01

Malleable words

01 Malleable words

Anne Storch, Angelika Mietzner, Nico Nassenstein, Janine Traber and Nina Schneider

The beach as liminal space, where unforeseeable encounters take place and transformation seems to dominate, is not only found to be a historical setting like that of first encounters in colonial contexts or as a place where one may be lost, but is also – invested with more banality and silliness – a mass tourism site, where it provides consumable liminalities. At El Arenal on the island of Mallorca, the beach combines, in curious ways, various such commodified forms of liminality, which, probably most saliently, are constructed as various forms of southernness. Often mockingly referred to as the colony of the north, El Arenal is one of Europe's busiest and largest tourist destinations, with the town mostly hosting tourists from Germany. Around beach section Balneario Nº 6, the German party tourism community is particularly visible, not only through the existence of a large number of clubs, bars and restaurants with special food and attractions for German audiences, but also through discourse. The beach is hardly ever referred to by its official name, but as the corrupted form *Ballermann*, a word originally created as the name of a bar in Germany. Yet this stretch of sand and the streets next to it are excessively southern, in the sense that voices from multiple parts of the world – German, Senegalese, Brazilian, Nigerian, Argentinian, Spanish – talk, shout, sing, play and flatter, creating (surrounded by sounds from the bars and music halls) an ambience of noisiness, whereby noise is one feature associated with the liminality offered by a kind of El Arenal and the space where encounters take place. Some of the exhibited objects and photographs may be perceived as stereotyped southernness (in contrast to other versions of the south). Another feature is the sexualization of encounters and events.

The beach itself, and also the bars and clubs, are arenas for the presentation of sexual prowess as well as submission. This trope is also represented by the many souvenirs offered in the shops around the area. Here, performed divisions between the two most visible groups present at the beach, namely European guests and African vendors, are clearly visible, albeit in absurd ways: none of the African vendors would ever sell any of the otherwise ubiquitous sexually connoted (and often tasteless) items, such as straws, bottle openers and other things in form of phalli and breasts. These objects are sold by different vendors. African traders offer glasses, watches, hats and other decorative accessories in screaming colors and thus contribute to the image of the *Ballermann* as an arena of disruption. Both the production of trash and playing with taboo are part of the liminal construction of the beach here, as a form of creating southernness in the sense of a specific way of being noisy, colorful, and disturbing. Other encounters between tourists and street vendors may involve sexual encounters or drug transactions. The boundary between tourist locations and the street – the place where the African vendors are – is blurred and subject to numerous normative negotiations. Such instances of norming are found everywhere in the liminal space of the *Ballermann*: while sex toys and obscene objects can be bought in souvenir shops mostly run by people with Pakistani, Indian and sometimes Chinese background, off-license alcohol (for the buckets used in communal drinking) is sold in shops owned by Spanish people or by beach vendors from Andalusia, who often have a Roma background, and so on.

This catalogue is about divisions and how they can be constructed and named, as well as unification in terms of how the merging of a variety of backgrounds serves to create a special arena in the context of tourism. A word that is of particular importance to the discussion of liminality, division and mixing is 'south'. It means and does many things in the contexts discussed in this volume: the 'south' evokes desires and escapist fantasies and refers to other places (never the place where one is at the time). The 'south' associates notions of space with the placement of people and suggests that there might exist a division of this entire world between north and south as an irrevocable truth. 'South' is also a word that evokes images of power and defeat, of northern colonialism and southern subalternity, of whiteness and color and race. It is a difficult word that refers to ideas (or practices) of obedience, which can be bought as cheap labor and convenience in global tourism settings in a so-called postcolonial world. The 'south' – which needs to be put in relation to 'north' – is also a term that serves as a tool to construct otherness, for example, the otherness of migrants. 'South' consequently not only denotes those spaces located elsewhere, but also people who are, through the racialization of skin

color, gender and class, conceptualized as 'southern' and therefore as other and different. This may entail marginalization or exclusion, but is not necessarily thought to result out of bad intentions. The migrants residing in global cities who are portrayed as 'southern' are increasingly seen, by linguists and sociologists, as people who add color and sound to otherwise bland urban landscapes. And such images, of course, are also images of a stereotyped 'south' where exoticism prevails.

