FEET ON THE GROUND:

ETHNOGRAPHY OF WEST SANDS

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‘Boys! Take a video of me running! In slow-motion, like this!’ These are the words my mother shrieked at my brother and me as she pranced along the sand of St. Andrews’ famous beach during our first visit to the university. This scenario - my mum grinning away and my brother and I equally amused as we held the camera - is one that can be witnessed on West Sands practically everyday. Tourists and first time visitors to the town are attracted to the vast expanse of sandy beach, but their excitement is doubled when they stumble upon a plaque that commemorates the filming of the 1981 British classic, C*hariots of Fire.* It is now almost two years since my first encounter with West Sands and the memory remains fresh in my mind. Despite this, Olympic runners and the film’s soundtrack are no longer what fill my head when I walk along the beach. As a student and inhabitant of St. Andrews, I

visit West Sands at least once a week: during a morning run, hanging out with friends after class, or playing football on a sunny Saturday. Through my countless experiences on West Sands I have become familiar with the geography of the beach, aware of the changing tides, and fond of time spent walking on the sand. However, the most significant development in my understanding of West Sands as a local rather than as a tourist is that I now notice, and am curious about, the people that surround me on the beach. Those who stand at the edge, take pictures and consult travel guides are now foreign and uninteresting. My attention is attracted by those who like me, fit a walk into their busy daily lives and explore the length of the sands.

Therefore, in approaching West Sands as an anthropologist, I was interested in discovering the motivations of these routine visitors to walk West Sands, and exploring their individual connections to the space itself. In the following paragraphs I set my informants apart from tourists or first time visitors by using the phrase "West Sands walkers". The action of *walking* West Sands implies not only a physical movement along the beach, but also an active engagement with the space itself. My description of this process is supported by theory from the anthropology of space and place. This approach defines space as 'socially constructed' (Hubbard 2004: 5) thus linking the character of a specific place to the people who interact with- and spend time in- that place. Yi Fu Tuan writes, 'What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value' (1977:6). In my fieldwork encounters with West Sands walkers I have come to understand this process of making a large public beach a familiar and personal 'place'. My informants develop a specialized relationship with West Sands as a unique social space, and imbue it with meaning and memory.

Methodology

In my fieldwork (three weeks of regular visits to West Sands) I tried to approach my informants and their activities on the beach from a variety of perspectives. On some visits, as an observer, I would sit close to the fence at the top of the beach and write in a notebook. From this removed vantage point, on a sunny weekend afternoon, I could follow the buzz of human activity in detail. I also practiced participant observation in which I involved myself in "beach activities" such as kicking a ball around with friends or relaxing on a towel. In this

position I was less able to survey the whole scene, but focused closely on interactions between people in my immediate surroundings, and considered my own involvement in the activity. I soon realized that engaging with West Sands walkers merely by observation limited my analysis largely to my own imagination and interpretation. Once I began talking to people on the beach my knowledge of West Sands and of the people who walk it was transformed. I conducted between twenty and thirty interviews with random people on the beach, ranging from brief two-minute exchanges to fifteen or twenty-minute conversations. I also interviewed five students (friends at the University St. Andrews) in longer forty-minute interviews; unlike the other encounters, these were arranged beforehand and the informants had a basic understanding of my project before we met up. I conducted these interviews as walks on West Sands. Apart from students my informants include locals, families from Fife and nearby areas enjoying 'a day at the beach', and visitors from other parts of the UK. All these people visit West Sands on a regular basis, whether it's twice a week, once a month, or once a year.

Defining the Space

Tuan claims that 'movement is often directed toward, or repulsed by, objects and places' (1977:12). This action of repulsion and attraction is fundamental to the motivations of West Sands walkers. My informants depict West Sands as a unique space in the way that it opposes and contradicts life in town or on the street. The people I talked to emphasised and praised the abundance of space on the beach. These claims were often exemplified by comparisons to the lack of space in their normal daily lives in town. Sophie, a student who favours morning walks on West Sands, used the phrase 'a lot of sky' to describe a dominant aspect of the beach. She justified this description by comparing it to the centre of town where one's view of the sky is obstructed by buildings. Rosemary, another student, mentioned the fact that there are no man-made objects on the beach, except for the wooden fences that line the sand dunes. Ben, who was at the beach to play football with friends, also discussed a lack of 'boundaries'. Therefore the abundance of space is explained and imagined in opposition to the bounded and enclosed spaces of town. My informants' imagination of space is also constructed in terms of proximity to other people. Several of my informants used the phrase, 'less people,

more space' and noted the greater amount of distance between people. Katka, a student from Slovakia praised the 'emptiness' and lack of 'crowding'. Similarly a couple visiting from Yorkshire told me the attraction of West Sands is to 'get away from the hustle and bustle' of daily life. West Sands walkers are therefore motivated to walk the beach to distance themselves from the busy streets in town. In this way West Sands also contradicts spaces of normal life as an area of decreased social interaction.

