

## SUTTON-SMITH'S FIVE EASY PIECES

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Brian Sutton-Smith was a sprite. I searched my vocabulary far and wide and settled on this word, this reference to lively, mythological creatures among the fairies and elves. I never met anyone like him.

There is a long line of anthropologists and folklorists who have studied children's games and folklore, stretching back into the nineteenth century (Bronner 1988; Bronner 2011:196–247; McNeil 1988). Brian belongs in that scholarly history, of course, but he was also the sort of charismatic leader a scholarly field, especially an interdisciplinary one, needs to thrive. Brian was a founding father of the children's folklore section of the American Folklore Society (Sutton-Smith 2008:96) in 1978, and by the time I joined The Association for the Anthropological Study of Play (then TAASP, now just TASP, dropping the narrower disciplinary designation) in 1978, I could see in both organizations how his energy and personality and intelligence was at the center of both groups. He was the force behind the children's folklore section's collaborating on a first-ever "sourcebook" for the study of children's folklore (Sutton-Smith, Mechling, Johnson, and McMahon 1995).

I first met Brian at the meeting of TAASP at the University of Notre Dame (Indiana) in 1978. I came from an interdisciplinary home of American Studies, where I had all my degrees and my academic employment, and on the recommendation of an American Studies friend, Bernard "Barney" Mergen, I decided to try a TAASP meeting and present my first paper based on my fresh fieldwork with a troop of Boy Scouts. Thanks to folklorist Henry Glassie, who was a fellow with me at the Yale National Humanities Institute in 1975-76, I had moved my Boy Scout research from historical, documentary evidence to observational, ethnographic evidence in the field—in this case, the summer encampment of a California Boy Scout troop high in the Sierra Nevada. By the time of the TAASP call for papers and then meeting, I was ready to present my first paper based on that work (Mechling 1980).

At that TAASP meeting, I saw first-hand Brian's genuine love of and enthusiasm for the study of play, especially the play of children and adolescents. I am certain that my great affection for TAASP and for Brian was that first encounter, where he treated me like a colleague whose work was intensely interesting to him. There were no academic hierarchies or accompanying snobbism at those TAASP meetings, in part because everyone there was studying something thought "trivial" by disciplinary colleagues back home (see Brian's "triviality barrier" essay, discussed below) and partly because the gathering was so interdisciplinary. Someone there could be a famous giant in his or her home discipline but at TAASP people were unlikely to know that. You were just Brian or Barney or Garry or Jay.

I think the best way to honor the memory of Brian Sutton-Smith and his work is to give people unfamiliar with his work an easy way to access his thinking on the play of children and adolescents. I have selected five key essays which, if

you read nothing else by Brian, would give you a good enough grasp of what he had to say to us and why he is so important to the study of the folk cultures of children and adolescents. Some familiar with Brian's massive work might choose a different five; these are mine, essays I return to for ideas and a reminder of why we (I) pursue the study of children's cultures. And, seriously, I see something new in these essays each time I reread them. What more could you ask of an essay?

I do not offer here summaries of each essay. Instead, I provide something of a reader's guide that signals what I find to be important in the essay. I also show the connections between the essays. I refer often to my own work to testify to the fount of ideas I draw upon in each of these five essays. I take them in chronological order.

One final note. I have struggled with what to call Brian in this article—Sutton-Smith or S-S for short or simply "Brian." I have chosen "Brian," which is probably too informal for an article somewhere between a personal reminiscence and a scholarly discussion of his ideas, but "Brian" seems right to me.