Other forms of southernness come into play as well: the beach may be declared to be 'German', and may be conceptualized as being 'colonized' by German tourists[1], but it is inhabited by people from many places. The German tourists, while claiming ownership over El Arenal in a carnivalesque way (planting flags, wearing motto t-shirts, drinking in groups marked by commonly worn insignia), do not hold this land as their exclusive property. Their bodies are adorned with cheap accessories offered by mobile vendors from Senegal and other West African countries, who wander the beaches and streets; they are treated by Chinese women working as mobile masseuses and buy drinks from vendors with Roma backgrounds. People continuously call to each other, rubbing each other's bodies, mingling and sharing. From a 'northern' perspective, being part of the beach and party life at the *Ballermann* turns all players, regardless of the places they came from, into 'southerners' of some kind, and creates a space where they can express their craving for another reality free from social boundaries, or simply for a better life. Nevertheless, this does not erase divisions and social inequalities, but turns them into something different.

This reluctance for clarity is not only visible in the presence of people experiencing diverse forms of liminality, but is also audible: in performances of subversive silliness, West African street vendors and German men address each other as *Helmut*; in a play on racialized difference and the underlying inequality of the encounter (where the tourist owns a return ticket and a passport, while the tourism worker may not have either of these), some West African vendors talk back by calling themselves *Dunkelmut*, a nonsensical creation playing with a contrast between *hell-mut* 'fair-*mut*' and *dunkel-mut* 'dark-*mut*'.

[1] Mallorca – colloquially referred to as Malle in German – is also dubbed as 'Germany's 17th federal state', as well as 'the charladies' colony', the latter referring to the initially cheap rates offered by hotels there.

The migrants living on the tourism business at *Ballermann* are mostly former citizens of Nigeria and Senegal, alongside some German expatriates. They participate in the tourism space as an inherent part of it, necessary for the tourist's amusement: to many tourists, hawkers are fantastic subjects for photos, amusing conversation partners for entertaining banter, and perversely exciting when a police patrol is present and drives these young men into hiding places, highlighting the absurdity of the party space. The material and verbal wit that is part of these encounters does more than offer entertainment and amusement. It creates silliness, removing clarity and normality, in order to make space for the self as other. Words remain at the heart of this, but they become more shapeless. Shared 'southernnesses', in other words, does not so much create a sense of belonging across class and language boundaries, but rather removes the need for clarity. The binaries that help to divide 'northern' and 'southern', often in violent ways, are mockingly refused and turned into an obscene mimicry of shared otherness. In his essay "Belief in Europe" (2015), the artist and activist Jimmie Durham plays with the binaries in which we are forced to live; for instance, in places called 'south' and 'north' or 'third world' and the like:

> It is tiresome to watch 'Third World' individuals (mostly guys, but not exclusively) make fools of themselves by reciting some version of this thing where we tell some white folks how bad some aspect of their culture is compared to a similar aspect in our own.
> Such as, 'the trouble with you Europeans is you have no sense of proper thickness in sauces; now in my culture, you see, the correct thickness of the sauce for the dish is the most essential part of life ...'
> The explainer/instructor assumes a patronising kind of smarmy attitude, as if he already knows, having got the listeners' attention, that they have entered into a complicity that is a social ritual, and that will leave him feeling frustrated and angry the next morning. Even though the white person has heard it all a billion times before, he or she listens with such sincerity and attention that we wonder about the listener's intelligence. (Durham 2015: 121)

What Durham's text shows is that speaking and writing about diversity – such as of languages and cultures – quickly tends to turn into speaking or writing about otherness and divisions. And these divisions, in Durham's text and in our lives, become absurd: "About the location

of Europe: it thinks it is a continent. Even though it uses the same maps and globes that the rest of the world uses", he writes "and can easily see that", he continues to write "it is not by any stretch a continent, it still thinks it is a continent" (Durham 2015: 122). Divisions, like words, are malleable; they can be stretched and compressed, made wide or narrow.

This becomes obvious in the way people are described, as Durham wittily explains, and also in the ways people can be addressed and referred to. At the *Ballermann*, the African beach vendors have a special way of acting which is adopted by the tourists and is taken back home as a linguistic souvenir: it is very common to hear tourists on their way back to Germany calling each other *Helmut* or *Gisela*, collective names with which the street vendors attract tourists. And it is also quite common to hear girls calling each other *geile Schlampe* 'sexy bitch', an expression which is used by Nigerian lavatory attendants as a ritualized greeting in the party zone. The female lavatory attendants work in the party locations of *Ballermann* and turn the toilet into a place of performance. They arrange shrines with antiperspirants, perfumes and lollipops, and help drunk toilet users out of precarious situations. This least of scientific places is a place full of meaning, performance, otherness and transgression; here, in complex transformations, the other turns into a mother figure who offers solace and clarity.

