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# Sandwork



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For Sigmund Freud, the terms “dreamwork” and “jokework” denoted the process by which the mind displaces social and psychological anxieties and permits them to emerge disguised in dreams and jokes. This article posits a similar process for “sandwork.” Examining the ways people play with sand in its three basic states—dry sand, wet sand, and mud—the author looks at photographic evidence and makes direct observations on California beaches and at lake beaches in the Sierra Nevada mountains. There, the author reads what he calls sand play “texts” for their coded meanings, most fundamentally in the contrast between clean and dirty. Among his findings, the author notes gender differences in the ways individuals play with sand.

**Key words:** beaches; gender; mud; photography; sand; sandwork; World Technique

**S**AND IS THE PERFECT PLAYTHING for humans; we are lucky there is so much of it. Dry sand, whether wild on a beach or tamed in a sandbox, has a sensuous feel, especially when warmed by the sun. Add water and the wet sand lends itself to shaping, constructing. On the wettest extreme is mud, usually dark, full of organic matter, often redolent with the earthy, fecund smells of a primordial ooze. Dry sand can feel clean; wet sand can feel clean but clingy; mud feels dirty. What better material is there for creating complex symbolizations of the body, of “clean” and “dirty” as fruitful categories for our thinking about purity and pollution, about good and evil (Douglas 1966; Babcock-Abrahams 1975)?

Playing with sand in its various states is so universal that the play has become nearly invisible to us, so taken-for-granted that it bumps up against what Brian Sutton-Smith (1970) called the “triviality barrier” of children’s play. Of course, it is the invisible power of play and culture that we should hurry to examine. So, while I describe and categorize here play with sand and mud, I have a more serious, nontrivial analysis in mind. Hence my title, “sandwork,” echoing Freud’s “dreamwork” (1965) and “jokework” (1960), his words for the processes

by which the mind takes repressed material, displaces it, and brings it back to the surface in a disguised form, including dreams, jokes, and other manifestations. It turns out that sand and mud provide perfect material for using play to address some of the social and psychological anxieties that plague individuals.

Doubtless every reader has played with sand or mud at one time or another. Those experiences help me communicate playing with sand that I cannot express satisfactorily with words. I rely here on the reader's experiences and my own, as a player and as an observer of others' play. I grew up in Miami Beach, Florida, a mile from the Atlantic Ocean. More recently, every summer for many years now, my family has spent weeks at a beach house rental in Santa Cruz, California, and at least once a day I take long walks on the beach observing, jotting down notes, and snapping an occasional photograph. I also have a number of photographs of individuals playing in sand and mud. Some are recent, and some are vintage.

Most children seem to be drawn naturally to playing with sand, while adults tend to view beaches (for example) as sites for leisure activity, from simple sunbathing to beach volleyball, more play on sand than with sand. Adults with children, however, often join the young ones in digging and building structures in the sand, and (as we shall see) some young adults delight as much as children do at playing in the mud.

Let me begin with discussions of these three states of sand and the play common in each—dry sand, wet sand, and mud.

## Dry Sand

Play with dry sand is a very sensual experience, and, in part, the sensory qualities of sand provide the basis for its use in therapy and education. Margaret Lowenfeld, a British pediatrician and child psychiatrist, began using play with figures on trays of sand in her practice as early as 1928. Recalling H. G. Wells's *Floor Games* (1911) and the pleasures he reported of creating miniature play worlds with figures and blocks, Lowenfeld in her clinical work with children used a sand play box she called her "Wonder Box."

She called her method the World Technique. Carl Jung saw the technique demonstrated at a conference in Paris in 1937 and recognized its potential for the psychoanalysis of children (Bowyer 1970). The 1940s and 1950s saw the widespread development of the World Technique and variations of it as diagnostic tools in working with children. Soon child psychiatrists and devel-

opmental psychologists employed sand play as a therapeutic tool, especially for Jungian approaches to the symbolic play of children (Kalf 2004; Bradway 2006).

