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Sea kayakers at the margins: the liminoid character of contemporary adventures

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The ethnographic data considered here were gathered over a seven-month period on and around the Isle of Anglesey in North Wales. The data were partly collected during sea kayaking courses at a commercial outdoor centre and also during more informal outings with independent members of a sea kayaking club. Material recorded on accompanied journeys, during participation on group courses and on expeditions was triangulated with notes from semi-structured interviews and spontaneous discussions. The notions of marginal danger and of apparently approaching the ‘edge’ are key characteristics of the late-modern forms of adventurous leisure. It is proposed that, rather like the strange vertical world of the rock climber or the subterranean one of the potholer, the sea kayakers’ environment is an alien, marginal, liminoid world. The ocean is not the natural territory of human beings. The kayakers move from the land to the sea and from comfort to hardship, from security to uncertainty, passivity to commitment and from action governed via ocular experience to total bodily/sensual immersion. Importantly, these shared experiences provide belonging in the ecstatic, temporary, Dionysiac communities who meet in these marginal places and situations in search of adventure and escape. Danger is but a small part of the meaning of such activity; it is the liminoid experience that is of key importance to participants.

Keywords: Dionysiac communities; liminoid; communitas

Introduction

The late-modern form of ‘adventure’ as a leisure pursuit is often theorised as one in which participants approach the edge of danger by pushing their skills towards their limit in challenging environments and uncertain circumstances (Lewis, 2000; Lyng, 1990; Mortlock, 1984; Weber, 2001). The truth is that most do not. The paradox is that many ‘post-adventurers’ (Varley, 2007) will throw themselves into the care of professional guides and instructors in order to pursue these adventure forms with a sort of quality-assured safety net (Kane & Zinc, 2004). Such cautious behaviours are further adumbrated by McNamee in his philosophical account of rational life planners and prudent adventurers:

The received picture is one where persons do not allow themselves so much to be at the mercy of the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune ... prudent planning and luck, far

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from incompatible with risk taking, are part and parcel of it when properly conceived. (McNamee, 2007, pp. 6–8)

In its contemporary form, for a price, the risk can be almost entirely managed-out of adventurous leisure pursuits by paid professionals who choreograph the experiences (Beedie, 2003; Cater, 2006). Furthermore, many ‘independent’ adventurers will adhere to training regimes and use weather forecasts, maps and radios to maximise the chances of their safe return (Beedie, 2003). Yet far too much of the work in this area focuses variously on ‘risk’, its management and how this is central to the construction of postmodern identity carapaces via adventurous leisure narratives (Becker, 2003; Cater & Cloke, 2007; Elsrud, 2000). The ‘pursuit of risk’ is thus far too narrow and potentially erroneous a platform from which to understand and develop concepts of adventurous leisure (Gyimothy & Mykletun, 2004; Krein, 2007; Vester, 1987).

Instead I want to suggest that it is the liminoid spaces temporarily inhabited by the adventurers-at-leisure that foster an otherwise elusive sense of belonging and offer an adjunct to rationalised, comfortable everyday existence, and that this, rather than risk per se, is a major attraction for participants.

Undoubtedly, in outdoor adventure activities such as mountaineering, potholing or kayaking, the vagaries of weather and other aspects of the natural environment may conspire to make progress unexpectedly difficult or risky. There is something in the uncertainties and challenges that can serve to give all of these tourists (expert-dependent ‘post-adventurers’ and independent ‘original adventurers’ alike) a particular bond which distinguishes them from other tourists. The experiences may also provide participants with opportunities for personal growth, satisfaction and self-development, *even if* the responsibility for their safety is not shouldered by the individuals themselves (Kane & Zinc, 2004; Loynes, 1996; Stebbins, 1997; Varley, 2007). It is the intention here to explain how these adventurers ‘do’ being a sea kayaking adventurer via their journeys – in liminoid or marginal ‘wilderness’ zones – and what aspects of the experiences generate meaning for the participants.