Normal scientific texts tend to make such transformations and the malleability of words and divisions invisible; writers of such texts, remaining faithful to a particular form, structure and placement of text and discourse, need to essentialize their gaze in contexts that seem to be quite the opposite of their own contexts: the places that are portrayed as foreign and interesting are made to appear uncontrollably diverse, in contrast to offices and homes. An often evoked example of this is the presence of foreign words in linguistic landscapes – language on the built environment – for example around railway stations, in areas where many shops are run by people from the 'south', or where foreign people live or meet. Such a way of portraying diversity and difference is not an innovative one, but is utterly traditional, and as such is true to ideas of languages and cultures as being separable from each other, of language as being artefactual – consisting of (written) words – and of diversity (symbolized by words coming from different places and contexts), standing in contrast to the tidiness of one's own room.

At the *Ballermann* this diversity is appropriated by the tourists, who demarcate the zone as theirs through linguistic landscaping, carried around on their t-shirts, while the vendors, in parallel, display an inverted mimicry of the tourists' strategies to inherit the place. They often wear the same t-shirts, depicting these tools of arena construction as a kind of parody of the vacationists. The t-shirts with place-specific slogans are performances of the liminal place, and an attempt at order, at trying to control diversity. Yet uncontrollable diversity, a chaotic concert of voices, and a lack of clear boundaries between different languages and cultural practices have been thought to be part of the 'south', and therefore also characteristic of the otherness located in the colonized parts of the world (regardless of compass points) since the early days of imperialism and colonialism. Nick Shepherd and Christian Ernsten, reflecting on alternative ways of doing science as dreaming and walking, see the persistence of old concepts as being deeply embedded in the form and location of thinking:

> This situation [...] takes its meaning and significance from the manner in which it, in turn, reinforces, reproduces and relies on a number of key oppositions that structure and provide the conceptual underpinnings of modern Western thinking (itself a complex amalgam of genealogies, lineages, positions, forms, knowledges and ways of being, presented here through this shorthand designation). These include oppositions between mind and body, reason and emotion, theory and practice, culture and nature, subject and object, beings gendered as male and beings gendered as female, beings raced as white and beings raced as black, and so on. The particular force, energy and violence of modern Western thinking and practice (its coloniality) comes about, in part, through the manner in which it lines up and connects terms on either side of the binary. Modernity itself – gendered male, raced white – is identified with the mind rather than the body ("a triumph of mind over body"), with certain forms of dispassionate rationality ("reason" versus "emotion"), with culture rather than nature (culture is understood to assert itself over and against nature), and with the kind of subject position that regards other beings and ways of life as objects of contemplation. It also takes the mantle of a certain kind of universality, which is another way of saying that it situates itself in a privileged relationship to time, space and history. The rest, a seething territory (metaphors matter) of body, affect, emotion, instinct, beings gendered as female, and beings raced as black, becomes a kind of alter-ego or mirror of the Western self.
> (Shepherd & Ernsten 2016)

This has not remained unreflected, but continues to creep back into texts and speeches, perhaps for the sake of clarity. Outside of the written world, the 'south', its boundaries and the differences between people are less clearly arranged. The territories named by Shepherd and Ernsten widen their boundaries, being constructed as malleable too. Places may be ambiguous in terms of their 'southernness', and may contain various forms of 'south'.