Beyond the Jungian depth psychology, other developmental theories recognize the therapeutic and developmental values of sand play. Both Jean Piaget (1945) and Maria Montessori (2009), for example, emphasize the importance of giving children tactile experiences, especially with substances like sand. And in humanistic psychology, a variety of sand-play therapy has emerged. Called “sandtray therapy” by its practitioners, the therapy is less interested in the symbolic content of the play with sand than in the process and the empathetic, supportive role of the therapist (Armstrong 2008). Whatever the approach, play with sand in a therapeutic setting stimulates creativity, memories, and emotions.

A common way to play in dry sand in the natural, nontherapeutic setting is to bury a companion in the sand with only his or her head visible. Photographic evidence from the nineteenth century confirms the widespread use of this play tradition, and doubtless it extends farther back in time than the photographic evidence (figure 1). But this simple play turns out to have great psychological complexity.

First, the weight of the warm, dry sand on the body simply feels good to most people. Although some psychologists dispute the effectiveness of weighted-blanket therapy (Gringas *et al.* 2014), others believe it has become an effective way to calm and comfort children who fall on the autism scale from mild to severe. The physical and psychological comfort of weighted blankets for some adults has also encouraged retailers to offer them commercially (Hochman 2014).

Simultaneous with the feeling of comfort in the weight of the sand, though, can be paradoxical feelings of helplessness. This helplessness taps a different sort of pleasure. In a series of nonfiction essays collected in *Danse Macabre* (1980), novelist Stephen King poses and tries to answer the questions: Why do we humans like to be frightened so much? How and why do we take pleasure in being frightened by horror stories, from campfire stories of monsters in the dark woods to horror novels and Hollywood films? In part King’s answer is that the old, more primitive part of our brain responds, perhaps with primal memory of when we mammals were small and more often prey than predator. In any case, we do like to be frightened when the fright is carefully framed as play (Bateson 1972).

Being buried in sand on the beach doubtless taps our fears of being buried alive. Heads above the sand, we are still just a few inches away from being buried



Figure 1. Burying a companion in the sand

completely, and that has to spark in our animal brains chemicals of some kind.

Second, the companions of the one buried have some fun with their buried friend. They might concoct some of the fun for the camera and produce trick shots like those of a head and feet separated by some distance (figure 2). In other instances, the buried person's companions might tease their helpless friend. Despite how risky it might be to psychoanalyze the motives and meanings of those captured in a snapshot, I suspect that the feeling of helplessness implied by the images here bring some masochistic pleasure to the nearly buried. I also have in my collection a vintage photograph of friends performing a funeral service over a buried friend and a Real Photo Postcard (RPPC) of a fake funeral for a buried man: which brings me to the next point.

Third, being buried in sand resonates with burial at death. This may seem like a strange pleasure, but imagining our own death and even observing our own funeral—elsewhere, I have called it the “Tom Sawyer effect” (Mechling 2008)—has some psychological pleasures and benefits. Susan Sontag, in speculating on why we like to imagine our own deaths while watching science fiction and apocalyptic, nuclear-bomb films, notes that reexperiencing our own deaths



Figure 2. Burying companions in the sand for the photographic illusion

repeatedly in the fantasy (dream) world of film actually takes power from death and our fear of death (Sontag 1966). First-person video games often deliver the same experience of dying and being reborn. Consider burial in sand a low-tech version of these experiences.

Play with dry sand, then, provides all sorts of pleasures, both expected and unexpected. Add water and the possibilities expand.

### **Wet Sand**

The wet sand on ocean, lake, and river beaches provides an irresistible material for play. Children add water to sand in sandboxes, but they more commonly experience play in wet sand at the water's edge. As everyone must know, the right ratio of water to sand makes the sand stick together and makes possible the sand castles and other sand sculptures so familiar on beaches.

The beach offers a significant zone for this play, a liminal space between water and dry land (Stilgoe 1994). Like most liminal zones, the beach proves both dangerous and exciting—dangerous because people drown and exciting,

in part, because of the danger of the sensory overload of sounds (rolling surf at the ocean), smells, sights, and the feel of sun, wind, and sand on the body. Playing in the wet sand at the beach (as opposed to playing in the dry sand farther from the water) intensifies all these experiences.

