

The Artifice of Play

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Abstract

It is natural for children to play, and a child who never plays would be a cause for concern. The experience of playing appears to be a condition for feeling fully alive. But play, in order to be play, requires artifice: props and techniques that transform non-play activity (as well as passivity) into play activity. One such artifice is sand storytelling that girls of all ages play in Australia's Central Deserts.

This paper examines how certain aspects of psychological growth might shape this distinctive technique of mark-making in the sand. The discussion focuses on the dominant theme, the family home. I want to suggest that the girls not only depict a house, but, through the totality of the play situation, also re-create the early relationship to their mother (or other primary caretaker). The original dialogue between infant and mother is thereby revived in the inner life of the girls, and at the same time reoriented towards their own emergent image as mothers. This bi-directional anchoring of the Self consolidates the experience of aliveness.

Introduction

... the live body, with its limits, and with an inside and an outside, is felt by the individual to form the core for the imaginative self.

(Winnicott 1958: 244; emphasis in the original removed)

Donald Winnicott came to make this observation about imagination on the basis of his therapeutic work as a psychoanalyst, and in particular his play therapy with children. I should like to take it as a starting point for a discussion of how the process of becoming a Self might feed into symbolic play in a natural social setting. The focus is on *milpatjunanyi*, a distinctive form of playful storytelling in the sand that Anangu girls at Ernabella grow up with.



Figure 1: Darlene McKenzie playing *milpatjunanyi* in the company of other girls, Ernabella 1/2004

Where is the live body in the placing of thoughts into sand? Where are inside and outside in the imagined space of play? What are the movements between thought and deed across the shifting boundaries of the Self in symbolising action? And what holds it all together?

These are some of the questions that I wish to pursue in thinking through *milpatjunanyi*, which is here approached as a window to the inner world of children. More specifically, this paper is about the feeling of aliveness that playing seems to bring forth. I emphasise that, rather than asking how culture and society shape human development, I am interested in how aspects of psychological growth shape a distinctive play technique that is as popular now as it must have been for very many generations. The vital attraction of *milpatjunanyi* is not just the result of a transmission of skills from one generation to the next; it is also, and perhaps foremost so, driven by the "continuity of being" (Winnicott 1958) that is experienced throughout a person's life and in the collective imagination. The perspective adopted here is then bidirectional; forms of self-experience in infancy are found to be "writ large" in children's play towards the future.

Conceptualising playing and development

In order to make transparent how *milpatjunanyi* integrates body and mind, and to appreciate better the many components, layers and functions that it combines, I need to first sketch the chosen conceptual and theoretical background that will guide the discussion. This seems best achieved in the form of general propositions about playing and human development.

1. The experience of playing appears to be a condition for feeling fully alive.
2. It is natural for children to play, and a child who never plays would be a cause for concern. But play, in order to be play, requires artifice: props and techniques that transform non-play activity (as well as passivity) into play activity.
3. The artifice of play is a technique of transformation that takes on various forms. Depending on cultural and personal preferences, maturational age and gender, and the immediate situation, these may be fantasy

- productions in word or image, experiences made manifest in the imaginary use of objects or dramatisation, acting out of inner dialogue, playfulness in exchange with others, and a whole range of combinations.
4. Playing facilitates psychological equilibration and growth, and specific forms of play can be discerned in all stages of life.
 5. Play is essentially an extension of, and even a substitute for, the original "potential space" (Winnicott 1971) between mother and infant that first gives rise to the imagination.
 6. The newborn baby is not a separate Self; this comes only gradually into being through complex mirroring processes in the relationship with the mother (or other caretaker). She reflects back the baby's whole being through her loving response.¹
 7. Psychological growth occurs by way of increasing differentiation of functions and their integration. (Werner and Kaplan 1963) At first, the functions of mouth, hands and eyes are closely integrated, as is most evident in the nursing situation. As the close tie between these three organs loosens, they take on new and explorative functions that are increasingly directed towards the environment. (Spitz 1955; Mahler and McDevitt 1982)
 8. Much of this happens through early forms of playful engagement, when the baby begins to discover that the feet, toes and fingers she may be playing with, just like the reflection of herself in a mirror, are indeed her own. (Mahler and McDevitt 1982)
 9. The extension of the body into the world is simultaneously a quest for psychological self-integration. The perception of our body as an integrated whole with an outer boundary (the building of the body scheme) is a gradual process that depends crucially on the earliest contact with the mother. (Schilder 1923; Hartmann and Schilder 1927; Scott 1948) She needs to be able to hold the baby physically, emotionally and with her

¹ A number of infant researchers disagree with this view, which was first challenged by Daniel Stern (1985).

