RE-PLACING MATERIALITY
A Western Anthropology of Sand

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Abstract: Sand has become such a powerful visual, emotive and experiential component of tourism. This essay ventures an ontological explanation for the Western world's acquired and now gripping fascination with this particularly mundane material, and its robust current connection with the tourism industry. The paper argues that this engagement with sand's materiality is a culturally determined response, an extension of an encounter with what is seen to be real, in the context of a contemporary experience that is increasingly given over to virtual objects and representations. An anthropology of sand—a conjunction of the cultural and material—with a particular focus on beach tourism, offers a complex, multi-layered experience where the real and the fictive are mutually constituted. **Keywords:** beach, materiality, metaphor, sand, shore, Western world. © 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

SCENE SETTING

> ''[W]e have to leave behind both Euclidean geometry and hermeneutics and consider instead the issue of a more complex topography'' (Heatherington, 1998, p. 184).

Recent years have witnessed a gestalt switch in the conceptualization of space which, along with time, is now less likely to be conceived as ''... existing independently as an unshakeable frame of reference *inside which* events and places would occur'' (Latour, 1987, p. 288, emphasis in original). Instead, space is seen as an outcome and product of interactions, ''*consequences* of the ways in which bodies relate to one another'' (Latour, 1997, p. 176, emphasis in original). The representation of space as generative, instead of generator, is a powerful critique of reductionist, Euclidean geometry: rather than an unproblematic and homogenous given, which lends itself comfortably to cartography, such a representation alerts us to the processes whereby space is malleable, continually reinvented through emergent human action and design (e.g. Bingham & Thrift, 2000, pp. 288–289). Space is reconfigured as a constituted product, its social character a

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consequence of enduring records (Ingold, 1993). And so, social scientists propound the dynamic underpinnings of social relationships through the mediation and negotiation of distance and the growth of interconnectedness (e.g. Hannam, Sheller & Urry, 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Spaces are actively embodied, being socially produced; they bring subjects into being (e.g. Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 416–417). Space, as Deleuze (2004, p. 12) has argued, "is imaginary and not actual; mythological and not geographical". Thus, traditional definitions of such symbolic constructions and concepts as society and culture, mind and matter, roots and heritage, with their connotations of place-bound "metaphysical sedentarism" (Cresswell, 2002, pp. 12–15, 2006, p. 26) are increasingly debunked, in favour of, say, "mobilities" (e.g. Urry, 2007), and "nomadism" (e.g. Bauman, 2001, 2007). Such ontologies conjure up the idea of a fluid, immaterial space freed from the physical quality of material substance. People are invariably 'on the move' and 'out of place', creating space, rendering it through diverse senses, and ascribing it with meaning and history, in progress.

For all their currency, what these approaches tend to have in common is a tendency to make the material world disappear. But: can one entertain memory and belonging without materiality? Is it not 'things' which, become seeped in, and with, social memory in their production and consumption? Is it not materials which perform the past in their existence in the present? "Connecting with immediate surroundings, through tactile and sensory engagement, is so basic and constant" (Clark & Clark, 2009, p. 311). Touch reduces stress levels, improves immunity, and enhances attentiveness (Field, 2000). Indeed, touch deprivation is fatal to infants (Montagu, 1971).

Venturing between the empiricist and the phenomenological, one can however hypothesize a melding of the real and the virtual, whereby each becomes folded and imbricated in the agency of the other. Places would not just be attached to space; but nor do they just travel with us. They also travel with the materials through which they are articulated. Material resources, spaces and technologies are much more than the affects and effects of human intent and action; they also structure, define and configure interaction; even as they themselves are (partly) outcomes of decisions, choices and interventions made by people. Places are captives of this "living in-between" (Game, 2001, p. 226), and are always unfinished (Heatherington, 1998, p. 187).