Moreover, building sand castles, sand sculptures, or even the most rudimentary construction in the wet sand plunges the player into reflections on permanence and impermanence. In Western culture, the Bible establishes the foolishness of constructing buildings on shifting sand rather than on solid rock, and proverbs reinforce this wisdom. In fact, this wisdom provides a metaphor for literature and song lyrics, such as the 1931 song, “Love Letters in the Sand” (music by J. Fred Coots, lyrics by Nick Kenny and Charles Kenny), which became a hit in 1957 in a recording by Pat Boone:

On a day like today  
We pass the time away  
Writing love letters in the sand

How you laughed when I cried  
Each time I saw the tide  
Take our love letters from the sand.

We have every reason to believe that the earliest children played in wet sand. The sketchy history of building castles and other sculptures in the sand, as put together by various historians, suggests that by the nineteenth century in Britain, the Continent, and the United States, the middle class saw the seaside as an attractive site for leisure and recreation (Lencek and Bosker 1998; Lofgren 1999). British newspapers report the building of sand castles on a beach in Wales as early as 1864 and reported in the following decades children’s building sand castles and “forts and bridges, houses, and lighthouses” (History House 2014). Near the turn of the century, Philip McCord and other sand artists apparently created sand sculptures for money at the beach in Atlantic City, New Jersey (Wierenga 2015), and early postcards from the era add visual evidence that children and adults built sand castles and other sand sculptures as part of the fun they experienced at the beach. Sand-castle-building contests apparently began in the late 1940s at seaside resorts and became more formally institutionalized in the early 1970s when Todd Vander Pluym and Gerry Kirk created Sand Sculptures International (Wierenga 2015). Sand-castle and sand-sculpture

contests are now part of the summer fare as beachside towns lure tourists to their communities.

I focus in this article on amateur, unstructured play with wet sand, and I am most interested in the play of children. Bronner (1998, 1999) discusses children's play with sand and rocks in some of his work on children's play and material culture, and I can build on his observations here with my own. My evidence is not systematic, but I have been observing sand play at the beach in Santa Cruz, California, for nearly forty years. Over that time, I have observed some patterns worth considering.

The beaches at Santa Cruz, at the north end of Monterey Bay, are close enough to the San Francisco Bay Area cities that they have become a favorite weekend and summer destination for families. Diverse social classes and ethnic groups seem to enjoy the beaches of Santa Cruz, a diversity reflecting the diversity of the Bay Area. The beach I walk daily is about a half mile long and often very crowded on summer weekends. I have the opportunity to watch a great many children, teens, and adults playing on the beach.

Play in wet sand can result in both nonrepresentational and representational constructions, and in both cases we see the fundamental folk principles behind the construction of everything from material objects to oral narratives. Aesthetic anthropologist Robert Plant Armstrong, in a trio of books (1971, 1975, 1981), coins and applies the terms "syndetic" and "synthetic" to contrast non-Western art (in the case of his expertise, Yoruba oral and material art) with Western art. He distinguishes between two "modes in which the human consciousness apprehends and enacts the world and the self" (1981, 13). "Synthesis" is the name of the mode familiar to Western people and their usual concepts of high art and popular art. "Synthesis," explains Armstrong, operates "through a process of oppositions and eventuations." The synthetic work is linear, it develops; it has a beginning, a middle, and an end, represented in its simplest form by the process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. The syndetic work, in contrast, is not linear; it does not develop, at least not in the way the synthetic work develops. The central generative and organizing process characterizing syndesis is accretion, the "repetition of the same or of a small inventory of similar units" (1981, 13). Syndesis is the name of the mode that governs most non-Western works and that governs much of the folklore and folk art we find even in Western societies (see also Bronner 1999).

The most rudimentary form of children's folk play with sand usually works from the syndetic aesthetic, sand added to sand in some nonrepresentational

form. Some children use objects found at the beach, including shells and feathers—also following the folk aesthetic of creating an artistic object through accretion. As children grow older and as they have more experience with objects and narratives governed by the Western aesthetic of synthesis, their sandwork becomes more representational. The interference of older youth and adults—interference disguised as instruction or help—complicates the creative process, often trying to move the child away from the pure folk forms and processes that give children pleasure.

