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Sacred Playground:
Adult Play and Transformation
at Burning Man

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Anthropology

by
Sarah Megan Heller

2013

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Sarah Megan Heller

2013

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Sacred Playground:
Adult Play and Transformation
at Burning Man

by

Sarah Megan Heller
Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology
Professor Douglas Hollan, Chair

Sacred Playground is an ethnographic study of adult play and transformation at Burning Man, a countercultural gathering that takes place in the Black Rock Desert in Nevada each summer. I studied this cultural phenomenon using mixed methods, relying primarily on person-centered interviewing with sixteen informants from the Los Angeles Burning Man community. I began this project in 2009, conducting this research as a cultural insider who has been participating in the event since 1999 and collecting quantitative data there since 2004. People who go to the event report having personal transformations there, and this research seeks to understand the psychocultural processes that produce these reported experiences.

I conclude that some people experience transformative moments at the event, which I refer to as entering into a mood of play in which a person becomes absorbed in the present moment, highly sensitive to their environment, susceptible to external influences, and more

likely to take risks that can lead to learning. It is a state of mind that seems difficult to achieve in adulthood and is rarely enjoyed by adults in public spaces in the United States, and so the sensation can feel particularly intense and profound when it happens out in the open during the Burning Man event. The primary argument presented here is that if we conceptualize play as a mood, and if this mood can increase social learning and cultural adaptation, we must question why this mood is often repressed in adulthood.

In the course of my research I came to describe my field site as a sacred playground. The place is especially meaningful to those who participate year after year, becoming experts in particular play practices, adopting the ethos of play that predominates in this community, and endeavoring to spread their ethos and practices to other locations. This ethos of play contradicts the dominant culture that posits adult play as useless frivolity, suggesting instead that the experiences occurring at Burning Man are important and highly meaningful. This dissertation offers an in-depth description and person-centered analysis of five play practices—going naked, heckling, sexy encounters, drinking alcohol, and working—building out from the body to larger social contexts as I seek to understand the consequences to a participant’s mind, body, and developmental trajectory.

The dissertation of Sarah Megan Heller is approved.

Letitia A. Peplau

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2013

*This dissertation is dedicated to Sophia
who taught me about play.*

*And to Erik
who taught me about transformation.*

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Figure 1. Black Rock City 2012



(Adapted from satellite image by GeoEye 2012)

Figure 2. Location of Black Rock City, Nevada



(Adapted from the National Atlas of the United States 2013)

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PREFACE

Getting Inside

I consider myself to be an “insider” and my research to be a “native ethnography.” In many ways, I may be more inside than many of my informants. Many of my informants had conservative backgrounds and were born in other countries, but I was born to artsy, countercultural parents in Northern California. I went to Burning Man for the first time in 1999 when I was twenty-two and living in San Francisco at the height of the dot.com boom, when the possibilities for innovation, success, and transformation seemed limitless. Within a few days at the event, I experienced a transformation myself. As I walked down the streets of Black Rock City, I felt lighter, more optimistic, and more open to trying new things. The awesome desert and the friendly people moved me emotionally. I was not aware of how in sync I was with the place, until I stepped into a trailer where some cantankerous women were gathered around a table complaining about the event and the strange people there. The judgmental mood in that trailer felt foreign and oppressive. I excused myself quickly, and quietly stepped back outside to rejoin the festivities.

As an anthropologist who has always been fascinated with culture, the large-scale art and the gift giving immediately intrigued me. I left Burning Man wanting to go back the next year to study the gift economy. In a personal sense, I wanted to participate in a cultural movement that seemed even more vibrant and progressive than those of the 60s and 70s, which had long occupied my historical imagination. I spent the next year making masks out of papier-mâché and costumes out of odds and ends I gathered up at yard sales. I also learned to dance better to

electronic music. I let myself be transformed into this new cultural subject, a burner. As such, I became prouder of my Californian heritage and enthusiastic about participating in an exciting, emerging, creative culture—one that greeted me with open arms.

I got an internship at the public radio station in San Francisco, and in 2000 I was given an assignment to interview people at Burning Man about technology. When I got to Black Rock City, I went to Media Mecca to register as a reporter. There I met Ron Jon and Action Girl, whose job it was to socialize the press. Ron Jon looked me up and down in my short shorts, my blue dog mask, and my new minidisc recorder strapped to my waist, and he said approvingly, “I wish all the reporters showed up dressed like this.” They gave me a press pass. I spent my second “burn” walking around with my microphone outstretched asking people to tell me about their use of technology. People were very willing to talk to me, more so than in San Francisco where people were often too busy or apprehensive to stop. I recorded hours of interviews about technology, but ironically I did not yet know how to use my own equipment very well, and I found out when I got back to San Francisco that the sound quality was not good enough to use on the air. Needless to say, I never became a reporter.

During this period of my life, I earned a living as a bartender. Larry Harvey and Marian Goodell were regulars at the restaurant where I worked. Having seen his photograph, I recognized Larry as one of the founders of Burning Man. Over time, I got to know Marian and I would call her to let her know whenever we had meatballs on the menu. In 2003 Marian, whose job title was Mistress of Communication, invited me to visit the headquarters of the Burning Man organization. She gave me a tour of their funky office building on 3rd avenue. At some point during the visit I told Marian that I was studying Demography. She excitedly told me that she was really into demographics too, and that she had, in fact, started a census at Burning Man.

And that was how I was recruited as the manager of the Census, which, although we call it a “census,” is actually a survey. Thenceforth, my “playa name” became *the Countess*—a female version of the Count from Sesame Street. The Countess counts burners like this: “One burner...two burners...three burners...” After that my transformation into an insider was complete.

VITA

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Publications and Presentations

- 2005 Burning Man: Transcending the Boundaries of Community and Exchange. Presented at the Society for the Anthropology of North America conference, Merida, Mexico.
- 2006 Burning Man: Nurturing Networks in a Gift Economy. Presented at the Communal Studies Association conference, Marshall, California.
- 2008 More 'Inside' than the Research Subjects? At Play with Identity at Burning Man. Panel: Embodied Engagements: Shifting Subjectivities in Ethnographic Practice. Presented at the American Anthropological Association annual meeting, San Francisco, California.
- 2009 Playing with Selves and Worlds: Possible Transformations at Burning Man and Beyond. Panel: Personal Transformation through Cultural Resources. Presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Psychological Anthropology, Asilomar, California.
- 2010 Dark Play: Transformations at Burning Man. Presented at the UCSD-UCLA Conference/Workshop Series on Culture and Mind, University of California, San Diego.
- 2011 Lightness of Being: Dark Play at Burning Man. Society for Psychological Anthropology Panel: The Neuroanthropology of Dissociation, Absorption, and Embodiment: Research in Ritual, Play, and Entertainment. Presented at the American Anthropological Association annual meeting, Montreal, Canada
- 2011 Kateri McRae, S. Megan Heller, Oliver John, and James Gross
Context-Dependent Emotion Regulation: Suppression and Reappraisal at the Burning Man Festival. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 33:346-50.
- 2012 Out of Order: Heckling as an Intersubjective Form of Play at Burning Man. Presented at the UCSD-UCLA Conference/Workshop Series on Culture and Mind, University of California, Los Angeles.
- 2013 Bring Your Own Cup: Drinking Alcohol at Burning Man as a Shared Play Practice. Panel Co-organizer: Play Across the Lifespan: Mood, Meaning, and Transformation. Presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Psychological Anthropology, San Diego, California.
- 2013 Sara Snyder, S. Megan Heller, Daniel Lumian, and Kateri McRae
Regulation of Positive and Negative Emotion: Effects of Sociocultural Context. *Frontiers in Psychology* 4:259.

CHAPTER ONE

Play as a Mood

This dissertation is an ethnography of adult play in the United States. My field site is unique because it is a temporary city, completely off the electrical grid, rebuilt annually for the Burning Man event. The event takes place for one week every summer and culminates in the burning of a large wooden man. I describe Burning Man as an adult playground. It has grown since 1986, from a bonfire on Baker Beach in San Francisco, California, to a rambunctious road trip to the remote Black Rock Desert in Northern Nevada, to an annual artist festival, to a temporary city called Black Rock City with a population over 50,000, to an alternative culture that is spreading across the world through regional collectives (Doherty 2004). The Burning Man event attracts people from all over the United States and Canada, from Europe, Israel, Australia, and Japan. People are often attracted to the event, because they hear that it is a place where anything goes, where you can “run around naked in the desert on drugs.” To those who return year after year, the event can become an opportunity to make and appreciate art, to meet different kinds of people, and to play and create together, with relatively few restrictions except those posed by the challenges and uncertainties of living in a hostile desert. The opportunity to gather together and play in this particular ecocultural context is felt to be so special and rare that many consider the event to be sacred, the epicenter of an emerging culture.

In the second chapter, I will more thoroughly introduce my research project, review previous studies of Burning Man and the anthropological literature on transformation, and layout

the dissertation chapters. In this introduction, I will provide an overview of my theoretical framework of play.

Theoretical Frameworks and Interdisciplinary Foundations

I take adult play seriously. From the beginning, my theoretical perspective was shaped by pediatrician and psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, who discussed how playing opens up a “potential space” for making reality (Winnicott 1971). Winnicott described how a newborn child’s existence starts by nursing and playing at her mother’s breast, and how that child’s reality slowly expands outward from that play experience to include the rest of her cultural world. I envision that later in adulthood she may encounter opportunities to step into potential spaces where alternative realities can be explored and taken-for-granted meanings can be challenged, disrupted, and revised. She may use such an opportunity to remake herself by veering onto one of many possible developmental pathways. I expect that her most potent reality-making tools are the cultural practices and social contexts that inspire her particular mind and body to experience play. Under the influence of play, her habitual dispositions can be more easily remolded—and a novel cultural subject can potentially emerge.

I conceptualize play as a *mood*. According to my theoretical framework, play is a basic emotional process, a type of elevated affective state. I hypothesize that for a typical person this mood requires coaxing and emerges rather slowly. As a mood, it may persist over an extended period of time. This mood can be interrupted and stop abruptly, but more often it wanes as a person becomes tired, bored, or hungry. It is not a discrete emotional response, which comes and goes rapidly in response to discrete stimuli. This mood is incited by a host of stimuli, often provoked by cultural means. It is simulated most effectively by psychocultural contexts and

practices designed to foster it—the ones a person associates with the word “play” and seem to have no other purpose. Yet I will argue that people can experience this mood while performing a wider variety of activities than those actions people happen to label as “playing” in any particular culture—even while working. I write against a definition of play as the opposite of work, unreservedly rejecting the work/play dichotomy that is a product of the Protestant work ethic. Characterizations of adult play as debauched or useless behavior are based on Western notions of productivity and efficiency. I offer instead a theory about an affective state of mind that is potentially ubiquitous in our lives and potentially universal in human experience, albeit “hypocognized” (Levy 1973) and devalued in the current historical period.

The notion of play as affect or mood draws together multiple, interdisciplinary theoretical strands in the preliminary formulation of a model for developing a neuroanthropology of play. My theory of play draws heavily upon psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of “flow,” where flow is understood to be an “optimal experience” in which a “person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990:3). From this perspective, I see play as a subjective state of mind that can be experienced through any number of cultural practices. A person becomes most aware of this state of mind when it peaks, in moments where she is feeling neither bored nor anxious, as her abilities stretch and she succeeds in meeting the requirements for action structured by her immediate environment. However, in thinking about play as a mood, I seek to extend Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of flow as a singular type of *experience* by linking the concept of play to a range of other possible moods that people may move in and out of—some of which may be quite subtle at times and thus unavailable to self-report. My conceptualization of play-as-mood is particularly inspired by neurobiologist Jaak Panksepp and his work with rats, a species

that happen to be both highly social and highly playful. Panksepp described play as a “joyous lightness of being” and distinguished its affective and biological characteristics from other basic emotional processes, such as *care* and *fear* (Panksepp 2010; Panksepp and Biven 2012).

Panksepp has helped me to understand the neuroanatomy and the epigenetic effects of play. In terms of play’s function, Panksepp has hypothesized that it can help a mammal to develop better social strategies and behavioral flexibility:

...play, when allowed abundant expression, helps construct and refine many of the higher regions of the social brain. Perhaps it is especially influential in refining our frontal cortical, executive networks that allow us to more effectively appreciate social nuances and develop better social strategies. In other words, play allows us to stop, look, listen, and feel the more subtle social pulse around us (Panksepp 2010:269).

I have based my understanding of play’s effects on the brain on Panksepp’s claims, as well as work on cognitive developmental outcomes from children’s play and positive emotion in adults, showing that playful activities that may seem silly actually make us smarter and more flexible (Fredrickson 2000; Fredrickson 2001; Fredrickson 2002; Fredrickson 2003; Fredrickson 2004; Fredrickson 2008; Fredrickson and Branigan 2005; Fredrickson and Joiner 2002; Fredrickson and Losada 2005; Gopnik, et al. 1999).

My main argument is that rather than think about play as something a person does, it is more useful to think of play as something a person feels. Likewise, anthropologist Victor Turner talked about play or playfulness as a “liminal mode” and Gregory Bateson talked about a “subjunctive mood” wherein a person moves from a sober “as-is” relationship with factual reality to a lighter “as-if” position, opening up to what is possible (Bateson 1955; Bateson 1956; Turner 1983). Building on Turner, performance studies scholar Richard Schechner designated what he calls a “play mood,” which may be decoupled from acts of “playing.” This decoupling is especially notable in his examples of risky “dark play” wherein contradictory or subversive

realities disrupt shared experience, threatening to heighten or obliterate the play mood in one or more persons (Schechner 1988). Similar to my way of thinking, anthropologist Thomas Malaby identified play as a disposition as opposed to an “activity” (Malaby 2009a). For me play-as-a-disposition highlights how some mind-brains are easily provoked into a mood of play and others are incapable of experiencing it. Within this framework, we can appreciate how people’s dispositions vary in a population, may change in response to context, and the tendency and motivation to enter into a play mood can be stimulated through training and mastery of a practice. From a neuroanthropological perspective, then, the extension of Csikszentmihalyi’s “flow,” along with Panksepp’s, Turner’s, Schechner’s, and Malaby’s notions of play as emotional process, mood, and disposition, makes it possible to think about various cultural practices and cultural contexts as eliciting that mood and shaping subjectivity in particular individuals.

Many play scholars have been influenced by anthropologist Gregory Bateson’s observation that playing in humans and animals often involves framing, communicating that what is happening in this moment ought to be regarded as play, and may not be factually real (see Bateson 1956; Bateson 2000[1972] on “metacommunication”). Building upon this astute observation, I see play frames as an important way that people communicate their attitude towards play. The act of framing a social context as one that is positively or negatively disposed towards play can happen at multiple levels of reality—in dyadic interactions, at the group level, or even on larger scales, such as whole societies or cultures. Unlike Bateson, I do not think that play is best conceptualized as communication, however. I think it is more useful to think of play as a contagious mood, something that can be caught through communication, and framing acts as a container that can help or hinder the spread of that mood. In his discussion of play moods, Schechner convincingly argued that a person may not utilize a play frame at all; instead she may

trick another person by keeping her playful attitude concealed, thereby keeping the play mood all to herself. Rather than a frame, I much prefer Schechner's description of play mood acting as a "net" (Schechner 1988). I see the metaphor of a net as a description of how a mood can envelope a person or a group of people and potentially change their appraisal of the context into a potential space where alternative meanings are explored. Similarly, anthropologist Peter Stromberg described how people get "caught in play," including how entertainment ensnares a person in an imaginative reality or alcohol and cigarettes can lure young person into an alternative identity (Stromberg 2008; Stromberg 2009; Stromberg 2012). Likewise, anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann described an "imaginative fabric" that provided a bounded play context where witches she met learned to practice their magic and tolerate the ambiguous outcomes of their spellwork (Luhrmann 1991). Anthropologist Robert Desjarlais described the ecstasy of chess players engrossed at their chessboards who enter into a "socialized trance," as one does in an engrossing conversation, sport, or performance; and yet he questioned the idea of play as a bounded phenomenon (Desjarlais 2011). From these perspectives, I see play as intimately tied to context, especially those contexts that effectively frame, catch, lure, or envelope a person or group of people. Yet, primarily I see play as a place one learns to inhabit in one's mind by activating certain brain pathways and potentiating new ones, and then reinforcing these pathways again and again. Play is a subjectivity, a way of feeling about one's relationship with the world. Actors, their audience members, drug-users, magicians, and chess players all seek to elicit this mood—a feeling of unlimited possibilities.

Building upon this idea of play as a mood, it becomes possible to talk about what this mood motivates people to do, and therefore what it accomplishes in the life of a person, for a particular society, and for a species. Historian Johan Huizinga identified a "play-element" in

humans that drives our interest in certain types of experiences—challenges, uncertainties, competition, improvisation, and innovation—while repetition eventually cements those experiences into institutional forms, from games to governments (Huizinga 1955; Malaby 2009a). Moving from this observation of a human drive to play, I am suggesting that we conceptualize play as a feeling, akin to sexual desire, that motivates people to pursue novelty, invent practices, and construct contexts that are likely to elicit and strengthen that feeling. For some people, adopting risky or experimental behaviors seems to heighten this feeling of unlimited possibility and further reinforce a tendency to pursue peak experiences. Through repetition and reproduction of cultural practices and contexts that support a mood of play, eventually meanings can be derived, habits can be established, and institutions can solidify, but at the outset people may be motivated to act in the pursuit of an elusive, seductive, absorbing mood of play that seems to have no purpose and no meaning. Francis Steen and Stephanie Owens have labeled play as “evolution’s pedagogy,” a cognitive mode of pretend play “designed to make use of surplus resources in a safe environment to train strategies for dealing with dangerous or expensive situations that have not yet occurred” (Steen and Owens 2001). In a similar argument, folklorist Brian Sutton-Smith has described play as “adaptive variability,” suggesting that humans engage in virtual simulations of existential themes in such a way as to activate and actualize their latent potential and flexibility (Sutton-Smith 1997). From this perspective, I see play as having a developmental function in humans, a tool for learning across the lifespan, which is vastly different from the characterization in Western culture of adult play as useless frivolity. My contribution to this literature is to insert a definition of play as a mood, which—rather than encouraging one type of behavior as lust incites sexual behavior—encourages behaviors that are non-specific. Play incites an individual to feel more creative in their behavioral repertoire and to

become temporarily willing to step beyond those behaviors that have worked in the past to experiment with new ones and test them out. Such experimental behavior can be dangerous, costly, and contradict the moral system as it stands, so it requires a special mood in order for a person to become bolder, as well as special cultural framing and safety measures for a society to tolerate it. People thus emboldened may learn something useful—they might even reinvent themselves, remake their reality, and transform their culture.

Conceptualizing play as mood that is shaped by and shaping culture, I have endeavored to answer Clifford Geertz's call for anthropologists to examine mood and motivation, wherein he defined *moods* as temporary states of mind that vary in intensity, but have no goal, while *motivations* refer to a goal (Geertz 1973b; Throop 2009). In his classic article on play Geertz coined the term "deep play" to describe the mood of Balinese men gambling at cockfights; as he struggled to make sense of the men's behavior, especially the irrationally high bets they made on very unpredictable games, he concluded that playing was a way of making meaning (Geertz 1973a). I think that the primary motivation of most players is not making meaning—although interviews and narrative data may lead one to this interpretation—rather I think that in the moment a person can be motivated to push the boundaries of what is safe and reasonable as a way of deepening and intensifying a mood of play. As I seek to answer Geertz's call to examine mood and motivation, I see myself as departing from the lineage of Geertz, who has a reputation for being unpsychological. Instead I see my work as developing a neuroanthropological theory of play (see Lende and Downey 2012 on "neuroanthropology"). I agree with Malaby, who studied gamblers in Greece and his assertion that Geertz's emphasis on play as a way of making meaning was a necessary counterpoint to the materialists' position that play is pointless, but that rather than replace one form of reductionism with another, we ought to consider more proximate causes

and consequences of playing (Malaby 2009a). Following Malaby's approach, I see a mood of play as a more proximate motivation than the pursuit of meaning. Meaning is a social construction that can help a person to make sense of and justify their pursuit of a favorite play practice. But if the urge to play does not make sense, it may initially be comprised of feelings produced by a game or context that ensnares a person in play's net, thereby emboldening her to overcome whatever risks and obstacles (mental or external) stand in her way in order to keep playing and to keep her in a mood of play.

I maintain that a neuroanthropological understanding of play as a mood, in fact, explains more of players' seemingly bizarre, risky, irrational, and self-defeating behaviors. It may also help us to understand ordinary sociocultural commitments, how people in general become embedded in what Sherry Ortner called "serious games," a metaphor she used to describe the various projects, dramas, and narratives in which people find themselves enmeshed in relations of power (Ortner 1996:12). Ortner was intent on modifying the word "game" with the word "serious" in order to counteract the playful implications of describing life as game. I, however, aim to reinsert the concept of playfulness back into "serious games" in an effort to understand the psychological development of a person who becomes motivated to participate in any game, project, drama, narrative, practice, or context. One person gets into a mood of play during a game of chess, another by playing the stock market, another by teasing their classmates, and another by dancing in the desert under the stars to electronic dance music. From a neuroanthropological perspective I see little difference between these activities, except the value that society places on them by labeling them differently (a game, serious work, mean, and inconsequential) and the effect that such labels have on a person's disposition towards experimenting and finding an activity that suits their particular mind-body.

My ethnographic approach is to focus on individual people and their development, but eventually I believe that my work will offer insight into relations of power and psychosocial adaptation—especially the extent to which a mood of play can be used to transform a person’s habits, attitudes, and dispositions in a struggle that has the potential to liberate a person from an extant power structure as she is drawn into the creation of an alternative one with different requirements. A transformation of practice requires a person to take reality lightly, to overcome constraints in the world and barriers in one’s own mind, to become willing to experiment with new beliefs and behaviors, and open to adopting the ones that work. The lightness, the willingness, and the openness that is necessary for a transformation to occur is fostered by a mood of play. In my opinion, play is a very serious game indeed.

Dark Play

The mood of play I am attempting to describe is not necessarily playful. It is not necessarily silly, light, and pleasurable. Themes can be dark and emotions can become negative and turbulent. Dark play, as defined by Schechner, is play that is risky, dangerous, or cruel (Schechner 1988). There are many examples of dark, edgy play at Burning Man, where people push the limits of civility, safety, and rationality. Because of these activities people get hurt. People get offended. People become obsessed and push their bodies to exhaustion and then become ill. Examples of a person becoming caught up in dark play can demonstrate how risk may work to get a person into a mood of play and heighten that mood. Yet dark play works precisely because it is situated on an edge, over which that mood may be suddenly extinguished all together.

Dark, edgy play is not all there is at Burning Man, however. People have opportunities to find forms of play that are effective for their particular mind. No one has to conform to one genre of play. For example, I interviewed a man named Eduardo, who often volunteered at the Hug Deli. When he donned the apron and stood behind the counter, he was transformed into a deli worker who offered people one of several types of hugs on a menu in exchange for two compliments. In this world he disregarded the cultural script in which an adult man would comport himself in a serious manner and spend his time in productive ways, which increase his wealth or physical fitness. Instead, Eduardo expressed a powerfully joyful and contagious mood of play while he dispensing hugs. He practiced this form of play not just at Burning Man, but also at other events in Los Angeles. Although this is not an example of dark play, it is risky play nonetheless. By acting in manner that is exceedingly playful, Eduardo risked social capital. He risked being labeled silly, irrational, immature, and maybe even insane. He acted in contradiction to the dominant culture, which labels the Hug Deli as a frivolous and irrational pursuit, a waste of time. Play is rarely safe. It often involves some risk.

At Burning Man some people prefer the daytime, when it is hot and more people are being silly and joyful and are engaging in safer forms of play. Others prefer the nighttime, when it is cold and darker forms of play predominate. At night is when the fires are lit. There is a certain kind of thrill that comes only at night, when a person explores Black Rock City on foot, alone, and meeting strange things and strangers in the dark. People who prefer dark play seem to need more risk to get caught in play's net, more danger and naughtiness. Perhaps they do this because it helps them to overcome the stigma associated with sillier forms of childlike play. Dark play is effective because it teeters on the edge of play and not play, as risk threatens to heighten or extinguish the mood. Dark play at Burning Man includes playing with fire and explosives,

using mind-altering drugs, drinking in excess, sadomasochism, heckling and playing pranks, stealing, and battling in a place called the Thunderdome. A person who engages in what I consider edgier, more dangerous forms of play may gain social capital within the context of Burning Man in the eyes of observers who admire his skill. However, it is also possible to lose social capital in the eyes of people, both inside and outside this context, who think the person is taking too great a risk. And inevitably someone will think that he has crossed the line from safe to unsafe, from funny to cruel, from eerie to scary, from play to not play.

