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On the Beach

John Beck

Abstract

The phrase "on the beach" originates as naval slang for being between assignments or unemployed and was used as the title for Nevil Shute's bestselling novel of 1957 about the last remaining survivors of a global nuclear conflict as they await their inevitable demise. The novel is about a certain kind of anxious passivity in the face of incomprehensible catastrophe but it is also a narrative about work and idleness. As such, the idea of being "on the beach" invites consideration of the shore as a liminal space where often conflicting social and existential issues of meaning and purpose are played out. The waves of so-called "beach-shaming" that occurred during the early months of the global coronavirus pandemic have located, yet again, the beach as a key battleground in contemporary cultural politics.

Keywords

Beach -- End of the world -- Pandemic -- Beach-shaming -- Waiting

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The beach was once a space of anxiety and fear, the site of shipwrecks and flooding, the edge of the unknown. When the Industrial Revolution and Romanticism led aristocrats and intellectuals to seek fresh air and open spaces for health and contemplation, the beach was reimagined as restorative (Corbin). The redundancy of the shoreline became precisely what was good about it — the beach was the end of the line, where work stopped and recreation, physical and psychological, could begin. As the popularity of the seaside as a holiday destination was accelerated and democratized by improvements in transportation and increased leisure time, the beach gave rise to another horror — that of the hedonistic mob (see e.g. Shields). By the early twentieth century, modernist writing was full of queasy observations of how the masses spilled out of the cities to contaminate the sands (see Boddy; Feigel; Carey). Contempt for the dumb carnality of the beach crowd reached its greasy apotheosis in J.G. Ballard's 1963 story "The Reptile Enclosure," where the seaside multitude reminds Mildred Pelham of "Gadarene swine" (426) and the beach appears to her husband Ronald as "an immense pit of seething white snakes" (429). Infrared lights from a newly launched radio satellite causes the crowds, lemming-like, to drown themselves.

With its twin heritage of health and transgression, the beach is a fertile site for moral confusion, where somewhere that is good for you is also where you can do bad things or where bad things happen. The corruption of healthy space by humanity's impure masses allows the beach to sit as a fallen space, or somewhere always teetering toward oblivion — an anxious zone about to be ruined or contaminated by unwelcome invaders. The beach as the liminal space where cure and pleasure are muddled, one often serving as an alibi for the other, is well documented, as is the encoding of seaside behavior along lines of class, race, gender and sexuality (Shields). As a physically ragged zone between two elements, as a staging site for transitional, transgressive and

transformational social practices and identifications, the beach carries a heavy symbolic burden.

Among the many oppositions that the beach complicates or confuses, perhaps the most febrile is the opposition between labor and idleness. The growth of seaside holidays in Europe and the United States during the nineteenth century among middle- and then working-class vacationers displaced traditional shoreline labor in order to claim the beach as the site of physical relaxation and display. The removal of clothes might have scrambled visible class distinctions and allowed for some cultural cross-pollination, but the beach also exposed *en plein air* antagonistic conceptions of what constitutes a good time. The seaside soon became a space of moral turpitude for middle class observers, where the sight of workers flagrantly not working only confirmed the need to preserve a rigid social order. It is this grotesque, carnivalesque beach of unregulated pleasure-seeking that Rob Shields identifies as the possible space "for the enactment of alternative, utopian social arrangements." This is why, he argues, the Victorians "so hotly condemned working-class behavior on the beach where lewd 'fun' became a threat to not only the social order of classes, but also the discipline which was taken to be synonymous with 'civilisation'" (91). The subversive whiff given off by the pleasure of not working, of course, has long been savored by radicals and anarchists (see, e.g. Lafargue; Vaneigem; Black). The beach challenges norms and conventions, but is, as a consequence, also a place where the social order must be most aggressively policed.