In my own observations at the beach in Santa Cruz, children over five years and prepubescent youth commonly combine nonrepresentational and representational forms, the most common being a circular berm with a castle or other representational construction within the berm (figure 3). One can understand why, on English and European beaches at the end of the nineteenth century, castles were popular representational constructions with wet sand; castles abound in the real landscape of these individuals, and middle-class vacationers and their children understandably built sand castles for fantasy play in miniature (Wells 1911; see also Stewart 1993). American youth and adults built sand castles, one supposes, because the name and the tradition was readily established. Besides, as anyone who has built a sand castle knows, wet sand is the perfect medium for building castles, moats, and bridges. The sand castle is so emblematic of figurative constructions in wet sand that current contests on beaches are still often called sand-castle contests, even though the contestants construct a range of sculptures.

Searching for meaning in wet sand play, observers find it hard to overlook some gender patterns. Like Bronner (1988), I was reminded immediately of Erik Erikson's observations of children's play with wooden blocks. Although Erikson (1950) was a psychoanalytic therapist who often worked with children and youth, he also considered human development the interaction of biology and culture. Erikson uses Freud's theory of infantile sexuality to understand the play of children. Briefly stated, Freud believed that libidinal energy exists in even young children, though that sexual energy focuses first on other orifices (mouth, anus) and later on genitals. Psychoanalytic anthropologists in the 1940s and 1950s built whole theories of culture and personality on the ways societies socialize these body systems (Whiting and Child 1953; Whiting and Whiting 1974).

When, in the early 1940s, Erikson joined a University of California, Berkeley, research project observing children (ages ten to twelve) playing with blocks, he was especially interested in gender patterns in the relationship between "geni-





Figure 3. Building sand castles

tal modes” and “spatial modes” (1950, 91). He observed, of course, what he came to call “unique elements” in the constructions, elements he could connect with individual children as he got to know them. But he was surprised to find a pattern of “organ modes” in the constructions (94–95). “The most significant sex difference,” writes Erikson, “was the tendency of boys to erect structures, building, towers, or streets; . . . the girls tended to use the play table as the interior of a house, with simple, little or no use of blocks” (96–97). Erikson also expresses surprise at and interest in the ways boys’ constructions featured both high rises and “downfalls”—“ruins or fallen-down structures”—all of which

convinced him that “the *variable high-low* is a *masculine variable*” (emphasis in original, 97). In contrast, Erikson observes that “girls rarely built towers,” that if “‘high’ and ‘low’ are masculine variables, ‘open’ and ‘closed’ are feminine modalities” (97–98).

Erikson then connects these observations of the block play of children with his discussion of Freud’s theory about genital modes and child development: “It is clear by now that the spatial tendencies governing these constructions are reminiscent of the *genital modes* discussed in this chapter, and that they, in fact, closely parallel the morphology of the sex organs: in the male, *external* organs, *erectable* and *intrusive* in character, *conducting* highly *mobile* sperm cells; *internal* organs in the female, with a vesticular *access* leading to *statically expectant ova*” (100). Erikson arrives at a conclusion later developed by Mary Douglas (1966), George Lakoff (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), and others—namely, that experience, and especially spatial experience, “is anchored in the ground plan of the body” (Erikson 1950, 102).

I am tempted, of course, to bring Erikson’s observations and psychoanalytic interpretations directly to the sand constructions I found on the beach in Santa Cruz and in the photographic record of children’s sand constructions going back at least a century (figure 3). There are reasons to be cautious, though.

The women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s changed many things. Most relevantly, developmental psychologists, teachers, and parents realized that the toys purchased for girls and boys were highly gender coded, and that the stereotypical gender performances the women’s movement sought to change were overdetermined by commercially manufactured toys. On the other hand, the folk toys and folk play of children provided play space to resist these adult-imposed, highly gendered conditions for play with toys. As adults became more concerned about the safety of children and, accordingly, reduced the opportunities for free play, they increased their control over the play environment of children. Their children’s power to control the toys they had to play with grew ever more limited.

Girls found ways to subvert the gender messages in the toys. Some of my female students reported in the 1990s appropriating their brothers’ LEGO sets and building the sorts of objects usually constructed by boys. Scholars of children’s play in the United States have noted that over time girls’ play has come to resemble boys’ play.