It can be difficult to get into a mood of play and it should be. Once in the mood, a person becomes more gullible, more suggestible, more willing to try new things, and more willing to take risks. Although this willingness and openness can help a person to learn and to be more creative, it is not a state of mind that should be entered into lightly. It is a vulnerable state of mind. Schechner understood that yielding to a mood of play is not an automatic process. A person must feel secure at the outset. Though “once play is under way,” Schechner wrote “risk, danger, and insecurity are part of playing’s thrill” (Schechner 1988:5). People who are attracted to darker forms of play seem to have a higher play threshold. It may be harder for them to enter into this mood, but once they find a practice that works and they become caught in play’s net, they may become intensely absorbed in an extraordinary experience. They may comport themselves in a sober and serious manner or they may become quite playful and extraordinarily enthusiastic. They may seem unconcerned about bodily and emotional injuries and the judgments of observers. Some dark players seem particularly driven to part with ordinary reality, to become caught in a kind of a trance that focuses attention on a limited sphere of reality, and allows the brain to process information as if that playscape was the entire universe. That playscape is like a laboratory or a dream, where a person can engage in playful experimentation, disconnected from

ordinary social, cultural, and moral frameworks. When the dark player comes back from his experimental trance, he may or may not find his reputation and his body intact.

The Thunderdome is the epicenter of dark play at Burning Man. It is a dome-shaped gladiatorial arena, where two people can go to fight each other. Because it involves violence, which is almost non-existent at Burning Man, The Thunderdome is one of the more extreme examples of dark play at Burning Man. The dome is a recreation of the post-apocalyptic Mad Max movie set (Miller and Ogilvie 1985). Like the movie version, Black Rock City's Thunderdome is crawling with onlookers climbing over the huge metal dome, peering down at the fighters, and clapping and crying out for violence. People can and do get hurt in the Thunderdome.

In 2009 my brother was injured in one of these battles and subsequently patched up in one of the city's medical stations. He and my research assistant spontaneously volunteered to be suspended from the dome in two elastic harnesses and to hit each other with padded weapons. I was surprised that he had not considered injury to be a possibility when he entered the dome to fight and I was angry that he had taken such a risk and was injured. His battle was recorded and posted on YouTube, and I viewed it after the event. In the video I saw him gracefully spinning, swinging, somersaulting, and laughing—clearly enjoying this opportunity to be suspended from the air and experience a lighter relationship with gravity. His opponent, on the other hand, appeared intent on actually winning the battle. He kept his feet firmly planted on the ground, comported himself with great seriousness and earnestness, protected his body, held onto his bat with two hands, and swung it as if fully intending to hit his target. These two fighters were playing very different games, but their bats were landing on each other's bodies, nonetheless. One appeared to be seriously fighting and the other engaged in a pretense of fighting in order to

fly through the air. Both appeared deep in a mood of play, like Balinese men at a cockfight (see Geertz 1973a on "deep play"). But unlike the Balinese, neither claimed a victory at the end of the battle. These were two peers playing a thrilling, dangerous game together inside a surreal, dome-shaped playground. Neither needed a win to pronounce the experience a success. A powerful mood of play was enough for them both.

My brother considered the fight to have been a peak moment. He associated the experience, not with *Mad Max*, but with "The Fight Club" (Fincher 1999). Through his fight and his injuries, my brother was able to embody the Edward Norton and Brad Pitt film about friends fighting each other in underground clubs, where male aggression is channeled, capitalism is disrupted, and alternative selves are given free reign. From his perspective, as a young man who had never been in a fistfight, the experience was transformational, the risks were acceptable, and he was proud of himself. From my perspective, the Thunderdome is an example of dark, risky play. Like Clifford Geertz, who had trouble understanding the irrationally high bets placed by Balinese men during cockfights, I cannot easily relinquish my belief that violence and cruelty are always to be avoided (see Geertz 1973a on "irrational"). Among all the ways to play at Burning Man, I consider fighting in the Thunderdome to be too extreme. Nonetheless, I sometimes find myself drawn to the lights of the Thunderdome in hopes of finding a battle in progress there.

Taking an ethnographic perspective on adult play practices at Burning Man, this dissertation will continue to explore a range of boundary-crossing behaviors. Examples of dark play, play that can be perceived as risky, help me to make the point that play is subjective and affects a person's mood and cognition. Play is a state of mind that varies, not only from person to person, but in the same person from moment to moment.

CHAPTER TWO

A Study of Transformation

Molly told me that Burning Man was a “transformational experience.” In 2008, she drove in a caravan following her new campmates from Los Angeles, California to the event in Northern Nevada. The caravan included several personal vehicles and an 18-wheel semi-trailer truck the group had rented to transport their camp’s supplies and structures to the Black Rock Desert. After passing through the tiny town of Gerlach, they reached the edge of an enormous, dry lakebed ringed by majestic mountains. Following signs to the event, they turned off the road and drove out onto the flat, cracked surface of the playa, where there was no vegetation, just miles and miles of flat earth made of fine, white, powdery, alkaline dust. The caravan passed through the Gate, where Molly presented her ticket and volunteers searched the vehicles for ticketless stowaways. Then the caravan finally arrived at the Greeters’ Station.

In the following excerpt from our interviews, Molly described being welcomed by the Greeters. She felt intense anticipation waiting in line, before it was finally her turn. She got out of the car and was greeted warmly with many hugs—some of the Greeters were naked. After asking if there were any “virgins” in the car, they guided her and another newcomer through the initiation ritual, which involves ringing a loud bell and lying on the ground making angel shapes in the playa dust. For Molly this was a beautiful, magical welcome to a place that became her new home. With enthusiasm and nostalgia building in her voice, she told me about her initiation:

*And all of our friends gathered around.
And watched us roll in the dust
And ring the bell.
And my friend C. was taking pictures.*

*And <Laughter>
I got hugs all over
from people that were naked,
that I've never met before.
And it was just...
It was the start to greatness.
It was kind of like
you recognized that life was
kind of gonna be different,
for the next week at least,
if not forever.
...And it really kind of was.*

Molly's voice trailed off dramatically at this last sentence. She felt that her life had changed after she went to Burning Man. She expressed joy, enthusiasm, and optimism when she talked about the event, her experiences there, and the transformation that it had generated. Molly's eyes sparkled and she spoke exuberantly about her plans to go back to Black Rock City the very next year, and every year after that.

(Molly's joyful story of arriving at Burning Man contrasts sharply with another story told to me by a hairdresser I met in Los Angeles, who was from South America and preferred life in New York City. As he cut my hair and smoked cocaine, he told me about how he had gone to Burning Man once and fled the Greeters' Station in revulsion. The man had driven there from Los Angeles wearing a nice linen suit, driving a fancy car, and intending to hear a particular DJ spin at the event. When "naked hippies" accosted him with hugs, getting dust on his clothes, he was appalled. He turned the car around and drove right back to Los Angeles without ever entering Black Rock City.)

Molly's eyes sparkled, she giggled and laughed as she sat on the edge of her bed in her North Hollywood apartment during our first interview. She went to Burning Man for the first time the previous summer, when the official theme of Burning Man was *American Dream*. Our monthly interviews began in the winter of 2009 as the economic recession began spiraling out of

control. Molly was 27 and pursuing her dream in Hollywood working as an actress. She also worked two other part-time jobs—one as an assistant and another as an administrator. Molly had been born in Britain and had lived in a conservative neighborhood in Philadelphia. She had majored in acting in college in upstate New York. She said that studying theater had already helped her to overcome her shyness and to become more creative and open; but that she was not the kind of unconventional person that was certain to go to Burning Man and love it. She heard about the event (and met her campmates) through a college friend, whose intense enthusiasm for the event surprised her. This positive report led Molly to overcome her reticence about camping and give it a try.

After only one week in the desert, Molly came to regard Burning Man as her community. She referred to herself as a “burner,” and spoke of her campmates as her new “family.” She expressed sincere affection for them and other burners. Most of her campmates lived in the Los Angeles area and so their relationships continued to grow and deepen over the year. They rented a cabin near Big Bear Lake and spent Thanksgiving there together. Molly’s camp communicated over email, sometimes a whole series of emails came in one day. And so Molly’s inbox became filled with plans for the camp for the coming year, invitations to local events, and snarky comments whizzing back and forth. Molly could not yet dish it out like her new friends could, but she was getting used to the joking, and was enjoying it as an expression of love. As a single child, she assumed that this was the sort of teasing that occurs among brothers and sisters—and she was glad to finally have some of her own.

Molly had been particularly fond of activities that involve motion, such as when she encountered a swing at Burning Man and saw performers who danced with two balls of fire, spinning them around on chains. With the help of two campmates, Molly started learning how to

spin fire herself. She practiced for me there in her bedroom, holding onto the strings of her battery-operated poi, one in each of her hands. She twirled the balls around in the air and tried not to hit herself in the head. Molly was reticent to actually light anything on fire until she was more proficient at her spinning technique and less likely to burn herself with the flaming orbs.

Molly went back to Burning Man in 2010 and by this time her identity as a burner, a novice fire spinner, and an accepted member of her camp was secure. At the end of a yearlong series of interviews with me, I asked Molly, “What is Burning Man to you?” She said it’s “my family vacation.” Like Molly, a number of people who go to Burning Man come to regard the place as their home, Burning Man as their culture, and those who go to the event as their people. This person-centered ethnography of Burning Man seeks to describe this peculiar cultural context from the perspective of people who go to the event. It is an attempt to understand how the place can incite such intense experiences and the possibility of personal and cultural transformation.

Who goes to Burning Man?

Every year since 2004, I have been collaborating with the Burning Man organization and with other academics in the United States and Canada in order to collect quantitative survey data at Burning Man. Although quantitative data do not address my research question on transformation, statistics do provide a picture of the population as a whole. I endeavor to publish more of our data in academia journals and books. However, I have been volunteering on the Census project all these years primarily as a community service, framing my unpaid labor as a form of “participation” and a “gift” in line with the values of the Burning Man culture. Demographic information is very useful to Marian and to other organizers in their negotiations

with authorities at the local, state, and national levels. These statistics are a form of power that helps the organization to fight stereotypes about people who go to the event and to keep the event from being shut down. As a participant and an insider, I support this goal.

We call our collaborative project the Black Rock City Census. Since not everyone fills out our questionnaires, it is not actually a “census,” it is a survey. We used a convenience sample. About 15% of the approximately 50,000 or so people who attended the event in recent years opted to fill out our survey. In 2012 we improved our methodology by conducting our first random sample, systematically stopping cars at the entrance to Black Rock City. We collected data during five sampling windows from Sunday to Wednesday, which is the peak of the ingress, when most people arrive. From each carload we selected one person to include in the random sample. The total number of people sampled was 470. Below are results from this survey.

Figure 3. Demographics of Black Rock City in 2012

These population estimates were based on a selection of participants (n=470), a systematic sample of people in vehicles entering the event. (95% confidence intervals given)

	<u>Population</u>	
AGE		
Under 20 years:	4%	(1 – 7%)
20 – 40 years:	71%	(65 – 77%)
Over 40 years:	24%	(19 – 29%)
Average age:	34	(33 – 36)
CURRENT GENDER		
Female:	38%	(32 – 44%)
Male:	60%	(56 – 65%)
Both/neither/fluid:	1.5%	(< 1 – 3%)
FIRST TIME AT BURNING MAN		
	39%	(32 – 45%)
CURRENT POLITICAL PARTY AMONG ELIGIBLE VOTERS		
Democratic:	34%	(30 – 38%)
None:	33%	(26 – 40%)
Republican:	24%	(18 – 29%)
Other:	3.5%	(2 – 5%)
Green:	1.5%	(< 1 – 2.2%)
ENGLISH IS FIRST LANGUAGE		
	86%	(81 – 90%)
RESIDE IN THE US		
	76%	(59 – 93%)

Thank you to Drs. Megan Price and Patrick Ball for analyzing this data, producing the population estimates, and their help designing and conducting the random sample in 2012.

Anyone can go to the Burning Man event if they can get their hands on a ticket and make the trek to the Black Rock Desert. Many people assume that there is a certain type of person who goes to Burning Man. Perhaps they assume that everyone at the event is like me, relatively young, with countercultural leanings, crafty hobbies, and liberal political views. But as our Census results demonstrate, there is diversity with respect to age, gender, political affiliation, language, and place of origin. A certain kind of openness, a non-judgmental attitude, would seem necessary, but it is not a prerequisite for getting into the event. As one walks down the streets of Black Rock City, one encounters many different types of people and personalities. Once there, a person may abandon their assumptions about the type of person who would go to Burning Man and perhaps even their prejudices about what one is supposed to do at Burning Man. One may be surprised to realize that the cultural context is compelling for reasons that have nothing to do with politics, ethnicity, place of origin, or class.

The Burning Man event seems to have the potential to attract and transform many different types of people. While I do think that one needs an open mind to experience this transformation, often something happens at the event that can help a closed mind begin to open. For some this transformation can feel so novel and intense that afterwards Burning Man may become all that person wants to talk about. As Molly told me during our first conversation over the phone, “People who don’t get enthusiastic about much, get really enthusiastic about Burning Man.” Friends and family may find this very annoying, or it may spur them to want to go themselves and have the same life-altering experience. If a person does become an avid burner, dedicated to going home every year and bringing their adopted culture back with them, that person may start to look culturally similar to other burners with respect to dress, values, and practices—giving the impression that there is only one type of person who goes to Burning Man.

What is Burning Man?

Burning Man is an emerging culture that began in San Francisco in 1986 and took root in the Black Rock Desert in Nevada beginning in 1990. My efforts to counter stereotypes about people who self-select to go to Burning Man should not be seen as an argument against attempts to characterize Burning Man as a *culture*. The event is a product of history and has taken on a certain form over time (see Doherty 2004 for a complete history of the event). The culture that has emerged at the event was shaped by a “technoliberal” cultural logic that permeates the San Francisco Bay area in which hierarchical structures are often denounced and individual agency and open-source technologies are valorized (Malaby 2009b; Turner 2005; Turner 2009). This logic of individual initiative and open access is clearly indicated in the “Ten Principles of Burning Man” as written by Larry Harvey in 2004 as a model of what had emerged in the desert and a model for guiding the culture as it spreads to regional communities throughout the world:

Figure 4. Ten Principles of Burning Man by Larry Harvey

Radical Inclusion

Anyone may be a part of Burning Man. We welcome and respect the stranger. No prerequisites exist for participation in our community.

Gifting

Burning Man is devoted to acts of gift giving. The value of a gift is unconditional. Gifting does not contemplate a return or an exchange for something of equal value.

Decommodification

In order to preserve the spirit of gifting, our community seeks to create social environments that are unmediated by commercial sponsorships, transactions, or advertising. We stand ready to protect our culture from such exploitation. We resist the substitution of consumption for participatory experience.

Radical Self-reliance

Burning Man encourages the individual to discover, exercise and rely on his or her inner resources.

Radical Self-expression

Radical self-expression arises from the unique gifts of the individual. No one other than the individual or a collaborating group can determine its content. It is offered as a gift to others. In this spirit, the giver should respect the rights and liberties of the recipient.

Communal Effort

Our community values creative cooperation and collaboration. We strive to produce, promote and protect social networks, public spaces, works of art, and methods of communication that support such interaction.

Civic Responsibility

We value civil society. Community members who organize events should assume responsibility for public welfare and endeavor to communicate civic responsibilities to participants. They must also assume responsibility for conducting events in accordance with local, state and federal laws.

Leaving No Trace

Our community respects the environment. We are committed to leaving no physical trace of our activities wherever we gather. We clean up after ourselves and endeavor, whenever possible, to leave such places in a better state than when we found them.

Participation

Our community is committed to a radically participatory ethic. We believe that transformative change, whether in the individual or in society, can occur only through the medium of deeply personal participation. We achieve being through doing. Everyone is invited to work. Everyone is invited to play. We make the world real through actions that open the heart.

Immediacy

Immediate experience is, in many ways, the most important touchstone of value in our culture. We seek to overcome barriers that stand between us and a recognition of our inner selves, the reality of those around us, participation in society, and contact with a natural world exceeding human powers. No idea can substitute for this experience. (Harvey 2004)

As both a model of and for Burning Man, the ten principles function very well as a road map for organizers and regional communities trying to adhere as best they can to a rapidly evolving, creative counterculture in the midst of unsympathetic conservative and corporate cultures. Some readers may view Harvey's model as a utopian vision without any real world relevance. However, these values reflect a history of antiestablishment movements in the US that have rejected the legitimacy of institutional authority and celebrated social, market, and technological systems based on multitudes of people acting of their own "free will," resulting in larger, emergent entities, which are assumed to serve the public good (Malaby 2009b). As such, many participants deny, downplay, or resist the governing control of the Burning Man organization and its sometimes-bureaucratic practices, while paradoxically enjoying the liberties and creative outlets that the organization works to sustain.

"Immediacy" is a principal that is often overlooked. Rather than outlining a policy, it is a description of the experience of making contact with others, the place, and oneself. Informants often described such experiences as "synchronistic." In other New Age contexts, "synchronicity" is often defined in terms of a belief that God or the universe has a master plan. But at Burning Man it is often used to describe a feeling that the day's activities seem to be unfolding just as they should, without any effort at all. People often attributed absolute agency to "the playa," a word that means "beach" in Spanish and refers to the desert, the ground, and the dust. The playa encapsulates all the powers of wind, dust, hot days, and cold nights in the desert, as well as the awe-inspiring landscape, the temporary city, and sometimes its inhabitants, too. In grouping all these variables into a single whole, the playa becomes an omnipotent agent, that which seems to have the greatest control over the course of one's day. As a person becomes less fearful of the vagaries of the playa and becomes willing to play with it and with others there, that person may

start to feel like a wandering, wondrous child with minimal agency, but possessing many conscious and unconscious desires that are somehow met by this place and the strangers they encounter there.

I prefer to label the Burning Man event itself as a playground, as performance studies scholar Rachel Bowditch did in describing the city that is built for the event. She wrote:

Black Rock City is an enormous playground—a hermetically sealed universe bound by rules determined in advance, rules that define a temporary world of play. Burning Man is a finite game with a definitive beginning, middle and end—with finite spatial and temporal boundaries—while Burning Man culture is an infinite game that is recreated each year; opening up possibilities of endless variations within the very finite world of Black Rock City. At this level, Burning Man is a paradox: an infinite game contained within a finite one; Burning Man happens inside Black Rock City and yet extends—conceptually and in terms of the play world created—beyond its limits. Even more paradoxically, the infinitude of Burning Man is possible only when the limits of Black Rock City are accepted by all players, including those not actually part of Burning Man: the BLM, the local Nevada authorities and so on (Bowditch 2010:136).

As a playground with a small number of rules and a great many cultural practices, Burning Man is a space filled with potential and dangers. The state of Nevada and the Bureau of Land Management tolerate this disorderly playground for the revenue it generates. By calling it a playground, we acknowledge that what happens there has a loose and complex relationship with reality. While playing together on this playground, some participants may find themselves in an altered state of mind, body, and culture—and more open to the endless variations that could become a reality.

What do people do at Burning Man?

People bring many different toys and cultural practices to Burning Man. These practices can contribute to people's transformational experiences. Here I will describe the most common

and visible practices at Burning Man and the ways that they seem to affect people's state of mind:

Bicycles and Mutant Vehicles

Ordinary vehicles are not allowed at Burning Man. Most people get around on bikes, many of which are decorated. Some people elect to construct elaborate "mutant vehicles," also known as "art cars." Often mutant vehicles are built by a group of people collaborating on a project. The vehicle, once built, often returns for multiple years, becoming a familiar sight. Gas powered cars, trucks, vans, and motorcycles have been transformed into ornate pirate ships, covered wagons, UFOs, houses, sea creatures, and dragons. Many art cars play amplified dance music loud enough for those in the vicinity to hear, calling upon them to come, dance, and (if there is room) board the vehicle. Many vehicles are decorated with lights, so that they can be driven safely at night and so that they can create impressive effects visible from great distances across the desert. Some vehicles are adorned with flame-throwers, stripper-poles, or places to sit. Some serve alcohol. Hundreds of mutant vehicles are first registered at the Department of Mutant Vehicles and then meander—day and night—through the streets and open playa. The erratic movements of mutated vehicles create a constant field of unpredictable sights and sounds that uniquely characterize the playful atmosphere of Black Rock City. Drivers rarely have a clear destination in mind and so boarding a mutant vehicle is often an act of submitting to an unpredictable series of events. (See Northrup 2005 for more on "art cars" at Burning Man.)

Gift economy

Burning Man runs on a gift economy. Instead of market exchange or barter, people at the event give each other gifts of food, drinks, services, and entertainment. Vending is restricted and corporate advertising is banned. Consequently, there is no profit to be made inside this city and

there are few opportunities to use money. The only exceptions to the no vending rule are one central café where coffee drinks are sold and three locations where ice is sold. All food and supplies must be transported to the event by participants and packed out again. By keeping the logic of the marketplace out of Black Rock City, people are in many ways forced to relinquish their habitual consumer ways of relating to people, places, and things and become more comfortable with unpredictability, as well as more resourceful. (See Kozinets 2002; and Kozinets and Sherry 2005 for more on "gift economy" at Burning Man.)

Theme camps

People form camps together with friends or join existing camps with people they may or may not know. These camps can become their own little communities, featuring their own particular cultural practices and social networks. Camps range in size from a few friends camping together with a couple of tents and their vehicles to 80 or more people who collaboratively build a camp with shared structures, public spaces, and a specific theme. Any camp with a name is a theme camp. A large number of camps feature a bar where they give away free alcohol, and/or play music, usually electronic dance music, but occasionally live instrumental music. Theme camps have the option of registering with the Burning Man organization and requesting more desirable locations along major streets, such as the Esplanade, which faces the open playa and gets the most traffic. Groups of camps sometimes join together and resister as a village in order to share one or more city blocks. Theme camps and villages often display their names on signs facing the street. They may also display a schedule of events including times and descriptions of workshops, parties, classes, or other activities. All activities are free and most are open to anyone, although there are occasionally age restrictions or private parties. Camps may advertise their activities and events through radio stations and print media such as the *What, Where, When*,

which is distributed at the Greeter's Station and online. Newcomers often read this booklet intently looking for interesting things to do each day, but many discover that it can be more invigorating to succumb to unpredictability by wandering haphazardly into random camps and participating in whatever activities happen to be available there. One can always leave and keep exploring the city until one finds a camp with an activity that one finds intriguing, stimulating, or otherwise suits one's needs for the current moment.

Art

Sculptures of all shapes and sizes fill the city's blocks, the public circles, the open expanse of desert in the center of the city, and all the way out to the orange trash fence that delineates the city's outer boundary. Some are burned at the end of the event. Those that are not burned often return for many years and become a familiar sight. Participants build the majority of these sculptures, working alone or in groups, without any assistance from the Burning Man organization or monetary compensation for their time and efforts. Amateur artists display their work alongside unnamed professionals and there are no references to the artworks' market value. Many projects are surreal structures that provide shade or interactive components, such as places to draw or write a message. Some art projects feature lights or a fire, such as a hearth around which people can gather and warm themselves at night, or a fountain spewing fire over people's heads. People are often invited to touch the art, sometimes to climb on it, move it, or make sound with it. The builders create imaginative spaces for people to explore and interactive tools with which to work through personal issues or cultural themes, providing a window into the artists' minds or into one's own mind. The most impactful art pieces are large-scale sculptural installations where hundreds of people can meander, sit, or lay down in and around it. The most iconic of these is the Burning Man, located at the very center of the circular city, high on a

platform, as well as the Temple, also located along the twelve o'clock axis, farther out into the desert away from the city. Every year the Burning Man organization designs and builds the Man and ritually burns him at the end of the event in a noisy, fiery spectacle, surrounded by hundreds of performers spinning fire and with fireworks exploding overhead. Ordinary participants design and create nearly all the rest of the art at Burning Man. Artists can submit their plans to the Burning Man organization and apply for a grant to help pay for materials and transportation, but not for labor. The organization selects one such group to build the much beloved Temple, which is the greatest honor.

Mind-body techniques

There are numerous camps that offer free classes in all types of yoga, mediation, and martial arts. One often sees lone yoga practitioners performing their sun salutations as the sun peaks over the mountains each morning. Acts of devotion or prayer are common throughout Black Rock City in the context of collective or private rituals. Various religious denominations are represented at Burning Man and one can worship with any number of Christian, Jewish, or Eastern religious groups. Many participants choose to explore ritual and spirituality outside the constraints of any single religious philosophy. Mind-body practices may be used to reduce anxiety and achieve a calmer, more open state of mind. They may also be infused with a sense of celebration, make-believe, or farce that activates and/or enrages participants' emotional reactions. (See Gilmore 2010 on "ritual without dogma" at Burning Man.)