Tourism is clearly a social activity; and the notion of "leisure space", for instance, includes the recognition that such spaces are the outcome of social negotiation (*e.g.* Preston-Whyte, 2001, p. 582). But, following Franklin (2003, p. 279), tourism cannot be reduced exclusively to the social: it is relationally linked and fused to a wide variety of objects— some of which are non-human (*also* Van der Duim, 2007; Franklin & Crang, 2001, p. 17). This paper challenges the contemporary 'givens' of simulacra, fluidity and immateriality. It grapples with the complex and convoluted relationship between the material and the social by offering a narrowly focused, but hopefully rich, critique of sand: and doing so especially in the context of tourism research. Agreeing with

Knappett (2007), the paper develops an example of how the conjunction or intersection of the social and the material can still be understood without the former swallowing the latter. And what better way to suggest that 'matter (still) matters', than by appealing to the multiple, and mutually constitutive, attributes of a particularly mundane compound?

BETWEEN SILT AND GRAVEL

> ''Sand is a substance that is beautiful, mysterious, and infinitely variable. Each grain on a beach is the result of processes that go back into the shadowy beginnings of life, or the earth itself'' (Carson, 1998, p. 125).

At face value, there is nothing particularly striking about it, unless one has the misfortune of getting some blown into one's eye (Lenček & Bosker, 1998, p. 5). Geologists would tell you that sand occupies that class of particulate size which occurs between silt (which is finer than sand) and gravel (which is coarser). The composition of sand is highly variable, and depends largely on its source material (such as local or surrounding rocks, reef and coral) and the conditions which affect its weathering. Sand can range from the bright white, limestone rich variety found in tropical and subtropical coastal settings, which may contain coral, mollusc and shell carbonate fragments along with other organic or organically derived fragmental material; and up to the very dark black variety that is of volcanic origin, made largely of pulverized lava, and rich in basalts, obsidian and possibly magnetite. Sand is a typical additive: a key ingredient in making concrete, glass, brick and paint. It has today become a choice medium for sculpture, permanent and transient. Mixed with salt, sand is applied generously by road crews to main roads after heavy snow storms to improve vehicle tyre grip while hastening melting. Because of their excellent drainage characteristics, soils rich in sand are preferred for such crops as watermelons, peaches and peanuts, as well as for intensive dairy farming, which must manage high amounts of effluent. Sand particles are basic abrasive components—used in sandblasting and sand paper—but also applied more gently to body and facial exfoliating scrubs; desert people know this well, having used sand traditionally as a cleansing agent for their pots and pans but also for their bodies. Sound-producing sand grains constitute one of nature's most puzzling and least understood physical phenomena, even though they have been reported for centuries.

And yet, the utility and status of sand goes far beyond its mundane chemical and physical properties. Sand drawings can possess several functions and layers of meaning: understood as artistic works, repositories of information, illustrations for stories, signatures, identity markers, or simply messages and objects of contemplation. The stuff has today achieved a powerful grip on the Western imaginary: its allure on the golden hordes that descend onto the pleasure periphery is

iconic and magnetic. It has become a *sine qua non* for tourism marketers. More intriguingly, it invites its temporary guests to an experience, which is as much mythical as it is tactile and sensory. One walks on, digs one's feet in, builds castles with, scavenges for shells or driftwood or beach glass and other little treasures in, and allows oneself to be buried in, this ubiquitous presence on the shore, whether dry or wet, powdery or caked.

It is for this reason that a proper anthropology is enacted, a context specific behaviour of vacationers on the beach who find themselves surreptitiously immersed in an experience they have sought out and which they then allow to embrace them for as long as they inhabit, and produce, its space. For all its mundane features, sand has become an almost essential compound to the enactment of tourist ritual, play or pilgrimage (*e.g.* Graburn, 1983). In proper anthropological style, the sand lubbers are both the subjects and objects of their script; they partake in a symbolic ritual of participant observation that revolves essentially around how to engage with, and get caressed by, sand: all the more so when there is no intention of swimming, or even of getting wet.

The paradox of this encounter is that it has rich elements of materiality, while nevertheless subject to different forms of construction, fetishism and manipulation. As such, it suggests a willingness to remain in touch with the coarse material world, even though the latter may have been altered to improve the experience, or simply to manage it better.

