

The unwitting anthropologist in Kobo Abe's *The Woman in
the Dunes*

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「たかだか砂が相手じゃないか。」

Takadaka suna ga aite janaika.

(“Only the sand was his enemy.”)

—Kobo Abe, *The Woman in the Dunes*

He was walking toward the beach looking for insects. He ended up trapped in a hole. “From the outside,” says the trapped narrator of *Suna no onna* (“sand woman”), or *The Woman in the Dunes*. “[It] seemed only a tiny spot of earth, but when you were at the bottom of the hole you could see nothing but limitless sand and sky” (Abe 63). This

“limitless” vision of the world from such a miniscule point is likely the vision of the Japanese Empire pre-World War II. But such a bold interpretation is only possible because Abe’s simple yet multifarious narrative, which allows multiple interpretations of his masterpiece. As one critic states, “No single interpretation does justice to this rich work” (Gioia). Here, I look not merely at the vision of the Japanese Empire, but instead I examine Kobo Abe’s book through a non-literary lens—an anthropological one. I will examine this work as if the main character, known throughout most of the book simply as “the man,” were a cultural anthropologist dropped into the story of who I call the “sand people,” a community trapped in time and space. I decided to analyze the story in this way because of the intrigue surrounding Abe “the scientist” in addition to Abe “the artist.” His canon is full of mysterious work and *The Woman in the Dunes* is no exception. Another important reason to analyze the story in this way is because of how easy it is to get confounded and bogged down by Abe’s use of scientific detail, hyperreality, figurative language, and metaphor. In other words, his literary style can be like quicksand. A student researching Abe for the first time would likely find him described as “bizarre” (“Abe”) or “absurd” (“The Frontier”). A surface reading of his works would seem as much. Yet it is the tangled mess of science and detail, mystery and exploration, fantasy and reality, the co mingling of a type of photorealism in narrative exposition with dream passages, that make his work so appealing. “This juxtaposition of the scientific and the grotesque remains one of the puzzles of Abe’s work,” an Abe expert explains. It’s “a knot at the heart of his texts that is difficult to untangle; ... yet it is this ... that generates the energy driving [his] texts” (Bolton 4).

Here, I will attempt to “untangle” the absurd, the bizarre, in order to get at the “energy” of it all.

In this paper, I first compare and contrast previous analyses of *The Woman in the Dunes*. In addition, I describe how the content of *The Woman in the Dunes* fits into an anthropological model, showing how Kobo Abe uses Niki Jumpei, the main character of the work and known simply as “the man” in this essay and through most of the novel, to be an unwitting anthropologist. I assert that looking at *The Woman in the Dunes* as a work of art in a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary way may reveal Abe’s core question to his reader. But before I go further into *The Woman in the Dunes*, let me explain a little about the man who wrote it.

Born Abe Kimifusa, 安部 公房, (*Kimifusa* is an alternative reading of the *kanji* for *Kobo*) in Tokyo, Japan, on March 7, 1924, Abe would spend all of his childhood in limbo between two worlds during Japan’s involvement in World War II. His father was appointed as a professor of medicine in the Japanese puppet colony of Mukden, modern-day Manchuria. It was here that Japan practiced its colonizing power, installing China’s last emperor as its puppet leader. This was not a good place for a child, but Abe spent nine of ten school years in Mukden, starting as an elementary student. We know that brutalities were practiced there. In addition, Mukden’s “scenery was endlessly empty and monotonous” (Hardin 443), much like the desert landscape described in *The Woman in the Dunes*. A young Abe returned to Japan to attend Tokyo Imperial University in 1940, thereby avoiding conscription. Needless to say that after living in a

war-ravaged Mukden, Abe was not willing to go to war. He left medical school in 1944, however, to return to Mukden when his father died. And after the Japanese surrender, he and his mother were stuck there before returning to post-war Japan in 1946 (“Abe”). He re-enrolled in medical school and graduated with a medical degree from Tokyo University in 1948 (Schnellbacher 2). But Abe did not practice medicine. Instead, he immersed himself in the budding arts scene in Tokyo, and made himself into an artist. Some have said that Abe had no choice since he was only “allowed to graduate ... if he promised never to take a job as a doctor” (Gioia). Abe, the artist, not only wrote novels, but he wrote plays and screenplays, was a photographer and critic. It should be noted that Abe is more highly regarded in Japan for his plays. He directed “the Abe Kobo Studio, a company that helped define experimental theater in Japan in the 1970s” (Bolton 2). Speaking mainly of his plays, Frank Tucker notes that Abe was noteworthy for his

propensity for experimental literary work, combining his familiarity with European 20th-century trends with the characteristic Japanese mindfulness of indigenous cultural tradition. (Tucker 837)

But in the West, Abe is most famous for his novels. It is important to note that his movement back and forth between Japan and Manchuria is key to understanding the Abe canon. It is also critical to understand, as Iles states, that Abe “exists within this system [of Japanese literature]” because he wrote in Japanese, but he is very much “a ghost in the machine” (Iles 5). Contrary to popular accounts in the United States