This particular study therefore focuses upon a hitherto unconsidered facet of these outdoor adventure activities which is a major contributor to the adventure tourists’ satisfaction. The notion of *liminality* is proposed as a central quality of the participants’ experience of their leisure, supported by evidence from an ethnographic study of various sea kayaker groups in North Wales. As Lett (1983, p. 45) points out, the term *liminoid* is used in those situations where solidarity is organic rather than mechanical; leisure rather than calendrical rites are the focus; and there is a pursuit of idiosyncratic symbolism and individualism rather than collective participation and collectively held meanings. For Turner and Turner (1978), liminoid activities do not occur amongst the central economic and political processes of industrialised societies, but along their margins, interfaces and tacit dimensions. ‘The liminal experience is the metaphorical crossing of some imagined spatial or temporal threshold’ (Pritchard & Morgan, 2006, p. 764). To this end, after describing what sea kayakers do and how and where they do it, the different aspects of their liminoid marginality (geographical, social and embodied) are described.

The paper draws some conclusions about the significance of this marginal territory inhabited by the adventurers at leisure and suggests why their activities are so important to them. The notion that such activities represent far more than mere fleeting, momentary excitement and postmodern identity construction is suggested,

and further, that the participants enjoy membership of vibrant, immediate (yet temporary) Dionysiac communities, immersed in a lived critique of routinised everyday life. It is argued, following Maffesoli (1996) and Turner (1969), that the liminality of the sea kayaker's world, poised as it is on the margins of so many facets of modern life, promotes a sense of *communitas* and belonging, woven together with an adventure-narrative drawn from the activity's historical and cultural origins. 'Ordinary life' is being transcended in a variety of ways by the sea kayaker tourists as they construct and participate in these temporary, marginal, ecstatic communities.

The research

Karin Weber (2001), in her critique of the extant published research on adventure tourism, provides an overview of the research approaches taken to date. She proposes that the practitioner-led studies are (inevitably) overly risk-focused, with an emphasis on managing danger and uncertainty, and highlights the need for research conducted from an emic, qualitative perspective which attempts to provide accounts of the subjective meanings generated by participants from their adventurous experiences. To this end, I chose to undertake a research project in a situation where participants may learn to explore and to experience their adventurous activities in conditions of – theoretically at least – *receding* structural control; to some extent a learning situation, preparing the participants for their own original authentic adventures.

As a neophyte sea kayaker, I allowed an emergent ethnographic research process to unfold (Lincoln & Guba, 2000) that began logically enough with participation in a beginners' 'Introduction to Sea Kayaking' course at a North Wales outdoor centre (the Holyhead Sea Sports Centre, or HSSC). At all stages of the research, participants were aware that I was a researcher in their midst, although my note-taking about each day's exploits would be scribbled in private, on my bunk or in a tent. It should, at this juncture, also be noted that all real names from the data have been anonymised.

The introductory course was followed by attendance at the Anglesey Sea Symposium, which was a kind of sea paddlers' festival, and then later in the year, after studying a couple of other client groups, I joined an instructor and a customer in an attempt to circumnavigate the Isle of Anglesey. This was of particular interest as, although by this time I had amassed a considerable corpus of data, I was keen to accompany an expedition by kayak should the opportunity arise. The expedition as a form of action requires the participants to be self-sufficient, self-propelled and, to a large extent, self-reliant (Mitchell, 1985, pp. 43–61). The opportunity to tag along on one of the HSSC's classic expeditions therefore formed the next phase of data collection. I accompanied a client, Jane, and the senior HSSC instructor, 'P.J.', on the journey in early September. Amongst these episodes, I triangulated the research by joining up with the Northern Sea Paddlers (NSP) – an informal group of kayakers who communicate via a web-forum.

The final research episode was with a group who is referred to in the corpus of data as the 'rough water group'. None of the group had paddled true sea kayaks before, but they had considerable whitewater river experience, and requested some excitement ('big water', in paddler argot) for their money, as well as some instruction. This four-day course in October 2005 meant that I was taken through the roughest, wildest water I'd experienced in my brief six-month career as a sea paddler. The course provided useful additional insights into the world of the sea kayaker as adventure-consumer.

The eventual decision to leave the field, implying that a saturation point had been reached in terms of data collection, was justified as follows:

- (1) No further insights seemed to have been gained during the final episode with the Rough Water Group (RWG); key insights seemed to be being repeated.
- (2) The commercial sea kayaking year had more or less come full circle at the centre. There were few takers for the kayaking courses for the remainder of the year after the RWG in October, and anyway, January/February saw the entire centre staff decamped to southern Spain, where they ran courses for undergraduate Adventure Tourism students.
- (3) I had encountered a range of ‘types’ in the cultural melee that is the sea kayakers world, from absolute beginners to seasoned adventurers, instructors, clients and independents, and felt that I had been afforded a glimpse of their worlds.
- (4) Finally, I also realised that in a relatively short space of time, I had begun to behave and speak like a sea kayaker, even if I didn’t paddle like one. I would even be routinely included in the instructors’ plans for ‘jollies’ – non-commercial adventures of their own invention.¹ Table 1 is provided below detailing the research phases in chronological order.