Chemicals

Alcohol, coffee, and cigarettes are the most pervasive chemicals used at Burning Man, and they appear to contribute to a heightened atmosphere of celebration, sociality, and recreation.

Marijuana may also be used for similar purposes, but is consumed much more discretely. Less

visible are illegal psychedelic drugs, such as mushrooms, LSD, ketamine, and MDMA. Their use is openly discussed at workshops on “entheogens,” a term used by proponents to redefine such chemicals as spiritual tools to connect with the unknown and increase creativity (Grey 2000). As for cocaine, amphetamines, or other narcotics, neither I have witnessed them being used, nor have I heard of anyone promoting their use at Burning Man. Those who choose to consume mind-altering chemicals may be trying to intensify the surreal, psychedelic atmosphere that already pervades in this setting. In addition to their intense psychotropic effects, illegal drugs can engender dark feelings of a sinister quality, especially at night, if one is alone or if one is aware of the risk of being arrested by law enforcement. On the other hand, some groups of friends enjoy consuming mind-altering chemicals together and it makes them feel closer. (See Davis 2005 on "the cult of intoxicants" at Burning Man.)

Body art

Many participants boldly display their bodies in creative ways. A lot of people wear elaborate homemade costumes. Some wear little or nothing at all, especially during the midday when it is the hottest. The diverse range of attire adorning the population of Black Rock City fosters an atmosphere where anything goes. It gives the impression that there are no negative consequences for breaking taboos.

Performance

Participants often perform for one another. Circus arts are common, such as walking on stilts, juggling, and performing with fire. Spinning fire is very popular at night. It is an adaptation of a Maori practice in which the performer lights two balls (poi) on fire and swings them from chains, creating circular trails of light around her body as she dances. There are other variations on fire spinning, one may use a burning staff, for example. Fire spinners are mesmerizing to watch and,

I am told, it is exhilarating to attempt. People often perform spontaneously for one another, carrying with them whatever they need to perform, such as a guitar or a flamethrower.

Performers also participate in organized, scheduled performances involving elaborate sets and hundreds of artists. Surrounded by performances, both organized and spontaneous, an individual may be inspired to join in the act and treat life like a stage. (See Bowditch 2007; Bowditch 2010; Clupper 2007a; Clupper 2007b; Clupper 2009 for more on "performance" at Burning Man.)

These are some of the things that people see and do at Burning Man. This list is meant to be general and fairly comprehensive. In the following chapters I will be more specific. By describing some specific practices from specific people's perspective, this ethnography will hopefully paint a clearer picture of what happens on the streets of Black Rock City and how certain practices can open up the possibility for a person to experience a transformation.

Previous scholarship on transformation at Burning Man

Previous research on Burning Man has situated the event at the cutting edge of social, artistic, and technological innovation. Scholars from a variety of disciplines have identified specific areas of transformative potential, documented people's narratives of personal transformation, and examined the discourse of cultural transformation that abounds in this avant-garde setting. Frequently scholars and participants wonder if the event's paradoxes contradict people's claims to have created a new social reality or transformed their lives in a meaningful way. Some visitors may even feel let down by Burning Man, thinking that it does not go far enough to change or subvert the status quo. However, contradictions do not negate the impression among Burning Man scholars that something quite radical and world altering seems to be happening at the event and as the Burning Man culture spreads to other locations. No one

can be certain if Burning Man will ultimately transform the dominant culture, or if the current system needs something like Burning Man to keep people locked in its grip. It is my opinion that a dialectical process of historical change will keep both at odds until some kind of synthesis is achieved.

One domain of transformative potential is the economy. Applied anthropologists John Sherry and Robert Kozinets suggested that Burning Man's gift economy, which operates according to generalized reciprocity, may constitute a rare escape from the hegemony of the marketplace, but then they lamented that this escape is only partial and temporary (Kozinets 2002; Kozinets and Sherry 2005; Sherry 1983). Nonetheless, they view the event as a site of resistance, which improves on, parodies, and disrupts ordinary market behavior. As I compare Burning Man to other gift economies, I see it as a revival of the North American potlatch—a playful destruction/consumption of wealth that can become heated, hedonistic, and competitive. I also see it as a season of giving—a playful sharing of wealth that is often full of caring and communal sentiment, which is becoming as vital to the economy in Northern Nevada as the Christmas gift economy is to corporate America.

A second domain of transformative potential is technology. Media and technology researcher Fred Turner studied the connections between Burning Man and Silicon Valley. He argued that the event has not only served as a site for product development, but also as a model of the social structure of new media manufacturing and a place to work through psychosocial issues that arise within that structure (Turner 2005; Turner 2009). From this perspective, I see participants becoming more technologically savvy, becoming cybernetic innovators who think outside the box, becoming more agile and creative members of a workforce that uses computers for work and play, and becoming better adjusted to the realities of our digital age. Participating

in virtual communities most of the year, they then unite annually to test their latest toys/tools in a challenging, yet supportive, setting. This actual playground is a transformative site to develop new technologies, while simultaneously developing a person's psychocultural toolkit.

A third domain of transformative potential is organizational. Sociologist Katherine Chen has argued that the Burning Man organization has shrewdly blended alternative and bureaucratic practices in order to foster creativity at the event and spread creativity to other cities through regional collectives (Chen 2005; Chen 2009; Chen 2011). Similarly, I see people innovating in the organization of their camps and other projects, but with fewer self-imposed restrictions as the Burning Man organization, which must adhere to its ten principals. Groups aimed at solving practical and artistic goals, find ways of organizing and motivating one another that have more to do with fostering good feelings and playing well together than with achievement. In his dissertation, American studies scholar Jeremy Hockett argued that people who come to the event often pursue activities that demand great effort and energy, but provide few conventional rewards and these "autotelic" experiences can effectively reassert the intrinsic value of work (Csikszentmihalyi 1975; Hockett 2004). Extending Hockett's application of positive psychology, I view Burning Man as an emerging society that is organized around the amplification of positive feelings. This society is denounced as hedonistic, but may eventually arrive at more optimal social structures and social values, which make better use of individuals' desire to seek out optimal experiences and enjoy the work that they select.

A fourth domain of transformative potential is art. The open desert is a unique setting for large-scale sculptures, leading longtime burner Louis Brill to argue that the event has fostered a new genre of art that is unrestricted by space limitations and gallery trends; and often this open-space art incorporates fire, interactivity, and unrestrained weirdness (Brill 2003; Brill 2007).

Similarly, performance studies scholars Rachel Bowditch and Wendy Clupper have both argued that a new genre of performance has emerged at Burning Man that blurs staged and ordinary reality (Bowditch 2007; Bowditch 2010; Clupper 2007a; Clupper 2007b; Clupper 2009). Like these researchers and author Barbara Ehrenreich, I see the performance culture of Burning Man as a revival of an ancient tradition of festivals and carnivals, such that play deprived people are given a rare opportunity to dance in the streets (Ehrenreich 2006:259). Clupper argued that “performative participation” in the Burning Man festival is potentially transformative, although not guaranteed, and that transformation occurs when people (1) attend, (2) become initiated participants, (3) engage with the space, (4) are moved emotionally by things that happen or people they meet, (5) are inspired to think differently about themselves, other people, or in general about the world, and (6) then undergo a transformation that can be permanent or temporary (Clupper 2007a). In these six steps Clupper has effectively described the emic perspective on transformation that can be achieved through active, visible forms of participation. I see *performing* as similar to what I refer to as *playing*. My choice of language allows me to engage with the literature on human development and social learning, as Clupper and Bowditch’s language allowed them to engage with the literature in theater studies and critical theory. We are essentially talking about the same process, although I highlight the emotional component as the key mechanism of transformation.

From my perspective, transformations are present moment changes in a person’s feelings and perceptions usually involving intense emotions; these experiences can be brief or extend over several hours and after the event these moments are fashioned into narratives as participants recount particularly moving experiences that occurred at Burning Man. I would add that such experiences are often most intense during the first, second, and third times a person goes to the

event. My interest in emotion stems from my observations of the collective mood at Burning Man, and especially the variation in individuals' emotional reactions to similar stimuli and in their ability to get into sync mentally with what is going on around them. In previous research on emotion at Burning Man by psychologist Kateri McRae and myself, participants that we surveyed reported using different strategies to regulate their emotions at Burning Man as compared to everyday life (McRae, et al. 2011; Synder, et al. 2013). Overall participants reported that in the Burning Man context they used less *expressive suppression* (a strategy of not displaying one's emotions that is generally associated with maladaptive outcomes), and greater use of *cognitive reappraisal* (a strategy of reassessing a situation that is associated with more adaptive outcomes). I surmise that variation among individuals' proclivity to be emotionally moved by things that happen and people they meet, and their different ways of working with that emotional arousal, may be the key to understanding why some people have only brief, temporary flashes of transformative possibilities, while others open up completely to the flow of events and allow the culture to get under their skin.

A fifth domain of transformative potential is spiritual. Anthropologist Lee Gilmore studied spirituality at Burning Man and questioned the mass media's construction of simplistic "techno-pagan" depictions of Burning Man's cultural bricolage (Gilmore 2007).

Gilmore found complexity in the experiences of those who make the annual "pilgrimage" to Burning Man in order to experience a feeling of community and to participate in open-ended "rituals without dogma" (Gilmore 2005b; Gilmore 2010). Often these rituals involve fire, an ancient symbol of transformation, catharsis, and community. A number of researchers have documented the annual building of the Temple, the use of inscription in catalyzing personal transformations, and the ritual destruction of the sacred structure at the end of the weeklong

event in a somber, cathartic, communal bonfire (Bowditch 2007; Gilmore 2010; Pike 2005; Sherry and Kozinets 2004). I see the Temple as one of the most remarkable traditions that emerged since I started attending the Burning Man event. Designed and built by participants (not the events' organizers) each year, the Temple has become a space for visitors to work through issues, especially those related to death, illness, stigma, and trauma by leaving inscriptions, building altars, and performing rituals at the site. It must be noted that not everyone who goes to Burning Man identifies with the spiritual and religious traditions that are flourishing there. I see those that identify with New Age spirituality as unknowingly following in the Protestant tradition of seeking a personal connection with the divine by breaking with established religious dogma that dictates how this connection is to be made. However, I do not care for the term "New Age," because it obfuscates the fact that this spiritual movement has been fomented by an influx of Eastern religious practices and ideas, such as meditation, yoga, and the Hindu belief that reality is played into existence. Playful spirituality at Burning Man may be an emerging synthesis of Eastern, Western, and pseudoscientific philosophies about the nature of reality.

One way scholars have analyzed Burning Man's transformational process is by applying ritual terms to people's experiences. Feelings of belonging to the Burning Man community provide examples of "communitas," for example. Many scholars have used Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner's lexicon to describe what happens at Burning Man as a ritual process, thereby validating the event as a "liminal" or "liminoid" phenomena, a "betwixt and between" place where meanings and identities can become ambiguous and fluid before they eventually morph into something new (Bowditch 2010; Clupper 2007a; Gilmore 2005a; Gilmore 2005b; Gilmore 2005c; Gilmore 2007; Gilmore 2008; Hockett 2005; Morehead 2007; Pike 2005; Sherry and Kozinets 2007; Turner 1967; van Gennep 1960[1908]). Burning Man participants have

themselves adopted these terms to interpret their culture, connect it to older cultures, and cultivate more effective transformational practices. In fact, the theme of Burning Man in 2011 was *Rites of Passage*. On the one hand I agree with the view that Burning Man is a liminal setting, situated within a larger American culture and society, a special occasion for breaking that society's rules and acting strange. But on the other hand, I see Burning Man as quickly emerging as a more flexible culture and society in its own right—one with more plastic rules than the American society that spawned it and back to which most participants must disperse once the event is over.

Even more useful than Turner's early work on rites of passage, I find Turner's later suppositions on play and the brain to be exceedingly helpful in thinking about how Burning Man might transform a person's brain, body, and culture through "ludic recombination" in a playful process of socially reconstituted realities "analogous to mutation and variation in organic evolution" (Turner 1982; Turner 1983:221). In this regard, I see myself following in Turner's footsteps to establish a neuroanthropology that explains exactly how people can become transformed by their social context. In turning away from ritual theory towards play theory, as Turner did later in his life, I am less interested in framings and passages and much more interested in the emotions and psychodynamics involved in playing. For example, one can certainly point out the frames and passages involved in the virgin's ritual at the Greeter's station. This ritual also involves acts of play, such as when a person is asked to lie down and make angel shapes in the dust. This is a form of play that children usually do in the snow. The action may activate memories from childhood and evoke a childlike feeling of wonder and openness, such as the feelings that Molly expressed to me in our first interview. I argue that this sense of wonder, openness, and suggestibility is a state of mind that is central to the transformative process. (And

it is a state of mind that my former hairdresser could not abide.) In my analysis I have endeavored to create a thick description of how the play practices of Burning Man evoke such feelings and potentiate transformations.

As I have demonstrated, most scholars have focused on particular domains of transformation. Hockett, however, took a broader perspective on the topic of transformation at Burning Man. He first attended the event in 1997 and it transformed his perception of humanity's potential; he described it as a "reflexive ethnographic experience" which gives a person some distance from their everyday lives and provides an opportunity to examine the normative structures within which they are accustomed to operating (Hockett 2004; Hockett 2005).

Reflexivity vis-à-vis Burning Man works on many levels at once. First there is the individual's experience, which is personally reflexive, as new roles are played over the course of the week and free association begins to break down the routine of mundane life in an environment of playful language and aesthetic intensity. Next there is a social reflexivity—as individuals engage in the ritualistic activity Burning Man generates, this "new" individual is then reintegrated into an also reformed social dynamic achieved by the total ensemble of the burgeoning community. This experience in turn serves to present the participants with an alternative reality that becomes juxtaposed with the so-called "real" world, as it is reentered (Hockett 2005:67).

Hockett described Burning Man as an ethnographic experience in which participants are prone to freely associate as they *play* their way through the week. I am reminded of Helen Schwartzman's analogy between children at play and anthropologists at play in the field, in which she said that both children and anthropologists are engaged in the arts of construction and transformation as they attempt to make sense (and nonsense) out of the contexts in which they move (Schwartzman 1978). From this perspective I see Burning Man as a cultural shock to a person's common sense assumptions. A person may become more reflexive and sillier. Such transformational experiences may alter a person's perspective at many different levels. In this ethnography I have

endeavored to describe how play operates at those various levels by starting with the body and working out to the associations one makes at the societal level.

I am interested in a domain of transformative potential that is essentially personal. I have heard people cite Burning Man as a turning point. In making this statement, a person may group all their experiences at Burning Man, both positive and negative, into a whole and refer to their “Burning Man experience” as a transformational event that lead them to change something—their identity, behavior, outlook, values, or priorities. Some people are so inspired by their time spent at Burning Man that their lives do indeed take a dramatically different course afterward. A person may change the direction of her career, move to a new city or become a nomad, make new friends, develop new skills or practices, or seek out different social worlds. Upon reflection, people may cite one particular moment at the event as prompting the more lasting type of transformation. The link between the transformative event and the transformation that occurs afterward is poorly understood, yet participants feel them to be inexplicably intertwined. Building on this previous literature about the creative innovations that are coming out of the Burning Man movement, I seek to understand the event’s transformative mechanism more thoroughly. I take a person-centered approach by examining the on-the-ground experiences of a small number of people who attend the event and their use of emerging cultural practices during the event. Over and above what people do at Burning Man, I am interested in how they feel when they are there, and the degree to which they are able to enter a transformational mood of play.

Psychocultural Perspectives on Transformation

Anthropologists contend that reality is, in many ways, socially constructed, as well as grounded in the material world. Thus people in different settings constitute reality in multiple

ways producing a great diversity of cultures throughout the world and varieties of cultural subjectivities even in the same community. A child learns how to construct reality by acquiring beliefs and practices from others and through experience, which affects the ways that she interacts with her ecocultural environment. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu developed a notion of “habitus” to argue that past experiences become indelibly inscribed into people’s bodies, thereby constraining their agency in accordance with the structures in their environment that have come to define their habits, schemas, perceptions, knowledge, practices, associations, dispositions, reactions, actions, and strategies (Bourdieu 1990; Bourdieu 1997). From this perspective I see Bourdieu as doubtful that a person can intentionally transform their habitus in adulthood once it has been defined by the environment and embodied by the person. Anthropologist Robert Levy, on the other hand, having conducted research on childrearing practices in French Polynesia and Nepal, concluded that the psychologies of people and the forms and structures of their communities are mutually constituted (Levy 2005). As mutually constituted, environments and psychologies affect each other. From this etic perspective, it seems more likely that people can, in fact, reconstitute their reality, construct new structures in their environment, and develop psychocultural tools that allow them to redefine and reinscribe their bodies with a different set of habitual dispositions. Although I concede that such transformations may be exceedingly difficult in adulthood, and especially if one is particularly set in one’s way.

I maintain that transformation is more likely in settings where an individual feels that there is a shared intention to become transformed, and that one can reimagine and refashion both the self and the world simultaneously. My theory of transformation draws heavily upon the framework of cultural psychologist Richard Shweder, who highlights the intentions of persons embedded within a particular “intentional world.” An intentional world is Shweder’s term for

the sociocultural environment, a reality that is real only if people direct their intentions towards it—their beliefs, mental representations, purposes, desires, and emotions—thereby allowing it to influence them and shape their intentions (Shweder 1990). Transformation appears at least possible when subjects and objects are viewed as co-constituted, functioning interdependently, identities interpenetrating. Perhaps sometimes they can undergo change together. Shweder asks that we attend to how people “actively,” “reactively,” or “passively” select their environments (Shweder 1990). From this perspective, transformation appears more likely when an individual actively selects an environment that strongly promotes and amplifies their particular intentions, rather than diminishing or violating those intentions.

In many cases, people in my study are searching for environments that will amplify both their ability to pursue their ambitions and also their feelings of connectedness to others. Cross-cultural psychologist Çiğdem Kağıtçıbaşı warns against pitting autonomy against relatedness, which she views as compatible human needs (Kağıtçıbaşı 2005; Kağıtçıbaşı 2007). In heeding her warning, I try not to assume that structures that support personal agency are in conflict with structures that foster feelings of belonging. For example, a person may actively select an environment that operates within a “liberal” cultural logic, in which the ambitions of that individual may be valued and amplified. Simultaneously, a person may actively select an environment that operates within a “communal” cultural logic, in which the emotional needs of individuals to feel safe and connected to others are valued and amplified. A person may intend to transform their lives in multiple directions when they, for example, choose to go to Burning Man, join a theme camp, cultivate a place in a community, or pursue relationships with others. In this way, many of the transformations I have observed look very much like Kağıtçıbaşı’s

proposed model of a healthy, well-adapted individual, which she calls the “autonomous-related self” (Kağıtçıbaşı 2005; Kağıtçıbaşı 2007).

My theoretical perspective on transformation has been shaped by the concept of “possible selves,” a term coined by Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius, and further developed by psychological anthropologist Steven Parish (Markus and Nurius 1987; Parish 2008). Parish defined transformation as the remaking of the self and possible selves as the different ways organizing a person’s life, the range of which may narrow or expand, depending upon trade-offs among what a person is, what they could become, what the sociocultural matrix can support, and what must be. Parish concluded that suffering and illness can prompt a search for a possible self and heighten a person’s awareness of multiple models of self that will help a person to adapt to the world and cope with the unknown.

Many psychological and medical anthropologists have addressed the topic of transformation in their work on illness and healing (Csordas 1997; Danforth 1989; Desjarlais 1992; Good, et al. 2007; Koss-Chioino 2006; Ozawa-de Silva 2006; Parish 2008). In these works, I see suffering and illness as coming, often unexpectedly, and forcing a change by dramatically shifting the trade-offs among different possible selves. I see my project as addressing the same existential themes in a different context. Extending the concept of possible selves, along with Shweder’s concept of intentional worlds, I examine how a person directs their intentions towards the project of living and the remaking of the self—often in moments of existential crisis and transition when a person is thrust into a particular world, as well as through opportunities to actively select environments that foster intentional states. My work conceptualizes transformations as persons working on finding solutions to the problem of living.

In this study, a person plays simultaneously with selves and worlds, often intentionally, hoping to find a balance between the person she can become and the life she can create for herself.

Mixed method, person-centered ethnography

My fieldwork was an eclectic mix of methods. I used various forms of participation, observation, and asking questions to study transformation at Burning Man. My goal was to triangulate my data and arrive at a well-informed analysis of what was happening in a person's mind and in their lives. In this dissertation I present data from two styles of interviewing, from journals written by my informants, from observations from my many years of participation, from video-recorded observations, and from quantitative surveys.

Most of the information for this dissertation comes from interviews conducted in the Los Angeles area. If not otherwise noted, the reader can assume that they are reading about one of the sixteen informants that I interviewed for an hour, once a month, for a year, beginning in 2009. I usually conducted the interviews in the person's home, occasionally on the phone or through video-conferencing. The kind of interviewing method that I used is called person-centered interviewing (Hollan 2001; Levy and Hollan 1998). I did not bring a list of questions to our interviews, just a recording device. During our interviews, the interviewee directed the dialogue herself. My goal was to help her feel safe talking to me and to learn to trust that I would not judge her. This extremely open-ended style of interviewing is based on psychoanalysis. The point of using this method was to get my informant to talk about what was salient for her, so as to minimize my impact on the data collected.

During my pilot research in 2006 and 2007, my research assistants and I interviewed people at Burning Man using a semi-structured style of interviewing in which we asked everyone

the same set of questions. I found that people could be highly suggestible and the questions I chose to ask produced very strong interviewer effects. I had originally planned to study the gift economy at Burning Man and so we asked many questions using the phrase “gift economy” and we asked about giving and receiving “gifts.” One woman, who was at the event for the first time, came back a few days after our interview to thank me for being the first to tell her about the gift economy. She thanked me profusely for this information, and she gave me credit for initiating a series of transformative experiences for her. It was then that I realized just how powerful interviewer effects could be in this setting.

In choosing to use person-centered interviewing, to not limit myself to a study of the gift economy, and to conduct my research where my informants resided, I endeavored to get at their *lived experience*. Consequently, my informants talked to me about more than just Burning Man. For instance, after telling me about her experience at the Greeter’s station, Molly went on to talk freely about her life. She reflected on her feelings by letting her mind go where it wanted to go, rather than where she thought I wanted it to go.

I interviewed Molly because she was planning to go to Burning Man in 2009 and I hoped to document any transformative experiences that she might have during that year. In the spring of 2009, Molly told me that she was pregnant. The pregnancy was an unexpected event. Initially she was distraught. But because of a previously diagnosed medical condition, she was also pleased to learn that she could conceive. Molly decided to accept this opportunity to become a mother and she hoped that she could carry the child to term. She even expressed willingness to become a single mother if the father did not want to be involved. Unfortunately, Molly miscarried four months later. Molly did not become a mother, but the pregnancy transformed her nonetheless. During our interviews she explored many hypothetical possibilities for herself and

her child (the one she lost and those she might have in the future), as well as possibilities for her career and her relationships with the father, her parents, her roommates, and her campmates from Burning Man whom she had recently cast in the role of family.

I rarely asked Molly questions, other than to follow up on something that she had just said. Mostly I would smile and nod, sometimes calmly, sometimes enthusiastically, trying to communicate understanding and empathy for her. It was easy to feel empathy for Molly as she talked about her pregnancy. I was pregnant myself during this time. One of the questions that she debated was whether or not the pregnancy should stop her from going to Burning Man that summer. As we discussed her situation, she would sometime ask me questions about myself, my pregnancy, and my plans for taking a baby to Burning Man. I tried to answer simply and not to reveal too much personal information, although my condition made that exceedingly difficult. I often suspected that Molly was transferring meanings onto me, onto my body, onto my life and marriage, onto my Burning Man experience, and eventually onto my baby. I did my best to let these transferences roll off me, rather than engage with her assumptions and curiosities. I resisted mightily the urge to question her about how she would work when the baby came and how she expected motherhood to affect her career path. In retrospect, I realize that I was engaging in countertransference. As I worried about Molly's decision, I was avoiding thinking about how motherhood would affect my own career path. But by keeping my comments, hypotheses, and concerns to myself, the interviews could stay focused on Molly, her life, and her perspective. Molly appeared to enjoy our conversations, even when she was talking about painful realities, but especially when she was talking about Burning Man. Molly spoke very openly with me from the beginning. She did not seem overly bothered by the unbalanced turn taking and that our conversations wandered far from the topic of Burning Man. Not everyone found it so easy to talk

openly, to be honest and vulnerable with me, and to veer off topic. For some it took several meetings before they became comfortable talking to me about their personal lives and started sharing their secrets with me. A couple of my informants never really seemed to open up, and they were both men.