("Japan's"), Abe existed as a relatively unknown entity in terms of his contribution to fiction during what could be considered Japan's golden age for writing. Perhaps this allowed the experimentation in his novels to go relatively unnoticed until much later in his career, thereby helping him distance himself from his peers. His uniqueness is elucidated in how Abe is considered a non-Japanese writer. In Japan he is labeled as a *gaichi*, which literally means "outside ground," being one of the many Japanese people who were either born or lived most of their lives abroad during Japan's pathetic and terribly destructive attempts at colonization. And as far as it can be determined, Abe was the only literary *gaichi* of his generation. This certainly elevates Abe's stature, not only in Japanese literature but in world literature. He witnessed the atrocities of war abroad and then saw Japan's destruction when he returned to 'his' flattened Tokyo. By being a *gaichi* and not identifying with a *kyoko*, defined as "one's birthplace" or "native village," Abe was always without one. He has stated that "I believe myself to be a person without a native home" (Miller 458-459). He was not only an outsider but found himself in total alienation. Therefore, it is within this framework that we must view Abe. His book, *The Woman in the Dunes*, can then be interpreted, I believe, as an extension of his experience with early movement abroad and confronting death, along with questioning the meaning of life and what happens after—concepts that must have germinated in a young Abe and transformed him.

Abe's writing career flourished until his death in 1994. His prose has been compared to Samuel Beckett, and worldwide he is known as "Japan's Kafka" ("Japan's"). This is because of "the way that many of his protagonists awake one

morning to find themselves in a world that is suddenly irrational” (Bolton 4). And he was also noted for his science fiction and his prescience, predicting the destructive nature of technology and the fall of communism (Tucker 837). “Progressing from surrealism in the course of the 1950s, Abe became interested in science fiction for its power to speculate realistically about changes in the world” (Schnellbacher 2-3). Thus, Abe’s storytelling mission was to devise ways to best present the world as he knew it.

The man in *The Woman in the Dunes* is a school teacher, but we are not sure what kind. What we do know is that he is a bug collector and an amateur, if not budding, entomologist. It is the weekend and he leaves for an excursion into the sand dunes of a nearby ocean community. He is looking for some specific types of insects that are native to the region. But in his heart he is hoping to discover a unique species that will carry his name into eternity. He falls asleep and misses the last bus. He then stumbles across a community with many homes that seem to be “buried” in the sand. The community decides to take him in for the night, setting him up with a youngish widow at the bottom of one pit. It is here that he will remain trapped, away from “the other woman” and his regular job in society, having to shovel the sand every evening to prevent it from destroying the home and possibly other homes in the community. He attempts to escape and he has disdain for the woman, who he initially regards as his enemy but then takes pity on her as she is bound with invisible chains and does not want to leave the community even if she could. When he is not shoveling, the man spends his days thinking about his past, present and future. He is never at home with the woman and spends all of his energy planning or thinking of his escape. The sand

people do not give him water in order to coax him into work, threaten him into submission. The man then invents an extraordinary device that can miraculously draw water from the sand. The man and woman have a relationship and she falls pregnant, but the pregnancy is abnormal and she is taken away to the hospital. The escape route, a rope ladder, was left unattended. But instead of leaving the community the man decides that there is nothing more to return to, thus showing his amazing transformation but leaving the reader hanging as to whether he will ever leave, with escape being the total object of his obsession (and this reader's unanswered question) from the beginning.

Much of the artistic criticism of Abe regarding this particular story of a man trapped in a hole with a woman has been channelled toward the 1964 internationally successful film with the same name as the book, "Suna no onna," or "The Woman in the Dunes" ("Abe;" "Woman"). The film is known to feature a fair amount of sexuality, which at the time was controversial in a quite conservative 1960s Japan. According to Roger Ebert, the film version is "one of the rare films able to combine realism with a parable about life." He goes on to state that "the film's sexuality is part of its overall reality: In this pit, life is reduced to work, sleep, food, and sex" (Ebert). The film's early and lasting success has helped attract attention to the novel. But the film's fame has not only overshadowed the book, but perhaps has influenced literary criticism and interpretation of the novel. The screenplay was written by Abe, after all. Wouldn't he portray clearly in the film what he wanted his readers to understand about his book? Having never seen the film, I will not comment on it except to say that its analysis is beyond the scope of

this essay. However, for such a great book, *The Woman in the Dunes* is sadly under-critiqued and misjudged, in my opinion. Thus, mentioning the film is important here.

Concerning the theme of sexuality in the novel which the film so aptly portrays, Van Wert states that the man in Abe's novel chooses to remain captive at the end because of his chance at offspring. "He stays, even when there is every chance for escape, because the woman in the dunes gives him what [the other woman] in Tokyo had never given him: an offspring, a sanctification of sex as pure feeling" (Van Wert 130). Van Wert says that "all of Abe's protagonists are elitist mole-men, characters who ... are hypersensitive, fragile creatures with strong intellects and weak egos." And he states that the man fits this pattern and uses "sex ... to [forge] a new identity by obliterating rational intellect" (Abe 129). Although the man's transformation is obviously a theme in the novel, I believe that sex is not a big part of the novel even though it is said to be a prevelant aspect of the film. Except for one paragraph (Abe 140) and the assault (Abe 230-232), it is often quite difficult to know when "sanctification of sex" or even if sex actually occurs. One reason for this is that so much of the narrative is in the man's head, which is full of random thoughts, odd descriptions, and lingering memories. In addition, it is played out with a mix of figurative language, vague detail, sentimentality, and violence, as in the assault. We can only be certain that a sex act has actually taken place only after the woman falls pregnant. Thus, it seems as if Van Wert is reaching for a conclusion with any type of "holy" act happening between the man and woman, fulfilling enough for the man to want to stay. Van Wert, however, does suggest

that *The Woman in the Dunes* offers a hopeful ending, which conflicts with many other Abe critics, in that “its conclusion allows for life beyond the sex of pure feeling with the woman” (Abe 132). Abe’s narrative is full of sensory images and the film’s impact on how the novel has been viewed allows for such an interpretation. However, it is inaccurate since actual transformative sex is not apparent in the novel.