Subsequently, I continued to find occasional opportunities to get out and paddle my kayak and to chat to members of both the HSSC and the NSP – and notes and reflections on aspects of these experiences and discussions further informed my analysis of the corpus of data generated from the five key episodes described above. Similarly, I continued to scour the discussions about sea paddling on various websites, the NSP message board and in canoeing/kayaking magazines.

What is sea kayaking?

Contemporary sea kayakers take to the waters in long, slim craft with romanticised names like the ‘Romany Explorer’, the ‘Baidarka’ or the ‘North Shore’ – names drawn

Table 1. Research episodes and references.

Episode/dataset	Date	Length	Corpus reference
Beginners course: ‘Introduction to sea kayaking’ at HSSC (includes the Sea Symposium)	28.4.05	10 days	V1.Beg.HSSC
Anglesey weekend with Northern Sea Paddlers (an informal group)	31.5.05	3 days	V2.NSP
Commercial expedition – around Anglesey with HSSC and one client (Jane)	9.9.05	6 days	V3.C.Nav.HSSC
Interview with Judy – filmmaker, researcher-adventurer based at the HSSC	18.8.05	2 hours	V4.Judy
Interview with Nick Dixon, celebrated sea kayaker and owner-manager of the HSSC	10.8.05	1.5 hours	V5.ND
A week occasionally involved with centre work and two courses – some Manchester kids and a grandpa and grandson	9.8.05	5 days	V6.Mkids
The ‘Rough Water Group’ – a commercial HSSC course for a group of white water paddlers from Skipton	11.10.05	5 days	V8.RWG

either from the cultural heritage of the craft as Inuit hunting kayaks or else suggestive of the adventures into which they might be pressed. The modern kayaks' bows are often slightly upswept like the Inuit original, but modern materials technology means that, unlike the traditional boats, two or three sealed storage compartments can also be included in the design. These voluminous holds are capable of swallowing more than twice the amount of gear and supplies than the largest of rucksacks, and thereby make possible extended wilderness trips without external support. Yet the design connection to their original Inuit heritage is so marked that, on a recent trip to Greenland, P.J. (senior instructor at the centre) was amazed to find local people pointing at his boat and calling it by its aboriginal name for their kayaks. They had immediately recognised the fibreglass object as something related to their own cultural history.

Paddlers attach themselves to the boat, sealing themselves in and keeping the sea out using an elasticated spraydeck, which fits snugly around their waists and connects them tightly to the rim of the cockpit. For the ocean paddler, the sea is thus both nature's gift as a transport medium and an enemy to be excluded. Out of their craft, on dry land, paddlers look rather comical and ungainly as they stride up the beach with these great black rubber flaps swinging between their legs. It is a key point of difference between the kayakers and other leisure users of the sea's margins, for only the sea paddlers wear these strange items.

In their hands, the kayakers hold long sea paddles; two blades mounted at either end of a long shaft; 'the kayaker's engine' (V5.ND). The paddle is *more* than a totemic possession for the sea kayaker; it offers the potential for movement and manoeuvring, and as such forms an essential and meaningful link between the paddler and her medium – the sea. A good paddle, the old timers will argue, is an extension of the natural body. Paddles must fit the style, strength and size of their owner. Being relatively portable, paddles also have more display value and semiological significance than most other bits of the kayaker's kit and therefore are significant in the visual separation of kayakers from 'others' who disport themselves on the coast (for a discussion on the intermediating role of technologies in touristic and leisure experiences, see Crouch & Desforges, 2003).