Although one might expect nowadays to find no gender differences in the wet-sand constructions by girls and boys on the beach, it turns out that some of the patterns observed by Erikson over seventy years ago showed up in the



Figure 4. Girls' circular sand structures

sand constructions I observed on the Santa Cruz beach over the five summers from 2011 to 2015. The feminist revolution and the revolutionary effects of Title IX—the federal law guaranteeing equality to girls in federally funded education programs, including college-level sports programs—do not chart a straight line of change and progress for girls' play. As Erikson noted in his conclusions, the block play of children showed him the convergence of biological, psychological, and cultural forces in the play of children.

My observations again are not based on scientific samples of children's play at the beach. Nonetheless, the evidence before me suggests that girls—especially in the age range (ten to twelve) observed by Erikson, tend to construct circular figures in wet sand. I observed several versions of the girls' circular constructions, sometimes with structures within the circle (figure 4). In some cases, the circle opened toward the ocean with a long channel, presumably meant to collect water. The resemblance of these constructions to female sex organs is too powerful to ignore.

Adolescent males sometimes form female figures in the sand, endowing the sand sculptures with breasts and sometimes more. For years, I studied a Cali-

fornia Boy Scout troop, doing ethnographic fieldwork at their annual summer encampment high in the Sierra Nevada for my book, *On My Honor: Boy Scouts and the Making of American Youth* (2001). An adult volunteer leader from the group told me that at beach camp, the boys once made a three-dimensional woman figure in the wet sand and even gave her some “pubic hair” made of seaweed washed up on the shore. Such figures occasionally show up in photographs and popular culture. The character named Freddie, played by Joaquin Phoenix in the 2012 film *The Master*, lies down in the sand next to such a three-dimensional sand figure and cuddles it like a real woman.

## Mud

The third sensory state of sand is mud. Although some people might call wet sand “mud,” I prefer to distinguish between clean wet sand at the beach, for example, and the dark, musky mud found in wild places. As I indicated earlier, mud has organic matter mixed in with the water and sand, making a primordial ooze for the senses, including smell.

If dry sand is at the clean end of the spectrum of clean and dirty, mud is dark and dirty. It is not hard to see the symbolic equivalence of mud and feces. Individuals recognize the equivalence in folklore. The online Urban Dictionary, for example, lists and defines slang such as “mudshit” and “mud butt” (Urban Dictionary 2012, 2004) which makes a symbolic equivalence, an equivalence that also shows up in medical descriptions of the characteristics (or consistency) of feces (e.g., OurHealth 2007).

Children commonly play with their feces, as is evident from numerous online sites where parents share problems and advice and where medical professionals help parents sort out normal from abnormal behavior by children up to preadolescence (Berkeley Parents Network 2009). In a few cases, children actually eat their feces (called *coprophagia*). For some people, play with feces extends well into adolescence and adulthood. Adolescents may play with feces in pranks and in ritual hazings (Bronner 2012), and some adolescents and adults find *coprophilia*, play with feces (“scat play”) with a sexual partner, to be sexually arousing and pleasurable. Dundes (1966) and others (e.g., Bronner 2012) have suggested that *latrinalia*, graffiti written on the walls of bathroom stalls, may be symbolically equivalent to smearing one’s feces on the walls.

The symbolic folk equivalence of mud and feces and the human pleasures

in play with feces suggest strongly that play with mud represents play with feces. In adolescents and adults, we see this in the sort of traditional college mud scraps discussed by Bronner (2012), traditional tug-of-war games, and in mud runs and various forms of mud wrestling. But turning back to the play of children and youth in mud, we can note a few things. Depending on its consistency, mud does not adhere to itself as well as wet sand does. Still, children make mud pies and mud cakes and mud sculptures by dripping mud that follows the syndetic aesthetic described by Armstrong.

Children's pleasure in playing with their feces also suggests that mud play evokes the same pleasures, the opportunity to play with a more acceptable symbolic substitute. Surely part of the pleasure of getting dirty is the displeasure it evokes in parents, teachers, and other adults. Dirt (in Mary Douglas's sense) is disorderly, a real challenge to the adult desire to control children.

Then, too, preadolescents and early adolescents are not unmindful of the connections between the anal and genital systems and orifices when it comes to play with wet sand and mud. I describe and analyze an example of this, too, in *On My Honor*. Briefly, one of the scout troop's organized games was Poison Pit, which involved digging a deep hole in the sand, filling it with water and urine, and trying to pull or push each other into the "poison pit" that their folk speech clearly showed was a symbolic vagina (Mechling 2001).