- mind, which, as Mahler and colleagues (1982: 833) emphasised, "seems to be the condition on which the feeling of 'being alive' rests."²
10. The finely attuned exchanges between mother and child take place through the ritualisations of infant care. The daily rituals are at once playful and formalised, which stabilises and instils trust. (Erikson 1998)
 11. The baby feels alive to the extent that the mother, by being in love with her child, can create a perfect environment that "actively adapts to the needs of the newly formed psyche-soma" (Winnicott 1958: 245). But very quickly, the baby begins to make up for deficiencies in the caring environment, which can never remain perfect, by mental activity. Such a move from being passively cared for to actively co-creating the environment is a vital step in the development of mind and Self (Winnicott's "good enough mother", 1958).
 12. The most important part in this complex process is basic trust. This is not the result of reliable care alone. Instead, basic trust hinges vitally on the emotional link to a significant person (Winnicott 1958; Bion 1994/1962).
 13. The early form of affective dialogue between mother and baby is a condition for the infant's expanding participation in the social domain.

Of special interest for examining developmental process in sand storytelling is the sequence of emerging differentiating capacities. Infant research shows that newborns are able to distinguish by touch (grasping) a finger from an inanimate object such as a stick, that the capacity to distinguish visually between animate and inanimate objects develops around 6 months, and the capacity to visually distinguish between mother and stranger emerges at around 8 months (Spitz 1965; Mahler and McDevitt 1982). René Spitz (1965: 172) considered the combination of these capacities to be a "momentous development in the infant's thinking process" that marks "the inception of the concept 'alive', of life." Of

² They also found that when the sense of a body self and the feeling of aliveness are missing, "this vital deficiency can be observed in psychotic children (particularly of school age) who, in order to "feel alive" compensate with aggressivization of their skin and skull", by scratching or banging the head against a hard surface (Mahler et al. 1982: 833).

course, these timelines may well vary across cultural milieus, just like the meaning the distinctions may obtain in any given situation. Nevertheless, the innate grasping of the finger and the subsequent visual differentiations must be significant factors in the process of becoming a Self for all children.

The mark-making gestures in sand storytelling occur at a high level of hand-eye coordination, and the integration of touch, gesture, and visual and verbal action is the most striking feature of this technique. I want to suggest that the primary intent of sand storytelling is threefold: to re-animate, to re-integrate, and to self-contain: the stick becomes an extension of the live body, the playing field a zone of familiarising the world around and within the Self, and in the total dynamic situation of humming, stroking, rhythmic beating, reaching out and pulling back in, the girl literally cradles herself.

With this very brief outline of developmental process in place, further examples may illustrate how maternal mirroring, expansion and integration of body scheme and of imagination, internationalisation, basic trust and continuity of being, may all be at play in *milpatjunanyi*.



Figure 2: Nicole Inkamala (left) and Darlene McKenzie, Ernabella January 2004

Milpatjunanyi – building the space, enacting the inner dialogue

Once seated on the ground, the player may strike the sand a few times with the wire as if to warm up and also to signal to others that a switch to playing is about to begin. The next step is to clear a patch on the ground with a sweeping movement of the arm. The flat hand, its edge or sometimes the wire, are used to smoothen the sand in a semi-circular area close to the body. A performance stage is thus created, a pictorial space with dynamic multidimensional qualities that, for the time of playing, will be filled with symbols drawn in the sand, with gestures in mid-air between face and ground, and with words or song. The sweeping is repeated at various intervals and always at the very end of playing before leaving the scene. To clear the ground marks new beginnings that invite revelations; but it also extinguishes their traces. In short, it reflects that anticipations need to be concealed.

Milpa is a bent stick or, as is nowadays preferred, a piece of wire about 50 cm long, to beat, poke, strike, stroke and scratch the ground. Girls carry the wire slung around their neck as they walk about, ready at any time to sit down and start playing. When in action, the wire is held in the right hand to give intermittent support to the mark-making with the left hand. Every so often, the girl would skilfully flex the "talking stick" into the desired curvature. It is mostly the tip of the wire bent downward that hammers the ground, and only occasionally might a girl turn it over so that the curve is pointing upward, namely in order to make strong lines by whipping the sand with the length of the wire. This alters the shape of the performance space dramatically. Its characteristic form is that of a container dynamically sustained by movements: (a) by sweeping the arm across the ground in a way that shapes a horizontal plane bulging outward from the player; (b) by bending the body slightly over the area as she places graphic symbols with the hand that, furthermore, often echo the shape of the pictorial plane; and (c) when sitting upright, by tapping and striking the bent wire. As a total image, the activity is reminiscent of the *wiltja*, the traditional round wet-weather shelter made from branches and twigs. It has womb-like qualities, and the term for

home, *ngura*, can indeed mean womb. The symbolising activity, that is, the actual mark-making, is directed back into this inner protected cavity.