Meanwhile, one should not forget that there other 'anthropologies' of sand, and these are not necessarily as Western culture-driven as is the subject of this paper. For example, the Sand Drawings from the Pacific archipelago state of Vanuatu are now incorporated amongst UNESCO's listings of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2008; Vanuatu Cultural Centre, 2007). These drawings have important ritual and performative functions, are conceived as forms of intellectual property, and are fundamentally transient: drawn out in earth or sand only to be blown away (Geismar & Tilley, 2003, p. 176; Rio, 2007, pp. 51–52). Sharing the sacred and the transient is the Hindu or Buddhist sand mandala: an intricate concentric diagram which depends on the precise positioning of what are usually many thousand individual grains of sand. As a meditation on impermanence (a central tenet of Buddhism), after days or weeks of creating its pattern, the sand is brushed together and placed in a body of running water to spread the blessings of the mandala (Fontana, 2006, p. 10). Moreover, mainly along the aquatic fault-lines that connect the affluent and secure first world with the developing world (the Mediterranean Sea, the passage between Morocco and the Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean, and the stretch of ocean between Indonesia and Northern Australia in particular), sandy beaches today mark preferred landing sites for offloading asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, survivors of harrowing ocean passages, looking for better lives, to the chagrin of the locals (*e.g.* King, 2001).

SAND IN THE WESTERN IMAGINARY

> ''The lone and level sands stretch far away''—Percy B. Shelley, *Ozymandias*, 1819.

> ''There are moments of sheer joyful pleasure when I want to say: 'I feel like child'. Moments when we feel wide-eyed, wide open, in love with the world. Running into the waves, the salt-smell spray in my face, or feeling the sand between my toes, it happens to me then'' (Game, 2001, p. 227).

In the Western tradition, sand has come to evoke time, impermanence and innumerability, but also a place of solace. It is a bearer of primitive knowledge and primeval force. The grains of sand in an hourglass, prized for their smoothness, chart a cold and methodical passage of time. The desert, occupying a fifth of the earth's land mass is, like the mountain, the forest, the valley and the island ''. . . a natural environment that has figured prominently in humanity's dreams of the ideal world'' (Tuan, 1990, p. 247). It is suggestively a space where both dangers (scorpions, demons, mirages, dehydration) and the promise of redemption lurk (Buckley, 2000). In *The House of Sand*, a movie with sparse dialogue, the sand dunes in a remote and empoverished corner of Brazil frame three generations of women struggling against both nature and a rigid social system (Waddington, director, 2006).

The grains of sand, on a beach and beyond, represent infinity, a number too large for human comprehension. A display case of wood and glass made in 2000 by Donald Lipski is calculated to contain some 210 million grains of sand, representing the number of people killed by war and genocide during the 20th century alone (Parrish Art Museum, 2008). In its ubiquity, sand has developed transcendental qualities. We can, as William Blake (1863) said, in an oft-quoted verse: ''see the world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wildflower.'' When combined with movement, shifting sands stand for turbulence, dynamism, brute power, and an impossibility of prediction; shrouding artefacts, eroding them, or revealing them at its whim (*e.g.* Mail OnLine, 2007). As quick sand, it can kill, slowly but surely, swallowing those that are reckless to fall into its grasp. Burying your head in it implies a withdrawal from a painful realization, and thus a refusal to accept the truth. In Christian scripture, sand is often referred to as ''a symbol of impermanence and the transience of human life and effort'', as in the parable about the foolish man who built his house on a foundation of sand (Beasley, 2004, p. 204).

Concurrently, sand alongshore can reflect a safer berth, a place where weary sailors can make landfall, beach their seacraft without mishap, and where the shipwrecked can rest and sleep. Homer has Odysseus being discovered by Nausicaa ''among the jutting dunes of sand'' (Homer, no date, Book 6, Line 172). With the onset of tourism—an outcome of the ''strange division of human life into working life and leisure time'' (Cameron, 1998, p. 128)—to the sailors using the sandy shores were added the members of the privileged classes; then those of

the burgeoning middle classes; and lastly democratized to whole populations. By the 18th century, the search for health had encouraged the development of the European seaside resort with its bracing water and invigorating air. The lure of the beach, the pier, and the promenade took hold amongst those who could afford to take on the new pastime of travel for pleasure and enjoy some respite from the toils of a dour, dirty and industrialized society. Seasides became products of ''ideas and ideologies, interest groups and power blocks'' nested within particular socio-economic contexts (Ley, 1988, p. 100; *also* Walton, 1983).