Molly was one of the seventy-two people who signed up to participate in this study in 2008, at an event called *Decompression*. Regional Burning Man communities organize Decompression events every year in many cities in the US and abroad; they are supposed to ease participants' return back to "the default world" (as the world outside Burning Man is labeled) and extend the Burning Man culture to others. The event where I recruited informants happened one month after Burning Man in a park near downtown Los Angeles. My research assistants and I set up a table with a sign-up sheet. At the same table, we were displaying data from the Black Rock City Census and recruiting volunteers to help with that project. I sent emails to all the people who had signed up for the research project and I scheduled phone interviews. While recruiting informants in this way, I made sure that there was diversity in my sample with respect to gender, age, and number of years attended. I made sure, as best I could, that each person was willing to commit to being interviewed once a month and that they actually planned on going to Burning Man in 2009. Eventually I had narrowed it down to eighteen informants for my study.

Some informants dropped out of the study before it was over. One dropped out early on after missing two scheduled interviews. Six informants decided, as the event approached, that they were, in fact, not going to Burning Man in 2009. In two cases, they were going to smaller, regional Burning Man events that year, so we continued those interviews. In four cases, the informants gave financial reasons for not going to Burning Man, and we agreed to stop their interviews. Two of these people had never been to Burning Man before—one decided to spend

her discretionary income on plastic surgery and the other spent it on rescuing dogs. I was very disappointed that these interviews in particular had come to naught. I desperately needed data on the experiences of first-timers in order to answer my research question, so I replaced them with four additional informants two months before the event. These I recruited through the Los Angeles regional Burning Man community email list. One of them dropped out of the study after going to Burning Man and after missing one scheduled interview with me. She never told me why. In the end, sixteen out of the twenty-two people I recruited participated in this study for the full year.

Figure 5. Study participants

Demographic data was collected and interviews initiated in early or mid 2009.

Years Attended	Pseudonym	# Interviews	Gender	Age	Married	Children	Political Party Affiliations *	Ethnicity	Job	Note
0		6	F	27				white	playground sales	Dropped
0		5	F	34		Y		white	nurse	Dropped
0	Gary	14	M	37			Repub, Dem	white	lawyer	
0	Cynthia	17	F	29			Democrat	white/Italian	sound editor	
0	Dylan	10	M	25				white	graphic/web design	
0		2	F	27			Democrat	white	ambulance dispatcher / student	Dropped
1	Robin	12	F	40			Democrat	white	nurse	
1	Molly	12	F	27			Repub, Dem	white/British	actor / administrator	
1	Dean	13	M	25			unaffiliated	white/Jewish	production coordinator	
2		6	M	28				white/Latino		Dropped
2		8	F	34				black	massage therapist	Dropped
2	Glen	13	M	50	Y	Y	Democrat	white	paralegal / MFA student	
3	Gabriel	12	M	38	Sep	Y	Democrat	Latino/Mexican	customer service / business owner	
4	Morris	13	M	67	Y	Y	Repub, Dem	white/Jewish	retired aerospace systems engineer	
4	Mick	14	M	36		Y	Indep Party	white	service technician	
4	Eduardo	11	M	34				Latino	electrical engineer	Regional
7	Linda	13	F	34	Y			white	social worker / government administrator	
8	Anna	13	F	32			unaffiliated	white	project coordinator	
8	Stan	13	M	37	Y			white/Jewish	government communications	
10		1	M	26				White	production / physical therapy	Dropped
11	Moonbeam	11	F	35				White	performer / designer	Regional
11	Danny	14	M	45	Y	Y	Democrat	White	writer / business owner	

* Exact question worded: *Have you ever been a member of the following political parties?*

In addition to the interviews, I asked my informants to let me observe them at the Burning Man event. They all agreed to be videotaped for one hour and we schedule a meeting time. All, except one, showed up for that meeting. When an informant arrived at our camp, my research assistant Maher greeted her and asked her to fill out a Census questionnaire. In this way I could compare her answers on the survey to the population level data we were collecting. After filling out the survey, the informant did a brief 15-minute interview with me in the privacy of my trailer. Then I introduced her to my other research assistant Taylor, who followed her for one hour with a video recorder. It was up to each informant to decide what to do during that hour. The virgins, those who were at Burning Man for the first time, had a much harder time deciding what to do. They seemed more awkward and quiet than the experienced burners. These recorded observations gave me rich information on the informant's ways of interacting with people, objects, and the place, than was possible to glean from our conversations about the event.

Most of my subjects framed our relationship as a form of "participation" in Burning Man. They saw me as another burner to whom they were gifting information that could be useful to me in my research. In line with this ethos, my research was also a gift, one that would ultimately go back to the community in the form of a book and articles. During our interviews, I was often quiet, absorbing my informants' anxieties and frustrations, as well as their memories and fantasies about Burning Man. I experienced a sense of illusion between us, as I do with burners in general, as we talked about Burning Man. This illusion is based on an assumption that we who have been to Burning Man have something in common. Although our experiences at the event may have been very different, we imagined that we shared similar experiences and values, which people who have never been to Burning Man might not understand. In this way burners are like members of a diaspora or ex-patriots living abroad, who find comfort in each others' company.

As my informants shared stories with me about Burning Man, we not only demonstrated our common language and values, but we co-constructed an intersubjective reality that posits us as members of the same Burning Man community.

In this illusory space of shared Burning Man experiences, I collected data on how people changed over that year. I learned about each person's life history, or at least the parts that seemed relevant for them to tell me, and how that history and the present articulated with what had and might happen at Burning Man. Often changes came in the wake of struggles—cancer, divorce, financial uncertainty, parenting, death, adultery, moving, and mental illness. Such situations demanded that my informants reassess their understandings of the people, places, and things in their lives. Some successfully changed the meanings and values they ascribed to themselves, to their bodies, and to those of others, in order to change. Change also came in the wake of Burning Man, which was also a struggle, but it could be a hopeful one, which presented an opportunity to remake one's life, at least for one week, and fill it with whatever one thought a life ought to be filled. At Burning Man and in the Los Angeles area, each individual in this study was struggling to find congruence between the persons they could become and the lives they could create for themselves there.

In an interview in July of 2009 that alternated between laughter and crying, Molly described losing the baby, the end of her relationship with the father, and letting go of a future, in which she had intended to take care of someone else and create more stability and security in her life. Molly's life, in many ways, had reverted back to the one she had before she became pregnant. She went back to a career that lacked stability and security, back to a Molly that was bubbly and happy around her friends, back to "selfish" activities, and back to her plans to go to Burning Man. So she was focusing her attention on getting work and saving up money to support

her “Burning Man habit” (as she jokingly referred to it), a habit that cost 4% of her income.¹ Although things were falling back into place, Molly was also aware of a darker version of herself, one that had emerged after many negative experiences in a row—feelings of sickness that had come with the pregnancy and the miscarriage, a car accident, a relationship that had let her down, and friends who had seemed so supportive at the time, but had, in fact, thought that her plan to have a baby was a terrible idea. Yet her relationships with others had deepened, especially with her Burning Man friend, a fellow first-timer with whom she had passed through the Greeter’s Station and had performed the virgin’s ritual together. Although it had been a dark, difficult journey, through these recent experiences, Molly had a glimpse of a healthier life, in which she took better care of her body and did not push herself so hard, as well as a more clearly defined vision of herself as a mother with a supportive partner. Now those possibilities seemed more real.

Play Practices at Burning Man

My research will demonstrate that some participants are able to use the Burning Man event to explore possibilities in a playful state of mind. Those who embraced the playful ethos of Burning Man and learned new play practices, as Molly did, often approached their struggles with more flexibility, greater tolerance for unpredictability and ambiguity, and more willingness to undergo a change.

Viewing the recording that my research assistant took of Molly, I observed her joining in an impromptu game of foursquare with three strangers. Foursquare is a simple ball game that

¹ On her Census form Molly wrote that she made \$25,000 in 2008, that she spent approximately \$1040 on Burning Man in 2009 (\$240 on her ticket, \$360 on camp dues, \$240 on travel and a hotel, and \$200 on costumes and other fun supplies), which is 4% of her income.

children in the US play on school playgrounds. Without any hesitation Molly played foursquare when the sacred playground presented her with an opportunity. And others were eager to play with her and keep the game going. Some may think that this was a silly act and a silly observation for me to report. However, I see her disposition towards playing and entering into a mood of play with others as an impressive sign of her psychosocial wellbeing. The openness and willingness that Molly displayed as she slipped easily into that foursquare game was the same openness and willingness, which she displayed in all areas of her life—in her interviews with me, and as she walked down the streets of Black Rock City, and I assume these characteristics were helpful in her work as an actress as well. In the theater Molly had developed her ability to enter into an uninhibited state of mind, to go with the flow. At Burning Man and in life she was able to adjust to unpredictable circumstances and process her emotions and experiences effectively. These skills helped her when she was thrust into a world that she did not select. Molly was distressed, when she learned that she was pregnant and even more distressed when she miscarried. However, distressed as she was, Molly was still able to imagine a better future when she would get pregnant under better circumstances. In a time of crisis, she was able to rally her friends around her to support her, and over time to evaluate their responses to learn who was the more honest and reliable friend, who truly supported her intentions. Molly moved from reactive orientation vis-à-vis her pregnancy and a passive orientation vis-à-vis her miscarriage to an active mode of intentionally selecting a more gratifying reality. As she played with selves and worlds, describing hypotheticals out loud during our interviews and inhabiting and embodying them in a mood of play at Burning Man, I saw her arriving at a more balanced, more autonomous, more related version of herself. And this was the Molly that I observed playing foursquare at Burning Man in the summer of 2009.

My field site is an ecocultural landscape that contains cultural practices that can be used to integrate aspects of a person's psychology—or at least play with them—and sometimes to achieve a more graceful transformation along various possible developmental paths. There are many opportunities to practice the mental and physical skills needed to improve one's ability to get into a mood of play. In the following chapters I will thoroughly investigate five specific cultural practices found at Burning Man and the ways that individuals used those practices, in particular developmental moments. In Chapter Three, the practice I will describe and analyze is *going naked* at Burning Man, a cultural trope that many hear about long before going to the event. In Chapter Four, I analyze a practice I refer to as *heckling*, a way of teasing strangers on the streets of Black Rock City. In Chapter Five, I describe *sexy encounters* among participants. In Chapter Six, I analyze *drinking alcohol* at the event, and in Chapter Seven, *working on* Burning Man projects. I conceptualize each practice as a form of play for the ways that it can sometimes stimulate a mood of play—or hinder it in some cases. In each chapter I will discuss how the particular play practice intersects with personal and cultural transformations, especially when people are using them intentionally to change something about themselves. Sometimes my analysis will seem incomplete, since the information I have about people is incomplete and their transformations were ongoing. With only one year's worth of data, I do not aim to prove that one of these practices, in and of themselves, produced lasting transformations. Rather my goal in chapters three through seven is to provide a thick description of this peculiar cultural context, some practices that can foster playful collective moods, and the successes and difficulties some individuals had with these practices.

In this introduction I have outlined some generalizations about some of the most visible cultural practices found at Burning Man; the practices I have selected to write about in the rest of

this ethnography were chosen for a reason. I intend that each chapter is a step towards an “ecology of mind” at Burning Man, in the sense used by anthropologist Gregory Bateson to mean a particular context made up of ideas (Bateson 2000[1972]). I selected particular practices that build out from the body towards larger social segments in space and time: from subjective, to intersubjective, to interpersonal, to personal relationships, to social groups—in this way a reader can become familiar with each part of the ecocultural landscape and different levels of analysis (see Scheff 1997 on “part/whole analysis”).

This ethnography was written intentionally with respect to form and style. I intend that the reader feel immersed in the setting, and perhaps even become transformed by reading about these play practices in such an intimate fashion. I am specifically referring to how I start each of these chapters with a second-person narrative, such as “When YOU walk down the streets of Black Rock City....” This writing style is designed to do two things. First, it emphasizes that *you*, the reader, could go to the event—if you can get your hands on this text could probably get your hands on a ticket to Burning Man—and have a similar experience to those I have interviewed. This is meant to demonstrate that there is no single *type of person* who goes to Burning Man, but a whole lot of different people having a certain *type of experience* there. Secondly, my creative writing style is a form of imaginative play that creates a certain mood. I hope to elicit in readers the same mood that many experience at the event, which opens them up to the possibility of transformation. In so doing, I hope to somewhat solve the problem that Bateson described, that some forms of knowledge are feelings, not ideas, and it may not be possible to convey them in words (Bateson 2000[1972]). Rather than judge people harshly for acting strange, I hope that you, the reader, will keep an open mind and feel somewhat playful as you read this book about this strange cultural context and the strange practices there. Even if you think my hypothesis

about play being a mood is irrational or irrelevant, I may prove it to you on a somewhat less conscious level of awareness. And one day in your sleep you may dream that you are there at Burning Man. Perhaps you are struggling to join in the fun or perhaps everything flows effortlessly. Reading or dreaming about this ethnography, I hope you will have a transformative experience—a powerful mood of play—that opens up all kinds of potentials.

In the last chapter, I take a person-centered approach and present a story of transformation from the informant I call Danny, who had been participating in Burning Man for the longest amount of time. It is difficult to connect such stories of transformation to any one practice that was learned at Burning Man, which sparked this transformation. And yet, this connection will hopefully be made clear in the end, after you have been immersed in the sacred playground and have come to appreciate how it involves a year-round process of personal and cultural transformation. There are a set of values and practices that can become embodied at Burning Man and by fantasizing about it afterward. The culture and its ethos can get under a person's skin and can help move some burners closer towards transformation, especially if they are seeking it.

CHAPTER THREE

Going Naked

When you walk down the streets of Black Rock City during the day, you sometimes see people going naked. Most people are wearing at least some clothes, often a “costume” of some sort. During midday, when the sun is brutally hot, people wear fewer clothes, stripping down to almost nothing. Occasionally you see someone that is completely naked. You may walk through a camp and see someone standing in front of a tent changing his or her attire—flashing a boob or a butt cheek. Or perhaps you catch someone fully nude, taking a shower in the middle of the camp. This sprinkling of naked body parts contributes to the casual, playful, titillating mood of Black Rock City, where it seems possible to break a few rules.

Quite often you encounter topless women. Perhaps a woman walks by wearing a sarong around her waist, goggles perched on her head, a backpack on her back, and nothing covering her top, except for two pieces of tape in the shape of an X across each of her nipples. You frequently see topless men without shirts and men wearing skirts. Perhaps a man walks in front of you wearing a loincloth and a big sun hat—and nothing else. Intentionally or unintentionally you may catch a glimpse of his penis between his legs. Perhaps you were watching a beautiful woman with perfectly shaped breasts dancing on the top of a bar and your eyes moved down to discover that there was also a perfectly shaped penis attached to the same body. It appears that people in this place appear unusually proud and comfortable in their own skin.

Perhaps you have never seen so much skin in all your life. This skin is covered in a fine layer of playa dust, which sometimes obscures racial differences by turning everyone the same

off-white color. How does all this skin make you feel in your body? Perhaps these naked bodies intrigue you, disgust you, and/or make you feel aroused. Perhaps you are trying to work up the courage to take off all your clothes as well. In the heat of midday it can reach unbearable temperatures, and it may start to seem like nothing for you to strip down to little or no clothing. In fact, your skin begs to be released from the constraints of fabric. Or perhaps all this flesh repulses you; and although your clothes feel sticky, they also feel very comforting wrapped around your body.

For the most part, people seem unfazed by all this nakedness. The police, for example, do not seem to mind the nudity. A sheriff drives right by a naked man and a topless woman, so apparently no one is being arrested for exposing his or her body in Black Rock City. And no one seems to be openly excited or dismayed when others are going naked. After a few days perhaps the naked people start to feel normal to you. They start to blend into the colorful, chaotic setting along with the art and the costumes. But then one day you overhear someone making derogatory comments about *shirtcocking*, which you learn is wearing a shirt, but no pants. Perhaps you have not yet spotted a shirtcocker yourself, but you can imagine how unappealing a sight it would be. You wonder if maybe public nudity is not as acceptable here as you originally thought. And then you see another naked person walk by you.

Figure 6. Respondents going naked at Burning Man in 2012

These results from the Black Rock City Census were based on a selection of respondents, a representative sample of all census forms collected in 2012 (n=2054). The population estimates were then adjusted using data from the random sample. (95% confidence intervals given)

Are you thinking about going naked at Burning Man this year?

No. I am not into that sort of thing	23.1%	(21 – 26%)
It sounds fun, but I have reservations.	21.0%	(18 – 24%)
Sure. If the opportunity arises.	27.9%	(25 – 31%)
Yes. It is a top priority while I am here.	3.7%	(2 – 5%)
I have already gone naked this year.	12.8%	(11 – 15%)
No answer / unclear answer	<u>11.5%</u>	(9 – 14%)
	100.0%	

Thank you to Drs. Megan Price and Patrick Ball for generating this sample, and their help in designing the sampling and sorting procedure.

Thank you to Dr. Dominic Beaulieu-Prévost for analyzing this data, producing the adjusted population estimates, and his help designing and conducting the Census in 2012.

Going naked as play

Going naked at Burning Man is a cultural trope about shedding conventions and inhibitions; it is a play practice that involves both breaking rules and conforming to rules about breaking rules. Earlier social theorists viewed rules as fixed and those who broke them as deviants from a society's norms, while more contemporary perspectives characterize rules as indeterminate, fluid, negotiated, and strategically constructed through social interactions. Anthropologist Robert Edgerton critiqued these contemporary perspectives, arguing that rules' plasticity had been overstated, and that every society, in fact, has firm rules controlling member's conduct that are not to be broken, as well as rules about breaking rules, which he called "rule exceptions" (Edgerton 1985). In outlining what a rule is, he defined "personal routines" as idiosyncratic rules, and "conventions" as widely shared rules of decorum (implicit or explicit) that when breached discredit a person as strange, annoying, or even dangerous. One might argue that Burning Man is a temporary, liminal site for rule breaking, especially for breaking personal routines and social conventions, and perhaps a few laws too. As the site of an emerging culture where rules are still being developed, tested, and negotiated each year, Black Rock City is an ethnographic example that fits well with contemporary characterizations of rules as fluid and strategically constructed through social interactions.

Despite the fact that only a minority is ever completely naked, nude bodies have come to characterize the event. "Going naked at Burning Man" is a cultural practice that is known to outsiders. Reports and photos of naked people appear in magazines and newspapers in "the default world," as the world outside the event is labeled, where media coverage has often sensationalized nudity and drug use at Burning Man. "Running around naked in the desert on drugs" has become a widespread characterization of what people do at Burning Man. Since

nudity is unlawful in most public settings, these reports effectively depict everyone who goes to the event as nudists and/or deviants who break the law. This media coverage contributes to the widespread stigma surrounding going to Burning Man, as well as simultaneously attracting people to the event who intend to run around naked in the desert on drugs when they get there. The spread of this cultural trope of going naked at Burning Man reproduces a culture of rule breaking. This lawless image of Burning Man does not always sit well with organizers and participants who go to the event year after year, experience it as a community with its own unique set of rules, and do not want to see their community regulated by outsiders or spoiled by antisocial behavior. On the other hand, some participants imagine Burning Man as a place where people can go wild and break all the rules, and hope it will remain that way.

With respect to attire, which is often a matter of convention, there is currently great flexibility and room for idiosyncrasy at Burning Man. Many people wear handmade “costumes,” the more creative and outlandish the better. There are camps that give away clothes and encourage creative costuming. However, there are a few rules regarding attire. For one, Burning Man organizers have banned feathers and glitter, which shed and are impossible to clean up. Secondly, they discourage corporate logos on clothes, which contradict the ban against corporate sponsorship and advertising. Nonetheless, there is a do-as-you-feel attitude at Burning Man, which translates into a wear-what-you-want aesthetic. Consequently, some people choose to go naked. And for the most part, others tolerate this choice. The authorities that police the event have, thus far, allowed people to go naked without arresting them or issuing citations. However, in 2012 Pershing county made an unsuccessful attempt to institute a festival permitting process designed to extract higher fees from festivalgoers, ban children, and regulate conduct during the event; the rural community was particularly concerned to protect children from witnessing naked

people and other immoral behavior.² The point is that going naked is controversial—both inside and outside the event. A publically displayed naked body pushes the boundaries of free expression, while at the same time constituting a salient symbol of the freedoms one can enjoy at Burning Man.

Going naked can be dark play, a risky form of play that borders on not play (see Schechner 1988 on "dark play"). It is a play practice that transpires at the edge of decency, having the power to both attract and repel. In the absence of an official policy for or against nudity from the event's organizers, there are certain preferences emerging among participants. Female nudity is more acceptable than male nudity. Full nudity is tolerated, but wearing a shirt without pants is not. This act is known as "shirtcocking." Since first hearing the term in 2008, I have heard many people making fun of shirtcockers ardently and with great repugnance. I have even seen a sign banning shirtcockers. But strangely, I have never actually seen a shirtcocker myself. While it may be possible to use this derogatory label against a woman, mostly it is used to censor men. With his unsightly member hanging down uncannily below his shirt, a man who parades himself in this way is assumed to act purposefully strange and annoying. He is believed to relish the negative attention that his action engenders with full knowledge that he is being offensive. Loud and vocal opposition to the practice of shirtcocking exemplifies how rules and rules about breaking rules can be negotiated among participants in an atmosphere of creative expression, tempered by a sense of awareness of how one's actions affect others.

As a person engages in socially and physically risky forms of play, her emotions, moods, and attitudes often change dramatically. If she is able, she may begin to experience what I call a

² Both a US district court and the Nevada state assembly opposed county's attempts to regulate the event, which takes place on federal land managed by the Bureau of Land Management (Graham 2013)

mood of play. The story of Becky that follows is a profound example of this emotional process. If a person can feel safe-enough and accepted by others, she may experience a temporary state of mind that bolsters her willingness to take risks and relaxes her habitual dispositions and associations. I hypothesize that there is a feedback loop, what psychologist Barbara Fredrickson calls an “upward spiral” (Fredrickson 2003; Fredrickson and Joiner 2002), in which this mood and the practices that elicit it can steadily increase a person’s willingness to relinquish herself to the setting and let the place and the people get under her skin. And like a wave crashing in on one’s brain, perhaps one or two days into the event, a person may finally feel like she “gets it.”

Becky

In 2002 I camped with a woman who was very overweight. Becky was obese, in fact. Becky found a ride to Burning Man online with a friend of a friend of mine. Becky and two Israeli men drove across the country in a rented RV. By the time they arrived in Black Rock City and I met Becky, she and the men had bonded over their love of music—hip-hop, reggae, and electronica. Becky impressed them with her surprising contributions to the playlist and her shared enthusiasm for listening to music.

The men set up a powerful sound system in our little camp, so that they could share their extensive collections of music with each other and with everyone in the vicinity. The people waiting in line for the port-o-potties across the street could hear our camp’s gift of music very well. Some came to visit us and profusely expressed their gratitude for the music, which had alleviated their boredom and made their wait in line surprisingly entertaining.

I did not bring any music, but I brought a lot of costumes. While we were setting up our camp, I began to take off my clothes and excitedly started changing into my first costume. Then

Becky proclaimed with deafening finality, “Let’s *not* be the naked camp!” I did not respond and neither did anyone else, but her words hung in the air like a dark cloud around my intentions to wear whatever I wanted.

Two days later, Becky had a sexual encounter with a man on an art car, and for the rest of the burn she was almost always completely naked. I was flabbergasted at the reversal in her attitude about nudity. Overnight she began exuding such immense confidence and radiating such joy that she lit up the whole RV. For hours she sat gleefully in the driver’s seat of the RV, playing music for us and for the neighborhood. Sweat was dripping off the rolls of fat on her body, as she changed the records on the record player and joyfully grooved to the beat of the music. None of the men expressed any reservations about seeing her enormous naked body and occasionally catching glimpses of her pubic hair. The men smiled and expressed gratitude for her taste in music and for her delightful attitude. Her buoyant mood was incredibly contagious, and I considered it an honor to be in such close proximity to her as she shed her inhibitions.

It was clear from both her behavior and her mood that Becky had experienced a profound transformation at Burning Man. Her awkward, overweight body had become a thing of beauty and pride, and she walked around Black Rock City during the day, as light as air, carrying just a parasol. She hoped to run into her one-time lover from the art car, but she never saw him again. I spied Becky one afternoon from a distance, sitting alone under a mushroom-shaped sculpture the size of a small tree. Her expression was so peaceful. She looked so very content and at home in her super-sized body. Becky’s transformation was the most dramatic I ever witnessed.