Bolton, in one of the more modern and in-depth analyses of *The Woman in the Dunes*, states that it is technology that brings the man and woman together. Technology was the common ground for “constructive and authentic engagement” between the man and the woman (Bolton 178). The obvious example is the water-collecting device the man created. Bolton’s ideas about technology are supported throughout the book, beginning with the “one lamp” (Abe 24) the woman has that they both need to share to see by, which is a source of communication, to the “shovel and cans” (Abe 30) that they both need to do their work, to the “umbrella” (Abe 26) that must be held up when eating. But it is the man’s invention which is key to communication with the sand people. Bolton notes that in the end, it is this device that the man wants to tell the sand people about more than ever, and perhaps that is his reason to stay:

There was no particular need to hurry up and run away. He now held a round-trip ticket—one on which the destination and return were both blank, to be filled in as he pleased. The more he thought about it, the more he felt he would burst with the desire to talk to someone about the water collector. And if he was going to tell someone, there would be no better audience than the people of this village. The

man would end up confiding in someone or other—if not today, then probably tomorrow.

He could consider how to escape the day after that. (Bolton 190)

This passage ends the novel and is Bolton's own translation rather than the 1964 translation by E. Dale Saunders. Bolton notes that the man, "perhaps along with the water, he had collected another self from the sand" (Bolton 190). There is a marked difference in Bolton's translation versus that of Saunders, but that is beyond the scope of this essay. It should be emphasized, as was shown previously, that Bolton's ideas about technology are supported in the novel.

Hardin, who conducted an interview with Abe, supports the view of "collecting another self." She states that it is "by enforced confinement in a sand hole [that the man] redefines his life and becomes a more authentic individual" (Hardin 442). In addition, Wimal Dissanayake reinforces this by saying that "what Kobo Abe has sought to do is to remove his protagonist from his cultural environment and to probe deeper and deeper into his own psyche as a way of attaining his authentic selfhood" ("The Woman"). The reasons for this new identity, I believe, are a result of the man's relationship with the woman. Bolton alluded to this above concerning how technology was a source of interaction between the two, leading to their improved communication and eventually their relationship, and the man's freedom at the end.

Another prevailing theme of *The Woman in the Dunes* concerns that of alienation and subjugation, à la that which is known to occur in communist societies. Marroum ties such themes to how, in “postwar Japan, ... people were subjected to an institutionalized, multilayered coercive authority that clashed with the stated aims of demilitarized Japan” (Marroum 88). Although it has been well-documented that militarized Japan was a hierarchical dictatorship, it is a surprise that an Abe critic has tied one of the novel’s themes to what was happening in post-war Japan. I am not aware of such a regime existing post-war, so I wonder if any of this is in error. Yet it is again beyond the scope of this essay to analyze the theme of subjugation in regards to what was happening concurrently in Japan at the time of Abe’s writing. Marroum does, however, make several good points regarding how Japanese intellectuals “born in the 1920s (like Abe) and 1930s turned to existentialism, while others embraced communism” (Marroum 88). Both existentialism and communism are part of Abe’s canon and personal story, which is an indication that he is more like his literary peers than other critics want to believe. Marroum is another critic who adds that the “sand” and the man’s “entrapment in walls of sand is also a condition of his discovery in a new self” (Marroum 89). This analysis ties his transformation to his immediate environment (the sand). I believe, however, from an anthropological sense, that one critical component is missing in Marroum’s analysis. This is the role of technology.

Marroum adds to the discussion with some interesting ideas about the power plays that exist in the community among the sand people. She has determined “two different modalities of power” that have organized their lives, where this critic and others

have noticed mainly that the power play between that of the man versus the woman, or the man versus the community, occurs within the confines of the sand pit. Marroum has looked at how this power establishment operates in space and is organized on a grander scheme that it would seem possible considering what the simple setting of the sand dunes community can account for (Marroum 91). Abe interestingly comments on his use of “space,” when he states that “we feel time only when we see the changes of space.” This is very much Abe, the scientist, speaking. He goes on to say that “human beings, because we have words, can see time as a kind of wrinkle or some shade of space” and that “by using imagination ... the human being goes beyond time” (Hardin 455-456). This brings up another important element in *The Woman in the Dunes*.

Abe alludes to “time” midway through his narrative: “Time was folded in endless, deep, bellows-like pleats. If he did not pause at each fold he could not go ahead” (Abe 120). And, “How true. Time cannot be spurred on like a horse. But it is not quite as slow as a pushcart” (Abe 125). Abe uses detail to slow down language, making the reader experience this kind of bending, expanding, and then slowing down of time (and space) as we know the characters must experience, and as some modern critics have noted (Mambro). This manipulation of time by Abe is done mainly for experimentation, I believe, than for any literary effect. Though the slowing down time leads to the character’s (and reader’s) own sense of isolation.