If it is correct to see in the microsphere of *milpatjunanyi* a momentary recreation of the baby's omnipotent being, the self-made shelter of playful significations makes this possible. Winnicott's (1958: 253) observation that, at six months of age, the baby "is at times using the circle or sphere as a diagram of the self", seems relevant here. This and the previous observations on the co-evolution of Self and m/other might explain why the most frequent motif of *milpatjunanyi* is the house, or more exactly, the interior of the child's home. The house, as John von Sturmer suggested (personal communication), is modelled on the breast and what it stands for. Although more evident in the cocoon-like structure of the bush shelter and its graphic representation as a circle or semi-circle (Figure 3) than in the rectangular constructions common today (Figure 4), this is true for any kind of home building. In *milpatjunanyi* the girl not only depicts a house; she re-creates the early relationship to the mother and extends the original dialogue – the bonding, the mirroring - into her own inner life. The fact that the usual mode of speech when playing is fragmentary and at the edge of audibility also indicates that here, the child is addressing the inside of the Self.³



Figure 3: Family in *wiltja* by senior Topsy Tjulyata Figure 4: Inside the house by 11-year-old P.

³ This is a comment offered by John von Sturmer who also suggested, correctly in my view, that *milpatjunanyi* is an attempt to describe, make intelligible and change the mother-figure.

How may such dialogue stimulate the first explorations of mark-making in the sand?

Example 1:

A little toddler girl about ten months old is sitting on the ground. She tilts her head slightly downward and holds her body mostly upright in order to watch her creations come into being. She is looking into the space in the sand between her legs where she has just begun to make marks by dragging a rusty nail that she holds firmly in her right hand. Her grandmother has been showing her how, by placing the nail into her hand, padding the sand, encouraging her to draw. I have a feeling that this has become a matter for attention because I demonstrated my interest by pulling out the camera.



Figure 5: Toddler girl Tjinyunta scratching lines into sand

To see the strong and secure motion with which she cuts deep lines into the sand is an impressive sight, and I am astonished to see such self-possessed behaviour coming from such a young person; to me her composed posture, skilled motion of the arm and happily absorbed look on the face, appear at odds with the white nappy from which the legs stick out, and also with the fact that she is only beginning to mimic baby talk. Her grandmother sits closely by her side, with one leg stretched out behind the girl's back, the other folded under. Her

hands that move with gestures as she is chatting to other women, including myself, are near the edge of the girl's playing field. The grandmother's dog is lying at the back on the other side of the girl. It is as big as the toddler and its snout moves in and out of the periphery of the playing field.

A number of features characterise the scene as an early precursor to *milpatjunanyi*. There is the grandmother's approval of the girl's mark-making as a proper kind of behaviour, which she would not have extended to a boy. (I have seen a grandmother actively stopping still the hand of her young grandson as he was trying to draw in the sand, saying "you are a boy, not a girl".) The girl's bodily posture and positioning towards her own sphere of engagement and away from others indicate the beginning of a self-contained space. The iron nail is similar in shape and size to a finger of this little girl, and to make lines with it much more effective. As a mark-making instrument, the nail as substitute finger will "grow" with the child into a longer bent piece of wire. Already the inanimate object is no longer that, and soon the joy of movement made visible in the sand will be invested in representations of thoughts by way of drawing meaningful shapes and figures. One aspect however is notably different. At no point does the little girl sweep clear the ground in front of her. She does not create a confined pictorial space, because representation is not her intent. With her, movement comes before the image. And yet, containment is achieved, namely by flanking an area with her legs and the presence of grandmother and her dog on either side. Soon the macrosphere of life that is physically present in this play configuration will be transformed and hence sustained through the artifices of sand storytelling proper.

Like all children's play, sand storytelling not only transforms physical sensations and life situations into symbolic representations. It also *is* social process and creates a distinctive sociality of its own. I shall briefly consider how.

Milpatjunanyi as social process

Milpatjunanyi is not sustained by a didactic orientation aiming to achieve a specified goal. Schoolteachers have noted that doodling on paper during class is like sand storytelling in the schoolyard during breaks, and that the girls use these related activities to ward off the macrosphere of school life. They often frustrate their educators when they deflect demands to perform certain tasks by silently withdrawing into doodling.