## I.

### **Brian Sutton-Smith. 1959. "A Formal Analysis of Game Meaning." *Western Folklore* 18:13–24.**

Brian began his study of children's folklore with his dissertation, eventually published as *A History of Children's Play: New Zealand, 1840-1950* (1982). He had already published *The Folkgames of Children* in 1973. The 1959 "Formal Analysis" article reflects Brian's dissertation work and his attempt to take a scientific approach (as a developmental psychologist) to the study of children's games. Anthropologists and others had been collecting children's games since the late nineteenth century, but Brian wanted to establish a more systematic, scientific, reproducible approach to describing and analyzing meanings of games. In part he wanted to elevate the legitimacy of the study of children's games and children's folklore in general (see the "Triviality Barrier" article, below), but he also realized that the scientific approach would require the comparative study of games across cultures to see the ways cultures shape children's games and play.

To accomplish his goals and bring other scholars into the circle of those studying children's games, Brian's strategy in the "Formal Analysis" article is to describe, categorize, and analyze a single game called "Bar the Door" in New Zealand, but going by many names in the United States (perhaps "Red Rover" is the most familiar to American children). Brian describes the game briefly and then proceeds to analyze its play, proposing a system of "ludic analysis" based on five major game features: (1) the game challenge, (2) player participation, (3) player performance, (4) the spatial scene, and (5) the temporal structure. I will not reproduce his analysis here, but I do want to point to a few important points he introduces in his analysis.

First, Brian's analysis of this "central person game" (where one player has the power over many others, a central feature of "chase and capture" games like tag) shows his interest in the ways children's games reflect their lives in

formal and informal institutions, in this case their lives in families and schools, where children have little power in relation to the “central persons” (parents and teachers) in charge of those institutions. The reader might think that Brian’s point is that games are “anticipatory socialization” for their adult roles, and there is some of that here, but Brian goes beyond what he would consider a narrowly reductionist, sociobiological understanding of the functions of play. Brian always attributed more agency to children than do most adults, including many scholars who study children’s lives. No, Brian’s linking the “game challenge” in central person games like “Bar the Door” to their lives in institutions is in the service of understanding how children *experience* the game. Even when describing and analyzing the formal structures of a game and the meanings of that structure, Brian never considers the analysis complete (or even adequate) without some effort to understand the *experience* of the game.

The second thing to notice in this article is Brian’s attention (this early, 1959) to the effects of the mass media on children’s games and folklore. He notes that the earlier animal symbolism and fabulous characters in the play of their games has been replaced (in the postwar era of television) with “modern symbolisms of the mass media” (p. 19). He later picks up this appropriation of mass media by children in his 1981 book, *The Folkstories of Children*, and in his commentary on ethnographic observations by his students in preschool and elementary school play settings (e.g., see the “Playfighting” article, below).

Third, Brian is ever-attentive to the similarities and differences between the sexes in children’s play and folklore. I discuss his unique book chapter, “The Play of Girls,” below, but in this 1959 article he observes that the increasing mixing of boy and girls on the playground has meant that girls are as likely as boys to play games like “Bar the Door” and that the girls sometimes invent “feminine variants” of the game (p. 19).

Fourth, Brian’s portrait of both boys and girls at play far from romanticizes children; in fact, he understands fully that children’s play is sometimes violent, mean, aggressive, obscene, and profane. Chasing and capture (tagging) games provide children with the perfect frame (Bateson 1972) for expressing aggression, sometimes real aggression but more often stylized aggression (p. 20). The folklore of male friendship groups depends on stylized aggression as the alternative to real aggression, and one of the paradoxes in this stylized aggression in games and play in boys’ folk groups (e.g., rough-and-tumble playfighting) is that the stylized aggression is a signal of closeness and trust. Similarly, Brian sees value in the stylized fear in the chasing and capture games. “In the game,” he writes, “fear may be experienced and yet it is not limitless. It exists within a controlled setting. The players control the fear, the fear does not control the players” (p. 20). In fact, the play frame of the chase and capture game provides a safe place and time for the child to experiment with power and control; the central person game, for example, temporarily gives power to even the less skilled player (p. 21).