To be beached is to be washed up. In naval terms, "on the beach" means to be between assignments, retired from service or discharged; in other words, unemployed, even stranded or left behind. The epigraph from T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" that Nevil Shute chooses to open his 1957 best-selling novel *On the Beach* establishes the tone of bleak abandonment the title is intended to establish: "In this last of meeting places / We grope together? / And

avoid speech / Gathered on this beach of the tumid river." The whimper, and not the bang, with which the world ends is the subject of *On the Beach*, a book that imagines the last days of Melbourne as the inhabitants wait for the inevitable arrival of the radioactive fallout from a nuclear conflict that has already wiped out all other life on the planet. At the edge of the world, the remains of humanity are on the beach. They have been laid off, made redundant, yet they carry on, largely because they do not know what else to do. Swimming, sailing, drinks in the afternoon -- the beach in Shute's novel once more becomes the site of moral confusion, this time turned by the anticipation of the imminent arrival of an invisible killer into the stage for a new kind of grotesque display. In conservative Melbourne, the danger is not that beach life threatens to undermine the bourgeois virtues of abstinence and hard work; instead, pleasure-seeking itself has become a form of labor, darkly pursued.

The mixture of tortured passivity and muted acceptance among the characters conveys the sense of entrapment experienced by a population with nowhere to run but also serves as an implied judgment against those who refuse responsibility. "We had nothing to do with it," complains one character, speaking about the war. "Why should we have to die"? (41). Imagining themselves as separate and insulated from the rest of world leaves the Melburnians confused and ill-informed about the conflict that will shortly destroy them. Shute wrote the novel between March and September 1956, as the Australian government assisted the British by hosting nuclear tests in the Monte Bello Islands (May-June) and at Maralinga (September-October). The passive acceptance of nuclear threat in *On the Beach* is not necessarily a charge aimed exclusively at Australians, but the fiction that it is the Northern hemisphere that is responsible for conflict and catastrophe is patently an evasion of the global reality. The conventional (self-)perception of Australia as an easy-going culture, with the beach as a key signifier of national

identity, is here deployed to critique naive insularity in the nuclear age and also, enlarged beyond the Australian context, to serve as a means of challenging the complacency and narcissism of postwar affluence (White). The novel borrows the notion of Australia as disconnected from world affairs -- the "world," as Rosalyn Weaver notes, has ended but this excludes Australia (for now) (71) -- in order to stage there, in microcosm, the drama of the world ending. In the nuclear age, there is no outside.

A common theme in Shute's novels is the dignity of work and the ingenuity and leadership shown by those willing to face difficult or daunting situations. He emigrated to Australia in 1950 partly to escape the postwar UK Labour government's welfare socialism and its punitive taxes on the wealthy. The welfare state, for Shute, stifled initiative and his protagonists are often goal-oriented experts — technicians, engineers, military men — who are unafraid of physical and mental challenges, know how things work, are highly skilled, adaptable, poised and strong willed. Shute's outlook is essentially a British imperial vision of moral authority achieved through struggle and competition (Lammers; Gideon; Weaver). Part of the tragedy in *On the Beach*, for Shute, is the squandering of know-how and initiative due to the compliance and complacency of a population too willing to follow without question.

While the rest of the world has been destroyed, the people of Melbourne seem untouched (initial panic having subsided) and able to continue with their lives. Despite some slackening of respectable behavior (a young woman like Moira drinks constantly and hints at sexual promiscuity) and an increasing willingness to court danger, as the deadly fallout gets closer the characters begin, curiously, to undertake more long-term activities: enrolling in long courses of study and planning farming and gardening projects for the following year and longer. Here, the rejection of complacency and fatalism is hard to read. It is at once poignant, honorably stoic and also a denial of reality. Is this a failure of imagination — a trait explicitly

valued by American nuclear submarine captain Dwight Towers — or a species of the ignorance that led to this fate in the first place ('no government was wise enough to stop us' [317])?