Sea kayaking as adventure

The theoretical adventure preconditions of risk and uncertainty abound when taking to the cold ocean waters in a craft little wider than one's waist, and only five metres long. The sea is a challenging, *alien* environment in which people are merely occasional visitors. The risks arise from rapidly changing wind and weather conditions, particularly in combination with the prevailing tidal movement. Strong winds can often mean that progress against them is unfeasible, and progress with them is dangerous, depending upon the skill level and experience of the paddler, as following seas² cause the kayak to surf down the face of huge waves at great speed. Winds also whip up the sea, especially in tide races and overfalls, so that the kayaker must pass through large, confused (rough) water where the waves do not move in ordered sets, but instead slap chaotically against each other, sometimes collapsing in on themselves, rolling the craft over. Large waves can suddenly materialise and may smash the unwary paddler onto rocks or cliff faces. In terms of *death*, the greatest risk for the sea kayaker is hypothermia. Capsized and unable to get back into the boat, the un-rescued individual may succumb to the cold in less than an hour, as the sea acts as a constant thermal reservoir, sapping the body's heat reserves.

The use of a sea kayak affords the possibility of exploration and self-supported travel³ carrying food, tent, spare clothing and cooking equipment in an ever changing and uncontrollable ‘natural’ environment. Using the kayak, travel is quiet and steady, up to around five miles per hour – rather more with a very strong tide – but access can be gained to shallow coves and cliff caves that larger, keeled boats would be unable to enter. One of the venerated elders of the British sea kayaking scene, Derek Hutchinson, explains the adventure like this:

Many of the more popular rock climbs are now worn smooth by countless grasping fingers and chafing boots. Hill walks which were once a real adventure are now well-trodden scars on the grass and heather. The kayak, however, cuts no groove and leaves no scar. The same stretch of water can be paddled every day but the surface may never be the same twice.

The sea provides the unfamiliar, the unworn and the unexpected. Sea kayaking gives a person the opportunity to venture on to a wild, unpredictable expanse in a craft that moves solely by the strength of their arm, directed by their experience and knowledge. (Hutchinson, 2002, p. viii)

Hanson, an American sea kayaker and author, adds:

There are those who say the great age of exploration is over, that even real adventure travel is dead. Those people have never been in a sea kayak.

Certainly all the continents have been mapped, all the big peaks climbed, and all the oceans crossed – but a new dimension of discovery still awaits us, on a more intimate level. I think of it as fractal exploration: you take smaller bites out of the world, but examine them more closely. (Hanson, 1998, p. xi)

There are core characteristics of this activity which add to its ‘deep adventure’ status, and the most notable is that of *commitment* (Varley, 2007). Commitment is a feature of many journeys and expeditions for sea paddlers because, once a group is engaged in an open crossing of a bay or estuary, sensibly making the most of the tidal current to push them along, it is not possible to turn back: the current would be too strong and would exhaust the paddlers in their attempts to progress against it. Further, it is likely that such a crossing would take the group a couple of miles away from shore in order to catch the tide stream, and, in some situations, the coastline might not afford navigable landing places anyway. There are echoes here of mountaineering’s sense of commitment, where descent from the mountain may not be possible immediately and quickly, even when faced with inclement conditions. This is arguably greatly at odds with the late-modern experience, in which so many aspects of life are contingent and negotiable, and in which choice is an ultimate consumer goal.

Topography of the adventurous margins

North Wales lends itself naturally to many forms of outdoor adventure. There are lakes, mountains, gorges, powerful rivers, forests and moors. This is an area where other industries and agricultural practices have struggled in recent times, but where tourism and leisure markets now flourish. This concentration of spectacular geographical features is set in the Irish Sea, which is itself dotted with islands here and there. There are beaches, cliffs, estuaries and tidal channels in addition to the mountainous topography of the interior.

The wild coastline of Wales is thus relatively remote from the busier parts of Britain. There is a substantial journey of about two hours to get to Anglesey from the major population centres of Northern England, and London is at least six hours away by car. This place is geographically, culturally and experientially set apart from urban life and thereby emphasises its own liminoid character. The visitors come to Anglesey precisely because the island offers something different – something that is unavailable where they live. Very few of the local Anglesey people go out in sea kayaks – this is a specialist activity indulged in by tourists, in the same way that it is generally the ‘strangers’ who come to climb the mountains of Snowdonia.

Anglesey is in effect a lump of rock obstructing the flood tide as it surges up the west coast of Britain towards Scotland. The very fact of this obstruction means that the voluminous tides that flow around Anglesey are constricted in many places, causing the water to force its way through gaps and over shallow rock features at great speed. In places, the water at the middle of the flood or ebb⁴ tide can be travelling at over eight knots, and the waves generated over rocks (overfalls) can reach eight metres in height. The area therefore provides endless challenges for kayakers in terms of adventurous journeys. Travel through the overfalls and rough tide-races can be hazardous and exciting, and the strong currents could quickly carry a capsized paddler well away from land.