In the 1960s Brian collaborated with anthropologist John Roberts on the cross-cultural study of games, a collaboration Garry Chick discusses in this special issue. Using ethnographic evidence and at times the Human Relations Area File, Brian and Roberts formulated and tested with the available data hypotheses about

the ways games (e.g., games of chance, of skill, of strategy, and combinations of these) reflect the cultures represented in the ethnographies (e.g., Roberts and Sutton-Smith 1962). The connection is not simply anticipatory socialization, letting youth play at games that provide skills for their lives as adults in institutions, though there is some of that in the games. The relationship is more complicated. My own example from my work with a Boy Scout troop at their camp uses the Roberts and Sutton-Smith categories and thesis to understand some of the games the troop played, in particular their "Treasure Hunt" game and ensuing "Nugget Auction" at the evening campfire. In my analysis (Mechling 2001:254–57) I observed that, although the main message of the Boy Scout camp activities is the notion that hard work (skill plus strategy) yields success, a message in keeping with the ethos of capitalism, the game of Treasure Hunt and the Nugget Auction actually undermined that message by having luck play such a large role in both games. So although the games look like anticipatory socialization preparing the boys for a life in a capitalistic society, the games revealed (and disguised, the value of folklore) an ugly truth about capitalism. It is in folklore, like games, that young people can be schooled in the cultural contradictions of capitalism.

## II.

### **Brian Sutton-Smith. 1970. "The Psychology of Childlore: The Triviality Barrier." *Western Folklore* 29:1–8.**

If folklorists studying the play of children and adolescents know any piece of writing by Brian, it is probably this 1970 essay, a plea for scholars to take seriously what he calls "childlore." Advanced, industrialist societies like ours tend to value work foremost and play only for its temporary, restorative relief from work (as "recreation"). In such a society, Brian argues, "fun" (a main feature of play) is thought to be trivial. Work requires a "mature" attitude in contrast with the "immaturity" of play. People in an industrial, competitive culture like ours value instrumental behavior more than expressive behavior. And apparently so do scholars of play, argues Brian, in that those scholars tend to emphasize the functionalist interpretation of the instrumental behavior—play as anticipatory socialization for what skills the adult will need in that society, for example—rather than add to their analysis an understanding of the expressive pleasure of play. The child's play is "autotelic," self-sustaining, fun (p. 4).

A developmental psychologist himself, Brian makes the surprising complaint that psychology has "little to offer" in understanding these expressive dimensions of play. The humanists are the scholars who understand and appreciate the joyful, expressive, autotelic dimensions of play (p. 4). For this reason, Brian insists that the study of play must be interdisciplinary. There is room for the developmentalists, of course, but the literary scholars, the historians, the art historians, and the humanistic social scientists provide necessary views. Actually, Brian sees two new (in 1970) areas of psychological research that promise an understanding of expressive behavior—research on creativity, and observational

research (in Head Start and poverty programs) that temper the sociobiological enthusiasms of developmental psychology and show us that “there is no natural and universal language of lore for all children” (p. 5). Sociohistorical forces lead to different “expressive formal systems” in childlore (p. 5; see Goodwin 1991 for an example of the work by one of his students).

To demonstrate the power of an interdisciplinary analysis of the particular influences of culture on childlore, Brian offers an example from the work he did with anthropologist John Roberts studying children’s games cross-culturally (see above). The example is the game of Tick Tack Toe (pp. 6–8). I shall not reproduce that discussion here but want to note simply that understanding the cultural variants in playing this seemingly simple game, including the gender differences, require perspectives from anthropology and history.

### III.

**Brian Sutton-Smith. 1979. “The Play of Girls.” In *Women in Context: Becoming Female*, ed. by C. B. Kopp and M. Kirkpatrick, 228–57. New York: Plenum.**

We have seen in the first two articles discussed here that from his earliest work Brian was interested in gender differences in children’s play and childlore. This interest was not unusual among developmental psychologists, but their studies in controlled settings (e.g., schools and labs) spoke only to issues of human development. Brian was rare among the developmental psychologists in that he wanted to study children in natural settings, where children exercise a great deal more freedom and agency than they do in classrooms and labs. He wanted to understand children’s lives as much as possible as they were experiencing everyday life, not through the controlled lenses of adults who themselves projected so much upon the children.