Partly, the tendency to just carry on is explained as a response to way the immensity of the situation has outstripped the capacity of the mind to grasp its significance: "It's too big," Moira confides to Dwight, "I can't take it in." He agrees, explaining that all the places and people at home in the US are still "all alive to me . . . just like they were." It must be "lack of imagination. I don't want to have any more imagination" (64-65). Dwight persists in describing his wife and children as if they are still out there in Mystic, Connecticut, enlisting Moira in the fantasy to the point where she buys a gift for Dwight's long dead daughter. Moira comes to understand that it is impossible for Dwight, who, like her, "had seen nothing of the destruction of the war" and which is therefore "not real" to them, to visualize his family "in any other circumstances than those in which he had left them" (113). Dwight's image of his family is "more real by far" than what is described as the "half-life in a far corner of the world" circumstances have "forced upon him" (112). This passage is focalized through Moira, the woman who mourns the fact that she will never see anything of the world, and that sense of Australia as a corner of the world is a reminder of the discourse of separation and exclusion that has now been confirmed by events. The notion of these last days in Melbourne as a "half-life," of course, also marks the contaminated, diminished and decaying existence they must now bear. What saves Dwight, though, is what he doesn't have: "He had little imagination, and that formed a solid core for his contentment in Australia" (113).

Dwight is focused only on duty, which is to perform his military role until the end, and death, which he conceives as a return "home" to his family. His stoic insistence on maintaining the narrative of return, as if the world is still out there, is a way of managing in the face of the inconceivable, but it is ultimately

horrifying since lack of imagination ends up being the privileged mode of acquiescent survival. For Peter Schwenger, the novel is precisely concerned with this numbing passivity, which he sees as "a projection past a future holocaust of the kind of attitude that precedes one" (44). In other words, *On the Beach* identifies in the coping mechanisms of the doomed Melburnians the passive acceptance of nuclear threat that, unless challenged, is likely to allow a devastating war to occur. The message from the future is that survival requires an end to thinking that issues like nuclear weapons are too big and only of concern to others.

Shute does not dismiss the unimaginative, though, and is able to see in the attachment to the rules and conventions of a dead world a kind of dignity, even if it no longer serves any earthly function other than the preservation of an idea of order. *On the Beach*, as a book about enforced redundancy, has a horror of idleness that competes only with its revulsion of Armageddon; indeed, it is not an exaggeration to see the latter as an outcome of too much of the former. When he is invited to Peter Holmes's house, Dwight thinks the change will provide "some relief from the vile inactivity that had tormented him in the last months" (20). When Moira complains that there is no longer any work she is qualified to do, Dwight suggests she should take a typing course. "What's the sense of that," she asks, "if there's no time to finish it, or use it afterwards?" Because it is something to work at, Dwight replies. For Moira, "Work just for the sake of working" (73) is absurd, but for Dwight work does not have to have a purpose and is intrinsically virtuous. Resisting being washed up is, for Dwight, best countered by an adherence to strict routine and a commitment to doing the right thing in the face of inconceivable adversity.

Doing the right thing includes taking a ship out beyond the twelve-mile limit and sinking it because "that was what the Navy Department would want me to do — not leave a ship like that, full of classified gear, kicking around in another country. Even if there

wasn't anyone there" (266). It also means no alcohol on American vessels, no unauthorized use of military vehicles, and no sex. Dwight explains to Moira that he has played straight with his wife throughout and "wouldn't want to spoil that now, these last few days." By this point in the narrative, Dwight's virtuous ways have rubbed off on Moira, who concedes that she "wouldn't want to start a smutty love affair when I'm dying in a week or ten days' time. I've got some standards, too -- now, anyway" (267). No longer willing to reach for oblivion in the bottle, Moira signs up for the typing course and later boasts that she'll "be able to get a good job next year" (175). The man with no imagination has enlisted Moira, perhaps the most insightful, and therefore unhappy, character in the book, into his fictional world of continuity through repetition. Her sense of an ending is converted into a work ethic robust enough to cancel the end of the world. And Moira is not the only one. More people than ever are attending classes. "I'd never have thought it would work out that way," says Dwight (176).

When people stop working things degenerate quickly in *On the Beach*. On a trip to Melbourne near the end of the novel, Mary Holmes asks her husband: "what's the matter with everything? It's all so dirty, and it smells horrid." Peter replies that he expects the street cleaners have stopped working. "But why should they do that?" asks Mary, "Why aren't they working? Is there a strike or something?" There is no strike, of course, but the folding of end-times into labor unrest is apposite. "Everything shut up, and dirty, and stinking. It's as if the end of the world had come already" (275).