Motoyama departs from such detailed analyses. He simply states that *The Woman in the Dunes* is Abe’s departure from communism since it was “written

immediately after his expulsion from the communist party” (Motoyama 305). Abe was interested in social reform and was a devout Marxist until he was kicked out of the Communist party in 1962 (Schnellbacher 3), around the time *The Woman in the Dunes* was written. However, I believe Motoyama's statement is made in error. He considers other themes, such as the “ideological freedom seen in *Suna no Onna*” (Motoyama 306). Freedom is at the top of the man's list for the entire book, excluding the ending. And this narrative carries the reader to the final “conclusion” of the man. However, Motoyama does not add to the discussion in either supporting this conclusion (freedom) or others (communism) with specific examples. Oddly, he states that *The Woman in the Dunes* is more a work of “surrealism” (Motoyama 323) than anything else. There is evidence that Abe was a surrealist in his early career as Schnellbacher already stated. Unfortunately, Motoyama provides no evidence for these ideas in support of “surrealism.” Others have also contributed to this prevailing notion that Abe was primarily a “surrealist” (Guest 162; “Japan's”), but none have provided much evidence to support their assertions. Similarly, Schnellbacher states that *The Woman in the Dunes* “succeeded in popularizing a fantastic realism in tune with the Japan of its time” (Schnellbacher 1583). This type of “fantastic realism” could be interpreted as *magico realism* or possibly surrealism. In his essay, Motoyama focuses on the avant garde literary movement and others which were happening in Japan at the time of the novel's writing. Thus, Motoyama's contribution is more of a historical perspective than a literary one, leading perhaps to the propagation of populist beliefs and somewhat unexplored

theories. I believe this is one of the reasons why *The Woman in the Dunes* is so sadly misinterpreted.

In spite of the plot's simplicity there are many theories about what the book is about. As Schnellbacher continues, "the many possible readings of Abe's imagery can be traced to his goal of writing literature that the reader must interpret in the context of his or her own world" (Schnellbacher 1583). This would make interpretations boundless. Because of this, I believe it is interesting to look at the story of the sand dunes community as a world of its own, which in fact it is, and that its main storyteller is a scientist sent there to do more than collect bugs, but to collect knowledge of the sand people's culture. But first, culture must be explained.

Culture, which we see at a microcosmic level in *The Woman in the Dunes*, is considered that part of us that separates us from the animals. According to Leslie A. White, culture was originally defined by anthropologists in 1922 as the following:

A class of phenomena peculiar to the human species: languages, customs, institutions, religions, tools and technologies, works and forms of art, ideologies.... Field workers went out, studied tribes, brought back descriptions of their customs, baskets, garments, weapons, etc. (White 158)

White goes on to add that "culture was redefined by 'scientific' traditions but it turned the elements of culture into abstractions which couldn't be defined by nature" (White 158). What we normally think of as second nature when we speak of culture, for example,

French culture, Japanese culture, and even American culture, is difficult for social scientists to precisely define. Finally, we are told that “there is no standard, accepted definition of culture in anthropology” (Lett 54; “Defining”). Not much progress has been made in defining culture in nearly 100 years. Because of that, a lot of freedom exists in anthropological models in helping to discern that which is not so discernible: for example, the mysterious culture in *The Woman in the Dunes*. Thus, I look at the cultural “layer-cake model,” one of the most innovative anthropological theories of the 1940s and 1950s, just before *The Woman in the Dunes* was published.

White stated that the whole of culture could be fit into a three-layered model atop a base standing for the environment (see Figure 1). White’s unique model placed “a layer of technology and economy at the bottom, a layer of ideology at the top, and a layer of social and political organization in between” (Erickson 143). White was an expert in cultural evolution and even created his own law of culture, called “White’s Law,” which is defined as follows:

Other factors remaining constant, culture evolves as the amount of energy harnessed per year is increased, or as the efficiency of the means of putting energy to work is increased. (Harris 259)

This statement sounds like it could have come from the mouth of “the man” in Abe’s narrative. What’s interesting about White’s theories is that they came out in the decades just prior to the publication of *The Woman in the Dunes*. White was known as a Marxist (White 7), as was Abe (“Abe”), so there was common ground, so to speak, between

them. Abe was a proponent of social change, and White was most concerned with how cultures could evolve. White believed it was “the harnessing of energy [that] was the chief motive force for the evolution of culture” (White 6). Of course this was driven by technology. And the parallels of White’s ideas to those of Abe’s in *The Woman in the Dunes*, are striking. Looking more closely at White’s “layer cake”, we see culture as basically having three layers—technology, social organization, and ideology—connected to the environment at its base:



Figure 1. Leslie White’s basic layer cake model (Brown).

What is interesting about this model is how neatly it describes how an anthropologist (or scientist) sees culture (our world) versus how a person living in that culture would see the world. Anthropologists believe that, as humans, we are prone to

misinterpretation in how we see ourselves in our position in our culture and why we do the things we do. All humans have culture. And although the cultures appear to be very different upon examination of the details, cultures all operate pretty similarly when it comes to their general components and how they evolve. For example, Japanese society has a mixture of belief systems based on Shinto and Buddhism. What White's model predicts is how we view the world. For example, Japanese beliefs tell people to go to the temple or shrine during parts of the year to pray. The Japanese also hold weddings at such shrines, and believe in the sanctity of marriage as is decreed by the buddhist priests. Marriage roles also dictate what jobs men and women should do. Traditionally, men should go to the company while women should stay home and take care of the house and children. This behavior affects the tools men and women use. For example, the man will usually drive and the woman will ride a *mamachari*, a bicycle with either a shopping basket or a child seat. This type of behavior affects where we live, socialize, and so on. Thus, humans view their behavior as operating "top-down," from their ideology, to their social organization, to the technology they use. An anthropologist, however, views things differently. She says that everything in our culture is connected. And that the environment causes all culture change. Technology is a result of the environment, which leads to how we aggregate, communicate, and participate in life. This leads to what we believe in. So in a way, we have created our own gods to worship, our anthropologist tells us. But she says that most of us just think that the gods created us. Which is true? I suppose without one you cannot have the other.