Although play with dry and wet sand has sensual qualities, it seems clear that play with mud is the richest form of sandwork, tapping the full range of psychological and social anxieties and addressing those anxieties indirectly through the play. Mud is a dense symbol of all the cultural categories, anomalies, and ambiguities people deal with individually and collectively.

## Playing on Sand

To this point I have been examining play *with* sand in its three basic states—dry, wet, and mud. Playing *on* sand deserves a separate discussion (though in my analysis of play with mud, we also encountered playing *on* and *in* mud). Play on sand responds to sand's special qualities. Sand is soft, giving, unstable. Unlike most surfaces on which we humans tread, sand puts us slightly off balance, literally and figuratively. Sand transforms the landscape and changes with every tide. Sand can create a feeling of the uncanny not dissimilar to the ways snow transforms a familiar landscape (Mergen 1997).

One sort of play on sand is of interest because it highlights norms of American masculinity—the creation of informal, human towers or human pyramids. There is a history of these human constructions in formal gymnastics, but I mean here the many instances (captured in vernacular photography for example) of informal human pyramids or towers on beaches (figure 5). The soft sand of a beach makes for a safe base for these pyramids, mitigating possible injury when the tower collapses. I say “collapses” because, although I have no empirical evidence beyond my own observations, these pyramids rarely come undone with the same careful, balanced precision with which they are constructed. The collapse of a human pyramid in a tangle of laughing bodies seems to be the aim, a point to which I return shortly.

Human pyramids are one of those forms of folk play that, like formal human pyramids in gymnastics and cheerleading, imply an audience. In the folk form, the audience is the photographer and camera (plus bystanders). From the number of snapshots I have collected from dealers at photography shows and online, it seems human pyramids are folk forms made expressly to be captured and preserved photographically. Put differently, I doubt people create human pyramids just for their own sake—the event begs for a photographic record.

Which is not to say that there is no intrinsic pleasure in participating in the building of a pyramid. Typically individuals build these on beaches while wearing swimsuits or, in rare cases, in the nude. The constructions require people to climb on and touch each other’s bodies, sorting themselves by size and strength. Those on the lowest row experience the pleasure of bearing the weight of friends directly on them and above them. Those on subsequent rows experience that pleasure plus the pleasure of increased height off the ground. One small participant ascends to the summit by climbing up the pyramid or tower of bodies.

Talking about the pleasure of bearing the weight of others may seem a strange mix of sadism and masochism, but I think this is exactly the mix of pleasure involved. What makes sense of this tension between the pain of bearing others’ weight and the pleasure of resting on the body of another is the teamwork the construction requires. Each individual in the pyramid depends upon the balance and strength of the others.

Often a human pyramid collapses while it is under construction—when slippery bodies and weaker limbs disturb the delicate balance. Even when the participants achieve the figure they want and the photographer records the



Figure 5. The human pyramid

triumph, the pyramid is more likely to end in a collapse of bodies than in a careful deconstruction.

Most of the vernacular photographs I have collected or seen in collections capture human pyramids constructed by boys or young men. I have seen the occasional snapshot with pyramids constructed by women alone or women with men, but I feel confident in asserting that this folk construction is primarily a male artifact.

Because of the likely collapse of bodies at the end of the pyramid, I see the construction as a form of what play scholars call rough-and-tumble play, a form of physical play far more common among males than females (Pelligrini 1988, 1993). The physicality, the value of strength, the sorting of the males by size, the vertical construction, and the presence of a single player at the top of the pyramid (resembling the king of the hill) all suggest the attractions of this play to males.