Mary's discomfort speaks to the wider concerns of *On the Beach*, which are about dignity and character in the face of calamity. Indeed, the novel is clear that the nuclear calamity was caused by a failure of character in the first place, as people refused to accept responsibility, think about serious issues, participate in decision-making, or even keep up with the science. If it is hard to sympathize with Mary's (and Shute's) right wing disapproval of an

inactivity that it interprets as idleness, though, it is equally hard to identify with stoic puritans like Dwight, for whom, as Schwenger writes, death "becomes a duty to be performed . . . with no more and no less a sense of ritual than has attended all the duties of [his life]" (44). As a response to Cold War nuclear dread, this is disconcerting, to say the least.

What *On the Beach* does successfully dramatize, however, is the corrosive experience of inertia induced by the anticipation of disaster. It is not really even anticipation, though, since the act of waiting presupposes some sort of expectation, an outcome that will bring the waiting to a conclusion. Since they already know what the outcome will be, if not precisely when it will come, the people of Melbourne, in the novel, have passed through to the other side of anxiety, where conventional temporal unfolding is meaningless. Anxiety, like waiting, as Laura Salisbury explains, "is always oriented towards a future" (97). Without a future, the characters in *On the Beach* have no use for anxiety and are left instead with a hollowed out version of what used to be called everyday life. Between life and death, on the beach, unemployed and stranded, outside conventional temporality, the options are a kind of tortured parody of the pleasure beach (Maira) or a blind obedience to precedent (Dwight). Shute prefers the latter, but it barely matters, since everyone dies at the end.

[section break]

There have been photographs of crowded beaches since the invention of photography. A busy Bondi Beach has been the subject of pictures since the nineteenth century, and photographs of seaside crowds, from Humphrey Spender's pictures of Blackpool for Mass Observation in the 1930s and Weegee's famous, astonishing *Coney Island at Noon Saturday, July 5, 1942*, through to Martin Parr's recent *Beach Therapy* series, have been routinely deployed to

seduce and shock in equal measure. The crowded beach is where appetites are fed, and this is both intoxicating and terrifying, depending on point of view. Weegee's shot, made for the left-leaning, advertisement-free tabloid *PM*, does not read crowdedness as threat, largely because the faces openly meet the gaze of the camera. Mass Observation's view of Blackpool, on the other hand, is less approving, seeing in the crowds a disturbing herd mentality where people flock to the town mainly to be in a crowd and where the "crush photos" are used for publicity (Cross 154). In Parr's typically ambivalent images of popular leisure, such as *Mar Del Plata, Argentina, 2014*, a sea of flesh and parasols is punctuated only rarely by patches of sand, ocean and a large Coca-Cola sign, and the emphasis is on scale.

In the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, images of crowded beaches from Bondi to Miami sparked global outrage and horror. The kind of photographs that customarily accompany reports of national holidays or heatwaves became, instead, signs of toxic nihilism. Tight cropping and compressed distance in many photographs visually exaggerated the impression of overcrowding and close proximity, but regardless of the accuracy of the images, the notion of the beach as the site of contagion itself became a viral trope. In Florida, where Trump-supporting governor Ron DeSantis resisted measures to curb the spread of coronavirus, Miami Beach became an early hot spot in March 2020 when it emerged that Spring Breakers were responsible for spreading the infection as far as California and Massachusetts. Photographs of the Winter Party Festival in Miami Beach, showing hundreds of half-naked young people dancing, drinking and embracing coursed through the global media (Mazzei and Robles). In California, the political divide was visibly apparent in April as pictures showed empty, liberal Los Angeles County beaches, which had been ordered to close, next to the packed, still open, conservative Orange County beaches across the county line (Cowan).