Bodily aspects of marginality

Whilst so much physical movement and exertion has been reduced from contemporary life, the pursuit of sea kayaking is precisely focused on the human-powered journey, and this is another point of departure for most participants from their everyday lives.

The majority of the power when paddling comes from two perhaps unexpected sources. Whilst most newcomers to the activity will tend to try to press enthusiastically ahead by maximising the use of their arms in rapid muscular action, the seasoned paddlers will invariably glide past them, using the power derived from the twisting motion of their torsos in combination with alternate pushing of their feet against the foot braces in the cockpit. All of the members of the neophyte group were amazed to find that, rather than aching shoulders, they found that they had stiff legs and mildly sore stomach muscles. In fact, the feelings generated by extended paddling sessions, the beginners group all agreed, were extremely pleasant; these were muscles so rarely used in other activities and gave a wonderful bodily awareness and feelings of power and balance. The alien use of the body in order to travel on the sea was changing their connection with their own bodies, as well as fostering kinaesthetic connections between body, paddle, kayak and ocean. Following our sessions out on the sea, the salt water environment was becoming part of us, and vice versa, as the following extracts from the corpus of data illustrate:

As we climbed into the mini bus, everyone had caught some sun on their faces, and our skin seemed to be tingling from encrusted salt water, fresh air and exercise – laughter came easily as various aspects of each person’s performance was gently examined and ridiculed. (Wednesday, V1.Beg.HSSC:9)

Nature has clearly begun inscribing itself on our bodies: sunburnt knuckles, matted, straw-like hair from the salt, and a pleasant ache in the shoulders, back, legs and stomach. We are often thirsty – perhaps the effect of being constantly in and out of the salt water environment. (Friday, V1.Beg.HSSC:13)

The kayaker's body is active both above and below the waterline. For example, in performing an Eskimo⁵ roll her world is entirely inverted; she hangs momentarily, peering up through the water to the sky above and to one side of the boat, which lies upside down on the surface. The paddler's legs are (ideally) still securely braced inside the cockpit. Then she presses her paddle upwards until it breaks the surface of the water, twists it perpendicular to the side of her craft and pulls up with a surge of power to sit upright once again, that's if things have gone according to plan. If not, she'll flop back into the briny, and set up for a second attempt or splutter and swim. Water trickles down the neck and up the wrist-seals of most paddling cagoules, and will slop around the cockpit after a roll. I discovered that even in the pub, hours after my rolling sessions out at sea, water would suddenly rush out from somewhere in my nose or ears, a reminder of the earlier conjoining of our bodies with the ocean.

The women persuade him [P.J.] to demonstrate an Eskimo roll, which he does a couple of times. All of us later agree that this was most impressive – there's something about the helplessness one feels when submerged under one's boat – the only course of action and immediate instinct [for beginners] seems to be to exit the boat as quickly as possible. To have the presence of mind to stay there, head in icy-cold water, and to practice the roll manoeuvres seems extraordinary. (Wednesday V1.Beg.HSSC:9)

It is interesting to note that the practice of performing a roll is virtually impossible to adequately describe in words. Most members agree that, after perhaps many minutes of submersion and gallons of swallowed sea- or swimming pool-water, 'something just clicked'. Of course, during the practice-and-fail sessions, particular aspects of poor technique are criticised, but the inadequate words are invariably bolstered with mimicking actions, partial demonstrations and even drawings in the sand (a particular P.J. favourite). Many sea kayaking actions, as for other outdoor adventures, are actions which are somehow *beyond the scope of language* – (Mitchell, 1985, p. 210) – and this point is further underlined by the fact that many members will quantify the quality of the roll, for example as '90% successful', and may add the qualitative situational anticipation: 'but I've never rolled *in anger*'.

In the pursuit of sea kayaking, the social, the body, the mind and the environment become viscerally entwined; each becomes part of the other and, like comedy characters who find fish in their socks, pieces of seaweed and other ocean debris find their way into all sorts of nooks and crannies – as the novice paddlers discover at the end of their day.