Transformation

In this chapter, I will present three narratives about the practice of going naked at Burning Man. As I present details on this bodily practice, I will conduct “a reading that hovers close to the body” to borrow the words of anthropologist Robert Desjarlais (Desjarlais 1992:31). To do this I may have to break a few conventions myself. Please try not to take offense. I will work hard to stay close to the person, to their experience, and to my own observations, only occasionally abstracting out to the cultural level of analysis. I will attempt to convey the felt experiences of persons encountering or engaging in this bodily practice, not just the discourse surrounding it. I will also describe the psychosocial risks, causes, and consequences of taking off one’s clothes and walking down the streets of Black Rock City.

In this chapter, I am arguing that going naked at Burning Man is a play practice that can be used to promote a transformative experience. One may feel this transformation immediately as a person yields to a mood of play. A necessary condition is that a person must feel safe to experience this feeling—protected from judgments and physical threats. So I will attend to the ways that informants handled self-conscious feelings and worked to create a situation, an intentional world, in which he or she could become comfortable in their own skin. The hypothesis that I am exploring in every chapter is that if a person is able to feel safe enough to get into a mood of play, they may become more willing and able to explore alternative versions of themselves and alternative versions of reality. In this way the Burning Man setting can function as an experimental laboratory, an occasion for making psychological, social, and cultural transformations. I maintain that playing at Burning Man can be a catalyst for lasting transformations when a person seizes opportunities to simultaneously play with both *possible selves* (Markus and Nurius 1987; Parish 2008) and *intentional worlds* (Shweder 1990), thereby

maximizing the possibility of finding a good fit between the two. In this chapter I will explore one medium with which people can play—their own bodies.

The data in this chapter will demonstrate how people may revise meanings, practices, and patterns throughout processes of personal and cultural transformation. In this chapter and the ones that follow, I focus on the lives of specific individuals and their stories of personal transformation. This ethnographic data, collected primarily through person-centered interviews, is a study of what Douglas Hollan called the “subjectivity potential” of a population, which defines the freedoms and constraints on a population’s ability to adapt to changing circumstances (Hollan 2000). More so than in other settings, people in the Burning Man community often approach meanings and cultural patterns as fluid and contested. These flexible attitudes give a person more liberty to pursue transformations and develop cultural tools in order to meet changing goals, more so than beliefs that view people and cultures as rigid, fixed entities. Despite the considerable durability of a person’s habitual dispositions, this population harnesses a potential to transform members in ways both immediate and over the long term.

The culture of Burning Man is still relatively new and in the early stages of becoming, and so each new member contributes to the size and quality of this emerging culture through their active participation and their particular transformations. People who come to Burning Man are socialized there, and they in turn socialize others. The people and the place sometimes transform a person into a new cultural subject—a “burner.” People who go to the event also find ways of transforming themselves in directions that are more personal. In these stories of transformation, we may see similar patterns, as when people develop a self that feels more *autonomous* in their comportment, as well as more *related* to others in their community . As I recognize shared cultural identities and similar self patterns, I approach development, as Thomas

Weisner does, not as stages along a linear path, but as a process that may proceed along multiple possible pathways (Weisner 2005a; Weisner 2005b; Weisner 2009). In the following narratives about going naked at Burning Man, I will examine techniques—especially the embodied techniques—that my informants employed to make it more likely that they would discover a self and a world that they could live with.

Moonbeam

Moonbeam, at age 35, had been to Burning Man eleven times when we met. During one of our first interviews, Moonbeam and I were talking about what people choose to wear at Burning Man. Moonbeam addressed a hypothetical naked man walking down the street in Black Rock City said unequivocally to that man, “I don’t want to see your wee-wee swinging around.” She spoke each word slowly and clearly in her high-pitched, angelic voice, like a teacher making sure that her pupil heard her correctly. Although a part of me fervently agreed with this statement, I found myself somewhat surprised to hear her articulate this anti-nudity sentiment out loud and so ardently. I thought of nudity as an accepted practice in so-called “hippie” settings and that it is bad form to judge people for going naked. Like me, Moonbeam had been born into the counterculture, as her name attested. Furthermore, she chose a lifestyle that reflected that cultural heritage. She lived the life of an artist and performer, and was residing in a rural commune at the time I was interviewing her. As I silently considered her opinion, I was forced to examine my own beliefs and attitudes about nudity. I realized then that I did not want to see the man’s wee-wee either.

Moonbeam was a stylist and clothing designer, as well as a performer, so she had a lot to say on the topic of choosing what to wear. I had asked her about the effect that these choices

have on interactions with others at Burning Man. She explained to me how costumes choices have both strategic and unintentional consequences. Clothing, hair, and make-up shape the mindset of the person donning them, she explained, and they also evoke reactions in other people. She gave many examples. She spoke about how a man dressed as a cupcake might look delicious to another person, who might then try to eat the cupcake. Or if a woman goes out as a witch, someone might ask her to cast a spell. If a person goes out as a teddy bear, they might get a lot of hugs, she said. It sounded to me as if she was describing a costume as a kind of invitation to play and how that social act often leads to unpredictable interactions with strangers.

If the naked man's costume was an invitation, it was one that Moonbeam was certain to refuse. It was not that she assumed a naked man to be lecherous. On the contrary, she understood that a person might have a very real need to have that particular experience of going naked at Burning Man. But in her assessment that experience came at a cost, because it created walls that impeded social interactions. And she felt it her duty to kindly make a person aware of that cost.

Here is the excerpt from our interview:

*Whatever you go out as there...
or even if you go out naked,
and that's kind of like saying
like, the au natural [look].
Okay.
A naked person
might not be getting this
and I try to let them know.
But first of all,
when you go out naked,
and you may be feeling free
and that's awesome.
And you may be needing that experience.
But just so you know,
There's a number of people
who aren't gonna come
anywhere near you.
And I'm one of em.*

[pause]
[speaking each word slowly and clearly]
*I don't want to see your wee-wee swinging around.
And I feel like you haven't made
any effort
at all
to express who you are.
I'm not gonna interact with you.
You know you've triggered buttons with me.
So immediately,
like you've created...ummm.
And that's ok,
if that's the experience you need.
There's some people who will...
And you're gonna have
whatever experiences you have.
And that's great.
You know, but you're making walls around you as well.
Like you're going beyond people's comfort levels.
I don't think a naked man is usually very attractive
And so I'm not gonna take steps towards that.
I think, like,
a man dressed as a wizard,
or even in corsets,
or even, like,
bound to that like tree or cross or....
unless they're naked,
dipped in blue,
and covered in glitter, like,
and everything is bejeweled.
Then you've at least gone into somewhere
where I can relate to you.*

In this interview, Moonbeam described how people in costumes relate to each other. She described what she would say to a naked person at Burning Man if she took it upon herself to socialize him. It seemed that, for the most part, she avoided interacting with naked men, but that she had, at least on occasion, “tried to let him know” why she kept her distance. She did not judge a man too harshly for his decision to go naked, and expressed empathy for the yearning to feel free. However, she had a desire to communicate to such a person the consequences of his actions by giving this naked man a window into her mind and experiences—into the effect that

his naked body had on her, such that she wanted to stay away. Instead of going naked, she sought to encourage people to make an effort to adorn their bodies and body parts in such a way as to intentionally facilitate social interactions, rather than scare everyone away.

Moonbeam recognized that going naked at Burning Man can be an important experience for a person, but she concluded that a person would find greater value in choosing to decorate their body, rather than simply exposing it. With a decorated body, she found that a person could communicate something deeper to others and make a connection. Moonbeam, for example, liked to wear black. She began to wear black when her mother died, precipitating a ten-year period of mourning. She expressed this feeling of mourning by wearing Goth styles of clothing. Over time Moonbeam became comfortable in black. Her feelings of mourning abated, her style evolved and she no longer wore Goth styles, but she continued to wear black. She wore black even though it had negative associations for some people. Like nakedness, she realized that black can trigger people's buttons, thereby preventing some people from being able to relate to her. One such person told her that she perceived Moonbeam as being dark and dangerous. Because Moonbeam wore black, this woman avoided her and was even rude at times. This person made Moonbeam more aware of the effect black has on some people. By donning black, Moonbeam chose to become a "dark fairy," a mischievous character that played with spiders, bats, and other dark things. Dressed as a dark fairy, she would seek out people who could relate to this darkness, and sometimes she even bit them, playfully. Burning Man was an especially good place for her to find others who wanted to engage in dark play.

Moonbeam had created a unique niche for herself costuming the Burning Man community. During the time that I was conducting my research, she worked and volunteered at events in Southern California that have been influenced by the culture of Burning Man, such as

Coachella and Lightening in a Bottle. I observed her at one of these events; while her colleagues were selling expensive, designer clothes and costumes, she was helping people make themselves costumes for free, out of odds and ends that she had brought for that purpose. When Moonbeam dressed a person, applied makeup, styled hair, or helped them make a costume, she had a very clear intention to help the person to find a character. She wanted that character to shape the mindset of the person wearing the costume and produce a transformational experience for him, as well as for the people he encountered while dressed up. Moonbeam often succeeded in this goal, not only through the costume itself, but also through her words and attitude as she dressed a person, helping him to feel safe and helping a character to emerge. Moonbeam seemed to me to be like a shaman, very skillful in her ability to use the medium of the body to foster a mood of play and facilitate a transformation into a possible self. The settings where she chose to work her magic were temporary playgrounds for testing those possible selves through social interactions that did not involve nudity.

Gary

Gary had survived alcohol. When I started interviewing Gary in his apartment in Hollywood in August of 2009, he was 37 years old and had been sober for four years. Gary frequently went to Joshua Tree National Park, but there he could not go naked. Gary's plan when he got to Burning Man was to run around naked in the desert sober.

Gary had wanted to go to Burning Man for over twelve years. He viewed it as a place where one could run around naked in the desert on drugs. When he got sober in 2005, he thought that he had missed out on the possibility of going to Burning Man, that the option was now closed to him. The first six months of sobriety were incredibly difficult. The urge to drink was

extremely powerful. He thought that if he went to Burning Man he would die there, because he would be unable to stop himself from drinking. Addicts, he said, have something inside them that tells them “to do the thing that the body wants to do.” At Burning Man he was sure that his body was going to tell him to go ahead and drink, that the cunning voice inside him would say, “It’s only one week and no one is going to find out.” Gary told me that in his opinion someone with an active addiction would not actually enjoy Burning Man, they would be incapable of enjoying the art and the people, instead they would drink until they passed out and maybe even died. But eventually, Gary started hearing stories from people in recovery who went to Burning Man and stayed sober there. He heard from these people that there are AA meetings at Burning Man. So, after a year of sobriety, as he started to feel more comfortable in his own skin, he came to believe that he could stay sober, even at Burning Man. Gary looked forward to the day that he would become one of those people who could speak to a person in early recovery, who was struggling and suffering, and assure them that eventually they would feel well enough to go anywhere and stay sober—even to Burning Man.

When I met Gary, he had not yet been to Burning Man, which made him a “virgin” in that setting. He had recently finished law school and had just taken the bar exam. While waiting for the results, he was planning his trip. He was so determined to go and not let anything get in his way that he postponed his job search until he got back. Gary was reluctant to travel all the way to Burning Man by himself. He invited a friend to go with him, a woman that he was dating, who could go for only four days. So they planned to return before the Man burned. Against the suggestions of more experienced burners, he rented an RV, so that they would not have to sleep in a tent. Before the event, Gary told me that they were looking forward to being “tourists” at Burning Man, “to see what the wildlife is like and blend in.”

Gary spent the entire first day at Burning Man naked. He said that he felt awkward in the early part of the morning, because no one else was naked. However, he did not feel like “a complete pervert,” because he had a “hot, almost-naked chick” on his arm. As the morning proceeded and the temperature increased, more naked bodies appeared. Gary went to an AA meeting naked. He was uncomfortable at first. But his anxiety was somewhat alleviated when a couple of men wearing women’s clothes entered. Gary told me all this during a brief interview in my trailer on Thursday morning during the event. I was sad to hear that he was still planning to leave the next day, and would not get to see the Man burn.

I asked Gary if he had acquired a playa name yet. Before Burning Man, as we were scheduling our interview, I had asked Gary what name he planned to use at Burning Man. He told me that he might use his pen name, Death Scribe. Gary had written many dark stories and poems when he was younger, drinking, and depressed, and a friend gave him the name Death Scribe. Death Scribe was an antihero—an author who, rather than saving the day, makes it a little worse with his gloomy prose. In the context of Burning Man, Gary found that the pen name did not seem appropriate. Instead, because his nipples were exposed, someone gave him the name Chipples. Chipples sounded like the exact opposite of Death Scribe to me.

Gary told me that he had understood Burning Man was going to be about “free expression,” but he had not understood that it would also be about “community.” He was not prepared for that. Because of various decisions he had made, he was having trouble feeling like a part of the community. Perhaps he never really *got it*. Gary never mentioned going naked as one of the choices that had impeded his sense of belonging. Staying in an RV was a mistake, he told me. Inside the RV, he felt like an outsider. He realized from something someone had said at the AA meeting that it could take several years to find one’s place in this community. He said that if

he came back to Burning Man, he would camp at Anonymous Village, where the AA meetings were held. That was where his community was and where he felt the greatest sense of belonging. I hoped he would make it back one day. And, having already had the experience of going naked, he would progress to new ways of participating and expressing himself that would increase, rather than decrease, his feelings of social connectedness and a mood of play.

Miriam

Miriam had survived breast cancer. When she participated in my pilot study in 2007, she was 51 years old and it was her third time at Burning Man. I interviewed her once during the event, had her fill out a Census questionnaire, and asked her to keep a journal and return it to me at the end of the week. On the questionnaire she identified herself as a writer from the San Francisco Bay area. She was one of the few informants who actually wrote in the journal I gave her. Miriam wrote many pages in her journal about the annual topless bike ride called *Critical Tits* and what it took for her to feel comfortable participating.

The first Critical Tits ride occurred at Burning Man in 1996 as a spirited offshoot of *Critical Mass*, a movement in which bicyclists ride en masse through American cities disrupting vehicular traffic in order to encourage the use of bicycles instead of cars. Over the years, some may have participated in Critical Tits in solidarity with the Critical Mass movement, others perhaps to make a fun performance art piece out of it, and ultimately it may have transformed into its own entity, which has little to do with promoting bicycle lanes. During the years I conducted my research, several thousand women and girls participated in the annual women's ritual (Ellis 2010; Sacred Space Holders 2011). They rendezvoused at the Man and rode their bicycles through Black Rock City all together in a parade. Some went completely topless. Many

adorned their nipples with pasties, tape, or paint. Observers saw a merry romp, but women who participated found it to be a very powerful and vulnerable experience. This vulnerability was magnified when photographers, trying to get a shot of the topless women without asking permission, created gauntlets of paparazzi that impeded the progress of the parade and brought the default world's gaze crashing into the women's safe, playful space (Ellis 2010). In spite of such obstacles, participants have described Critical Tits as, and intended Critical Tits to be, an expression of women's power, diversity, and freedom—and a way to feel connected to other women in the Burning Man community (Clupper 2009).

For Miriam, Critical Tits was an opportunity and a personal challenge to work up the courage to go topless while at Burning Man. During her battle with cancer, Miriam's breast had been removed and reconstructed. Where once there was a nipple, there was instead a scar. Miriam intended to join the Critical Tits ride the first time she went to Burning Man in 2005, but she did not. The women in her camp did not invite her to ride with them and she took this personally. She felt excluded by them and assumed that it had something to do with her unsightly breast. Miriam wrote in her journal about the girl she once was and how she had come to view her scarred breast as a freaky sight:

*Before
cancer I would have been one
of the perpetually topless gals
thrilling my breasts in the open
air. Now I'm more of a freak
and I've had enough cringing
reflexive looks in the hot tub
to know it's a freaky site for
some. Not all. But some.
I ended up watching the
ride from the street, sickened
by my loss.*

Because of the associations that Miriam made between her experiences in hot tubs and her experiences in relation to her female campmates, Miriam sat on the sidelines during Critical Tits in 2005.

She had an entire year to reflect on what had happened, and to concoct and implement a plan that would allow her to realize her goal. By the following year, she was more aware of what she needed to allay her anxieties and feel safe being topless in public. She chose different campmates and forged new relationships with them. These relationships would provide the safety, support, and feelings of belonging that she needed to participate in the women's ritual. These new friends helped Miriam to decorate her body with paint before the ride.

*I had these 2 new girlfriend[s]
and I knew I'd make it...
With paint where the nipple should be it's
hard to tell it isn't original mammary flesh.
The three of us rode in glory.*

With a painted nipple, Miriam was able to go topless during her second trip to Burning Man. During her third burn, Miriam wrote about the possibility that she might participate in the Critical Tits ride once more:

*I may
do it again this year,
[I am] considering exposing my one
perfect, beautiful, "remaining"
breast and swaddling the
other in white.*

Over a period of three years, Miriam was able to use Critical Tits parade as an opportunity to work through issues associated with her scarred body. Through the process she pushed herself to develop relationships with women, cultivate feelings of belonging, and engage in culture practices that helped her to feel comfortable in her body.

Conclusion

In the previous two ethnographic examples, my informants each removed their clothes in a way that they hoped would help them in a process of recovery from illness. In four days, Gary never really felt comfortable enough at the event to experience an intense mood of play or a dramatic transformation. However, Gary did leave Burning Man with a story about running around naked in the desert sober, which he would in turn be able to share with other alcoholics in the midst of their own transformation, who might then be convinced that sobriety does not signal the end of play in their lives. As for Miriam, by her second trip to Burning Man, she had developed new relationships and brought paint that helped her to enter into a mood of play and embody a less inhibited self, not unlike the one that she had lost during her successful battle with breast cancer. Through continued participation in Critical Tits, even if only in her imagination, Miriam could forge new associations to replace those that marked her body as a freaky sight. And in the preceding ethnographic example, an experienced burner, Moonbeam, skillfully outfitted others with costumes and simultaneously coaxed them into a playful, possible self that could immediately become a transformative experience for them. They were then poised to spread a mood of play to others, reproducing a culture of playful, transformative, edgy interactions.

Going naked at Burning Man is a symbolic shedding of constraints and inhibitions. It is a cultural trope, an exemplar of personal agency and free expression on the sacred playground. It is a play practice that transpires at the edge of decency, which may be intended as a light-hearted act, but it can also turn dark, inspire controversy, create anxiety and interpersonal distance, rather than the mood of play that most people seek out at the event. When people are able to get into a

playful mood and silence their judgments or mute their assumptions about being judged by others, they can feel transformed by the practice of going naked.

CHAPTER FOUR

Heckling

When walking down the streets of Black Rock City, strangers often talk to you. Usually they say something nice, offer you a gift, or invite you to hang out with them. However, sometimes—not often, but sometimes—a person you encounter on the street will make fun of you, make you the butt of a joke, or criticize you for something that you did. Perhaps you are made to think that something you are wearing or doing inspired this one-off joke. But if you stick around and watch, you may see that this verbal assault was one of a litany of foul-mouthed, mean-spirited attacks that this jokester is throwing at everyone he encounters. This is his shtick. You may think it is a highly entertaining performance, an improvised gift to the community, but it is certainly an uncommonly hostile one.

Perhaps a woman is standing out in front of her camp wielding a megaphone so that no one in the vicinity can escape her witty onslaught. Maybe she is standing on a soapbox. Perhaps she has friends or has attracted a crowd. Does this make her seem more or less threatening to you? Perhaps you are easily provoked to feel defensive in front of so many people. Or possibly the crowd's laughter and impolite commentary softens your impulse by making it more obvious that she is putting on a show. Maybe you can find it in yourself to relax and appreciate the humor in the harsh things that this woman is saying about you, your body, your costume, or your behavior. Hopefully she inspires you to take yourself less seriously. You may attempt to match her position with a witty reply or a self-effacing concession. You do your best, and she seems

pleased that you are playing along. But eventually she gets bored with you and moves on to fresh play.

Perhaps you stay to watch the stream of playful, hateful banter, as she starts in with the next person walking down the street. She calls one man a “virgin” for his apparent ignorance of the rules or customs of Burning Man. She calls another woman a “hippie” for her seeming laziness and sense of entitlement. She calls another man a “douchebag” when he falls for her prank. She calls a woman a “tourist” and her friend a “frat boy” for no apparent reason as far as you can see, other than that they are wearing ordinary clothes. Do you empathize with any of them? The virgin, the hippie, the douchebag, the tourist, the frat boy—they each have a choice to keep on walking or to stop, engage with the person heckling them, and become a willing participant in her impromptu show. The longer you stay the more you are impressed with her relentlessness. Perhaps you even start to egg her on and join in the teasing.

One morning you may encounter a group of people calling themselves the Yahoo Reformation Task Force. This posse decides to take you to task for being a “yahoo” and “mooping,” which you learn is a term that refers to littering. It matters not that you did not drop the moop (an acronym for Matter Out Of Place). You just happened to be standing near an empty water bottle and they blamed you for leaving it there. The Yahoo Reformation Task Force harangues you about the water bottle until you pick it up and put it in your backpack. The task force seems content then, and they continuing on their merry way—patrolling for yahoos.

Heckling as play

Generally people do not relish being humiliated and antagonized. But societies sometimes have specific opportunities for members to engage in joking behavior that would

otherwise be taken as offensive. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown defined “joking relationships” as two people who are permitted to tease each other and are required not to take offense (Radcliffe-Brown 1965[1952]). He described this teasing and joking behavior as simultaneously friendly and antagonistic.

The joking relationship is a peculiar combination of friendliness and antagonism. The behavior is such that in any other social context it would express and arouse hostility; but it is not meant seriously and must not be taken seriously. There is a pretense of hostility and a real friendliness. To put it another way, the relationship is one of permitted disrespect (Radcliffe-Brown 1965[1952]:91).

This pretense of hostility is a form of play. It is a stance that suggests that the information being presented may or may not be true, and should be taken lightly. The person who reacts without seeming to take offense is also playing. Two people who are able to joke with each other in this way without taking offense may forge a relationship that is special among all other relationships. In some kinship systems, anthropologists found that insulting speech had tied two people together into a lifelong joking relationship with specific obligations and responsibilities (Eggan 1955[1937]; Radcliffe-Brown 1965[1952]). In American society, joking has been observed among friends, competitors, and strangers, but in these cases the insulting speech is clearly marked as play with specific linguistic practices, familiar phrases, and mutually understood rules, which are known to members of the same community (Goffman 1955; Goodwin 2006; Labov 1972). Cultural practices can establish that one person is inviting the other person to participate in a joking ritual—by taking turns insulting each other, for example. At least on the surface, a person may be “just playing.” However, joking games can potentially dishonor and humiliate one in front of peers, if jokes are taken as truth or one is shown to be lacking a quick wit.

Extending previous anthropological work to better incorporate the feelings of participants in joking relationships and rituals, I see joking practices as a way of sharing a mood of play with others. These practices may cause people to *interpret* reality differently by inspiring a mood in which people *feel* lighter about reality. Humor, on the one hand, can be a gentle nudge that spreads a contagious playful mood from one person to another, a way of communicating that this mood is what the situation calls for, as well as a way for participants to ease into this lighter feeling together. Teasing, however, can be an aggressive play practice, a way of communicating that all participants must take reality lightly. The jester may insist on everyone joining him in a mood of play. If participants are able to get into this playful mood then they will become more able to relax their urge to defend their pride or honor, to withstand snubs or digs, and to let the joking encounter take its course. However, some jokes are heavier and meaner than others; some joking is seriously offensive, not “just play.” Thinly concealed hostility and negative judgments have the potential to turn an encounter into dark play. Participants in dark play may act as-if they are in a mood of play, even if they are not feeling it. As a person responds to an insult, they may express positive emotion only to save face in front of others. It is possible that this offended person must work very hard to suppress his pride, while in actuality he is experiencing intense feelings of humiliation and shame.

Heckling is the term I have chosen to use for the practice of publicly teasing and antagonizing people at Burning Man. I have chosen to reify the use of a term that is occasionally used to describe this joking practice, because, in the same way as heckling interrupts a performance, heckling at Burning Man involves interrupting a person in the midst of a flow of events, who does not expect to be treated harshly, and shaming them in public. The heckler at Burning Man takes a line that is antagonistic, crass, and irksome. The person who is heckled is

thrust into the spotlight, becoming an unwitting object in a performance for others. This person may or may not welcome the heckler's intrusion into their day. This joking practice is typically directed at strangers walking along the streets of Black Rock City, and it often involves the use of a megaphone to demand their attention. This behavior creates a big stir when it happens. It is a relatively rare practice at Burning Man, which is, however, becoming more common and recognizable over time. There is no commonly used emic label to describe the behavior or the person who does it. There is no established ritual response. Yet when I am talking about heckling to people who have been to Burning Man, people usually figure out quickly what kind of behavior I am talking about. And they usually mention megaphones.