In Italy, which suffered an early and devastating wave of contagion, relaxation of lockdown also led to trouble at the beach. *The Guardian* reported how one visitor's experience in the Marche region went from "paradise to hell" within hours as large groups descended on the beach. "It was the most dense crowd I've ever experienced," she said, and dangerous due to lack of masks and distancing (Giuffrida). In the UK, when restrictions on movement were relaxed in June, a similar situation occurred when thousands arrived to enjoy the beaches in Dorset. A "major incident" was declared in Bournemouth as a multi-agency emergency response was prepared to tackle overcrowding, gridlocked traffic and violence. Refuse crews were abused and intimidated as they attempted to clean up, illegal campers defecated on the beach, and angry motorists knocked down barriers in order to park in restricted areas. Council leader Vikki Slade described the mood as "ugly," characterized by frustration, aggression and disrespect (Brewis). Similar scenes of antisocial behavior occurred across the country.

The beach thus became a battleground during the early stages of the pandemic over the right to free movement. As lockdown restrictions eased, reopened beaches again became flashpoints in conflicts over social order and appropriate behavior. As in *On the Beach*, because emergency has wiped out conventional roles, routines and responsibilities, distinctions between fear and pleasure, duty and abandonment have evaporated. While some insist on behaving as if nothing has changed, others are terrorized by such indifference or ignorance. The danger is real but unevenly acknowledged. Alongside the anxiety expressed by many that beachgoers were oblivious to the threat they posed to themselves and others, there is also a moral dimension to the disapproval that echoes Shute's rejection of idleness. Going to the beach during a pandemic did not just transgress the public health message but also seemed to suggest a hedonism unrestrained by the discipline of work — even though, during lockdown, work was something many

people were instructed not to do, could not do or had to do at home. Part of the outrage directed at beachgoers seems driven by revulsion of flagrant displays of idleness. It is true that hanging out at the beach does not seem an appropriate response to a global emergency, but as *On the Beach* suggests, the horror of anticipating a catastrophe messes with the social order in all sorts of unexpected ways. Shute, I suspect, would be with the beach-shamers and recommend a re-commitment to the duties of the old normal, however performative. In the face of Covid-19, as with the nuclear cloud, partying during an existential crisis means we've already lost.

By July 2020, as many places edged toward a renegotiation of the norms of social behavior, the beach-shaming articles of April seemed overwrought, though a more conciliatory tone came only as the (perceived) excesses of the previous months waned. In *The Atlantic*, a Harvard epidemiologist is brought in to point out the over-reaction: "You'd think from the moral outrage about these beach photos that fun, in itself, transmits the virus." In fact, being outside is a "public-health win" (Tufekci). True, though the moral outrage -- and the pleasure of being outraged -- often has less to do with contagion and more to do with open displays of people not working. The run to the beach during the pandemic, so often framed using the familiar language of "hordes descending," tapped into a deep-seated fear of the energies unleashed by mass beach-going which is riddled with class hatred. This is a point even *The Daily Telegraph*, a newspaper not known for its plebian sympathies, realized when it noted the snobbery and disdain among outraged middle-class social media users for resorts like Southend, Bournemouth and Broadstairs (Smith).

The carnivalesque threat of the unleashed masses is never far away on the beach, which is why, even when faced with contamination and death, as Mary Holmes reminds us, it would be better, for some, if people kept working. With only days to go before the fallout kills the city, Mary mistakenly believes the Melbourne

street cleaners are on strike because they have hung up their brushes. In a way, like the Covid-era beachgoers, they are on strike, no longer willing or able to perform the rituals of assent that maintain the illusion that everything is normal. Beaches are among some of the remaining open public spaces available for many people, so they are likely to be among the first places to fill up when fresh air is needed and therefore also pressure points that reveal deeper structural asymmetries between, say, urban and rural inhabitants and attendant inequalities of race and class. The misbehavior of people in public spaces may be undesirable and even reprehensible, but it is rarely unmotivated.

Writing about the place of leisure in medieval life, Chris Rojek recognized that the “lewdness and vulgarity of carnival were directly related to the low degree of control that people had over natural forces and their own emotions.” People who “could be plunged into crisis by . . . calamities of nature,” he goes on, “might take an exaggerated pleasure in their mass leisure forms” (27). For the beach-shamer, the shoreline crowds constitute a grotesque display of transgressive excess even when the crowds themselves might not be taking much exaggerated pleasure in their chosen form of leisure. What is clear, though, is how the beach continues to be a site through which issues of social and political limits are expressed and challenged.