Kayakers at the margins

The comments above alluding to the paddler's nearness and bodily relationship to the water are most significant. If the rock climber's world is a liminoid one – being both on the rock and in the air on a vertical plane – so is the sea kayaker's world, which is both *on and in* the water, and equally marginal on several counts. Firstly, water is not the natural habitat of the human being, yet the kayakers spend hours sitting in it, paddling over it and (at times) rolling under it.

The kayaker's world is also liminal in that more than for any other small craft, the kayak explores the territories where the edge of dry land meets the sea. Indeed, the tidal reach is emblematic of the 'betwixt and between' character of liminal states – not quite land, but not entirely of the sea either (Trubshaw, 2005). Additional aspects of sea kayaking's liminality are shared by other outdoor adventure sports, such as the fact

that this is, for most members, *non-work* time and is also environmentally, socially and physically quite distinct from whatever their versions of everyday life happen to be.

A further consideration is that the act of sea kayaking is a potentially dangerous undertaking in an unfamiliar environment – an activity which is at odds with the late-modern obsession with security and safety and therefore marginal in yet another sense. The effort of staying alive whilst undertaking journeys by sea kayak may be seen as liminoid in that survival is less easily taken for granted in these settings than when pursuing the mundane activities of the urban diurnal round.

This consideration of the environmental/corporeal lot of the sea kayaker serves to underpin a number of theoretical points. Firstly, the activity is one pursued at the margins of modern life socially, geographically, bodily and elementally. Secondly, the oceanic environment is sufficiently so demanding and difficult that detailed planning and the accumulation of skills are required in order to conduct the journeys with some chance of success and safety. Thirdly, the close, embodied relationship between the kayaker, the equipment, other paddlers and the watery environment provides the special liminoid character of the activity which underpins the culture as a whole. The wild, unpredictable natural environment is a key part of the game and supplies the adventure qualities that provide the opportunity for self-mastery and transcendence – towards a re-enchantment in the face of the stultifying conditions of rational modernity. Even the temporal dimensions are at odds with industrial time, in that instructors, clients and independents must all wait for tides and weather conditions and plan their journeys according to natural time.

At this point, I therefore wish to invoke the concept of *communitas* in liminality as pursued by Turner (1969), Van Gennep (1960) and later by Maffesoli (1996). These ideas commence with a consideration of the important Nietzschean dimension of the Dionysiac (ecstatic) experience as a counter to the alienating and disenchanting experiences of everyday modernity – a characteristic which underscores the experience of adventure as a distinctive form of social activity.

Communities of adventurers

The Greek deity Dionysus had a passionate band of followers who would form communities, or *thiasos*, bonded for the duration of their ceremonies of ecstatic worship. Nietzsche became fascinated by the contrast between the Dionysiac and Apollonian orientations to life, and it formed the basis for his early work in *The Birth of Tragedy* as a critique of the individuation process and the suppression of the emotions in modern life. The Dionysiac experience is rooted in emotions ‘and the living of life as destiny’ (Lopez-Pedraza, 2000, p. 36), and is stimulated particularly by the emotions aroused in the contemplation of one’s own death. This is characterised as the strongest and most individual of expressions of feeling. Nietzsche wrote about *amor fati*, or the embrace of fate as part of the Dionysian orientation to life, and that is part of the adventurer’s spirit, even if the commodified forms attempt to resist its realisation via systems of rationalisation and calculation.

One such festival of ‘communal effervescence’ in the sea kayaker’s world is the annual *Symposium of Sea Kayaking*, which is a mixture of carnival and exchange (of ideas and experience) and, for many, is the melting pot in which the sea kayaking world is maintained and recreated as a cultural form. My notes generated from attendance at several of these explain it thus:

The place becomes a re-creation (and recreation) of modern society, as the new-gear freaks, the classic kayak enthusiasts, the folding kayak group, the individualist-loners, the DIYers, techno-gear-freaks, celebrities, heroes (heroes are generally the same thing as celebrities in these circles), beginners, elders, original adventurers and customer-tourists are all represented to some extent. Here, the meaning of the social dimensions of sea kayaking is forged for many, as the event and the centre itself acts as a cultural sump: a reminder of the history of it, a record of the doing of it, the development of a narrative of it and the embodied experience of it. New tales are told and some will pass into folklore. Friendships and liaisons, arguments and quarrels all reshape and delineate the pursuit of sea kayaking as it emerges as a distinctive social form in its own right. The Dionysiac emotions of anxiety, fear, joy, alcoholic excesses in the Cross-Paddles bar and the acknowledgement of a community, bound by mutual respect and *communitas*, emerge over the weekend.