The pleasures of the pyramid for American males take form and function as a reaction to the rules governing males' touching males in American culture. The norms of heterosexual masculinity and the homophobia that pervades the culture mean that boys can touch boys and men can touch men only in stylized ways. To use Bateson's (1972) language, American males can touch other males only in a frame that stands apart from everyday life and that communicates a metamessage (notably, "this is play") so the participants understand that words and gestures within the frame do not mean what they would mean outside the frame. Carefully framed and performed touching is especially important in most male friendship groups where strong bonds of affection must be understood as between heterosexual males. Boys and men can touch each other on the playing field, in rough-and-tumble play fighting (Wallis and Mechling 2015), and in other settings so long as the touching is "stylized," which in most instances means that the touching is exaggerated. Most boys are socialized in their male friendship groups to give and take stylized aggression, from verbal dueling to rough-and-tumble play fighting. Scholars of masculinity typically see stylized aggression as a way for men to avoid real aggression and real violence, of which many are capable.

This cultural formula for how males may touch each other in carefully framed events sheds light on the human pyramid constructed by males on the beach. The participants enter a play frame with the understanding that they will be touching each other in planned and unplanned ways (e.g., the collapse of the pyramid, though we might say even that is planned because it is almost



inevitable). The players can take pleasure in touching and being touched by friends because the frame makes it clear that this touching does not mean what it would mean outside the play frame.

I should add that the “mask of play” (Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne 1984) may operate less benignly and less voluntarily when both males and females build the human pyramid. Both Sutton-Smith and Goffman (1974) recognize that Bateson takes—paradoxically, given his scientific credentials—an overly romantic view of play, assuming that players enter the play frame voluntarily and failing to see that not all players have the same power and that some players may be using the play frame for other motives. For Goffman (1974) that involves use of the confidence game in his exploration of frames; for Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne (1984) the use play to “mask” other motives, from work and sex to deep play (see also Geertz 1973). Thus, some of the men in a pyramid including women may be employing the play frame to touch women in ways that would be forbidden outside the play frame. These men may be manipulating the play frame to mask sexual intent. By the same token, it is also possible that some women in the mixed-gender pyramid might be playing from similar motives. Some of the women players in an all-women pyramid for that matter, may be manipulating the play frame to mask the touching of others for sexual pleasure, though women in American culture have a great deal more license for touching members of their sex than do men.

I witnessed another example of the play frame allowing male-to-male contact in my fieldwork for *On My Honor*. (The “Poison Pit” game I described earlier was one game among many during a half-day “insane day” away from the everyday life at camp on a sandy island in the lake.) This was a game of steam-roller, and—unlike other games pitting patrol against patrol in contests—this one seemed less a competition and more a game designed for pure fun. The boys lay down in the sand, shoulder to shoulder, and the game began when the boy at one end rolled toward the other end on top of the boys who lay between him and that end. Boy after boy rolled down the line, full bodies touching full bodies. Again, the play frame permitted boys to touch and be touched in ways that would be forbidden, especially for pubescent and early adolescent boys (ages twelve to fourteen) who were still trying to construct, maintain, and repair their performances of American normative heterosexuality (Mechling 2001).

A familiar category of play on sand consists of games usually played on other surfaces. At the beach, people play football, Frisbee, whiffle ball, and volleyball. In fact, since 1966, two-person volleyball on sand has become an

Olympic sport. Consider how playing on sand changes the experience of these familiar sports. All of them require running, but running on sand presents an additional challenge. In Bouissac's (1977) semiotic analysis of circus performances, he argues that tension with gravity provides much of the drama and attraction of the circus. A number of circus acts—from tightropes to trapeze to juggling—require balance; the performer defies gravity, and the tension for the audience lies in expecting that the performer can lose this battle at any moment. Similarly, running and playing on soft sand adds to the likelihood of falling, and in both the case of Bouissac's circus performers and the folks playing on sand, this struggle with gravity and falling tap the pleasure of *ilinx*, the sort of vertigo Caillois (1961) identifies as one of the four kinds of games and their pleasures.

Note, too, that games like whiffleball, football, and volleyball, when played on soft sand, add the pleasure of *ilinx* to two other elements normally in these games on other surfaces—as Caillois names them, *agon* (competition) and *alea* (chance). Strategy, skill, and chance, to use the categories of games used by Roberts and Sutton-Smith (1962) in their cross-cultural study of games, also come into tension with *ilinx* when these games are played on sand. And, of course, *ilinx* provides a great deal of the pleasure in the human pyramid (or, at least, the pleasure of the tension in defying gravity until the pyramid's collapse provides the vertiginous thrill of falling slowly).