The scholarly and everyday cultural landscapes of the 1970s saw the rise of feminist theory and its challenge to the generalizations in psychology, history, and other disciplines based on the study of men’s lives. In psychology, perhaps the most influential book coming out of this era was Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* (1982), in which she sparred with Lawrence Kohlberg and his characterization of girls as “less mature” than boys in their moral reasoning. Not less mature, argued Gilligan, just different. The feminist research of the 1970s provided the ideas for the rise of interdisciplinary women’s studies courses and programs in universities.

The sociocultural landscape in the U.S. was changing, as well. The social movements of the 1960s challenged the patriarchy. The women’s movement and, after Stonewall in 1969, the gay rights movement challenged masculine, heteronormative understandings of gender and sexuality. Laws in cities, states, and at the federal level increasingly forbade discrimination based on gender, and although it failed to gain the necessary number of ratifications from state legislatures by the 1979 deadline, the proposed (in 1972) Equal Rights Amendment

("Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex") to the Constitution came very close to passing. What did become federal law was Title IX of the U.S. Education Amendments of 1972, a law of significant relevance to the play of girls and young women. Title IX forbids discrimination in school activities on the basis of gender, thereby opening to girls and women equal opportunities in organized sports. In many ways Title IX is the most important, empowering social experiment in the past forty years, and Brian understood that. His 1979 book chapter was published in that new world.

In an effort to push the study of play beyond the textual approach and into the realm of context, Brian here proposes that "*sports* themselves can be used as the metaphor for preliminary thinking about the context of play," and his communication approach to sports requires seeing the roles and performances of the "quadralogue": coach, player, co-player, and spectators (p. 231). Brian then proceeds to review the current research on the play of girls using this "sportive theory of play."

Here is what I find so significant about this chapter by Brian, apart from its being the first comprehensive survey of what we know about the play of girls (we need another). First, Brian shows how the arc of the history of girls' play is toward bringing it closer to boys' play. The games of girls shifted in the twentieth century from a focus on themes of status and marriage to themes of egalitarian competition (p. 233). Title IX accelerated that change in the 1970s, notes Brian, as girls and young women have access to team sports previously played exclusively by boys and men. Note that Brian added an "Epilogue" to this chapter just as he was preparing it for publication, an epilogue that discusses some research by one of his students on the advice manuals for professional women in the 1970s, advice manuals that recognize that one of the goals of Title IX was to give girls and young women a socialization in play and games closely resembling the socialization experiences boys and young men bring to the professional, bureaucratic, patriarchal organizations the women were entering in increasing numbers in the 1970s (pp. 251–54).

Second, Brian's survey of girls' play and games (always drawing comparisons with boys' play and games) introduces ethnic differences as another source of variation. Brian's chapter takes advantage of the new attention to ethnicity and social class in the 1960s and 1970s.

Oddly missing from this chapter is the attention Brian pays elsewhere to the influences of the mass-media (especially television) on girls' play and games. He and his graduate students at the University of Pennsylvania were paying attention to this influence at the same time (e.g., Sutton-Smith 1981).

It is important to recognize before leaving the discussion of this important chapter that Brian mentored a good many female graduate students and young female scholars, and they, in turn, have provided us with the close ethnography of children's play, especially the play of games and girls, which only female researchers can accomplish. I have in mind scholars like Diana Kelly-Byrne (1989), Linda Hughes (1993; 1995), Marjorie Goodwin (1991; 2006), and Felicia R. McMahon (2007), among others.