Impressionists like Claude Monet (1840–1926) and Eugène Boudin (1824–98) painted quaint beach scenes (such as *The Beach at Trouville*), with copious amounts of sand. They were accompanied by more traditional representations of beachscapes by noted artists like James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) and Jean-Charles Cazin (1841–1901). In these scenes, the human actors are typically sitting or strolling, even if somewhat visibly uncomfortable with the 'new' medium. Given that distinct 'beach attire' had not yet taken on, the genteel men persist in smart suits and hats; the women wielding parasols, walking dogs, or trying hard to generate some sense of gaiety as they 'play' in knee-deep water—still fully-clothed—in rough surf in *The Beach at Granville* by Eugene Isabey (1803–86). As the art evolved, and impressionism set in, the sand lost its colour, contours and texture, but remained the preferred medium in/on which to place and represent troubled human spectators in *Rough Sea at Etretat* (1868–69) by Claude Monet (1840–1926), or *Poor People on the Seashore* (1903) and *Mother and Child on the Seashore* (1921) by Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), or the colour zones of *Sand Spit* (1959) by Milton Avery (1893–1965). More contemporarily, the ambling protagonists of the paintings by Alex Katz (1927), with their unique style of modern realism, inhabit pristine white sand foregrounds: note *Four People with Towel* (2002) or *Walking on the Beach* (2002).

The coastline has become a magnet for tourists—especially to the masses oriented to the 'sun-sea-sand', or '3s', variant—even as some two-thirds of the world's population is already coastal (Cameron, 1998, p. 149; Gillis, 2007; Jennings, 2004). Sandy beaches have become amongst the most heavily consumed sites of this predatory industry. Through time, as such sites mature and risk decline, they become the targets of attempted rejuvenation and restructuring strategies via ''product reorganization'' and injections of ''authenticity'', concepts that camouflage the power implications of such changes (e.g., Claver-Cortés, Molina-Azorin, & Pereira-Moliner, 2007; Sedmak & Mihalič, 2008). The fishers with their boats, nets and dry fish have been gradually exiting the sandy beach scene. Amusement industries—ferris wheels, illuminations, music stands, pony rides, beach hawkers, casinos, restaurants, hotels, ice cream parlours, sun lounger and umbrella rentals—have risen up to take their place, hoping to accommodate, entertain and profit from the multitudes of hosts and guests. The fishers—with their visibly more colourful boats—may be there too: serving as deep actors of a constructed culture, possibly hopeful of landing cli-

ents for deep sea fishing expedition, or else a whale or seal watching tour. Meanwhile, visitations can get lengthier, and less transient, with the purchase of beach properties.

This sea change in use values is part of a major reconceptualization of the value of sand in modern Western culture. In a book suggestively titled *Along the North Shore*, an author from Prince Edward Island (Canada's smallest province, located in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence) documents the industries, past and present, which supported a particular township. None of these industries look at sand, or the beach for that matter, as a resource—except for tourism which burst upon this small Canadian community rather late in the day, but (given the location) remains unsurprisingly limited to a narrow time window. Not only that, but the sand in particular was a major threat to all the other current industries that depended on the fertility of the land and its soil— whether it was agriculture, lumbering, or coopering (Morrison, 1984). The processes of desertification and deforestation loom large in many parts of the world and remain greatly feared.