Finally, the famous white beach at Daytona Beach, Florida, provides a unique and surprising way to play on sand. That beach is world famous for being so hard-packed that you can drive a car on it. Vintage photography testifies to the long history of people walking, bicycling, driving, and even landing airplanes on the beach. The Daytona automobile races began on the sand in 1902, and the beach was the site of many early land speed records (Cardwell 2007).

### **The Beach as a Liminal Zone**

Sand in its various forms and the sandwork humans perform with, in, and on them intersects with the scholarly literature about beaches and the history of tourism. This scholarship sometimes addresses the sensual qualities of sand, sea, wind, and sun. Lencek and Bosker (1998) devote several pages to the natural history of sand as prologue to their presentation of the beach as a site of pilgrimage and tourism from antiquity, and Löfgren (1999) notes the sensual qualities of sand that attract humans (see also Urbain 2003). In *Alongshore* (1994), Stilgoe

draws on several disciplines to write poetically about many aspects of the New England shore, including a chapter on the behavior of sand. Social scientists (e.g., Douglas, Rasmussen, and Flanagan 1977; Edgerton 1979; Fiske 1983) have studied the informal social cultures people create on beaches.

The history of seaside and lakeside beach tourism lies beyond the scope of this article, but these authors make an important point about sand and play—namely, that beaches are what anthropologist Victor Turner (1967) called *liminal zones*, zones “betwixt and between” the established cultural norms for human activity and meaning making. Cultures tend to treat these liminal zones as dangerous to the established cultural categories, and people invoke ways to control and tame the anomalies of the liminal zone (see also Babcock-Abrahams 1975). Through ritual, but also through play, people allay human anxieties about the liminal zones. A beach, of course, constitutes just such a liminal zone, where water meets land, and the sand, wet sand, and mud I have discussed are neither water nor land but something betwixt and between.

The normal rules of society do not apply in liminal zones. In them, time and space are exempt, which is how Bateson (1972) describes the play frame. The freedom from social conventions in the liminal time and space of the beach shows up in the historical progression from bathing costumes to increasingly revealing bathing suits to nudity (Lancek and Bosker 1998; Löfgren 1999). Nude beaches are an extreme manifestation of the freedom enjoyed by the liminality of the beach (Douglas, Rasmussen, and Flanagan 1977; Hoffman 2015), and sex on the beach pushes the limit even more. Since, at least, the iconic and erotic roll in the sand by Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr in the 1953 film *From Here to Eternity*, sex on the beach has been a fantasy for some and a reality for others. Even a cocktail is named after the activity. Of course, anyone who actually has sex on the beach often learns that the sand creeps into inconvenient and even painful places. So we are back to sand, where we started.

## Conclusion

Sand in its three primary states—dry, wet, and mud—provides a versatile medium for human play. Play with sand in these states provides sensual pleasure, but as symbolic material sand also permits the player to express feelings and explore meanings not available through more conscious, transparent play. Sand in its various states is the perfect symbolic material, for exploring the

cultural categories clean and dirty. Gender and sex both find expression in play with sand, and the tradition of burying a companion in sand permits pranks and even safe play in imagining one's own death. The weight of warm sand on our buried bodies provides a mix of comfort and pleasure. Play with mud seems to satisfy a psychic urge to play with one's feces.

One of the paradoxes of play with wet sand on the beach is that building sandcastles and other structures erases the usual distinction in our culture between work and play. Working at building in the sand often leads to the state of "flow," the concept Csikszentmihalyi (1975) invented to get past the play-work dichotomy and to capture the physiological and psychological state we enjoy when totally engrossed in an activity, from rock climbing to brain surgery. It is the pleasure of the process, of the state of flow, in building structures in wet sand at the beach that impels us to build, even though we know that the product of our work will disappear with the next tide. We crave the feeling of flow, and the beach is the perfect setting for inducing that state.

Play on sand has its own unique pleasures, disrupting the usual experience of play and sports on other surfaces. And the liminal nature of beaches, at the border between water and land, provides time and space for play often forbidden elsewhere. In all of these instances, the human body—which Douglas (1966) and others show us is the perfect model of society—is at the center of the sandwork. In the shorthand used by Douglas and Babcock-Abrahams (1975), sand is good to think.

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