Despite this, West Sands is not an anti-social place. Many of my informants expressed a connection to the other habitual walkers of West Sands, 'a sense of community'. Although they may not know anyone else on the beach personally, they imagine a 'common purpose' and a shared experience of 'appreciation'. Walkers seldom interact with each other directly, but there is nevertheless a bond. One way in which walkers imagine this community is in the presence of footprints. Tim Ingold writes, 'a walker does not set out on a blank sheet' (2011: 145); although the walker's preferred route is repeated on each visit, the surface of the sand is altered and marked by the movements of other walkers. Ingold describes footprints as 'symbols of social relations' (2008: 7); the intersecting paths that walkers imprint in the sand are a constant reminder of the presence of other West Sands enthusiasts. Furthermore, due to the 'temporal existence' of footprints, the movements of the unknown walker seem recent and their marks retain a certain amount of energy. In this way walking West Sands is a social activity as my informants develop an indirect yet familiar connection to fellow walkers.

Reflecting this indirect bond between West Sands walkers, one of my informants used the phrase, 'everyone's beach'. This suggests an acceptance of other walkers and a considerable level of comfort in sharing the West Sands space with others. While this statement represents the views of most of my informants, a few of the people I talked to made it clear to me that this acceptance of others is matched with a strong conviction that 'their beach' must remain undisturbed and unaltered. The following comparison of two pairs of West Sands walkers emphasises the fact that while West Sands is an open, undivided community, it remains a highly personal place to each routine walker.

A comparison of West Sands walkers

On multiple visits to West Sands I observed an elderly couple using metal detectors as they roamed along the fence that lines the sand dunes. Unlike other individuals or families that I saw with metal detectors, this couple obviously treated metal detecting as an intense, serious exercise. They wore matching grey uniforms, complete with long trousers and hats, and their ears were covered with a hefty pair of headphones. The headphones seemed to serve a dual purpose; to transmit the beep sounds from the detectors, but also to further the couple's isolation from their surroundings and other people. They also created distance between each other: walking in a parallel direction, but always keeping about fifty feet of sand from the other person. They walked slowly, with their heads down and their arms sweeping and probing with their treasure finding tools. They were performing a well-rehearsed ritual. As an ethnographer I was at first intrigued and satisfied just in the act of observing. This couple stood out completely from the rest of the walkers on the beach - who were moving with purpose towards a fixed direction, heads raised, interacting with their peers, guiding a dog or looking at the waves. I also wasn't sure of how to approach them; I would inevitably interrupt and disturb their careful and intense search. Finally, on our third encounter I plucked up the courage to initiate a conversation. I curved my path gradually towards the old woman, but even with just a few feet between us she seemed reluctant to acknowledge my presence. It is likely that they never get approached. Eventually she looked up, lifted her cap and took off one headphone to ask me, 'What do you want?' I introduced myself and briefly explained my project. She agreed to

answer some questions, although made it clear she didn't want to talk for long. At first she seemed uncomfortable and her responses were guarded. How long have you been coming here? 'Oh, too many years now'. Do you ever find anything? 'I find all sorts of things'. During these short exchanges she resisted looking me in the eye and muttered short responses, obviously not interested in sharing any details of her activity with me. At one point she stopped me and asked me once more about the aim of my project. She didn't have much trust in me. However, she soon shifted the conversation to a topic she was confident in expressing. She raised her voice and exclaimed, 'they've ruined this beach!' She began criticising the Fife Council's recent installment of fences along the perimeter of the dunes, claiming that West Sands now attracts far fewer visitors. She waved off the environmental objectives of the project and instead described a scam by the Royal & Ancient to make people pay to see golf tournaments rather than watch from the dunes. Our conversation ended soon after she made her complaint.

On another day of fieldwork I met two women from Cupar, on their weekly walk on West Sands. Unlike the metal detector couple that remained at the periphery of the beach, this pair moved along the waterline, a popular route. Contrasting further, the two ladies were chatting away to each other and walking at a great pace. In this way they claimed attention rather that hid from it. Despite this, they too were hard to approach, as they also seemed to be in a world of their own - one of gossip and laughter. When I interrupted them in order to introduce myself I was immediately asked by one of them to present my student ID card. This woman, who I soon found to be the more outgoing of the two, put on a serious expression while the other one looked away and giggled. This playful gesture reflects the animated tone of the interview; they were very open to interacting with me, and were excited by the opportunity to share their chat with another person. Whereas with the metal detector enthusiast I initially led the interview, these two women took charge of our conversation straight away. I was immediately warned that West Sands is their 'secret', and that I 'mustn't spread the word'. They added that they 'treasure the days when there's no one else around'. They described to me their usual route and told me that a walk on West Sands is usually followed by coffee, where the conversation is continued. The outgoing lady also told me she walks with a different

friend on Tuesdays. Therefore a visit to the St. Andrews beach is essentially a socialising activity with close friends. The more reserved woman used the phrase 'movement time' to describe her walks on the beach and said, 'we walk as fast as we talk'. Her walks are full of energy and purpose, and walking is directly linked to interacting with a friend. Finally, as we parted I was once again warned to 'keep West Sands hidden'.