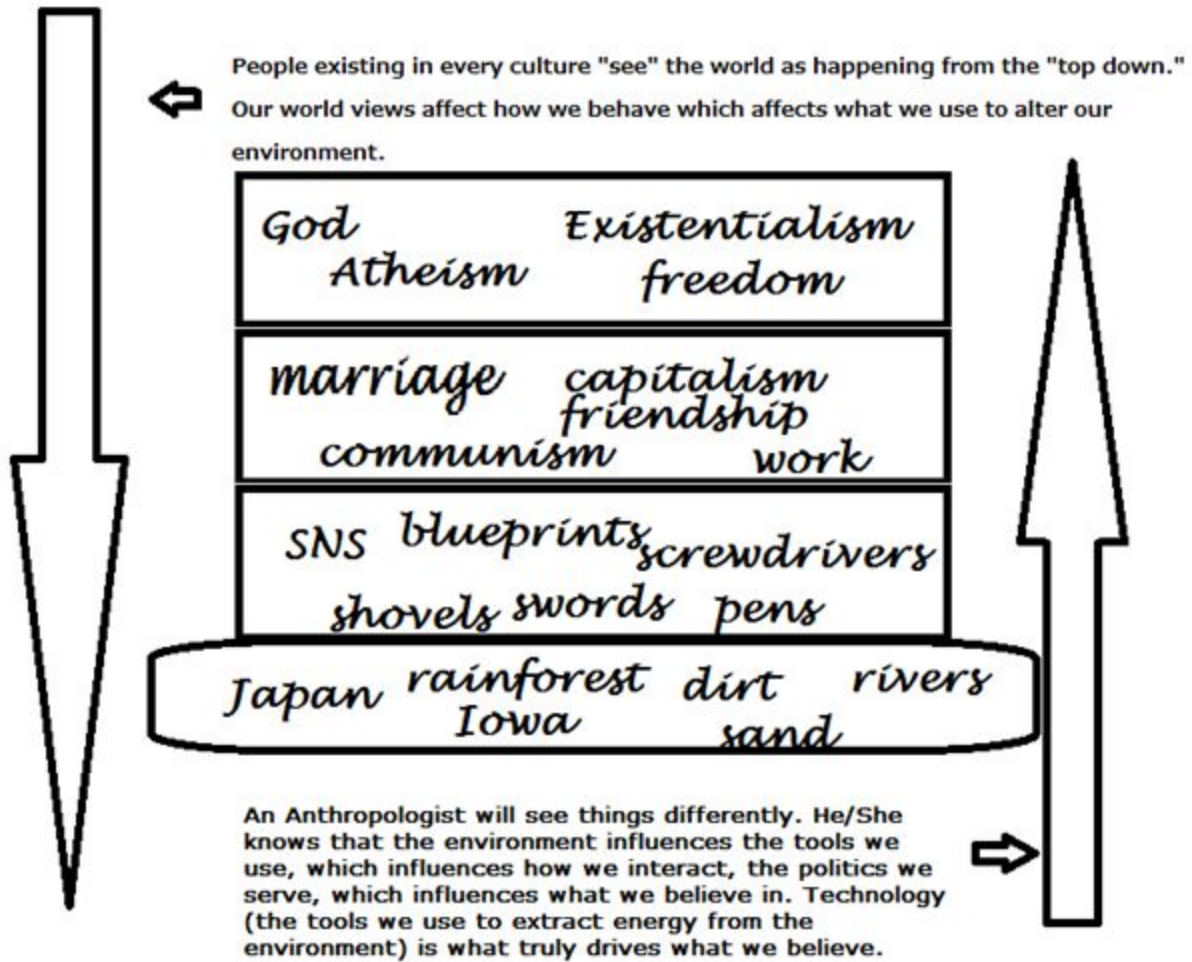


Figure 2. Explanation of White's culture model.

White's model is now more than half a century old. It is still used today by a select number of cultural and medical anthropologists as a teaching tool and also to account for how and why cultures change. It should be stated that Anthropologists do not view cultures so simply, by using one model alone. However, what I hope to show here is that using this rather unique and elegant model helps reveal what I believe Abe

originally intended his readers to see: Japan in its purest assemblance. In addition, what is most important here is how the model serves as a literary analytical tool. Where White's model shows how "cultural systems [sought] to maximize [efficiency] through technological innovation" (Park 356), Abe's *The Woman in the Dunes* depicts the man, the main character of this book, actually inventing a new device, the water collector (Abe 233-234). In fact, Abe emphasized technology and science in all of his books.

Bolton said this about Abe:

Alongside his artistic accomplishments runs a series of anecdotes about his continuing scientific interests: he remained an inveterate technophile all his life, fascinated with machines of all sorts—particularly cameras and automobiles; he once received an international inventor's award for a car part he designed; he composed electronic music during the infancy of the genre, and an antique patchcord synthesizer was still sitting in his study when he died; and he was also one of the first Japanese authors of his generation to write on a computer.

