coast has been a liminal space, a transient context where different ethnic groups exchanged narratives and commodities. While the Imperial and colonial powers prohibited the illegal exchange of goods, smuggling, the Caribbean peoples traversed waters and wetlands to meet, fight, rejoice, settle accounts, and the exchange of gifts, men, women, children, slaves, and foodstuffs (Bentley, Bridenthal, & Wigen, 2007). And yes, they also entered into the serious business of commodity exchanges. Despite the stringent regulations, control of boundaries and coastal waters, and punishments, the Caribbean coasts remained as a porous boundary of cultural and material exchanges: Calvinist ideas, salted fish, rum, tobacco, molasses, peoples and textiles in the past; music, lifestyles, drugs, fish, manufactured goods, workers, tourists and people in the present.

### **The Frailty of Liminality**

Since the coasts are, as McCay cogently expresses, 'liminal ..., complex, contextually contingent and changing' they are also prone to be the target of developers, preying on the frailty of liminality.

In the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico there is an ongoing debate on the definition of the maritime coastal zone (*ZONA MARÍTIMO TERRESTRE*, or *ZMT*), loosely (and arguably) defined as the demarcation line in the shoreline delimiting the authority of the Commonwealth (and thus, what should be a public good, a common resource) and the rights of private landowners; a zone that should be technically established through the measurement of tides, wave action, wetlands, known flood areas, location of the dunes and vegetation, and the extension of the storm surge, in a hurricane.

The Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (*DNER*) agonizes over the act of presenting a technical definition of the *ZMT* and the limits of private property, and the rights of owners and developers to build on the coastal zone (in itself a legal definition of the US Coastal Zone Program: one kilometer inland, from the shoreline). **As the definition and the boundaries are fluid so are the expectations of builders and developers to continue their occupation of the *ZMT*.** The legal context is always on dispute, as the rights (of owners, the Commonwealth and the public) are always contested, and decided on a case-by-case basis. However, as Fontáñez Torres states, there is also the social claim that the *ZMT* and the beaches are an essential component of the patrimony of the people of Puerto Rico, represented by the legal actor known as the Commonwealth, itself represented by the local Department of Justice, and by the Office of the Attorney General (two different offices). The *DNER* is in the difficult predicament of exercising its duty of protecting the shoreline, coastal resources, and the rights of the citizens, while avoiding a clear definition of the *ZMT*, to keep it liminal and changing, despite the data, Federal Emergency Management Administration flood maps, precise satellite images, and computer models available. Fluidity serves the purpose of dealing

with developers, NGO and coastal communities on an individual case, rather than having the problem solved, with one or more of the multiple actors opposing the DNER decision, and taking them to court. To 'help' the Commonwealth on the difficult task of defining such a liminal and fluid space, a contingent of lawyers, scientists, environmentalists and specialists in coastal resource management contributed to the formulation of a law project (sponsored by the three political parties at the House of Representatives) aiming at its definition and protection. As the project died in oblivion, due to the lack of political will, the group developed, wrote and published a primer on the ZMT (Lugo ET AL. 2008) that is currently the main reference on the topic for the general public, as well as for government officials. At the margins, outside the boundary of the circle of power, the coast is defined and clearly mapped, albeit the inherent difficulties of such a difficult (if not impossible) task.

### The Littoral and the Importance of the Historical Dimension

What is the beauty of McCay's arguments? For once, someone just described the coast (did she?) as a permeable, porous, fluid and liminal space. Accepting that, as a fact or as a hypothesis, requires that we think over our models, descriptions, and definitions of the littoral. Also, she relies on the weight of the historical analysis that goes beyond the temporal fixation on the present of the traditional ethnographic approach. The coast is a continuum of land-and-seascapes shaped by human processes over time, on the long-duration, to evoke Ferdinand Braudel. The 'natural' features of the coast have been constructed, structured, shaped by the legal battles, urban growth, economic processes and constant formulation and claims of property rights over time. It is in the long duration of littoral cultures (Bentley, Bridenthal & Wigen 2007) where the coast appears as a truly liminal space, always contested. It is then, when the fluid character of the littoral makes sense, and appears perhaps in a more coherent manner.

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