Meanwhile, it is the stylized fine yellow line of sand that melds with the forest green and aquamarine blue skies and ocean swathes in the broad vistas of the islands off the US state of Maine by contemporary artist Eric Hopkins (www.erichopkins.com). The connection between sun, sea, sand and islandness is perhaps the most powerful trope in modern business marketing. The pervasively transparent impact of tourism is keenly felt on the smaller warm-water islands and their more fragile habitats and communities (*e.g.*, Apostolopoulos & Gayle, 2002; Briguglio, Archer, Jafari, & Wall, 1996; Gössling, 2003). In the Caribbean, where islands were crafted as slave-driven (mainly sugar cane growing) plantation economies following their European discovery, emancipated slaves were given commercially non-viable lots along the coast, with their sandy and infertile soils. But, with the tourism boom, and the decline in the world's sweet tooth, investments shifted rapidly from inland production to the shore as the new playground site. Beach access is now often controlled or constrained, and—especially on the smaller islands—the locals protest that they have been cheated even of the sight of the ocean by a physical and visual barrier of hotels, restaurants and foreign owned properties (Baldacchino, 1997, p. 101; Hutt, 1980). This is one example of a dramatic reversal of value and taste related to the definition of pleasure[1].

Various characters from the West, fictional or real, who travel to islands may return, like Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719/2001), redeemed, resolute, recommitted to the values of their religion, their society, and the basis of its power and wealth; while others, like the survivors in Golding's *Lord of the Files* (1954/1978), are disturbed, broken and visibly shaken by the experience. The lingering machinations of the sun,

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[1] Another interesting reversal is the shift from an essentially heliophobic public to one that worships the sun: a white skin was a prized possession amongst well-to-do Europeans in the 19th century; whereas UV-lamps and bronzed, sun-tanned skin are now all the rage, skin cancer threats notwithstanding (Lenček & Bosker 1998, p. 202).

sea and sand may be seen to have played their part in these ethereal plots and transformations (Deleuze 1953/2004). Indeed, shores—whether or islands or elsewhere—are attributed with the same propensity to imperil identity and disorient the self (Lenček & Bosker, 1998, p. 30). In *Castaway*, another movie with hardly any dialogue, a stranded individual (acted by Tom Hanks) thrown ashore on a deserted island after a horrific air accident must craft a survival strategy as well as an alter ego from the litter thrown up on his sandy beach (Zemeckis, director, 2000). Given the towering importance of tourism receipts to many island or coastal economies—especially in the island Caribbean—this fantasy of a beguiling hidden treasure must be sustained and hopefully fulfilled.

This is how the sand becomes part of the West's modernist delusion of domination, partaking in obliging the beach to succumb to human design (e.g., Redfield, 2000; Grove, 1995). The technologies and tools for these acts of micro-imperialism include beach towels, oils and lotions, shovels and buckets, barbeque kits, as well as the body's bare skin. The experience is however only for brief periods, until it is time to leave (leaving most of, but never all, the sand behind) and—on a very different time scale—before the sand is swept away as it yields to the fury of the sea. In this losing battle, owners buy a little more time, often with taxpayer money, in a desperate effort to hold on to their beachfront mansions (Cameron, 1998, p. 6, 204).

Perhaps the ultimate sandy beach experience was to be found at the Miyazaki Seagaia Ocean Dome, the world's largest indoor beach, in Japan. Designed by the Mitsubishi Heavy Industrial Group, the complex opened in 1993 at a cost of US$2 billion, and could accommodate 10,000 people. It held artificial sand, made of crushed marble: ''almost identical to the real thing except it doesn't stick to your body quite as much'' (Japan News Review, 2007). The Ocean Dome also sported artificial waves, a fake flame-spitting volcano and the world's largest retractable roof, which provided a permanently blue sky. The air temperature was held at around 30 °C and the water at around 28 °C. It seemed for a time that ''Eden was finally under man's [*sic*] control'' (Lenček & Bosker, 1998, pp. 282–283). Yet, the Ocean Dome was never profitable and closed down in 2007. Ironically, this complex was just 300 metres away from a 'real' sandy beach. If islands and beaches go together, then the controlled, safe, enclosed and sterilized environment of the Seagaia was the quintessential 'islanded beach'.

BEYOND THE MUNDANE

> ''Police in Jamaica are investigating the suspected theft of hundreds of tons of sand from a beach on the island's north coast. It was discovered in July that 500 truck-loads [of white sand] had been removed outside a planned resort at Coral Spring beach … The 0.5-hectare strand was to form part of a resort complex costing $108m, but the

theft *of its most important feature* has led to its developers putting their plans on hold'' (Davis, 2008, emphasis mine).