(Bolton 2)

Thus, Abe the man was never far from the characters he created.

How do we interpret the culture of the sand people? As Schnellbacher states, it is a "society that can be seen as existing alongside the everyday familiar to the readers, but which still conveys a science fiction-like 'sense of wonder'" (Sch 3). As Abe's character, the man, ventures from his more city-life abode into the outback of Japan, Western readers can relate. Who doesn't want to escape on the weekend to the quaint

communities that dot our metropolises? Yet Abe's story immediately alerts the reader to have caution before proceeding. In place of a rabbit hole, there are just "the dunes [that] lay sprawled over the village." And we are told from the beginning that "it was a disturbing and unsettling landscape" (10). But to understand the culture, as White states, we must first know a little about the environment.

What do we make of the sand, which is obviously the main feature of the environment, the base of White's layer-cake model, of the sand people? Schnellbacher states that

the sand metaphor can be read many ways. The title, strictly translated as 'The Sand Woman,' also leaves open whether "woman" means the character in the novel or a gendered personification of nature as that which flows and needs stability by (male) civilization. (Schnellbacher 1583).

This explanation exemplifies how the environment is firmly connected to the woman and how she seems to operate independent of White's model, which is not true.

Schnellbacher fails to show how she does this: by technology. By using the shovel and by being in constant movement (especially at night, much like the Moon), the woman easily embodies nature. The man, though, cannot be considered stable except in his constant desire to understand why the woman stays and in his obsession with escape. Schnellbacher supports this by stating that the man's "obsession with sand [was] in existential terms" (Schnellbacher 1583), and also by using passages such as "I rather think the world is like sand" to support his idea. When talking to the other woman (the

man's companion in Tokyo) as a flashback to his existence with the sand people, the narrator states:

I rather think the world is like sand. The fundamental nature of sand is very difficult to grasp when you think of it in its stationary state. Sand not only flows, but this very flow *is* the sand. I'm sorry I can't express it better. (Abe 99)

Thus, the man has a basic understanding of “the woman as sand” or “the woman as nature” model before he reaches the community. But since this is given in a flashback, it could also indicate that this “memory” helped lead him eventually to his conclusions.

The sand, when we think of it in general terms, seems rather lifeless and harsh. It is a result, as the narrator notes, of the “decomposition of land through the erosive action of wind and water” (Abe 13). Deserts are made of sand. Abe describes the sand in detail, noting its average dimensions of $\frac{1}{8}$ of a millimeter in diameter. The man analyzes it, is enthralled by it, and notes that the sand can also be a life-giving force. Of course he loves his insects more. But without the sand, the ones he cherished would not exist. The sand, in fact, “was the condition for the beetle's existence” (Abe 12). Such a description early in the novel shows that the man is fully capable, like the woman, in working *with* the sand instead of *against* it. Thus, the water collector the man eventually invents, though surprising, is not unexpected.

One of the more interesting and horrific descriptions of sand in the book comes after the narrator describes sand's dimensions, and its ease at being easily moved by water. The narrator explains how sand is formed and how its eventual wrath will unfold:

Because winds and water currents flow over the land, the formation of sand is unavoidable. As long as the winds blew, the rivers flowed, and the seas stirred, sand would be born grain by grain from the earth, and like a living being it would creep everywhere. The sands never rested. Gently but surely they invaded and destroyed the surface of the earth. (Abe 14)

It sounds like us. We are not sure how these narrative details, which we assume are the musings of the man, should be viewed as ideas held by Abe. But such negative aspects of the sand, mixed with his own curiosity of it, foretell of his inner turmoil and his adventures to come. Furthermore, the conflict experienced by the man represents much of the conflict experienced by Abe in his own life. We can see the sand as another representation of the Japanese Empire of his youth spreading destructively across Asia.

Additional descriptions of the environment early in the story reveal images of “the soil [that] gradually became whitish and dry.” This helps lead the reader into another realm. Eggplants, which have a purplish and white flesh and resemble the color of the human body, we are told populate this landscape by mistake.” In fact, they are the only thing growing in this barren place. In addition, Abe describes “the unchanging landscape stretch[ing] endlessly on” (Abe 7) leading to an idea of eternity. Thus, I

believe we can look at sand here as alluding to the eventual total disintegration of the body.

The sand as the main part of the environment exists everywhere. It never seems to leave the characters. The man notes that after sleep it “had accumulated around his waist where he had tied the drawstring and the skin there was inflamed and itchy” (Abe 87). It is almost as if the man has just risen from a burial. The woman tells the man about the “sand rash” early on but he does not believe her. She states how the sand affects the skin and that the skin eventually “scales off” (Abe 57). Later, “the skin on his back ... had been stripped away ... and ... under his disappointed skin a thousand wounded centipedes began to struggle” (Abe 121-122). We can interpret how the environment, the sand, strips everything, including the people, into something “other.” And regarding skin,

They say the level of civilization is proportionate to the degree of cleanliness of the skin. Assuming that man has a soul, it must, in all likelihood, be housed in the skin.... If he waited an instant longer the skin of his whole body would rot away and peel off. (Abe 122)

The environment has made the man soulless. He becomes nothing. A blank slate to be engraved upon.