## IV.

**Brian Sutton-Smith and Diana Kelly-Byrne. 1984. "The Masks of Play." In *The Masks of Play*, ed. by Brian Sutton-Smith and Diana Kelly-Byrne, 184–99. New York: Leisure Press.**

I return to this essay more often than to any other by Sutton-Smith. A fan of Bateson's work, I also recognize that Bateson's idea of the play frame and its paradoxes betrays an uncharacteristically romantic view from someone whose scientific credentials and rhetoric do not really prepare the reader to see that romantic notion. But Sutton-Smith, also a fan of Bateson's theory of play and fantasy, saw early the romantic streak in Bateson. Goffman's appropriation in *Frame Analysis* (1974) of Bateson's notion of frame recognizes what Bateson apparently did not—namely, that not all players are in the frame voluntarily, that players bring to the frame different power, and that some players can use the play frame for ulterior motives. Hence, Goffman argues that *all* social reality is constructed, maintained, and repaired using the same communication devices as one finds in the confidence game, a social constructionist view that I have embraced and used since reading Berger and Luckmann (1967) in the early 1970s. Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne's (hereafter S-S/K-B) way of making this point is to provide a typology and examples of the ways people mask other motives with the play frame, as when a sibling uses the "I was only playing" defense when using the play frame to hurt a sibling more than necessary in a game.

I have found the idea of the masks of play, including the "deep play" Geertz writes about, endlessly useful in my writing (e.g., about deep play by warriors and veterans—see Mechling 2012; Wallis and Mechling, in press). On re-reading the essay for this occasion, though, I have seen some things that are there—some things that have always been there—that have slipped my mind. For instance, S-S/K-B take a gentle swipe at all the authors in the volume they edited, a volume of papers first delivered at a TAASP meeting. It seems to S-S/K-B that despite all the research on play presented at the conference and in this volume, the "most general strategy for *not* studying child play seems to be to write articles on their functions and pretty much to ignore the detailed moment by moment description of the experience itself as if we already know what that experience is" (1984:186). Ouch. That sentence summarizes beautifully and accusingly the purely functionalist approach to play, a critique S-S repeatedly made throughout his career. He did not deny that play has functions, but why (he asks here and elsewhere) stand so far away from play that the scholar cannot attempt to express the inexpressible, the pure joy and fun that the player experiences when entering that state of FLOW described by Csikszentmihalyi (1975)? Amidst all the analysis in *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997), Brian's point in that book is that is that we need to understand that play is not merely instrumental, that it is expressive, consummatory, joyful, and fun. This is why Brian appreciated so much the research that somehow approached the child's experience of play, not an easy task for adults trying to access the "experience" a child is having while playing.

It may seem contradictory that, immediately after making the point that a functionalist analysis of play may be a necessary but not sufficient moment in understanding play, S-S/K-B begin their catalog of ways play masks motives and ways other frames mask play, a "function" of play. But S-S/K-B are alert to the pleasures of these masked activities, most of which boil down to the pleasure of exercising power in a situation. "Children would rather argue the game than play it. The joy is the power of control rather than the play" (1984:190). Note how between Brian's earlier interest (with John Roberts) in the structures and functions of games and the 1984 "masks" essay, Brian has come to see more interesting the pleasures of power children experience in playing and arguing the game. The example S-S/K-B use in the section of this essay on "Masks for Power" is childhood initiation rites, a topic of great usefulness to me as I have explored folk initiations in Scouting and in fraternities and sports teams (Mechling 2008b; 2009; see also Bronner 2006; 2012). Usually the players in children's folk initiations, both those being initiated and those doing the initiation, are enjoying the event, though a few of those doing the hazing or initiating may be using the ritual or play frame as a mask for other motives.

S-S/K-B recognize that a great deal of the power play in children's and adolescents' folk initiations puts forbidden parts of the body and taboo functions (urination, for example) at the center of the invented initiation, just as they are in much of children's lore (Mechling 1986). Brian understood that children's lore is profane and "dirty"; I think that is why he appreciated my first TAASP paper on the game of Poison Pit played by the Boys Scouts I studied, a game involving urine and references to menstruation (Mechling 1980; 2001). When Geertz (1983) outlined the qualities of "common sense," a type of knowledge deeply implicated in the study of folk ideas and folklore, he added "earthy" after a list that includes "naturalness," "practicalness," and "immethodicalness." "Earthiness" is Geertz's (1983:93) polite term for transgressive, profane, obscene, and taboo. As far as Brian was concerned, if the scholar clings to the romantic view of the child and ignores the fact that children enjoy forbidden, obscene, profane, and cruel play, that scholar has no hope of understanding the child's experience of play.