In the company of sun and sea, sand has become the third pillar of the largest service economy in the Western world. Treading, or even just sitting, on sand with bare feet along a beach is aggressively marketed as a therapeutic, relaxing and titillating, even erotic experience, a bulwark of tourism industries the world over, and especially in warm water locations. Engaging with sand mesmerizes and appeals, across ages, class and gender. Tourism and its marketing juggernaut are so gripped with this bland material as a crucially evocative visual cue and pleasure fetish. Ironically, players in the hospitality industry compete and pay extravagantly to locate their hotels, bars and restaurants along a sandy beach, rather than in cheaper, although probably more luscious and ecologically diverse, surroundings inland. Developers go to extreme lengths and expenses to preserve sandy beaches from the onslaught of storms, winds and currents. Coastal engineers transform otherwise rocky bays, pebbled shores and shallow pools into bland beaches, covering the bedrock or the shale—along with, one may add, the planting of palm trees and the uprooting of mangroves. Indeed, where sand is not present, or not present in the right texture, colour or quantity, it can be imported and transported, by the barge or truck load, put in place, and replenished regularly, via a bizarre ritual known as 'scraping' or 'beach renourishment':

> ''About twenty years ago, Governor's Bay locals sourced truckloads of sand and restored the beach at Sandy Bay [in New Zealand]. Sadly, time has washed their efforts away, but they're keen to do it all over again'' (Onboard Newsletter, 2006).

This coarse granular substance, within which may lurk such potentially dangerous, dirty or sharp objects as broken glass, tar balls, contaminants, plastic bottles, dog poop, cigarette butts and ashes; so difficult to walk on over long stretches; so easy to lose objects in; so difficult to get fully rid off one's body, or off one's food; . . . is seen as positively pretty and alluring, the very image and coseted feel of paradise.

> ''In the sand lies the ribbed blue cap of the standard plastic 1.5 litre bottle of mineral water, without which no Mediterranean tourism is possible'' (Löfgren, 2002, p. 155).

SAND AND MASS BEACH TOURISM

> ''Designed by its architect-owner, you will live beach-side on white sand in rustic elegance'' (Yucatan Vacation Rental, 2008).

One of the ironies of beach tourism is that the brochures and images tellingly suggest spaces that are emptier than what one actually experiences. Beaches have never been more crowded, and yet beach tourists today are largely atomized: individuals, couples, friends or families maintain as much distance from each other as the space on the beach

allows. The greater their nakedness, the more emphatic the implicit rules about approaching or staring. The beach-goers are social aggregates, lonely crowds, aligned towards the sea and the sun, and seeking to be as oblivious of each other as possible. Given these, and other constraints[2], the shoreline must be 'managed': ''in order to exploit opportunities and to avoid conflicts'' (Jennings, 2004, p. 900). The sandy beach is a response to the convenience of coastal operators for handling the Western invention of mass tourism, and the ideal material on which to stage the dynamics, sub-text and all, of a satisfying beach experience.

First, a sandy beach is the human equivalent of the parking lot. To attract visitors, business operators may need to provide parking spaces that are flat and even, and which are preferably marked, to accommodate the visitors' vehicles, in an orderly and space maximizing fashion. Similarly, a sandy beach is a much better utilization of frontage than a rocky one: the space is flat and fairly even, or gently sloping towards the sea, permitting a safe and comfortable access by individuals, who then proceed to claim and colonize their space. Rocky beaches, in contrast, are less amenable to accommodate large crowds of beach loungers; their beachscapes are also much more abrupt, sharp-edged and haphazard.

Second, consider the interest of beach front business developers in maximizing their revenue. A sandy beach can accommodate increasing levels of user density. As more individuals turn up on an already occupied beach, and unless they wish to accompany others, they instinctively tend to carve out, and settle down in, a space that is as distant as possible from that of other occupiers; such space availability gets progressively reduced with higher beach occupancy. In an extreme situation, sun loungers, towels, sun umbrellas and picnic coolers may be stacked, or packed, right next to each other, charting out the visitor's ''little plot of sand'', the limits of private territory (Löfgren, 2002, p. 230). Such can be done best on a wide and landscaped sandy beach.