Figure 6: Rochelle Minutjukur, Petrina and Belinda Windlass, at play during class break.

The intersections and conflicts between playful graphic speech and educational goals are a complex matter, and I here simply wish to indicate, like others have done before me, that the foremost problems with school pedagogy seem to concern the question of how each child can insert herself socially into a given activity. A consideration of the context for playing sand storytelling may point to directions for further thoughts.

Example 2:

It is school holidays and the best time in the hot weather season to engage with girls and their sand stories are the late evenings, from around 9pm until after midnight. I find them in the usual spot between the church and the store, as a church service is being held outside on the platform across the road. At play tonight are nine girls between five and 13 years of age.

They sit in a circle, with enough space for each to have an approximately 80 cm-wide story field in front of her, the typical semi-circle in the sand wiped clean with the hand. No single girl tells a full story. Several make a few graphs in the sand, followed by idle hitting of the stick (all are using the bent wire). I see mostly squares and rectangles – rooms inside houses, that is. The two smallest girls throw a dead lizard across, they try and scare me with the warning – snake! and make a snake's track behind me. Three older boys come charging through the lane-way between church and shop on the other side of which a police car has pulled up. The boys are running towards a house and one girl explains to me, "They're running from the cops."

Like yesterday, I notice the precision and speed with which they hammer and even stencil marks into the sand – like a typewriter pounding the letters of a name. M., for whom I had written my name in the sand last night, remembered it earlier in the day, "typing" it without hesitation.

After a while, she leaves the circle and sits down a couple of metres away, again clearing the space in front of her. One of the older girls sits down next to her, they seem to be really exchanging something, but I cannot hear what.

Attention turns towards me: Can you tell a story? Where did you come from? Do you know my mother? Where are you staying? Can we come and stay with you? Have you got a friend for company? I know most of their grandmothers, and we establish our kin relationships. My "mother" Y. pulls out a photograph folded twice – of the deceased girl E., who recently died from a congenital heart weakness at age 15. She asks if I know this girl, and when I affirm, wants to give me the picture as a gift. E.'s younger sister who is also present does not seem to mind.

On another night, two teenage girls let me sit next to them. They are chatting as they engage on and off in *milpatjunanyi*, and are very frank in responding to my queries about their lives. Both grew up at Ernabella and recently started going to a high school for children from Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands in Adelaide. They draw their school bedrooms in the sand: a vertical rectangle, two beds, door, cupboard, a room-dividing curtain, and another set of beds. The girls and boys share rooms according to communities. Next to the room of these two Ernabella girls is "Indulkana", or is it "Fregon"? One of the girls checks every detail in her drawing with the other - "Cupboard nyangatja, mulap?", is this really where the cupboard is? and so on. All numbers are counted in English.

I ask what else they tell in *milpatjunanyi*. The response is instant: "We are sitting here, Ute, I., and J. [three U-shapes], and we are talking [the wire is made to poke lots of holes for spoken words – again, the motif of the typewriter; but – letters are never used, as I. tells me]. A car is coming along [rectangle] with two people [two U-shapes inside the rectangle]." This is actually happening while she is explaining what they play. I can hardly make out anything in the dark, and admire that everything is spotted so quickly. Then more talk about family relationships. One of the boys playing nearby is a cousin and the girls point him out to me indirectly by sketching his position among others in the sand. He is sitting on a boulder with other boys. The boulder is depicted as a circle and the elongated semi-circles mounted on top represent the boys.

This shall suffice to convey a sense of the co-activities around *milpatjunanyi*. I found especially remarkable the ease and spontaneity with which it is entered and left, how it echoes, expands, and re-socialises scenes as they happen close by and in the more distant fields of the past, the future and other locations. The situation as a whole presents a relatively open space of playful sociality, with individual pockets for withdrawal without being cut off.

Taken together, the vignettes point to the following functions of *milpatjunanyi*:

- Creating a social field with peers
- Withdrawal, the technique of creating a safe interim space
- Self assertion (knowing something already, drawing on the familiar)
- Tension relief (boredom, looking busy)
- Fun
- Running commentary on what is going on around the players; a way of talking politely about others, watching closely without being involved.

Concluding comment

Like all genuine playing, sand storytelling is a foray into the social with impunity. Playing affords social immunity that, in this potential space, is real. It is a necessary artifice that allows the Self to grow and thus to feel fully alive.

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