Heckling contradicts the friendly, warm, neighborly attitude that permeates the Burning Man event, especially during the daytime. In Black Rock City it is common for strangers to wander in and out of each other's camps, and camps often have activities planned or food to share with those who show up. A person often waves to those walking by their camp and invites them to come visit. Interactions in this face-to-face community tend to be mutually supportive and to foster feelings of belonging, even and especially among strangers. People tend to be very accepting of one another—old and young, well dressed or raggedy, riding a bike or on foot. Unless evidence points to the contrary, people often assume that the people they meet are there to have a good time, socialize with others, and are open to strange and unexpected experiences. This is a solid assumption in most cases, and it is enough for someone to safely initiate an encounter that can bring people from very different backgrounds together and potentially lead to the formation of a friendship. Many face-to-face encounters at Burning Man were later described as meaningful, transformative moments.

Hecklers are outliers. They judge others harshly and are loud in expressing their opinions. Hecklers survey a stranger's self-presentation and label their attributes as either positive or negative social values. They are on the attack, pointing out differences and deviations from a norm that does not have a clear point of reference. Although playful, hecklers are not clowns. Their wit is sharp and biting. Their demeanor is often cool and calm. They may sport attire that is considered stylish in this setting or they may not. But they position themselves as the cool kids. They are at home on this playground. They may accuse a person of being an outsider or one who does not know how to comport themselves in this place by lodging insults such as "virgin" or "hippie," for example. Hecklers have helped these terms to become derogatory labels in the Burning Man context by virtue of the offensive way that they can be delivered and imbued with negative connotations. Hecklers' power is in their gaze, their humor, and in their ability to use speech to construct a world where they know what the rules are, and are in charge of enforcing them.

The heckler is akin to a mischievous court jester who has taken up the mantle of the absent king, assumed his throne for the time being, and has begun barking orders at his subjects. Without any real authority, a heckler may try to get others to conform to his vision of proper comportment at Burning Man. The practice allows a peer to communicate explicitly—ways of acting—and implicitly—ways of feeling—that he considers appropriate for this cultural context. The practice of heckling reflects one of many ways that cultural patterns are both challenged and reinforced through social interactions among peers at Burning Man.

In this chapter I argue that heckling is a form of play at Burning Man. Heckling is a social act that has a playful intent for the most part. In verbally attacking another person, a person may intend to foster a festive atmosphere that they associate with making fun and playing

pranks. In this sense heckling can be a play practice for getting into and expressing a mood of play at Burning Man. As the mood of play builds and seems to spread to others who appear entertained, a heckler may become emboldened and fiercer in their verbal attacks. In this way, heckling may not be primarily about what a person is saying and doing, but about the collective mood that may be achieved by crossing the line into cruelty and pushing people's buttons. However, heckling is a form of dark play, in which only one side may actually be experiencing a playful mood. Jokes are highly subjective and may require some insider knowledge. A newcomer to Burning Man may not entirely grasp the heckler's meaning or intention. Nonetheless, the newcomer may understand that this person is "just joking" and feel a familiar pressure to smile and pretend not to be offended.

Dean

One of my informants, Dean, was a very sensitive, delicate young man, who had been traumatized by bullies in school and at work. I wondered if Dean had encountered any hecklers at Burning Man and if he had been able to tolerate being insulted and teased in that way, in that context. I found no mention in our interviews of him being heckled at Burning Man, which were full of reports of him being teased in these other contexts. So I emailed him in January of 2012 to ask him about it directly. By then he had been to Burning Man several times. Without defining the term heckling at all, I wrote, "I am writing a chapter on heckling at Burning Man. I was wondering if you ever came across any hecklers when you were in Black Rock City." Dean replied:

Hmmm, I actually can't recall many hecklers at the Burn. My first year, in '08, one time someone yelled out "virgin!!" when I was riding my bike back to camp as it was getting dark and didn't have any lights on my bike. Another time I was challenged to ride my bike over the "ramp of death" in front of a camp whose name I can't remember. The ramp was

really just a flimsy 2 foot high one, but the people at that camp were yelling out of a megaphone challenging everyone to do it. Not sure if that counts as heckling, but I've definitely seen other people get heckled, mostly as they were passing by random camps who were sitting there people-watching.

As I expected, Dean was not sure what I would count as heckling, and yet he was familiar with the joking practice. Without any further prompting, he listed off several examples of the behavior that he could remember. As I would expect, he did not consider it a common occurrence, but he had encountered some hecklers. He had been both a recipient and an observer of the practice.

Notably, Dean's encounters with hecklers at Burning Man had not triggered any strong negative reactions. He seemed to regard what happened as brief and inconsequential; he did not regard the hecklers as unduly mean. This is in marked contrast to what he experienced day after day at work. There he felt that his coworkers crossed the line from playing to bullying. He reacted as he had in high school to being bullied, with paralyzing anxiety. He felt himself to be a victim of harassment. His work suffered and he lost his job. But Dean's experience at Burning Man was different. Unlike other contexts, Dean did not feel like a complete misfit at Burning Man. At least in small doses, he could tolerate being teased. There was something about the Burning Man setting, the voluntary nature of interpersonal encounters, and his altered state of mind that allowed him to overcome his anxieties, go with the flow, and abide the hecklers' rudeness.

Transformation

In presenting herself as a heckler at Burning Man, a person embodies a *possible self* that can only live in this particular *intentional world* (see Markus and Nurius 1987; and Parish 2008 on "possible self"; see Shweder 1990 on "intentional world"). The heckler assumes a line, a course of action, which takes the alternative world of Black Rock City as actual reality and its

customs as common sense. Additionally, the heckler assumes a right to be rude as she shows and tells others how out of line they are with that reality. Hecklers are veteran burners who sometimes come across as “burnier-than-thou,” especially in relation to inexperienced participants, but even in relation to those who have been to the event a handful of times, but do not assume to know everything about the culture. This burnier-than-thou attitude appears deliberate and cocky. Hecklers often take a very strong stance with respect to what Burning Man is about and how one should behave there. They may even make it their mission to urge other burners and Burning Man as a whole to develop in a particular direction.

Like hecklers at a show, hecklers at Burning Man use aggression and disdain to heighten the riskiness that is inherent in any face-to-face encounter. At Burning Man they use offensive speech, dares, and pranks as tools for remaking the world as one with fewer boundaries, where a person may say and do something unexpected that pushes another to react immediately and then to actively participate in that boundary-crossing world. One megaphone-wielding heckler, who goes by the name Magister Caveat, described all burners as hecklers. He wrote in a blog post, “Burners are both famously nice-‘n-welcoming and brusque and insulting. We’ll give you the shirt off our backs and then make fun of your costume” (Caveat 2012). Some readers posted replies in which they agreed with this characterization of burners, but others thought that heckling was atrocious behavior. In the blog post, Caveat asserted that burners share certain values with hecklers who interrupt a show, both are “trying to create aesthetic experiences that depend on being here now – in this moment – and rolling with whatever happens” (Caveat 2012). According to his way of thinking, the heckler’s impulse is to break down barriers that separate performers from their audience, forcefully if necessary, and perhaps to obliterate the category of audience altogether.

In 2012 this same Caveat insulted the Census and declared war on us. As the manager of the Census team, I felt that I had to set aside my data collection duties and respond to his repeated attacks and pranks. My team's honor was on the line, as was my reputation as their leader, the Countess. If I did nothing the Census team would be remembered as being no fun at all, and if I did something, well...who knows what would happen. Despite my fears and reservations, I forced myself to put down my serious work face and get into a mood of play. Then I rallied my campmates to do the same as we planned our retaliation. I sent a spy next door to see if Caveat was there for happy hour at Media Mecca, where he worked as a volunteer coordinator. After our enemy had been located, we attacked him and everyone else who had gathered for a drink that evening. I carried a huge cowbell and rang it loudly to signal the start of our attack. We inundated the camp with our war cries and our foam anvils, and we covered everyone we met with pink Census stickers. When I found Caveat, I threw down the cowbell and swung at him with two foam clubs. It was quite a rush.

A society may be said to have certain rules about how one is to comport oneself in relation to others, including the extent to which a person should go to maintain their self-respect, as well as to save another person from unpleasant feelings. Sociologist Erving Goffman developed a concept of "face-work" in order to describe how people comport themselves in face-to-face encounters in such a way as to maintain both self-respect and consideration for the other person. He specifically wrote about how people modify their expressions in order to protect their dignity and honor:

While his social face can be his most personal possession and the center of his security and pleasure, it is only on loan to him from society; it will be withdrawn unless he conducts himself in a way that is worthy of it. Approved attributes and their relation to face make every man his own jailer; this is a fundamental social constraint even though each man may like his cell (Goffman 1955).

Two people may have very different ideas about what attributes they think constitute positive social values, and how they view a particular situation. A person may have to work to align those divergent perspectives, especially if one person's behavior threatens the position or line taken by the other. According to Goffman, a "line" is a view of a situation and evaluations of the participants, including and especially oneself (Goffman 1955). This line may appear intentional and willful, even if it is not. A person's "face" is, therefore, the social value claimed as a result of the line one took, or is assumed to have taken during a particular encounter—intentionally or not. In order to maintain this positive social value and sustain the expressive flow of events, a person must present an image of the self that is consistent and supported by others.

When confronted by an assault to my team's pride, I took a line that was fierce, albeit playful. My team was transformed for a moment from a bunch of nerds into a horde of warriors gone amok. Not only did this outburst of violence provide a much-needed break from sorting paper Census forms and entering data into computers, but it was also a direct path into the present moment, a way of entering into a mood of play together. This is a mood that participants are often seeking when they cavort in Black Rock City, but one my volunteers too often sacrifice in order to get our Census tasks done carefully and efficiently. Once I put down my serious work and committed myself to the mock battle, there was no going back. In the middle of my glorious attack, however, Danger Ranger, the founder of the Black Rock Rangers, intervened between Caveat and myself and wrapped his arms around me so that I was unable to strike any more blows. As I struggled to get out of the gentle Ranger's firm embrace, he whispered in my ear that we had gone too far. His serious tone and call for peace snapped me suddenly out of my fierce, playful mood and put me on the defensive. I tried to explain to him, as best I could, that what was happening here was play—and that it was mutual. In the end, he let me go. And I

successfully recovered one of our volunteers, Trapper Lyn, whom Caveat had kidnapped and had held hostage in a trailer. Eventually, after the war was over, Trapper and I returned to Media Mecca to have a drink with her captor. It was said that we won the battle between the Census and Media Mecca.

A heckler succeeded in getting me into a mood of play that day, and transforming me into a more violent possible self. I had no previous experience with rough-and-tumble play, and so perhaps I was rougher than I ought to have been. After I had initiated the battle, I found myself committed to a flow of events over which I had little control. I had to roll with whatever happened next, including my own aggressive impulses and the criticism that I had crossed the line into real violence. I feared and continue to fear that my reputation may have fallen in the eyes of Danger Ranger, but the win increased my team's collective sense of pride and the battle gave us a much-deserved dose of play. I appreciated how the heckler's pranks, although threatening to our work and to our vulnerable social standing, ultimately brought our two camp's closer together and elevated our social capital. During the event, the heckler's risky dark play practice sparked an abrupt, almost immediate transformation in my state of mind and it also motivated me to participate in an unpredictable flow of events. In his blog post after the event, this same heckler described all burners as hecklers. In this way, he attempted a longer lasting transformation by urging the Burning Man community to embrace his art form as typical of the culture.

Linda

"Heckling is certainly an art form at Burning Man," said one of my informants when I told her about the term that I was using to label this joking practice. Linda had seen a fair amount

of heckling in her ten years in Black Rock City. She went on to tell me a story about getting heckled for dressing ugly at Burning Man.

A friend had convinced Linda to join her in making old lady costumes for Burning Man that year. One day during the event they put on the old lady outfits. With her hair in curlers, pointed bra, big granny-sized underpants, glasses, slippers, and a see-through house dress, she set out from camp with her friend. They received a barrage of insults from strangers they encountered on the street and from one camp in particular. The hecklers called them “virgins” and expressed disapproval of the ugly costumes, claiming that the two women were not dressed appropriately for Burning Man.

The hecklers were joking, as hecklers do, and through this mode of communication they conveyed an opinion that these women had misinterpreted the aesthetic style of Burning Man. As she told me the story, I thought—but how could any costume be labeled as being wrong for Burning Man? It is a place where anything goes, isn’t it? Yet the hecklers’ asserted to Linda that women ought to try to look *hot*, not *ugly* at Burning Man. Within an hour Linda went back to camp and changed into something sexy. But her friend wore the old lady outfit for a day and a half, playfully interacting with the hecklers and seeming to enjoy the banter. Her friend did not seem to mind being heckled for her aesthetic choice. But Linda felt very uncomfortable and chose to conform to the hecklers’ suggested dress code.

In her everyday life working in a government office as a social worker, Linda had to dress conservatively. At Burning Man she got to explore an alternative, sexier version of herself. While exploring the city through the eyes of this sexy possible self, Linda entered into a mood of play. In this mood, she was able to display the appropriate attitudes and responses—interpreting meanings loosely and not necessarily assume a person’s words or deeds to be accurate reflections

of the person's true beliefs or their total self. In this mood, she was open to unpredictability and tolerant of unexpected behavior from others. In my estimation, it was not her ugly clothes that were inappropriate for Burning Man that morning—it was her mood.

Linda explained that her friend had worked as a waitress and an actress—jobs in which she “traded on her [good] looks”—and that the friend enjoyed dressing in ugly clothes for a change. Perhaps Linda's friend craved a temporary vacation from her sexy self, which was a habitual pattern and had strategic goals related to the reality of her working world in which she was using her body to earn tips and callbacks. The possible self that the friend chose to embody that day was an ugly old self. While exploring the city through the eyes of this ugly old lady, the friend enjoyed a different kind of attention from the people she encountered. She was able to get into a playful mood and play with alternative strategies as she navigated the city dressed as an old lady. The insults that were hurled at her did not refer to her whole person—just a possible self. Perhaps it was a future self—an old lady who cares not how she looks, but moves freely through the world in her undergarments ignoring social pressure to conform to a more perfect vision of womanhood.

Anna

Anna is cool. She exudes a confident burnier-than-thou attitude. She is one of the founders of her camp, a jovial group that spends much of their burn sitting in front of their camp using a megaphone to heckle passers-by as they invite them to participate in a scavenger hunt. When I met Anna, she was 33-years-old and living in a one-bedroom apartment near West Hollywood. She had been to Burning Man nine times. Anna was raised Catholic and grew up in a small town in Connecticut where “Democrat” was a dirty word. She went to college in upstate

New York and moved to Los Angeles after graduating. She was earning a living as a project coordinator; “babysitting people” is how she described her job. In her free time, she was involved in performing, making costumes, spinning fire, socializing with her campmates and other burners, and organizing their camp for the next burn. I often saw Anna at local Burning Man-related events in the Los Angeles area, where she was dressed in playa-ready attire, such as a big tutu. She always greeted me warmly, yet maintained a cool distance.

With the help of my research assistant, Taylor, I recorded one hour of video footage of Anna at Burning Man in 2009. Once the camera was turned on, Anna chose to immediately ride her bike back to her camp. Since I only had permission to film Anna, Taylor kept the camera focused on her. But I could listen to interactions among her campmates and with strangers. Perhaps her campmates already knew about the study, because no one seemed surprised when she showed up with a videographer in tow.

It was Monday morning—the first day of the event. Anna’s camp was nearly set up, but a few camp members were still constructing a shade structure out of wood that would become their “front porch.” This was where I assumed that most of the socializing, smoking, drinking, and heckling would occur. Anna joined several of her campmates, who were sitting facing the street in front of the game boards. These were two large boards—one marked “Lost” and one marked “Found”—with tiles that listed items for the scavenger hunt. Some tiles read: “Best Tits,” “Thunderdome winner,” and “Worst Tattoo.” One of Anna’s campmate was using a megaphone to “run the boards” and to heckle passers-by, as well as members of the camp. Both tasks involved judging people openly and making snarky comments for all to hear. The game was intermittent, but the joking was non-stop. Those sitting in front of the camp helped to judge participants’ claims to have found something from the Lost board, such as the best tits or the

worst tattoo. If the submission was deemed worthy, the participant would receive a “semi-fabulous prize” and the tile would be moved from the Lost to the Found board. The person with the megaphone had assumed the greatest responsibility for keeping the judgments and the jokes flowing.

“Your brother’s gone native,” someone yelled. The others laughed out loud. Anna’s brother was a newcomer that year. He was eight years younger than her and had told her before the event that he maybe wanted to get naked and run around in the desert. She had thought that was weird, but was trying to treat him like a responsible grown-up. A few minutes earlier, Anna had also commented on her brother’s revealing attire, saying under her breath, “I could do without that loincloth. Its really short.” The hecklers expressed mock concern that the cloth might get shorter as the week progressed. One day he might be wearing a sock, for example, instead of a loincloth, said one campmate. Anna’s brother said nothing in reply, but looked amused. He took the joking in stride, adjusting the fabric hanging from his waist, making sure everything was in order.

Several of Anna’s campmates devised a prank. They hung a sign on one of the port-o-potties across the street that read “out-of-order.” Some thought that the sign’s was hilarious, because there is no plumbing in a port-o-potty that could actually be broken. Some of them hoped that the sign would deter people from using that potty, and then the camp would have a clean port-o-potty reserved for their use. When they showed Anna the sign she said, “You’re not really going to put that up, are you? Oh. We are bad people.” The woman next to her disagreed, “No. We are awesome people. Clever ideas!” Once it was up, the sign immediately became an excuse to harass people who attempted to use the out-of-order potty. “That’s out-of-order, douchebag!” yelled the one holding the megaphone. Some of the campmates groaned in

disapproval, while others laughed and egged him on. “Give them hell, sonny! Give them hell!” enjoined one man. Another said softly, “That’s not nice.”

Conclusion

Burning Man is an emerging culture, consequently there is more ambiguity in this place and the cultural patterns have not yet become fixed. Heckling is emerging as an art form at Burning Man—a particularly ironic one, because it contradicts the general tone of the event in which the stranger is welcomed warmly and gently into the fold. Furthermore, the heckler’s art demands flexibility and extreme tolerance from others, as it constructs a sardonic view of Burning Man as an intolerant culture with fixed rules and cultural patterns that must be followed. In this chapter I have presented informants’ narratives, video recorded data, and my own experiences and observations of heckling. This data demonstrated heckling to be a highly social form of play wherein hecklers adopt a rude possible self, who aggressively interrupts another person’s social space and attempts to pull that person into an antagonistic, intersubjective encounter. Once a person decides to actively participate in the intentional world of the heckler, the encounter may unfold in unexpected ways.

Heckling is a play practice that is rude, abrasive, and disrespectful. Encounters with hecklers are not always felt to be playful; they can become dark. Examples of dark play illustrate how acts of playing and a mood of play can be decoupled. However, I give hecklers the benefit of the doubt that their intent is not to offend, but to foster a mood of play. By insulting others, devising pranks, and inventing tools for irritating others out of their comfort zone, hecklers may foster an immediate transformation of a person’s state of mind. They may even create an experience where a whole group of people can experience a mood of play together. Over time,

hecklers may intentionally cultivate longer lasting transformations, such that others may be pressured to conform to their vision of Burning Man and that rude and hostile joking may become a way of life in the Burning Man community.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sexy Encounters

When spending time in Black Rock City, you may become sexually aroused. You may find yourself standing in front of a sculpture featuring voluptuous breasts and a hairy vulva, as a giant penis shaped art car crawls past you. You may see people holding hands or kissing. In some camps, off the beaten path, you might even spot a couple having intercourse or oral sex. Perhaps you seek out a special dome or tent, where you heard that groups of people are having an orgy. Even if you are not actively looking for sex, your subconscious is probably paying attention.

Sex seems to be on everyone's minds and tongues on this adult playground. Racy costumes, suggestive language, and spicy playa names are ubiquitous. People flaunt their bodies and their sexuality openly. You probably saw a pornographic film playing on a big screen in front of a camp on the Esplanade, and another one playing on the surface of an art car. You read in the *What, Where, When* about various camps that offer to help you to find a play partner or to realize some fantasy. At Jiffy Lube, for example, a man can meet other gay men who are looking to have sex. At the Temple of Atonement, a master can whip her slave in a semi-private dungeon or they can participate in a workshop on sadomasochistic techniques. At Costco Soulmate Trading Outlet, you can answer some questions about yourself and get paired up with a soul mate. Perhaps you heard about one theme camp on the radio that sounded really appealing to you. So you decide to drop in on one of their parties or attend one of their workshops, and participate in various getting-to-know-you activities.

At Burning Man it seems possible to play with possible sexualities, explore sexual fantasies and practices, and participate in sexual communities. But it would really help to have a willing partner to facilitate this experimentation. Men and women may be flirting with you—or perhaps they are just being friendly. All this sexy play makes you excited and hopeful. But sometimes you might feel lonely, ashamed, and frustrated. Perhaps you are entertaining a fantasy about having at least one a sexy encounter with a stranger while you are at Burning Man.

You are not the only one.

When you finally encounter a person who you find somewhat attractive and who seems to like you back—you may fall in love with them immediately. This feeling may last only a minute. It may last a week...or longer. You may feel immense joy and comfort in discovering a new friend with whom you can play and explore—free of any expectations or history. While absorbed in the interaction, you may feel that you have found your life partner or a new best friend. Or you may feel content with having one deep conversation with this stranger and then parting ways.

Figure 7. Respondents' sexy encounters at Burning Man in 2012

These results from the Black Rock City Census were based on a selection of respondents, a representative sample of all census forms collected in 2012 (n=2054). The population estimates were then adjusted using data from the random sample. (95% confidence intervals given)

Are you hoping to have a sexy encounter with someone you meet at Burning Man this year?

No. I am not into that sort of thing.	11.0%	(9 – 13%)
It sounds fun, but I am in a committed relationship.	28.1%	(25 – 31%)
Sure. If the opportunity arises.	33.2%	(30 – 36%)
Yes. It is a top priority while I am here.	2.1%	(1 – 3%)
I have already had a sexy encounter this year.	12.6%	(11 – 14%)
No answer / unclear answer	<u>13.0%</u>	(11 – 15%)
	100.0%	

Thank you to Drs. Megan Price and Patrick Ball for generating this sample, and their help in designing the sampling and sorting procedure.

Thank you to Dr. Dominic Beaulieu-Prévost for analyzing this data, producing the adjusted population estimates, and his help designing and conducting the Census in 2012.

Sexy encounters as play

Sexy play is a common pursuit at Burning Man. What I am calling *sexy play* is an encounter between two people who get to know a sexy side of one another while at Burning Man. It may start with looking and flirting, and then progress to spending time exploring Black Rock City together. As two people explore the city together, they also explore each other and the possibilities that emerge through their interactions with each other and with the place. The practice involves stroking egos, and perhaps stroking bodies as well. Sexy play is based on sexual interest and the exploration of that interest, but it does not necessarily involve sexual intercourse or forging a lasting relationship. There are no promises or monetary investments that need to be made in order to participate in sexy play once a person gets to Burning Man. There are plenty of things to do on a playa date that cost nothing—dancing, eating, drinking, appreciating the arts, making art, getting a massage, lounging in the shade, riding bikes or art cars, attending a performance, and getting warm by a fire. And either person can depart at anytime when they feel that the encounter has run its course.

In this chapter I argue that sexy play at Burning Man is joint play in which both participants cultivate a mood of play in one another. It is a highly cooperative play practice. Sexy encounters are more playful if neither person has a clear agenda, and both allow the encounter to unfold in unexpected ways. Two people may foster an intense mood of play by focusing only on the present moment, on playing and enjoying the Burning Man event together without following a cultural script. In this mood, two people may become more willing to explore sudden attractions and impulses, co-creating a passionate experiment in immediate togetherness that potentiates a wider range of possible behaviors and possible selves. Under optimal conditions, persons may become completely absorbed in one another, feeling unselfconscious and confident

in their ability to woo, entertain, and be entertained. In the company of a stranger especially, a person may find great freedom to experiment with a novel side of him or herself, including an aspect of sexuality or a relational skill that was heretofore underdeveloped. Participants sustain this experimental mood by responding honestly to feelings and surrendering to impulses as they arise in both participants, and selecting practices that effectively coax a jointly experienced mood of play and tease it along over time. Sexy players keep their sexy experiment in motion by being willing to engage their curiosity without thinking about the past or thinking too far into the future, by trying not to judge the other person, and by trying not to anticipate or manipulate the outcome of the encounter. Most encounters end when the mood fizzles out.