Third, sandy beaches are by far the more ideal settings for safety and surveillance when compared to other types of beaches: rocky, pebbled, broken shale. In many cases, the contours of sand on coastal beaches permits a slow and gradual descent into the sea, both at high or low tide, making it ideal for those who may have difficulty in swimming, or may not know how to swim at all. They can actually walk into the water, and wade, with a flat and sandy sea bottom beneath their anxious feet. Depending on the clarity of the water, they may also be able to see the bottom of the sea, to their great relief. From their perch, any lifeguards are often also afforded largely uninterrupted vistas of the sea, the sandy beach and its occupiers.

Fourth, sandy beaches and waters are more pliable and amenable to popular water and beach sport, as anyone who has tried to play in shal-

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[2] These go beyond the social and pleasure-focused to include environmental preservation, protection against sea-level rise and other shoreline defence strategies.

low rocky water would have found out. Whether it is surfing, beach volley along the shore, amateur water-polo in the shallow sea, or just building sand castles, the relative absence of abrasive and obtrusive objects—sharp coral and rock formations, in particular—allows one to concentrate on the game and the fun, rather on where to put one's next step.

Fifth, the materiality of sand helps to enhance a profoundly sensual, intimate and atavistic aspect of beach visitation. A sandy beach, more than any other beach, is a site of hedonistic pleasure—even building a sand castle is ''non-work, work for pleasure'' (Löfgren, 2002, p. 234, 269). It is the site for the rediscovery of one's own body, as much as for the oggling and contemplation of that of others. Lenček and Bosker (1998, p. 53) refer to the beach as a space of ''sybaritic celebrations''. But a *sandy* beach, with the scouring of the sand, enhances the already intense physical experience, making it even more voluptuous (*ibid.*, p. 106). It is here that life becomes ''body work: exposing the body to sun, sea, wind and sand—and the critical eyes of others'' (Löfgren, 2002, p. 224).

Finally, by becoming a medium for play, sand in a way becomes a surrogate for hypnosis, bringing out ''the child in the adult'' (Löfgren, 2002, p. 220). Indeed, 'Sandplay Therapy' is one evocative, playful and highly creative approach used by psychotherapists which avoids hypnosis but has similar effects on clients (*e.g.*, Kalff, 1981). The sandy beach is the main public locale for adults to project themselves back safely into childhood roles: adults are at liberty, and are even expected, to fool around, build sand castles, dig canals, and perform other 'childlike acts', especially if they are in the company of children. Sand has today become an established educational medium in such places as kindergartens where, however, the adult engagement with the stuff tends to be prescribed by adult roles (such as teaching, parenting and general supervision). It is thus not as intense and visceral as on a beach, even if the 'beach' is an urban and surreal one—as are the beach bars in Berlin (Zeitchik, 2003) where otherwise generally stoic German adults can behave like children, bringing along that something playful: ''a mix of whimsy and seriousness'' (*ibid.*).

That such arguments are hardly explicitly raised or articulated is evidence of the psychic grip that the nondescript substance has achieved, largely in the 20th-century West, elevating itself—like lobster (Corson, 2004)—rapidly from the worthless to the priceless.

BETWEEN A ROCK AND HARD PLACE

> ''If you like nature, and love white sandy beaches with palm tree are in particular [*sic*], then this screen saver is for you'' (Snmp Utilities Software, 2008).