In my own work I have found very useful the S-S/K-B discussion of play as a "mask for danger," recognizing the thrill and pleasure of risk-taking. They make room for what Geertz (1973) calls "deep play," a phrase originated by Jeremy Bentham for play in which the stakes are so high (loss of fortune, health, or life) that the play is irrational from the utilitarian standpoint. S-S/K-B had their college students give accounts of their own experiences with dangerous, "deep play," and the authors reproduce several examples (college students continue the patterns of adolescent play). Even without the irrational risk, "dark play" (with death, for example) carries pleasure. I see this in the sorts of vernacular photography (snapshots) by warriors (Mechling 2012) and in the accounts of dark play in warriors' memoirs and fiction (Wallis and Mechling, in press).

S-S/K-B, near the end of this chapter, come back to their critique of the scholars of play, and their surprising turn is to accuse even Bateson of creating a metamask. Put briefly, they focus on Bateson's point (in his "Theory of Play and Fantasy," the foundational essay on play frames) that "the peculiarity of play ...

is that it is a mixture of primary and secondary process (S-S and K-B 1984:195; Bateson 1972:185). S-S/K-B fault Bateson for dwelling only on the secondary (conscious) process of play's psychodynamics while neglecting the primary (unconscious) process:

Because his [Bateson's] own concern was largely with communication and metacommunication, he has made it easier to talk about the logic of play than about its illogic. Unwittingly, he has contributed to the idealization and bowdlerization of play, which has been a part of the twentieth century's "scientific" approach to play. (Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne 1984:196)

The corrective prescribed by S-S/K-B is to bring to the analysis of play both "Bateson's paradox" and "Freud's disguise," to see the ways play both is like a dream (the title of Bateson's essay is "Toward a Theory of Play and Fantasy," after all) and not like a dream; play both is about reality and not about reality (p. 196). The authors propose that we who study play "combine the Freudian view of ambivalence with the Batesonian attitude to paradox" (p. 197), and they suggest the neologism *play as paraguise* to capture the "scientific unidealized study of play" they hope for.

## V.

**Sutton-Smith, B., J. Gerstmyer, and A. Meckley. 1988. "Playfighting as Folkplay Amongst Preschool Children." *Western Folklore* 47 (3):161–76.**

When teaching and writing about Bateson's frame theory of play and fantasy, I have always found playfighting to be the best example of framed communication where the messages exchanged within the frame (ruled by the metamessage "this is play") do not mean what they would mean outside the frame. Most recently, John Paul Wallis and I found in Bateson's paradoxical playfighting frame the key to understanding why soldiers and Marines in combat zones engage in rough-and-tumble (R&T) playfighting, a surprising example of deep play when played in an active combat zone (Wallis and Mechling, in press). As Brian and his co-authors note, playfighting has been of interest to scholars of play for a long time, but what Brian's team of graduate students brings to the topic is access to Philadelphia preschools and the ability to record actual instances of playfighting in "natural settings," in context.

Brian and his co-authors plunge into the 1980s debate about "war play" and whether children should be allowed to play with toy guns, a debate that rages today (Mechling 2008a). This is a topic of great concern to parents and teachers, sometimes to politicians, and to the general public. The death of a twelve-year-old boy, Tamir Rice, in Cleveland on March 2, 2015, shot dead almost instantly by a police officer arriving on the scene and taking the boy's pellet gun for a real one, is only one among many tragedies and near-tragedies involving children's play

with toy guns. So the debate Brian and his students entered in the 1980s is far from old and far from trivial.