Regarding the technology of the sand people, as mentioned previously, the main tools they use are rudimentary. One of the most rudimentary tools in *The Woman in the*

Dunes is the sand itself, where the woman “cleans off the dishes just by rubbing them with sand” (63). There are others: shovels and kerosene buckets used to extract the sand from the holes. “Hey, there!” the sand people say, “we’ve brought a shovel and cans for the other one!” Notice how Abe introduces the word, “other,” here. The man initially refuses to be part of this “other” and refuses to use the tools. Our first impression of the sand people’s technology in the story is therefore negative.

Technology is being forced on the man as part of his enslavement, and this act of slavery proves accurate when we learn later what the sand people do with the sand: “they sell it” (Abe 222). But this is not all negative. When the man eventually “decides” to stay in the community, the sand that he has “freely” chosen to shovel becomes his own source of income and contribution to society. And as also was mentioned previously, technology soon offers hope for the man in the story. With his water collector invention, and eventual access to a rope ladder, the man is able to participate more in society, and help the community survive.

We also realize that the man's previous tools, for example his bug collecting devices, were “ways to escape ... from his obligations and ... inactivity in his life” (Abe 40). The man thought these were necessary in order to fulfill his dream to be a famous entomologist, when he would find something so that his “name appeared in the illustrated encyclopedias of entomology ... for something less than eternity” (Abe 10). The fact that the man was escaping his life and dreaming of fame shows how miserable he was. He never seems to want to return home except that it would involve escape again from being “lured by the beetle into a desert from which there was no escape”

(Abe 50). The man was living out the life of the creatures he was in fact trying to snare. Freedom for him was not a return home, but instead just another form of escape. Such tools in his new community would prove fruitless. In fact, the original object of his affection, “sand and insects [which] were all that concerned him” (Abe 8) were everywhere: “It was certainly an environment in which insects would gladly live” (Abe 24). There would be no need for such bug-collecting tools. The only ones he needs are the ones that bind him to the woman and his new community.

Are the rules of society protecting us or keeping us in bondage? Do they do both? Is the man in Abe’s narrative being protected from his old life in a society that was “meaningless” and “a tower of illusion, ... a dangerous house of glass” (Abe 94)? Social organization makes up the next layer of the cake. This is the middle layer, which means it is directly influenced by technology and perceived by humans to be influenced by our own beliefs, our ideology.

The work of the sand people is quite simple: shoveling. This aspect of their life, how they work, act, communicate and organize, boils down to this: “you can’t ever catch up with the sand no matter how much you shovel” (29). This eliminates the need for any other “grain” of life, as it were. Schools, police stations, politics, institutions, whatever—all totally worthless in the face of the sand people’s tasks for survival. Capitalism, socialism, all of it is nothing standing before a wall of sand. All communication is stripped completely in terms of how it relates to the sand. Abe’s book is a beautiful example of how clearly the environment and the technology used to

extract energy from it (White's Law) affect how we organize. The only useful social interaction we have in the book is between the man and woman in regards to how they are going to shovel enough sand to keep from getting buried by it. All other talk and action proves superfluous, even dangerous. Even though the man spends a lot of his time trying to understand the woman, it doesn't really matter in the end. He eventually sees himself in her. She is his mirror.

One of the biggest changes in Japanese society concerning relationships between men and women pre-war and post-war, was how they ate. Abe is able to hint at some of the absurdity of how Japan was before, where women ate first:

When he had finished eating, the woman returned to the sink and, putting a piece of plastic over her head, quietly began to eat her own meal under it. (63)

This "parallel" world, though simple and stripped to its bare bones, still operated in a time capsule compared to the modern Japan of 1962 that Abe was using as juxtaposition.

The sand people are not identified with any belief system. Thus, we must leave the ideology part of White's layer cake model empty. However, parts of the novel can be fit into the model. One is Abe's theme of existentialism. Where ideology is described as our belief systems, existentialism is using a sort of pseudo reality to see ourselves as a free and responsible agent in our own destiny. Even though this would seem to discount any sense of the divine, it is still a belief system. Regarding identity, Abe cryptically

states it “is like the square root of a negative number” (Bolton 3). I believe Abe wants us to think deeply about identity. Or perhaps he wants us to give up thinking about it.

Let’s have a look at the main character. He’s an insect collector. He collects bugs for their beauty but also for their uniqueness. And he identifies himself as a teacher, and also with all of the “certificates” that society has bestowed on him (Abe 51). Such things are useless in the sand community. Even his knowledge gained up to now is useless here. In addition, the narrator describes evidence of collecting insects as a mental quirk (Abe 4). Though it is odd at first to think of such a past-time as abnormal, in the sand community it actually is. There would never be enough free time to pursue such things. An interesting aspect of an insect collector, the narrator states, is that “he should not have the sun at his back” (Abe 15). In this way, the shadow of the collector does not scare away the insects. But it also keeps the insect collector, the man in Abe’s story, from looking at his own shadow. This is likely an indication that we live in a world where we avoid our own shadows. With the sand people, the holes are always dark and usually in the shade of the sun, so the people in fact live in “the shadowy interior[s] of ... hole[s]” (Abe 17). Perhaps Abe’s choice of occupations for the man was significant. Furthermore, Abe insisted (counter to the time) that “the person appearing in the work of art (the character, or the narrative voice) must be distinguished from the person of the author” (Schnellbacher 3). Although we search for the main identity of the man to be the writer, Abe, himself, it does not seem so.