The 'south' also represents a trope that often occurs in literary works. In the novella *Death in Venice*, Thomas Mann writes about an elderly, 'northern', bourgeois man, who travels to the Venice Lido in summer. The hot and humid climate, the high season on the beach and the outbreak of a cholera epidemic all function as a background for the actual story that unfolds once the story's hero, Professor Aschenbach, falls in love with a boy whose family has also come for their summer holidays. The beach as a prototypically liminal space, the almost tropical climate of this southern place, and the sexual though fatal attraction of the seemingly innocent boy, perfectly create an imagery of southernness which also evokes notions of ruination and decay. In this south, its destructive inhabitants are faced with the cracks and debris that are the consequence of bourgeois boundary-making. Michael Taussig explores the semiotics of the 'south' as an idea in the novella, and as a concept that not only exists as a kind of opposition to the self (any self), but that also asks for a sacrifice: "This sun does *not* give without receiving" (1999: 94). However, the sacrifice is not an openly visible one, but secret. The overwhelming power of the 'south', its capacity to ruin the prototypical protagonist of the 'north' in Mann's novella, is secret, yet can be guessed and felt. Secrecy, as lingering malice, is part of southernness as well, and here the 'south' once more becomes uncontrollable, this time not in terms of diversity, but in terms of destructiveness:

> For the secret is overdeterminedly southern. But at the risk of enormous and enormously-forgotten banality, note there can be no south without a north. The secret then is "Asiatic Cholera," and its lair is the innermost recess of the Third World [...] The expansion of self is here couched in the motif of travel to far-off Third World places, but the travel is also a seizure that stands for instantaneous transformation of Aschenbach's [Mann's protagonist] very identity, as he imagines tropical forests and lush landscapes centered on the figure of the tiger – the figure, we could say, of the "south," it being this particularly exotic animal, camouflaged by jungle, that provides the formula for beauty, danger, secrecy, and wild release. (Taussig 1999: 80-81; 89)

The delusional sexual desires of Aschenbach that eventually kill him have their direct equivalent in the performance of sex and the subsequent representation of performances in social media, resulting in shaming of the participants and their social degradation in their normal environments at home. The 'south' here stands as a symbol of its lure of sexual greed and ruinous stuffiness, both in Mann's novella and on the beach of our time in Mallorca. As images of its visitors' transgressions float around, words remain at the heart of all this, but they become more shapeless.

References

Durham, Jimmie. 2015. *Various Items and Complaints*. London: Koenig & Serpentine.

Shepherd, Nick & Christian Ernsten. 2016. Reasoning, emotioning, dreaming: report from the first Cape Town curatorial residency. https://nickshepherdblog.wordpress.com/2016/06/18/the-cape-town-residency-nature-cultures-of-table-mountain/ (Last accessed May 15 2017)

Taussig, Michael. 1999. *Defacement*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Structure of the catalogue

This catalogue provides materials on different aspects of life, transgression and divisions at the *Ballermann* – "Dress Code", "Expressive Normaliminalities", "Deep Normaliminalities", "Lost/Found Normaliminalities", "Global Normaliminalities", "Reflections" and finally "Shrines". All of them deal with notions of southernness, and with the interaction of 'southern' and 'northern' actors in El Arenal and the space where their encounters take place.

- **DRESS CODE**: Pieces of clothing, worn by the tourists exclusively during their stay. Linguistic landscaping happens considerably through wearing motto t-shirts with *Ballermann*-specific words or phrases.

- **EXPRESSIVE NORMALIMINALITIES**: Typical souvenirs of the *Ballermann* tourists. Mostly items of everyday life with a sexual connotation such as cups, straws or bottle openers.

- **DEEP NORMALIMINALITIES:** Life and things from the suburb of Son Gotleu, where most of the African protagonists of the *Ballermann* live. Items of everyday life stand in stark contrast to the items portrayed in "Expressive Normaliminalities"

- **LOST/FOUND NORMALIMINALITIES:** Flotsam and jetsam of the beach mile, which were collected during various visits, lost property of those who inhabit liminal spaces. Moreover, they combine trash and leftovers of beach parties, excessive drinking and photographs of dirty corners of El Arenal and its terres vagues of tourism, spaces that appear as messy, empty or deserted (after the touristic encounter).

- **GLOBAL NORMALIMINALITIES:** The Nigerian emigrant Festus Badaseraye left his country in the search of greener pastures almost 30 years ago. The exhibition shows his way to success up to his present life as a taxi driver, book author and law student. His book "De África llegué" ('I came from Africa') was only lately translated into English.

- **REFLECTIONS:** In the course of a critical discourse on their research, the group of scholars who have visited the *Ballermann* reflect on their experiences.

- **SHRINES:** A shrine of a Nigerian lavatory attendant is reproduced and contrasted with images of the 'real' toilet. They are extremely dilettante efforts in order to highlight the banality of this place.