At Burning Man sexy play often involves forming a temporary relationship. This relationship is comprised of a series of playful, suggestive, spontaneous interactions, which may last only a few hours, or a series of such encounters that could extend over the entire week. Temporary relationships may happen in other liminal or vacation contexts. Two people feel the impact of these sexy encounters immediately, by showing one another openness, love, and acceptance in the moment, and by showing little concern for the past or the future. In narratives about Burning Man, people may remember a relationship that started on the playa as profoundly meaningful, even and especially when their timeframe was limited in duration and there was no pressure to stay in touch. When the relationship was understood to be temporary, risks can be minimized, such as the risk of becoming wedded to this person, having a misunderstanding about what will happen after the event is over, becoming disappointed by the other person's shortcomings, or becoming embarrassed by anything that was said or done during the encounter. As long as the temporal non-contract is respected, some fears and insecurities can be alleviated, allowing players to narrow their focus on the present and on each other. When the participants

are strangers or near to strangers, the past is also rendered irrelevant, and both people can better elicit novel possible selves, those that emerge in the present moment, which may have little to do with habitual selves that were forged in some other context, for some other purpose. Of course some playa relationships continue after the event is over. One may be reluctant to let these pleasurable feelings subside and let these seemingly impossible selves dissolve into thin air. So a person may try to revive these feelings and selves in other contexts, by keeping the relationship going.

Some people view relationships as a game and approach interactions strategically. “Gamesworthiness” is an awareness of all possibilities, consequences, and points of view, and the strategic implementation of such awareness without letting feelings or impulsivity interfere with achieving one’s long-term interests (Goffman 1961). Stephen Eyre, Valerie Hoffman, and Susan G. Millstein used this concept of gamesmanship in their analysis of 39 African-American adolescents’ sexual behavior. They produced a grounded theory outlining four interrelated games that these adolescents played to win: the courtship game, the duplicity game, the disclosure game, and the prestige game (Eyre, et al. 1998). The participants in the study described a community that had strict social norms, in which certain sexual acts, sexual orientations, and subjectivities were considered right and others wrong. In this rigid context a strategic mode of gamesmanship was considered a valuable social skill, which enabled a person to make rational decisions about sex—having it or not having it, and talking about it or not talking about it—in order to garner relationships and prestige over time. However, strategic thinking had to be dissembled because of its moral ambiguity. Playing these games was highly risky and manipulative, and the losers suffered irreparable costs to their reputations.

Ideally, sexy play at Burning Man is not a game. It is not about getting what you want, forcing oneself on another person, feigning interest, deceiving a person about one's true intentions, or devising ways to get a person to eventually make a firm commitment. Sexy players surrender to a love story and play as if that story is real and true, albeit temporary. The participants in my study operated in a community that does not have strict social norms; there are more sexual acts, sexual orientations, and subjectivities that are accepted there (as compared to the adolescents in the previously mentioned study, for example).³ Furthermore, people are actively trying to devise ways of empowering women and sexual minorities in the community—not dupe, shame, or hide them. In this more open-minded, sex-positive, gender-bending context, a strategic mode of gamesmanship is considered quite inappropriate, and perhaps even dangerous. Accordingly, strategic thinking about sex and courtship is out of sync with the spontaneous and playful atmosphere that people are often trying to create in this setting. There are no winners and losers in sexy play, just encounters that foster good feelings and those that foster bad feelings.

Sexy play may not be a game, but it is a risky practice. It can become dark play when one or both people are not in a mood of play, if someone gets hurt, or if stories told after the event injure a person's reputation. In the moment, a person may have difficulty reading another person's signals accurately and sustaining a pleasurable experience for all. A person may find it difficult to stay in the moment, to disregard social norms learned in other settings, and to keep from judging oneself harshly. A person may wind up feeling rejected. And after the event is over, gossip can spread in which a person may garner a reputation for playing fast and loose with others' feelings. Generally one does not get a bad reputation for having many lovers, but for having many angry or irritated lovers. Another person may become known for getting

³ At Burning Man people would draw the line at pedophilia, necrophilia, sexual assault, and any other non-consensual acts.

themselves into unpleasant situations or for being in a perpetually bad mood. By the following year, such persons may find him or herself cast out of a camp or other group. No one wants to spend the burn around someone who becomes known for creating unnecessary drama.

Gabriel

During Gabriel's first trip to Burning Man in 2006, he spent most of his time exploring the city alone. Every evening, however, he and a woman from his camp, his "playa friend," went dancing together beneath Uchronia, the enormous structure known as the Belgian Waffle, which attracted thousands of revelers each night that year. The 15-story cavern was built by a group of Belgians out of 100 miles of two by three-inch wooden beams, rejects from a lumber mill, which they nailed into a haphazard, free-form, crisscrossing pattern that looked like a gigantic wave (May 2006). At night they illuminated the sculpture with lights and electronic music. I also remember dancing there for hours, congregating with throngs of other people beneath the massive configuration of timber. The collective mood of the place was so penetrating that one wanted to stay there forever and never leave. The experience convinced Gabriel that he would come back to Burning Man every year.

When Uchronia was set ablaze on Sunday night, the fire it produced was tremendous.⁴ Gabriel recalled feeling very moved as he watched it explode in flames and burn to the ground. He thought that he might have shed a tear. On the other hand, Gabriel expressed not an iota of sentimentality about watching the Temple burn, which (if you recall from Chapter Two) people usually find very moving and spiritually meaningful. Gabriel, however, felt very emotional

⁴ The Uchronia team supposedly planted trees in Belgium to offset the fire's greenhouse emissions (May 2006).

watching the Waffle burn that first year. He thought about the many wonderful nights he had spent there dancing with his playa friend. And he knew that the relationship was over.

A few years prior Gabriel's marriage had fallen apart, after he caught his wife having an affair. Gabriel, who had been born into a Hispanic Catholic family, did not tell me about this affair during our interviews, instead he told me that he and his wife were no longer attracted to each other. "It's a mutual thing," he told me. "We're not into each other anymore, so why stay together? You don't have to stay together anymore," he explained. At the time that I interviewed him in 2009, he was 38-years-old and had been to Burning Man three times by then. He considered himself separated from his wife, although they still shared a home together, and he was looking forward to getting a divorce and moving out, but he stayed in order to be there for his children. In 2013, when he finally told me about his wife's affair and that she still had romantic feelings for him, he had still not filed for divorce, but was planning to do it soon, after the children left home.

During our interviews Gabriel had presented his family's situation in a remarkably happy light. He described having a very amicable separation in which he and his wife were content to co-parent their two children together, and even to share their house with each other for the time being, although they slept in separate bedrooms. Gabriel told me that he thought that (and hoped that) it would be "a very good divorce." In the meantime, he was not interested in dating, in spending time and money going to see movies or eat dinner with other women. When he was not working or occupied with his family, he spent his free time volunteering and going on outdoor adventures. In addition to his full-time job in the textile industry, Gabriel operated a business renting camping equipment and organizing trips to nearby parks, forests, and deserts. Many of these excursions involved his Burning Man community, in which he took people from Los

Angeles rock climbing, river rafting, camping, hiking, and mountain biking, as well as arranging for outdoor dancing. It was clear that Gabriel did not have time for any more commitments.

Gabriel told me that he did not view Burning Man as a “hookup” scene. In most nightclubs in Los Angeles, however, he felt that there was a pressure to participate in the “hookup atmosphere.” He felt odd as a man dancing alone in those types of clubs, but he did not want to approach a woman either, because she would be likely to interpret his asking her to dance as a signal that he was interested in initiating a sexual encounter. In his Burning Man camp and at other Burning Man style events or clubs, which he attended and organized, he could go alone and dance alone, and he did not feel any pressure to hookup with anyone. Nonetheless, at these same events, he would occasionally find someone he liked and whose companionship he enjoyed very much. And sometimes they might hookup. After the event was over, so was the physical relationship, as it was with his playa friend in 2006. Gabriel told me that the best thing about that experience was that when he saw her later, it was as if the sexual encounter had never happened. He was grateful for that. On other occasions, he had to explain to a woman that he was not looking to pursue a longer-term romantic relationship. Those conversations could be unpleasant and tensions could linger.

I agreed with Gabriel’s characterizations of the Los Angeles nightclub atmosphere as a kind of sex game, where agonistic relations between men and women made it difficult to relax and enjoy oneself on the dance floor. I told Gabriel that I appreciated hearing his male perspective and that I agreed that people appear truly friendly, approachable, and safe at Burning Man, but I am never really sure if there is a hooking-up vibe lurking underneath. I asked Gabriel to describe to me, in his experience as a male, how a sexual encounter would be initiated at a Burning Man type event or club:

*I would say at a Burning Man event-club,
 When it comes to hooking up,
 my point of view,
 I wait for the hints to be thrown at me,
 by the, you know, female.
 I'm not one who pushes for it.
 I wait for those hints to come my way.
 And if I get those hints,
 Then I slowly ease my way...in.
 And see what happens with that.
 But then again,
 I don't go to these events
 to go hook-up.
 I just go to have a good time.
 Yeah. In fact, I am one who...
 I shy away from those types of...uhh...incidents.
 Cuz, I don't know...
 I am not...I am not at a point
 where I want to hook up.
 I just go out to enjoy myself.
 So, sometimes hooking up
 can be a little dramatic
 or a little weird.
 I don't want to loose friends,
 because of this person
 or that person.
 I am just there to have a good time.*

Apparently Gabriel regarded sexy play as too risky a practice to make a habit of it. For the most part, he prioritized his long-term friendships over temporary liaisons. Yet despite his proclamation that such liaisons were not the purpose of his being at Burning Man type events, he had, at least once or twice, responded positively to an unexpected invitation from a woman, and allowed himself to be drawn into a sexy encounter with her. As with other informants' narratives about sexy play, we will see that it is often the woman who makes the first move and everyone tries to minimize their expectations as best they can.

Transformation

When players feel safe enough to experiment, sexy play has the potential to contribute to transformational experiences. In four senses, sexy encounters can be considered transformative: (1) as an immediate transformation of one's state of mind into a mood of play, (2) as an interpersonal practice that when repeated may help to transform one's relational patterns with others over time, (3) as a social practice that can forge new relationships, and (4) as a cultural practice that when shared with others may be contributing to cultural transformations on a larger scale. Burning Man is a potent place for experimenting with sexual curiosities, because people can play with *possible selves* and *intentional worlds* simultaneously until they find a sexy self that the world seems to accept—or at least one other person can accept for a brief period of time (see Markus and Nurius 1987; and Parish 2008 on "possible selves"; see Shweder 1990 on "intentional world").

People are often very accepting of one another at Burning Man. (The hecklers described in the last chapter are an ironic exception to this pattern.) A person may express pride in characteristics that in other contexts make them feel different and alienated from others. People are quite open about their sexual orientations at Burning Man—heterosexuality, homosexuality, or bisexuality. People display their bodies provocatively—male, female, or transgender. People are often prompted to admit to certain sexual proclivities—such as having polyamorous relationships, which is a term for having multiple relationship partners at the same time, and sadomasochism, which is referred to as “kink.” People even form theme camps around these types of sexy play practices or orientations. Such openness about one's sexuality makes it easier not only to find like-minded play partners, but also to experiment with connecting to and through an emerging sexual identity.

My research assistant, after participating in same-sex encounters at a theme camp for gay men, reported some of his racy experiences to members of our camp. I recall how he was both gleeful and sheepish as he told us what goes on at this other camp. Although certain sex acts may have been familiar to him at the time, the act of openly disclosing his sexual orientation was new. For the first time in his life, he had informed a straight man that he was gay. He considered this moment a transformative experience. Previously, he had kept his sexual identity a secret from heterosexual people. When I asked for his consent to include his story in my dissertation research, he gave it. I asked him why Burning Man was the first place where he felt comfortable revealing his sexual orientation openly. In an email he wrote, “I felt comfortable coming out at BM because everyone was different, and therefore I was not afraid of being different myself. Burning Man's best gift to me was the gift of acceptance =).”

In the United States, attachment, love, and acceptance are emotional experiences that most people value and consider necessary components of healthy, fulfilling, lasting relationships—in friendship, familial, and romantic relationships (Bellah, et al. 2008[1985]; Quinn 1996; Scheff 1997; Scheff 2011). Because of previous experiences, not everyone finds it easy to become attached to others, to fall in love and feel loved, or to show acceptance and feel accepted by others. Social forms of play may provide opportunities to practice these relational skills. I argue that when social play practices elicit a mood of play successfully, a mind becomes more pliable and a person more willing to try new ways of relating to others. Sexy play practices may be particularly important in a society that increasingly values relationships between two people who are genuinely attracted to each other and who are emotionally fulfilled by their relationship, more so than couples determined to stay together no matter what. In the US, a

person is expected to possess the capacity to fall “head-over-heals” in love with another person and to maintain a romantic attachment over time.

Many researchers have described a trance-like state of infatuation, called *limerence*, in which a person acts crazy and irrational in pursuit of the object of their affection, until either the feeling wears off or the two people develop a more lasting attachment (Fisher 1992; Scheff 1997; Scheff 2011; Tennov 1979). What these researchers are studying is what I am calling a mood of play, a temporary state of mind that focuses the attention on another person or object, and with seemingly little effort can lead to the formation of an attachment to that person or object. Similarly, in mother-infant play, a person learns how to co-regulate emotional signals and expressions in synchrony with each other and respond to their immediate environment, such that play forges an emotional bond, a secure base for the developing person to explore and attach to other objects and people in their environment (Schorer 2001; Weisner 2005a; Winnicott 1971). Likewise, in sexy play, two people interact, using both verbal and non-verbal communication, mutually coordinating their gaze, facial expressions, and body movements in synchrony with each other and with their immediate environment. When the encounter successfully elicits a mood of play, two people may describe the experience in flowery language as falling in love. An alternative conceptualization of this experience is falling into a mood of play together.

Sexy play may be a useful developmental tool for anyone looking to form loving and fulfilling relationships. Even if sexy play does not immediately lead to a long-term attachment, it may be useful to experience a transitional relationship in which a person can develop their emotional-cognitive repertoire. Sexy play can help a person learn how to co-regulate emotional signals and expressions in synchrony with another person, to respond to the environment and act in harmony with another person’s reactions, and to build up a person’s confidence. Furthermore,

sexy play may be a powerful play practice for learning how to enter into a mood of play in concert with another person. Sexy play may have many uses, including finding a partner for sex or for a romantic relationship. But even in the absence of such outcomes, it may be a potentially transformative relational practice. Some may consider sexy play as “just hooking up,” a casual, disposable relationship that has no meaning, or as something radical that requires a belief in “free love” or “polyamory” in which a person is looking to avoid a single committed relationship. Rather, I am suggesting that sexy play may lead to a broad range of psychocultural outcomes.

Anthropologist Naomi Quinn outlined a model of marriage in which Americans in her study described relationships that were emotionally meaningful and lasted a long time; they believed that happy marriages took a lot of hard work and effort, which Quinn described as the quintessential American manner of achieving one’s goals (Quinn 1996). All of my informants wanted emotionally fulfilling relationships, as well. Many were *working hard* to realize this model of the ideal relationship. But many were also *playing hard* to achieve it, and that is the quintessential Burning Man way.

In this chapter I am arguing that a person who participates in sexy play at Burning Man may develop relational skills that could potentially enhance their ability to form healthier, more fulfilling relationships in other contexts in the future. Burning Man is a social context that does not have a clear developmental trajectory into one type of committed relationship or sexual identity. It is a highly social, highly playful context, where a mood of play can be more easily elicited. In this atmosphere, where there are no rigid cultural scripts demanding that a person play a sex or courtship game, a person has an option to voluntarily participate in sexy play or not. If a person chooses to make or accept an invitation to play in a sexy way, they may be able to refine their psychosocial skills of love, attachment, and acceptance.

Moonbeam

“Costco Soulmate Trading Outlet is Black Rock City's leading supplier of high-quality, low-cost soulmates,” boasts Costco’s website (Costco Soulmate Trading Outlet 2012). Soulmate trading is a playa dating service that is also a playful piece of performance art, as well as a serious critique of corporate culture. At the camp one can select among various brands of soulmates: “National brands include Male, Female, Het, Gay, and Bisexual. Private label soulmates include Techno Boy, Flaming Fag, Baby Dyke, Redneck, Beautiful Bi, Punk Piercing, and Artsy Fartsy.” By engaging in soulmate trading, participants enact a farce that mocks corporate culture’s commoditization of every human need, cooptation of every cultural trend, and reification of cultural stereotypes. At the same time soul mate trading has utility for those who use it as a free dating service. There is a real possibility of finding a connection with another person at Costco.

Moonbeam, whose costuming skills you may remember from Chapter Three, woke up early one morning with the intention of finding a soul mate at Costco. She thought it was such a cheesy plan that she was ashamed to tell any of her campmates about it. When she got to Costco, they were out of the membership forms that one must fill out to get matched with a soul mate. Moonbeam quickly grew bored and impatient waiting for them to arrive. So she decided to find a soul mate without their help. “Fuck this!” she said to herself as she walked out of Costco, “I’m gonna find my own soul mate for a day!...Who needs fucking Costco.”

As Moonbeam stepped out from Costco, she spotted a man on a motorcycle. He was standing near the Talk to God phone booth (where you can have a conversation with a person on the other end of the line pretending to be God). The man she spotted was hot. He had covered his

motorcycle in faux fur. Moonbeam decided that she was all set with him as her soul mate. She did not ask him outright to be her soul mate, but she walked over to him and asked, “You wanna take me around and see the art?” He said, “Yeah!” And that’s how the date began.

*So I jumped on.
And then <Laughter>
Me and this guy just ended up on this fantasy date...
where we'd go to these art...
we would go to the different art installations
and then a whiteout⁵ would hit.
So we're sexy as shit, right?
The hair's all windblown...
we've got goggles on.
There's been whiteouts all day...
so we both have goggles on.
So there's this mystery.
There's just these characters.
And the characters...
with the goggles and all this stuff.
It was just like,
so sexy.
And...um...I don't know how we dove into it...
but we'd just do these, like,
passionate kisses
at each art piece during whiteouts.
You know, until the white out subsided enough
to get on the bike...
and then we get on the bike,
and we go to the next thing.
And for like half a day
we just ended up on this whole adventure,
never really seeing each other's face or anything...
you know, but these personas we had created.
It was awesome!
I felt like I had the best boyfriend ever.
...riding around on this bike.*

Most people ride bicycles at Burning Man. Motorcycles are not permitted for personal use. If a person tries to bring in a motorcycle, the volunteers at the Gate will confiscate it and hold it

⁵ A whiteout is when a dust storm hits the city and there is no visibility. Afterwards everyone and everything is covered in a layer of white dust.

there until the event is over, unless that motorcycle has been transformed into a work of art and has been licensed by the Department of Mutant Vehicles. Initially Moonbeam was not aware that the motorcycle they were riding was prohibited. At some point Moonbeam learned that in order to get his furry motorcycle into Black Rock City, her soul mate had bypassed the Gate and rode it through the orange trash fence, which surrounds the city. Moonbeam came to realize that her soul mate was a “total renegade.”

Around midday, the renegade motorcyclist drove Moonbeam back around to the Talk to God phone booth. Moonbeam decided that this must be a sign that the date was coming to an end. Straddling the motorcycle, they embraced for the last time.

*And it was like,
here we're saying goodbye forever, you know?
So it just allows for this fantasy
and this romance, and just...
So then we have this like passionate, windblown kiss
and I had some scandalous outfit on anyways,
you know, like, probably just like my underwear
and some garters with some boots
—just some total fantasy gear.
And I remember like, we were saying good-bye,
and we were on this, we were on the bike.
It was...it must've been so sexy.
We ended up having this crowd of like 30 people around us.
Like, it'd be interesting...
there must be pictures and video.
Like, people were like taking pictures and video.
Whatever,
we were really in our bubble.
We didn't really care.
But it must've been this really aesthetic moment, you know?
Or...like, it was just really passionate and like beautiful.
And then you know....
I walked away
and I was just like.... you know,
this fantasy woman that the desert blew in.*

Moonbeam went on to explain exactly how the fantasy bubble burst, during their last embrace,
when he asked her to take off her goggles:

*And I was like God, I don't know
if I want us to take off our goggles.
It was like so perfect
the way it is.
But then it was cur-
It was so perfect,
and his body was so beautiful,
and our energy was so great.
I was like you know,
maybe I should have him take off the, the goggles.
cuz if... he's beautiful or something.
I mean beautiful—
what I saw was beautiful...
But you know the eyes are such a
different thing, you know.
You see so much more in the eyes...
And <deep breath>
I was like okay,
I hate to like,
burst the bubble.
But I gotta know.
Maybe I wanna spend more time with him
<Laughter> or something.
And um... he took off the goggles...
and then like,
it just kind of demystified the whole thing.
It brought this real-
reality into it.
And he was handsome...
but just not what I was looking for.
...maybe in his soul or...
I'm not really sure what it was, you know.
But I was like okay, that's over.
And then I walked away.
And I was kind of bummed that we took off our goggles.
But it was still a really cool experience,
and I was still high from it.
But you know, I had...
at the same time I had to.
But anyways, that was it.
It was such a highlight of my Burning Man.*

Moonbeam's narrative painted a picture of perfect playa date, replete with synchronicities that seem to happen regularly on the playa when a person can get into the right frame of mind. What Moonbeam described in this narrative was a profound mood of play, a temporary state of mind that focused her attention on another person, in which her anxieties melted away and with seemingly little effort the day seemed to unfold just as it ought to have. The mood was elicited through sexy play, and it dissolved the moment she and her play partner removed their goggles, when the fantasy was replaced with thoughts about the future and how the date would be remembered or revisited. Play is a fragile mood. During sexy play at Burning Man a person can feel transformed into a mood of play if they are able to abandon a strategic mode of gamesmanship, for the time being, and follow signals from the playa and the other person during the encounter. Succumbing to a mood of play is an exercise in fantasy, but it is also a useful skill as one gets to know a person and learns how to live with them—without trying to control them.

Including Moonbeam, six of my sixteen informants embarked on new relationships during the year that I interviewed them. Before the year was over, Moonbeam moved in with her new man (not the renegade motorcyclist), and she seemed very happy with the situation. Anna, however, had more difficulties in her relationships.

Anna

Anna, who you may remember from the previous chapter on heckling, had twice met men at Burning Man and pursued a relationship with them afterwards. She met Billy there in 2005. The relationship with this world traveler continued to intrigue and frustrate her for years afterward. In 2009, she met Travis, who lived close to Los Angeles, and they were still in a relationship at the time that our interviews concluded six months later.

Let us start with Billy. Anna felt an intense connection with him from the start. She described herself as being a very innocent then, as a “daytime burner” who was not into the “whole hooking up scene.” One night she was wandering around in the desert alone and she hopped on an art car. There she met Billy and they started talking and it turned out that they had both traveled to Eastern Europe. The art car stopped and they both got off. As he walked away, an unfamiliar voice in her head said, “He’s the one.” She thought it was an insane thought. Billy and Anna “hung out” several times during the week, and she implied that some kind of sexual encounter had transpired. She assumed that since he lived in another country the relationship would end when the event did. After the Man burned, she got up and said to him, “Hey. It’s been nice knowing you.” She was surprised when he asked for her email and phone number. She was even more surprised when he showed up in Los Angeles a few weeks later.

When Anna got the chance, she visited Billy in South-East Asia. Eventually, she started to wonder, “Maybe there is something here? Like maybe I’m not totally crazy? Maybe that voice in my head wasn’t like...I was on no substances at the time...Like maybe, maybe it’s for reals? Who knows?” Anna felt sure that they had a strong connection, although Billy was reluctant to form an attachment. When they were together, she felt that they were very in sync and much of their communication was effortless. She felt that he could read her emotions easily and he seemed to know exactly what to say to her. But to Anna’s chagrin, at the end of their engagements Billy always “reeled his emotions back,” saying that he did not want to become too attached. She told me that he had said, “I don’t want to get attached because I want, there’s so many things that I want to accomplish and I am worried that if I’m attached, I won’t be able to accomplish those things.” Anna seemed defeated when she spoke of Billy and her frustrated desire to have more of him or to be finished with the affair altogether. She seemed unable to

completely let it go. But when she saw him at Burning Man in 2009 it sounded like their sexy encounters were finally over.

Over the four-year period between 2005 and 2009, Anna had hardened into a more hardcore burner. She learned to spin fire, became a member of a dance ensemble, and the coordinator of a theme camp. The year she had met Billy had been a turning point in her transformation. Her social networks expanded. She came to feel connected to many different people and camps in the Burning Man community. She was no longer someone who just went to Burning Man and thought about it two weeks out of the year. Burning Man became her life year-round. Yet, she felt unfulfilled without a committed relationship that would lead to marriage and children.

Anna met Travis at Burning Man in 2009 through a fellow fire-spinner. After attending a memorial service at the Temple for a member of the fire-spinning community that had died of cancer the previous winter, Anna and her friend explored the city together, along with the friend's campmates. One of these campmates was Travis. Anna and Travis stayed up all night on drugs and watched the sunrise over the mountains in the morning. Then she said goodbye. But Travis kept coming by her camp throughout the week.