What Brian's team of graduate students can contribute to this debate is actual ethnographic description and analysis of children's playfighting. Brian gave his student researchers two tasks in their fieldwork in the preschools: "to look for the relationships between playfighting and aggression and for any distinctions between them, and to look for the influences of television and of the teachers upon the children's play" (p. 164). With this assignment, the researchers worked in nine preschools, taking notes on the play of two hundred children aged three to five years.

As in my discussion of the first four "easy pieces," I shall not summarize the findings here except to say what I find so useful in the article for my own work. First, boys' drive to play with guns is almost impossible to extinguish, even in those schools (e.g., university-related schools and Quaker schools) where the anti-gun, anti-wartoy policies were most strict (p. 169–70). The power of that drive obviously is something scholars and policymakers need to be able to understand.

Second, most of the aggression in these playfighting games is stylized aggression, often cloaked literally in the folk-contrived costumes suggesting superheroes and fantasy characters the children observe on television and in movies (p. 168). While the authors do not explicitly make the points I draw from this observation, I want to make the connections here. I concur with Jones (2002) that children need early experience with stylized aggression, especially as an alternative to real aggression. In fact, Brian's students discovered cases where the children actually controlled and contained the real aggression of a player by making him abide by the rules of the fantasy play and stylized aggression (p. 174).

Third, and still on this topic of stylized aggression, the researchers found what was to them a surprising degree of folk-imposed sex segregation, and it was primarily (by far) the boys who participated in the playfighting (p. 171). Looking back at Brian's "The Play of Girls" and his brief discussion of the changes wrought by Title IX, one wonders where and how girls and young women acquire the skills of stylized aggression they will need to perform in organizational cultures that still resemble the culture of the male friendship group as honed on playing field.

Fourth, I value the ethnographic confirmation in this work that television programs aimed at kids clearly influence the playfighting. And the fieldwork observations should put to rest (but they won't—this is a resistant belief) adults' worried view that aggression and violence in children's television programs results in real violence and aggression in children. What the ethnographic evidence shows is what I found to be true in the Boy Scout troop I studied, namely, that children and youth appropriate from mass-mediated, popular culture those symbols and narrative themes they find useful in their own folk cultures, their own folkplay. Put differently, those adults who still believe in the direct influence of popular culture on children fail to appreciate the true agency of children and youth. And the only way to appreciate fully that agency is to observe carefully and for prolonged periods of time the actual ways children play.

## Conclusion

The most recent of the Sutton-Smith "Five Easy Pieces" I have recommended here was published in 1988, very nearly thirty years ago. Brian continued writing through those years, and luckily for us he wrote a substantial memoir about his life and work in 2008 for the newly launched *American Journal of Play*. That memoir, "Play Theory: A Personal Journey and New Thoughts" (2008), recounts the phases of his thinking about play and sketches his journey from naughty play in his New Zealand youth to the project he was working on in his last days, a book that was to be titled *Play as Emotional Survival*, ideas which he presented in his keynote address at a TASP Conference in 2007 at the Strong National Museum of Play (which holds the Sutton-Smith Papers). In that address Brian explained that (as the handout outline for his address puts it) the address and book would be "my response to my deconstruction of play theories without providing an alternative in *The Ambiguity of Play*, 1997." What is clear from Brian's lecture is that he was drawn more and more to a Darwinian explanation for the power and durability of the play instinct.

Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio's 2005 book, *Descartes's Error* (see also Damasio 1999) gave Brian scientific support for his belief that within us is a dualism, a struggle between the "primary emotions" of fear, anger, happiness, and so on, all expressed in play one way or the other, and the "secondary emotions" (pride, envy, guilt, shame), which "act as basic play regulators from rules to referees" (keynote lecture abstract 2007). Play's evolutionary role, argues Brian, is "to bond all of these opposites (a synergy) into this new form of behavior" (keynote lecture abstract 2007). In evolutionary terms, as animals evolved from the "reflexivity" of reptiles to the "reflectivity" of mammals, play emerges as a behavior that enables mammals "to balance these two adaptive systems [reflexivity and reflectivity] without choosing the wrong one on any given occasion" (keynote lecture abstract 2007). Play is "an alternative theatric synthesis of reflexive and reflective response systems (which is supported in neural terms by the interaction between amygdala and frontal lobes)" (keynote lecture handout 2007). In terms of my own research, for example, the stylized aggression in playfighting among male warriors in combat zones provides a "theatric synthesis" of the two adaptive systems, reflexivity and reflectivity, under stressful circumstances (Wallis and Mechling, in press).

Brian did not live to complete this work, but he left us enough of a trail for us to follow him toward a theory of play that incorporates the most recent thinking in evolution and brain science. In the 2008 article he called this his "third theory of play" (the first being "play as a viability variable" and the second being "culturally relative play forms") and he outlined the theory in terms of four "adaptive layers" (2008:113–17). It is up to us to see where Brian's third theory of play leads us in understanding the play experience in children, adolescents, and adults.

In all of Brian's work, then, from early to late, you can find the distinct perspective he began with, i.e., a commitment to understanding children's play as experienced by the children, a firm confidence that children's experiences can be studied scientifically without losing the magic of their play, a respect for

the agency of children, a refusal to romanticize the child, an understanding that children can be mean and obscene and profane, a commitment to championing children's right to free play, and an insistence that functionalist analysis of play must be complemented by analysis that understands the autotelic nature of play.

Sadly, what has changed is the flow of ethnographic work directed by and inspired by Brian. It is difficult to see whether the decline in ethnographic studies of the folk cultures of children and youth is due to waning interest by scholars or to the cultural and legal difficulties of studying children in "natural settings" rather than in classrooms and laboratories, controlled settings subject to the governmental and institutional rules for studying "human subjects." There are occasional bright spots, like Clark's *In a Younger Voice* (2011), and Clark shares Brian's views of how to study children (see also Clark 1995). In gatherings of folklorists and others who know the unique value of ethnographic study of children's lives, though, scholars often exchange stories and laments about the difficulty of getting their university IRBs (Institutional Review Boards—those committees that approve research with human subjects) to even understand the nature of qualitative research on children in natural settings, much less approve the research. Usually staffed by natural scientists and social scientists who take seriously the word "scientist" in their field and only rarely staffed by the lone humanist or two, most IRBs see our fieldwork with children as unscientific and maybe dangerous. Indeed, another genre of stories shared by male folklorists who have attempted to study children in the natural settings of playgrounds and neighborhood streets and beaches is the "the time mothers on the playground called the police when I was trying to talk with their kids" story. Parents' concerns are understandable, if overblown (see Best 1993), but a combination of the difficulty of getting a research project approved by the IRB and then, if approved, the difficulty of getting adults in those natural settings to understand and accept the research methods of fieldwork with children has meant that many folklorists find it much easier to abandon the ethnography of children's lives altogether. This is a great loss.

Brian's grand project, passed down to his students and to those like-minded colleagues who knew him, and the principles guiding his project are in danger of being extinguished. I do not have a solution to the IRB problem or to the problems in American culture that nurture fear for and over-protection of children (e.g., witness the recent debate over "free range children" parenting practices and the actual legal trouble for parents who let their kids roam free). We will always have our own children and grandchildren and nieces and nephews to study and write about, but that "sample" is limited and skewed. I wish, for example, that we had enough fieldwork based on the play of girls in formal and informal settings that someone will write an updated version of "The Play of Girls."

Brian never accepted the ways adults (parents, teachers, coaches, politicians) project their fears onto children or the many ways adults try to contain and control the play of children. My wish is that this very personal review of five of the essays by Brian that I return to again and again will recruit readers to Brian's "project," that there are enough sprites or even sprites-in-training reading this that we will

conspire somehow to continue Brian's work, even against the bureaucratic and cultural forces against us. For the children.

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