Shute's novel responded to the fact that the threat of nuclear war left no part of the world, and no human relationship, untouched and untainted. *On the Beach*, despite its political and literary shortcomings, grasped something about human limitations that is, at once, appalling and poignant, relevant beyond its specific historic moment and disturbingly apposite in relation to our often impoverished capacity to connect individual and local circumstances and behavior to broader national and global phenomena. Shute struggles to decide whether his unimaginative characters are right to maintain a stiff upper lip or whether this dim stoicism is what

caused the catastrophe in the first place. What is clear, though, is that isolationism is no protection and an abdication of responsibility. What happens in Seattle or Moscow or London eventually has a bearing on the fate of Melbourne. An irradiated magazine picked up in one continent will contaminate the reader who opens it in another. How much or how little we understand what is going on around us shifts the position of everything. Objects, weather systems, communications, information, habits, values, decisions, beach parties -- everything visible and invisible is implicated in the unfolding of events and the determination of fates.

This awareness, and the frailty of the human capacity to act upon it, is underscored from the beginning of the novel in Shute's invocation of Eliot's hollow men, gathered on the beach sightless and unwilling (or unable) to speak. The Australian survivors are marooned on a dying planet, but they barely grasp the meaning of what is happening and how this situation came to pass, let alone what to do about it. There is uncertainty, disagreement and disinformation about the cause of the war, the effects of radioactive fallout, when the contamination will reach them and the distribution and duration of its impact. In the absence of any meaningful action that would mitigate or prevent the radiation from arriving, and with nowhere to run, the general response is an attempt to continue to live as before, albeit with every conversation and every action marked by a shadow of anxiety and dread. In part this signals defiance in the face of certain death but, while it might be psychologically necessary in order to avoid mental breakdown, it is also a refusal to engage with reality that may reveal a more longstanding problem. The need to follow the rules regardless of circumstances is presented as paramount in *On the Beach*, and while the novel favors those who do so, it also exposes how adherence to convention can obliterate agency and replace it with a hollowed out and merely performative decency.

Being on the beach remains a condition of stasis, a place of

redundancy and abandonment. It is also a place of possible release, exposure and openness. For many writers and commentators, beachgoers continue to represent, seemingly at the same time, lemming-like acquiescence, mob violence and utopian resistance. The site of idleness is, at once, a source of anxiety and emancipation. Measures intended to contain the spread of coronavirus, and the public and official responses to them, have in many countries revealed or amplified profound disagreements over the meaning and value of science, the role of government and its relation to the people, and the rights and responsibilities of the individual. In a very different context, these were also Shute's concerns in *On the Beach*. The beach embodies in that novel, as it does now, the contradictions exposed by catastrophe and provides the venue through which social, economic, political and moral struggles can be played out. As in Shute's anxiety- and denial-filled Melbourne, the virus has rendered waiting the cultural dominant, whether framed as dread-induced stillness, sheltered withdrawal, dutiful compliance, work-shy inactivity, impatient frustration, or bewildered incomprehension. Waiting has also, in some contexts, become a kind of decency -- in order to protect others, to reduce pressure on essential services, to stop the spread of infection. This is not Shute's version of waiting, which is waiting, as it were, under erasure, since in *On the Beach* there can be no future (though the point of the book is to function as a period of grace gifted from an imagined future it is still possible to avoid), but it is, nevertheless, a waiting without known outcome. As a consequence, the attendant anxiety that comes with the unforeseeable continues to permeate everyday life under pandemic conditions. Global threats, Shute maintains, require public comprehension of the interconnectedness of things across scales, strong leadership, and a willingness to act. Above all, in order to avoid being washed up timely intervention is essential. In Shute's novel, the irritation and revulsion shown toward idleness is, no doubt, a class-based demand for discipline and

continuity but it is also a broader call for political agency and decisive action. Recent beach-shaming narratives reveal a similar frustration, the sunburnt mob taking, once more, the blame for a broader and deeper set of structural, social and political failures.

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