For each of the different paddler ‘types’ mentioned above, the enjoyment of sea kayaking has its own form. The exciting aspect of the symposium, though, is that it forces a co-mingling of these different individuals, and provokes a confrontation with their subjectively held meanings and values. One clear example of this phenomenon is that several highly self-sufficient ‘original adventurers’ (see Varley, 2007) still choose to attend the event, even though the trips are led (sometimes by them) and generally autonomy and freedom are compromised. These members will pitch a tent, cook their own meals and fiddle with the bits and pieces of their paddling equipment, only occasionally entering the centre buildings. Self-sufficient by nature even in these contexts, such people will nevertheless meet with all of the other delegates in the bar and attend the ‘celebrity’ talks and lectures. The talks, usually by people who have paddled great distances, or in relatively uncharted areas, or both, offer another glimpse of one meaning of the activity for many. The tales of hardship and pleasure, the dangers overcome and the tactics employed all contribute to understandings of what it is to go sea kayaking, how it is different from many people’s ordinary lives and how, if conducted appropriately, it is a pastime which searches for, tests and develops the strong, resolute character in all of us.

Nietzsche was fond of using the imagery of the seas and mountains and cast them as the metaphorical realm of the superman, beyond the cares of ordinary folk – an arena for pure experiencing and the transcendence of modern monotony. Bowles (1994) follows this argument in a paper entitled ‘Glorious Enchantments’ and strengthens the claims for outdoor adventure as a way-in to authentic experience on the margins of civilised life, encouraging the pursuit of authentic being via transcendental moments. Part of that transcendence is achieved through the liminoid character of the activities, experienced beyond the bounds of the mainstream everyday world.

The actual content of the Dionysiac experience requires further articulation, as far as is possible here, in order that we might consider its application to the concept of adventure experience. The image of Apollo provided by Nietzsche is as the god of ‘measured restraint, that freedom from the wilder emotions, that calm of the sculptor god’ the ‘divine image of the *principium individuationis*, through whose gestures and eyes all the joy and wisdom of “illusion”, together with its beauty, speak to us’ (1967, pp. 35–36). This is occasionally disturbed by irruptions from the Dionysian world, in which a mixture of terror and ‘the blissful ecstasy that wells from the innermost depths of man, indeed of nature’ that is ‘brought home to us most intimately by the analogy of intoxication’ (1967, p. 36) may be experienced. As Novak explains: ‘The Dionysian spirit lives in the full-blooded embrace of life in all its darkness and light, terror and joy’ (1996, p. 21). This is life lived firmly in the present, for the here and now of ecstatic communion. For the adventuring and partying sea kayakers at the symposia and beyond, there are surges of such feelings

generated by the embrace of nature and the communal effervescence of mutual experience in liminoid places.

Conclusions: Dionysiac adventurer communities and Turnerian *communitas*

Clearly, there are several significant aspects of Dionysian culture as proposed in *The Birth of Tragedy* which have implications for a consideration of the popular search for adventurous leisure forms. The first of these is the tendency for Dionysiac cults and societies (*thiasos*) to emerge. Nietzsche's early work focuses on the 'primal unity' of communal submersion in ecstatic joy (1967, p. 21). For Maffesoli, such ideas still obtain in contemporary society. Ritualistic, emotional, ecstatic communities (neo-tribes) are created as a response to the flatness of alienating and disenchanting life (Maffesoli, 1996). These neo-tribes are temporary micro-communities which provide a sense of collective immersion (Featherstone, 1992, p. 164). Similarly Turner (1969, pp. 94–130), echoing Nietzsche, had espoused the view that societies emerged as the result of an ongoing dialectic between structure and antistructure, as in the tensions between Dionysian and Apollonian values. Both argue that successful, meaningful civilisations achieve a balance of the push-and-pull between the Apollonian and Dionysiac values, and that the richest experiences are lived precisely in those contested margins – the liminoid zones. In adventurous leisure pursuits in particular, the bond of shared flow or *communitas* often emerges via the mutuality of ecstatic experience and liminality (Gyimothy & Mykletun, 2004; Turner, 1969; Wang, 1999; Weber, 2001). This is different to the stage-managed 'delivered *communitas*' at Wilderness Inquiry, the leisure service provider studied by Sharpe (2005), or the rafting companies studied by Arnould and Price (1993) and by Holyfield (1999). Rather, this is *communitas* that emerges as part of the shared but *incidental* narrative of adventure and ecstatic communion (Maffesoli, 1996). The notion of liminality is thus a key adventure quality as it involves a separation, a becoming other, in the sense that new environments, different ways of living and different social forms are taken on. For sea kayakers, this might be evidenced by their activities out on the ocean, in an uninhabited environment, using kayaks and equipment that are of little use at other times. There is a particular technical language employed, as well as arcane phraseology (argot) used to describe the experience and its conditions, which bonds the participating members. The usual complexities of modern life are pared down to the simplest essentials specific for travel and survival in that demanding environment.