The larger-than-life attributes of sand have assured it a presence in the realm of electronic gaming and science fiction. From the *Shifting Sands* of Super Mario 64, to the Sandy Desert of Tatooine, childhood

home of Anakin Skywalker, in *Star Wars* (Lucas, director, 1977–2005)—filmed, by the way, in Southern Tunisia—from Indiana Jones' *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg, director, 1981) to *The Mummy Returns*, (Sommers, director, 2001) sand continues to exert its magical qualities of mystery, dark secrets, its subtle power of engulfing all, or its disposition to whip up raging storms... while its embedded and belittled characters are tested, and either triumph or die. One does not need to feel and engage with actual, material sand anymore to witness and experience its powers; the gaming and movie industries know that it helps to connect plots to such archetypal metaphors. Cutting edge, Nintendo Wii game technology takes one further: in *Sandy Beach*, one can develop sandcastle building skills, and then put them to good use to defend and repair the castle from attack by pesky, swashbuckling crabs (Wii-Ware World, 2009).

And yet, even as the annihilation of space and time are claimed and celebrated, people still maintain almost pathological and obsessive links with the substantive here and now. While transportation and information and communication technologies usher in faster, easier and cheaper mobilities, there is a persistent fascination in the West, if not a renaissance, in such pursuits as gardening and photography, the latter capturing otherwise fleeting moments in time and space (Schivelbusch, 1987, p. 63). In its irreverent dullness and banality, sand may be exercising a similar allure: its corporeality and immediacy evoke a communion, albeit fleeting, with *terra firma*, sealed within an overwhelming emotion. Has a candidate for such powerful connotations ever been as materially coarse and innocuous?

CONCLUSION

> ''I've still got sand in my shoes
> And I can't shake the thought of you.
> I shake it all, forget you
> Why, why would I want to'' (Dido, 2004).

A beach, cautions Dening (2004, p. 16), is ''. . . a double edged space, in between: an exit space that is also an entry space; a space where edginess rules''. Beaches are powerfully evocative places where elements, histories and ecosystems collide. They are the dynamic interfaces of the basic materialities of land, sea and air. They are interstitial spaces that can harbour high biological diversity. They are liminalities that are ever pregnant with possibility and surprise: be they locales that receive welcome cargo (Worsley, 1968), the tragedy of a shipwreck, or just the humdrum washed up artefacts that could easily end up as memorabilia.

This paper has sought to move beyond such an anthropology of the beach (*also* Dening, 1980), since it is the *sandy* beach in particular which has become the stuff of ''fantasy'' for the West today (*e.g.*, Taussig, 2000): the eponymous smorgasbord for exhibitionist physical exercise, sloth or just fun. It is at once symbolic and grounded; a

simulacrum and material. Sand's millenary dark side as a mysterious force of death and revival, of destruction and confirmation, has been reinvented and repackaged as a platform of childlike exuberant consumption, indulgence, frolic and play on the coast. Its cleansing properties correspond to the figuration of vacations as a healing experience, a cleansing of the body, mind and soul; rejigged and re-energized to sally forth and take on, once again, the tribulations of a cold, depressing and repressed urbanized routine ... until it is time for another escape. Sand is an unstable, shifting form, difficult to hold, shape and control, subject to perennial erosion into ever smaller parts. Nevertheless, it has become that basic *topos* of, and for, a reengineered, domesticated and re-placed *milieu* that remains so very much material, reminding us that fulfilling dreams is not just the preserve of virtual reality. ''[A] sun and sand holiday is much more than just a sun tan and sand in your sandals'' (Aguiló, Alegre, & Sard, 2006, p. 222).

Connecting is vital: ''the things that people make, make people'' (Miller, 2005, p. 38). It is the embodied engagement with materiality that constructs personal and social identity; and, within the Western imaginary, sand on a beach conveys this dialectic co-production by ushering in a whole repertoire of ''doing'' (*e.g.*, Butler, 1990): of ''body techniques'' (Mauss, 1936/1979) which socialize and constitute us temporarily as pleasure–cum-tactile seeking subjects. Thus, in its suggestive materiality, sand on a beach is not a given or finished product; but neither is it an ethereal and imagined one. It is a thing ''in the making'' (Ingold, 2006); incorporated through stylized and socio-culturally packaged body work and performance (*ibid.*).

> ''Lots of people spend summer days walking, sitting and lying on it, but beyond worrying about how to keep it out of their shoes, hair and cars, does anyone give it much thought?'' (Johnson, 2008). ∎

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