Abe wrote in a period of the “I” novel in Japan and he was very much a trendsetter in Japanese literature. Whereas Western writers used what was known as the “authentic novel” in Japanese as “the most natural form ... to express [the] self,” thereby “strictly presenting the author’s attitude toward life” in the third person (Suzuki 49). In contrast, the “I” novel was written in the first person and defined as a truly Japanese form of expression in that it was created out of “the deepest self” (*mottomo fukai watakushi*), and was considered the “most natural form for Japanese writers” (Suzuki 51). What’s ironic is that the main character seems to share a birthday with the author. In addition, Abe was a real-life bug collector (“Abe”). So identifying the man of Abe’s narrative with Abe himself is not so simple.

One of the problems with White’s layer cake model of culture is where to put the individual. Yes, it is the individual who is using technology (the bottom layer) to harness resources from the environment. It is the individual who marries, who goes to work, who participates in society (the middle layer), and it is the individual who shapes the opinions, perception, beliefs that govern his or her world in their own individual mind, although how they outwardly express their beliefs would be easier to classify. We must ask ourselves where to put the mind. And since much of the landscape of *The Woman in the Dunes*, the energy and action of the book, occurs in the man’s mind, any belief system seems muddled, stagnant, even if laid bare. “Somehow, it was working out very differently from the simple geometric process he had evolved in his head” (Abe 68). We could say that the man’s conflict is in his perception of reality and the external reality that he finds himself in. Can it be that simple? Perhaps White’s model is more useful

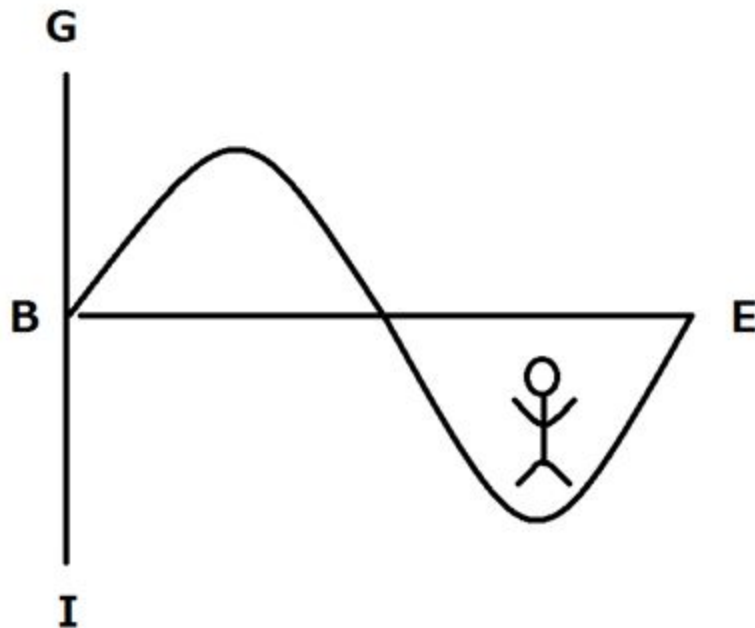
after all. It reveals the conflict of humankind, which is what life seems to be about: trying to find where we fit in the world.

The hero or heroine of this story is the reader. He or she picks up the book in the first place, enters the strange inner and outer landscapes of the man, and the woman, the community. It is the reader that plods along, word by word, detail after detail, in his or her own investigations of this wasteland. And how fruitful it was of Abe to drop the man into this hole, because it is an idea that everyone can relate to.

What is freedom? Perhaps that was Abe's core question. Freedom has been discussed as a theme of this book previously. But one place where it fails is in the man's preoccupation with insects. He encloses them in tubes to kill them and eventually pin needles in them so that "he need never fear [they] will escape" (Abe 4). And the man's freedom? How to escape? Was it suicide? Many writers of Abe's generation committed suicide, with Mishima being the most famous ("More"). Of all of them, Abe was probably the most tormented. Perhaps Abe was exploring suicide in his book, and the central question would be what could have driven someone to take his life? It is my opinion that the novel is an allegory of the Japanese afterlife, based on my recent study of *yomi*, the Japanese version of both heaven and hell. Future analysis of *The Woman in the Dunes* could shed light on this.

But the choice at the end of the book is the most intriguing. As discussed previously, most critics believe that the man stays in the community. But we don't really know. And it is this blankness that the reader is left with after finishing the book that

makes the story more compelling. Kurt Vonnegut was also an anthropologist, just not a prominent one. As an experiment, if we plot this story on Vonnegut's famous "Shape of Stories" graph, we see a typical "man in the hole story" ("Three"; "Kurt").



At the beginning of the book, we can assume that the man, the budding entomologist, is out and having a fine day on his day off, so he starts out high up on the G/I (Good fortune/Ill fortune) axis. The air is nice, the day is beautiful, and he finally catches a glimpse of the sea. He finds several cool insects and reaches peak happiness. He starts to get tired and falls asleep, missing the last bus. Happiness goes down. Then, getting trapped into a hole, literally, isn't fun, which plunges his happiness way down, and he can't escape. This is the lowest of the lows. But there is a woman. She turns out to be nice to him. He gets used to the place. Little victories happen,

mostly psychological, and we see his happiness inch higher. Inventing a device that can extract water from the sand should be peak happiness for the man, but remember: he's still trapped in a hole. And not all is rosy with the misses. Finally, the rope ladder is there and he can make his escape. But we don't know whether he is happy or not. The man knows that physical freedom from the hole won't make him any happier one way or the other. We wonder, probably much as he does, that perhaps the central question of Abe's narrative is this: does anything really matter?

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