Exploring liminal states, Turner proposed a three-stage process of separation, marginality and reincorporation (1969, pp. 94–95) as individuals leave behind their usual situations and become absorbed into the new community (see also Lett, 1983). The marginal aspects of the sea kayaking experience fit with this model as members change out of their land-clothes, enter their kayaks and leave the shore for the open sea. They then journey along the coastal territories, suspended in and on the water, and finally, as they acquire new skills and the argot of the sea kayaking culture, they are reincorporated – now members of this distinctive adventure community. It is precisely these stages that afford the sea kayaker the possibility of making themselves *other*; they are separate, marginal and yet now belong to a new world with more immediate values, emotions and temporary structures.

Mitchell (1985) explains that outdoor enthusiasts are primarily involved in a social act structured by a myriad of self-imposed restrictions, rules and limits – canoeists, potholers, climbers and mountaineers all frame their own social order as part of the

creation of meaning in self-directed leisure. This proto-rationalisation process is focused on an immediate goal (usually the journey) generated by the participants themselves. As such, this separate aspect of their lives achieves its own completeness; in Mitchell's words, 'a sense of quality and rounded wholeness' (1985, p. 214). It may be seen that these proto-structures develop symbolic qualities for members and voyeurs alike, and that such practices may be seen as part of the rituals of leisure, circumscribing members of the culture and separating them from others. Whilst chaos, violence, irrationality, sensuality and death may be the most often evoked Dionysiac experiences, the sense of community and the stillness and tranquillity that settles after these are equally important aspects. It is during the periods of reflective tranquillity, beyond the storm, so to speak, that the satisfaction and deep meaning of sea kayaking and other forms of adventurous leisure as liminoid, transcendent experiences can be felt. As such, a communal immersion in the natural world, in combination with the experience of marginal or uncertain situations, at a remove from mainstream society, provides the preconditions for *communitas* and the potential for realisation of unified, animated and spiritual meaning (Mitchell, 1985, p. 212).

The adventures of the sea kayakers allow for a process of self-separation from the quotidian grind and a reincorporation into a special, meaningful liminal world. This alternative world is tensioned between the Apollonian ideals of comfort, predictability and security (provided by purveyors of its commodified form, and/or by the use of predictive strategies, planning, training and technology) and the Dionysiac experiences of *communitas*, emotional expression, transcendence and bodily re-invigoration. The presence of risk and the relative unpredictability in the ever-changing ocean environment provide a tremendous theatre for the late-modern adventurer to enact their escape attempts and to re-engage with themselves and with others at leisure. Thus, it is proposed that *both* aspects of meaning may be derived (via communion with nature and via self-mastery in the face of risk) and that both are important aspects in the theoretical construction of the outdoor adventure.

Notes

1. Plans such as an expedition involving paddling out over 14 miles of open sea to the isle of Lundy in the mouth of the Bristol Channel, completing 'The Devil's Slide' (a classic rock climb), a couple of pints and then paddling back.
2. A term used to describe the effects of strong winds that 'follow' the direction of the tide, and therefore usually the direction of the paddler. The kayak becomes hard to manage, as it is designed to turn back into the wind, meaning that the paddler must try hard to resist this tendency in order to avoid being side-on to the waves, thereby risking capsize.
3. Without recourse to shops and other social structures for the duration of the journey (up to two months) if necessary.
4. High or low tide, respectively.
5. The Eskimo roll is a self-rescue technique whereby the paddler, following a capsize, uses the paddles underwater (upside-down in the kayak) in order to thrust themselves back upright. There are many different names for and styles of roll used by kayakers.

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