This comparison depicts extremely different behaviour between two groups of West Sands walkers. For one group the beach is a place of intense and constant isolation, whereas for the other, the beach is primarily a place of social interaction. While one group was disturbed by my interruption, the other was stimulated by it. However, my encounters with them also reveal significant similarities that illustrate a common valuing of the West Sands experience. Both groups described their idealised version of West Sands, and emphasised a fear or reluctance for that version to be altered. The fences disturb and offend the metal detector lady as they divide the previously open space. The metal detector's meticulous search of every inch of the sand is impeded and the usual route is cut short. In her mind the project was useless; she values her own understanding and interest in the well being of West Sands. Meanwhile the social ladies also emphasised a need to preserve West Sands in its ideal state: as their own personal secret. They are threatened by the idea of other people sharing their experience. Therefore both groups arrive at West Sands with a specific idea of the best conditions for their walk. In this way walking West Sands is a highly personalised experience. The way people see the beach is completely influenced by their own imagination of 'the perfect walk'. Their focused ideals are reflected in their purposeful movements on the beach. I described both groups as being 'in their own world'; this is true of all the habitual walkers I met and observed. Therefore a visit to West Sands is full of intention, routine and ritual. They are entirely familiar with the space and are able to repeat the same walk endlessly. West Sands walkers therefore use their experience on the beach as an exercise of control. Tuan represents this aspect; 'to be in command of space' (1977:36) and claims that, 'man… organises space so that it conforms and caters to his biological needs and social relations' (ibid: 34). Each beach walker constructs an understanding and an imagination of their space. They also develop a fear for that careful construction to be disturbed or altered.

Engaging with the space

I have determined that West Sands walkers designate the beach as their own personal space, and value their experience highly. I now turn to an exploration of the ways my informants benefit from this specialized relationship with their routine walk. In experiencing the 'perfect walk' students claim to separate themselves from their university lives and thus rely on trips to West Sands to relieve stress. Katka, who walks West Sands in the context of deadlines, claimed to leave the beach with an, 'empty mind'. Similarly, Sophie described going to West Sands to 'completely zone out'. Another student claimed to go to West Sands to 'put [his] life into perspective' and to make his problems seem small. The students I talked to also discussed the beach as a place to relax and 'go a bit wild'. My informant Ben defined this division; 'I never come here for work. It's always for recreation'. Similarly Rosemary discussed a lack of restraint and expressed a 'sense of freedom'. She supported this claim with a story about being on the beach late at night with a few friends and a bottle of champagne. Ben told me a similar story from Freshers Week, and recalled jumping off the sand dunes with a friend on a morning run. Tuan voices this connection between space and less restricted behaviour, 'space is a common symbol of freedom in the Western world...it suggests the future and invites action' (1977: 54). Following this trend, Sophie excitedly told me about her 'new thing', she

runs barefoot along the water line. Therefore students use West Sands as a place of therapy through more relaxed behaviour and improvised movement.

In my discussions with other groups of beach walkers this theme of freedom was extended to ideas of memory and imagination of the past. I spoke to a fourth generation St. Andrean who walks on West Sands every other day. I prompted her to recall her earliest memories of West Sands and she told me her father taught her to swim there. She stressed the fact that West Sands remains unchanged, while the town is completely different. Furthermore she said that on her walks she often wonders whether the monks from the cathedral or the soldiers guarding the Bishop's castle walked on West Sands. This extension of her imagination to the 14th century emphasises her belief in the unchanging character of the beach. This imagination plays a role in relaxing her on her walks; 'I enter the beach full of worries, but leave it with none!' This aspect of 'timelessness' also came up in a conversation with a woman who was at West Sands for the day with her daughter and grandchildren. This woman praised the 'timeless', 'traditional' activities that are associated with 'a day at the beach'. She found that spending a few hours on the beach was a way to distance the kids from their 'Gameboys and computers', and she believed they enjoyed themselves more fully. For that family, the West Sands experience bridges the gap and releases tension between generations. Therefore, West Sands is not only valued for its abundance of space; walkers also escape to a broader timeframe are brought closer to events of the past.

Routine walkers of West Sands develop a reliance on their escapes from normal life. Unlike the tourist, who views the sands through a camera lens but doesn't step onto the sand, the routine walker engages fully with the space, following a well-rehearsed route. The most significant aspect of these people's relationship with West Sands is that they arrive knowing exactly what they will get out of the experience. To them it is a second home, an escape to a place that is familiar, secure and stimulating. This represents the transition from 'space' to 'place'. While a first time visitor looks at West Sands and sees a public beach, the seasoned walker sees an intimate and familiar part of their lives with which they engage and interact on each visit.

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