After the event, she told me about their ongoing relationship. For several months, she was hesitant to call him her "boyfriend." Anna had reservations about becoming involved with Travis. He had a child in another city, and he had a drug history that concerned her. She wanted children eventually, but he did not want to have any more. He was very sweet though, and he quickly became attached to her. After feeling rejected by Billy, she had wanted to find someone who paid her more attention, and yet once she had it, she was not sure it was really what she wanted. I suspect that what she really wanted was to realize the American model of marriage and family, as well as to sustain a heightened mood of play for longer than may be possible.

Mick

When I met Mick, he was a 36-year-old single father. He worked as a service technician and lived in the San Fernando Valley, not far from his own mother's home. At the time, he was fighting for custody of his daughter, which he eventually won. He suspected that the girl's mother was addicted to methamphetamines. She had moved in with Mick's former friend, a drug dealer. Mick did not consume illegal drugs anymore. His employer drug tested him randomly. This record helped him to prove to the court that he was the more reliable parent. Mick had forged a very clear separation between his Burning Man life and his family life. He did not want anything to jeopardize his custody battle. So even when he was going to daytime, family friendly events, he usually left his daughter with her grandmother at her house.

Throughout the year, I saw Mick actively participating at various Burning Man community events in the Los Angeles region. In public, Mick seemed a very jolly man. He had a big belly, and he looked quite dashing in a bowler hat. He seemed to have fun, drinking and dancing. Once I saw him judging at a grilled cheese cook-off, and he shared a sandwich with me. At the time that I was interviewing him, Mick was nursing a broken heart and a broken ego. He consumed alcohol, food, and video games, but these various forms of play did not seem to fill the void left by his ex-girlfriend. She continued to be a source of drama and disappointment. In the privacy of our interviews, he expressed a yearning to find a romantic partner that would love him and stay with him.

During one of our first interviews Mick told me about a sexy encounter he had with a stranger at an outdoor Valentine's Day street party put on by a group of burners in downtown

Los Angeles. Mick had been drug-free for a month and a half at the time. He was standing on the corner with a big smile on his face, happy to be there, when he spotted an attractive girl wearing very short shorts and red knee-high stockings, with hearts painted on her face. She seemed to be there alone too. She smiled back at him, which warmed his heart. Then she disappeared. Then she reappeared ten minutes later, saddled up next to him and “like a little fairy” flashed him another mischievous smile. “Do you like the little green gardens?” she said and he understood this to mean that she was offering him marijuana. He replied, “Ahhh....yeah.” They discretely shared her pipe. Other than that, they did not exchange any words. She disappeared again. She spotted him once more, when he burst out laughing during a surreal performance involving a man in a pink tutu. She turned around and smiled at him knowingly.

“And that was it. That was...was my Valentine’s date. And she had no idea. And maybe I was hers. And I had no idea. And it was perfect. That is all it needed to be. It was beautiful.” I agreed that the story was beautiful and sweet, and risky too. I am sure that the young woman had no idea that Mick had risked his job and custody of his daughter to share this one perfect moment with her.

Conclusion

Burning Man is a sexually charged atmosphere. That does not mean that everyone is having sex, but there is a lot of sexy play going on. What I am calling sexy play is an encounter between two people who express mutual attraction and share a sexy possible self with each other. Ideally, sexy players do not concern themselves with manipulating outcomes, just with keeping the mood of play afloat. Sexy players accomplish this by surrendering to a love story and playing as if that love story was real and true. The relationships formed during sexy play may be brief,

but they are nonetheless small intentional worlds wherein a person can experiment with a sexy side of themselves and test it in front of another person.

Forming a relationship with a stranger is a risky practice, and getting caught up in a mood of play makes them even more risky. A person may act quite crazy under the influence of play. However, when a person feels safe enough to relinquish control and succumb to this mood in concert with another person, sexy play can lead to transformations—for better or for worse. A person may form a new relationship or adopt new practices. A person may learn or reinforce interpersonal skills, such as those related to attachment, love, and acceptance. These skills may be useful in the future. Furthermore, people who experiment with sexy play may contribute to social change on a larger scale, including broadening the acceptability of diverse models for sexual comportment, identities, and relationships.

CHAPTER SIX

Drinking Alcohol

When you walk down the streets of Black Rock City and interact with people, someone will invariably offer you a drink. Perhaps a man offers you a swig of whiskey, directly out of his Jim Beam bottle. Or maybe a woman tosses you a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon, which she pulled out of the cooler strapped to the back of her tricycle. Out on the playa, a bar on wheels may drive by you at five miles per hour. If you wave, the driver-bartender might pull over to let you sit down on one of the barstools surrounding the bar. As you drive across the desert, you see the cracked, dusty surface of the playa moving underneath your dangling feet. Perhaps you already feel drunk.

On the main streets, you often find camps with a bar stationed in front. It might be covered with an elaborate shade structure, surrounded by walls, decorations, and places to sit. It might be a simple covered structure, like an oversized lemonade stand—but unlike children’s lemonade stands, this lemonade is free and it’s spiked with booze. Perhaps your first time out, you tried to pay for your drink. Someone had to explain to you that the alcohol is a gift, and you are not expected to give the bartender anything in return for the drink. At the next bar, you keep your money in your pocket, and consider waving the bartender down and just ordering your favorite drink, as is your habit in the “default world.” But you have second thoughts, wondering if this is the way it is done here. If you are gregarious, gorgeous, or are wearing an extraordinary costume, then you might be offered a drink immediately. If you are shy, you may wait awhile for someone to notice you and offer you a drink. Perhaps you finally get up the courage to ask for

something. *What do you want?* the bartender asks you. *What do you have?* you reply. The bartender smiles as he pours a rum and Coke into your cup. The beverage tastes deliciously sweet, and it seems almost magical that you didn't have to pay anything for it.

Although alcohol is ubiquitous and free, acquiring a drink without a cup and ID can be difficult. Perhaps the bar does not have disposable cups—in an attempt to reduce waste, they say. Even if they find a cup for you, you may be reproached for expecting that they have one. You, of course, want to demonstrate your self-reliance, as well as your respect for the environment. You quickly learn to carry your own cup, as well as your ID, and by doing so, you start to feel like you are learning how to navigate this alternative culture. You may also find that you are drinking more than you expected. Perhaps you had preconceptions about Burning Man and expected to find more illegal drug use. Maybe you are surprised that alcohol seems to be the drug of choice for the majority. You may have seen a woman surreptitiously pop something into her mouth, and you wondered what it was. You occasionally see your neighbor smoking a pipe in the back of his camp. Perhaps he would share if you asked? Alcohol, however, is very easy to score. There are hundreds of bars where it is openly and freely distributed. Some of these bars are open all night.

One night you might trek out onto the playa, all the way out to the orange trash fence, and find a bar in the middle of the desert. How excited you are to get a drink here! But the bartender demands that you give him something in return before he will pour you a drink. You are caught off guard, since you had been told that barter is not the norm. If you are really desperate for a drink, you may scrounge around frantically in your pocket trying to find something to give him. Perhaps you find a little plastic bracelet that someone handed you an hour ago. Or maybe you find a pair of goggles sitting on the counter that someone left behind. You hesitantly hold the item up to the bartender hoping that it is sufficient. He nods contentedly, takes the item from

you, and pours a generous shot of tequila into your travel mug. Although grateful for the drink, perhaps you inwardly scoff at the baseness of this attempt to turn a free-flowing gift economy into a tit-for-tat barter economy. Or perhaps you approve of the balanced relationship that has been established through the return gift.

Alcohol can have a magical, compelling effect on your mind and body. Perhaps it relaxes you, making it easier for you to slip into an unfamiliar social situation and bond with others. It can make you feel very silly. It can also be dangerous. It may affect your judgment. It certainly makes it more difficult for your body to stay hydrated; and dehydration is an ever-present threat in this brutal desert environment. If you overdo it one night, you may have to spend an entire day recuperating in your camp, as your body reminds you that alcohol is a poison. In large enough quantities it can make you very sick.

Perhaps your friend becomes really ill, so you manage to pull yourself together and flag down a Black Rock Ranger riding by on a golf cart. They cart you and your friend to medical services. He is laid out on a cot and hooked up to an IV drip. This brings him back from the edge—slowly. On his third bag of fluids, he suddenly regains consciousness and urgently has to pee. Awkwardly, you help him outside to a port-o-potty to relieve himself. Eventually you are told he can go, and you help him get back to camp and to his tent. At some point, he starts to feel himself again. As the sun sets that evening, the cacophonous roar of the city beckons him back to the party. You wonder if he learned anything from last night's experience.

One afternoon you wander into a neighboring camp where no alcohol is being served, but it seems quite possible that people are intoxicated. Some people are quite loud and jovial. Others are quiet and contemplative. One person is frantically trying to get prepared to head out of camp and attend an event they read about in the *What, Where, When*. Another person seems on the

verge of a total emotional meltdown and is being comforted by a friend. Two people are passed out on the couch in their underwear, drooling. On the other couch, a man and woman are making out; eventually they retire to their tent. It may appear as if all of these people are in some way drunk, or high, or recovering from being drunk and/or high. But maybe not, you think. Perhaps everyone is simply enjoying a time-out from everyday life, where you have to act proper and be fully dressed in front of your friends. You relax in the shade on a hammock with a beautiful, half-naked woman, and share a cigarette with her, even though you don't smoke. It feels like you just stepped into somebody's home and it immediately feels like your home too.

Later that afternoon, you and the beautiful woman stumble into the Gold Club Café. It's a small dome, with a bar at the far end and tables on your left. You see people sipping cocktails, listening to live music, and eating gourmet food. There is a white board on the wall listing items that are needed by the café—ice, any type of alcohol, fresh mint, limes, and cranberry juice. The woman explains to you that the Gold Club operates on donations from the café's members, and anyone can become a member by making a donation. A minor contribution, such as a bag of ice, gets you a copper medallion. A second-tier donation, such as a good bottle of liquor, gets you a silver medallion. Major donations over multiple years earn you a gold medallion. These necklaces mark individuals as members, and the higher your membership status the more quickly and lavishly you will be served when you visit the establishment. Perhaps you are eager to join this lively supper club and earn their approbation through a donation. Or perhaps you inwardly deride this warping of the gift economy into a social hierarchy. In any case, you enjoy the jazz band and the warm buzz inside the small dome, and you hope to be served at some point.

Figure 8. Respondents' alcohol use at Burning Man in 2012

These results from the Black Rock City Census were based on a survey conducted online, post-event, and the link advertised on the Jack Rabbit Speaks email list (n=779). These results were not adjusted, and therefore may not be representative of the people who were at the event that year.

This year at Burning Man, did you use alcohol?

	Number	Percent
No	76	9.8%
Yes, once	23	3.0%
Yes, on two to three different occasions	88	11.3%
Yes, on four to five different occasions	87	11.2%
Yes, on more than five occasions	130	16.7%
Yes, more than once per day	300	38.5%
No answer/unclear	75	9.6%
Total	779	100.0%

Thank you to Dr. Dominic Beaulieu-Prévost for analyzing this data and producing the report. And thank you for his help in designing and conducting the Census Decompression survey in 2012, along with Dr. Kateri McRae.

Play

Drinking alcohol is a play practice in American culture. It is an activity that many adults in the United States use for celebration and recreation. My argument is that people are often using alcohol as a play practice to induce a mood of play. This mood is an elevated state of mind, in which people often feel less serious. In this mood, they may act in ways that appear quite silly and childish to observers. This is the cultural script. It is what constitutes drunkenness in many drinking contexts in the US—especially in bars, nightclubs, and beer gardens, during sporting events and celebrations, and after work time is over. There are departures from this script. While some people become happy, others become morose or even aggressive. But for the most part, a person holding an alcoholic drink in their hand is supposed to be in a better mood than one who is drinking tea, coffee, or soda, and they are given more leeway to act out of character.

In this chapter I argue that alcohol can be used to induce a mood of play, in which a person becomes more likely to act in ways that they would not dare to act when not drinking. Many readers may assume that alcohol makes all people act worse. However, previous research has demonstrated that drinking behavior varies by cultural context and on different drinking occasions (Heath 2000; MacAndrew and Edgerton 1969; Marshall 1979; Stromberg 2008; Stromberg 2012). Anthropologist Dwight Heath compared drinking in different parts of the world, and he found, most surprisingly, that the Camba people in Bolivia drink strong fuel-grade alcohol in large quantities, during which time they are calm and quiet, even as they drink to the point of oblivion and fall asleep (Heath 2000). He also pointed out that in some rural contexts in Spain and France, alcohol has traditionally been consumed throughout the workday and its effects do not seem to interrupt ordinary states of awareness (Heath 2000). However, in other cultural settings, including the US, drinking is used to intentionally and dramatically alter

consciousness, differentiating it from ordinary work time or resting time when comportment is typically more serious and more predictable. Consequently, we need to distinguish between drunkenness as a simple physiological response to alcohol and as a culturally constructed practice situated within particular occasions for drinking.

The physiological response to alcohol is clear, but drunken behavior is not. As a person consumes ethanol, they become less coordinated, less in control of their sensorimotor functions. This is true everywhere. This is what police officers are testing for when they ask a driver to “please step out of the vehicle” and demonstrate eye-hand-foot coordination. However, it is not the case that a person drinking alcohol automatically becomes morally and socially incompetent as well. In certain societies, where drunkenness is believed to produce moral and social incompetence, occasions for drinking may become opportunities to take a time-out from decency and propriety. In such societies and on such occasions, I argue alcohol is associated with playtime, wherein alternative arrays of possibilities become available.

On the Micronesian island of Chuuk, drinking alcohol is associated with playing war. Mac Marshall wrote about the angry culture of drinking among young men on this island, and he called them “weekend warriors” (Marshall 1979). During the time that he conducted his research, there was intense social pressure for young men to drink alcohol when it was offered to them. They claimed to drink out of boredom and frustration over their lives, especially their lack of employment. They drank in groups with friends, either in bars, where they bought each other rounds, or in the bush, where they shared a bottle of liquor with their “booze brothers.” When they became drunk, they often became violent. They swaggered in the direction of a neighboring village, making earsplitting war cries, and fought as if in a kung-fu movie, often using lethal weapons, such as homemade nun-chucks. They were regularly injured and sometimes killed each

other in drunken battles. In Chuuk culture, men were supposed to be brave, powerful warriors, strong thinkers, willing to be aggressive when necessary, and to protect their community. But under the law, they were not supposed to make war. However, the ramifications were very lax for violent acts committed while under the influence of alcohol. Marshall wrote, “To become drunk in Chuuk is to put on a culturally sanctioned mask of temporary insanity. While insane/drunken one can express physical and verbal aggression that would bring strong disapprobation were one normal/sober” (Marshall 1979:53). Drunkenness created a social time-out for young men of Chuuk to act in ways that defied the laws prohibiting warfare, but conformed to social expectations that they prove themselves to be men. In Chuuk drinking alcohol was a form of dark play, in which ordinary men could become transformed into warriors. If a young man survived this dark form of play, he could potentially establish himself as an adult male worthy of fear and respect.

At Burning Man drinking alcohol is associated with playing community. In this chapter I describe a festive culture of drinking among people who are eager to create immediate feelings of belonging. For many, a primary and salient way to make a connection with other people is by drinking alcohol together. People bring a lot of alcohol with them to the desert. Alcohol may be the most widely appreciated gift to give and receive upon meeting a person at the event. One is not obligated to accept a drink, but the constant sharing of alcohol does make it seem as though drinking is what most people are doing in this place. My main argument is that drinking alcohol is a common form of play at Burning Man. It is a widespread practice that is used to facilitate and expedite a shared mood of play among participants. Sharing cultural beliefs about alcohol’s psychoactive effects, adults who drink together can use alcohol to synchronize their mood. They use it to time the onset of that mood, calibrate its intensity, and manage its expression—in

concert with one another and with the social context. Drinking alcohol is one of many acceptable paths to entering into a mood of play at Burning Man, but it is certainly not the only one.

Drinking is usually accompanied by other practices, such as socializing, dancing, riding around on bicycles and mutant vehicles, and exploring the city in small groups on foot. Together these practices can elicit and sustain a very intense mood of play. Drinking among friends and strangers is a way of playing together—playing with a chemical toy that can provoke a shared mood and construct an experimental setting, wherein a person often gives the other more leeway to act strange and break rules.

At Burning Man there are a few rules around drinking. A person is supposed to carry their own cup at all times, so that they can accept a drink when offered one, as well as their own bottle of water so that they will stay hydrated. One regularly encounters opportunities to drink other people's alcohol, especially at camps where bars have been stationed in the front area of the camp, and people are giving out drinks. Alcohol is legal and free. Drinking alcohol is allowed in all public spaces throughout the city. People drink anytime of the day, alone or in groups. It is also okay to pass out in public, on a stranger's couch, for example. There are few physical, temporal, or social boundaries limiting where and when alcohol is consumed and where drunken comportment is tolerated. However, local sheriffs and park rangers do enforce laws against drunk driving and underage drinking. Beginning in 2009, they began requiring bars to card their guests, and so people began carrying identification to prove that they are 21-years-old or over. Beginning in 2011, they began requiring mutant vehicles to keep open containers of alcohol out of the driver's compartment. Besides these two rules, there are few constraints limiting the consumption of alcohol at the event. One witnesses people who seem as if they are intoxicated, day and night, throughout the city. There are some exceptions, such as at the Temple

and especially when the Temple is burning on Sunday night. In these most sacred settings, boisterous drunkenness is likely to be tamped down, and even if people are under the influence of alcohol, they will try to comport themselves more quietly and respectfully. But in many ways, the whole week of Burning Man is an occasion for drinking.

During the weeklong event, it seems that it is always playtime and being in a mood of play is practically mandatory. As I have described in this dissertation, participants encourage one another to be creative and to challenge social norms through art, self-expression, and innovation. There are many ways to participate in this joyful, festive, social atmosphere and enter into a shared mood of play. Nonetheless, playing is usually associated with childhood, and it can be challenging for an adult to act playful. It may not be his habit to behave uninhibitedly in front of others who might judge him as crazy or childish. I argue that alcohol is such a salient tool or toy for many adults, because it gives them permission to forgo the serious stance of adulthood and to act silly and childish. To become drunk at Burning Man is to put on a culturally sanctioned mask of youthful exuberance, which can be removed later. While drunk at Burning Man one can express a mood of play most boisterously and behave in ways that would otherwise garner judgments, if one were sober in the default world and the behavior could not be explained by a temporary state of mind in a temporary setting.

At Burning Man drinking can also be a dark form of play. Drinking gives a person a wider license to act in ways that they may not dare act otherwise. As such it is a particularly expedient tool for entering into a mood of play that can cross lines quickly. As alcohol heightens people's spirits, it can also turn those spirits dark and obliterate people's awareness of the open-hearted, creative, and communal spirit that has been so carefully constructed by those organizing the event, building the art, and participating in the theme camps. The mood created by alcohol

can cross over from play to not play, from creativity to habit, from communal chaos to selfish destruction. One person may suspect another drinker of having crossed a line, by engaging in some kind of unacceptable behavior, and may feel that they do not share the same intention. Alcohol can be consumed in a selfish or greedy manner and viewed in a negative light. Those who arrive at the event late in the week and seem to be there “just to party” and not to participate in the building of a community may be derogatorily labeled as “weekend warriors.” Similarly, some participants may slander “frat boys,” “raver kids,” and “hippies” for being overly focused on partying and/or getting high, rather than contributing to the event. Alcohol and other drugs may draw a person back into old habits and identities learned in other party contexts, ones that are not very creative. Some people may be viewed as drinking and partying too excessively, pushing their bodies or the group beyond what is considered safe or fun. Some people may, in fact, cross the line into addiction and find that they are unable to stop themselves from drinking. In many different ways, alcohol involves risks, and these risks make it a dark play practice.

In addition to drinking alcohol at Burning Man, there are even darker play practices, such as using drugs that are illegal and could get a person arrested. Instead of alcohol, I could have written this chapter about illegal drug use. However, by focusing exclusively on illegal practices I would have contributed to stereotypes about Burning Man, which tend to sensationalize illegal drug use and to obscure the greater amounts of alcohol consumed there. Writing about illegal drugs, I might have made many of the same arguments. Illegal drugs can also be very effective paths into a mood of play. For some the risks of arrest and stigma may heighten the mood, while others may find these risks intolerable. I would argue, for these reasons, that illegal drug use is *always* a dark form of play. A person who smokes or ingests illegal drugs knows that they are breaking a law. Consequently, people who use illegal drugs at Burning Man usually hide them

and use them clandestinely. Perhaps in the future, I will write about illegal or hidden forms of play. But it has been much more interesting and productive for me to begin with an analysis of alcohol use, which is not always so dark and risky. Drinking alcohol is commonplace. Drinking at Burning Man is often a joyful form of play, practiced openly in public, and shared widely among strangers; and this drinking can *sometimes* slip across the line into dark play. This ambiguity better highlights the subjective nature of risk and play.

Gary

“I am trying to cut back,” Gary said as he declined a shot of tequila from a man on a bicycle. You may remember Gary going naked in Chapter Three, but he was not naked when my research assistant recorded this interaction on the streets of Black Rock City. On the video, I was able to observe one of the lines that Gary used to refuse alcohol at Burning Man. Gary, you may remember, was an alcoholic, who had no intention of drinking while at Burning Man. Gary’s comment to the man on the bicycle implied that it was a very nice gift and he would normally say yes to the alcohol, however, he was working to moderate his drinking somewhat. In the manner that Gary chose to decline the alcohol, he concealed his addiction and sobriety, and he refrained from overtly labeling drinking as a dark and dangerous form of play. He tried to keep the mood light, as he said no.

Gary claimed that he did not feel tempted to drink at Burning Man, even though he was frequently offered alcohol. I suspected, however, that the frequency of these declined offers might have made it more difficult for Gary to feel a sense of belonging and discover an appropriate play practice that would allow him to join in the festive mood of play without risking his life. In our interviews, Gary told me that he had been surprised at how much drinking he

encountered at Burning Man. It was more readily available there than he was expecting. He said that he now knew what it must be like for an overeater to try to control their addiction to food in a world where food is constantly available and people are constantly presenting the overeater with opportunities to keep eating. Gary's narrative demonstrates how a gift of food or drink, although it may be offered as a gesture to break down barriers between people, could instead have a distancing effect. Luckily, there were places like Anonymous Village, where Gary felt a sense of community among others working to maintain their sobriety and serenity. If he had camped there or at another sober camp, he might have had a secure base from which he could have explored the event and returned home multiple times a day to feelings of safety and belonging.

Transformation

Anthropologist Robert Edgerton wrote a book about drunken comportment with Craig MacAndrew, in which they analyzed ethnographic data on drinking cross culturally. They found that drinking alcohol is often, but not always, correlated with periods of "time out," when social rules are loosened (MacAndrew and Edgerton 1969). During certain occasions, people may make exceptions to certain rules, taboos, and laws for those under alcohol's spell. During such time-outs, people may be more likely to express feelings that are considered incorrect and behave in ways that would seem improper under ordinary circumstances. At such times, anthropologists have witnessed people acting in what seems to be direct opposition to the ideal comportment for that society. In some contexts, people can express feelings while drunk, which are common among people in a given population, but are in conflict with the expectations imposed by the dominant culture. The researchers challenged the commonly held assumption that alcohol simply

loosens inhibitions and people everywhere become inclined to “change-for-the-worse” when they drink (Heath 2000; MacAndrew and Edgerton 1969).

MacAndrews and Edgerton argued that alcohol is neither necessary, nor sufficient, for eliciting drunken comportment. Edgerton tested this theory on his fellow faculty members in UCLA’s Department of Anthropology. Unfortunately, he never published the results of his findings. Tom Weisner told me what he knew of Edgerton’s academic experiments. Edgerton threw a party and invited his fellow faculty members. He took a big bottle of vodka and poured the contents into a punch bowl. He made a big show of it so that everyone was under the impression that the punch contained alcohol. Actually, he had poured water into the punch. The punch he served contained no alcohol at all. As the party progressed, the anthropologists, thinking that they were drinking alcohol, began acting drunk. They became louder, friendlier, and sillier. It took time for me to appreciate the significance of these stories about Edgerton’s deceptive experiments. These anecdotes suggest that the social context of drinking matters; there is a powerful placebo effect that influences what we assume is solely the chemical effects of alcohol.

After analyzing three different play practices in the previous chapters of this dissertation, I hope I have already convinced you that alcohol is neither necessary, nor sufficient, for eliciting a mood of play. Nonetheless, many people in the US and in my field site depend upon alcohol for this purpose. Oftentimes, the alcohol itself is attributed with the power to change one’s state of mind, while the effects of the social context go unnoticed. Perhaps alcohol is a popular play practice because it seems more expedient, and therefore alcohol makes an efficient use of a limited amount of playtime. Also it takes less effort than other practices that require one to develop various sorts of skills. Or perhaps it is popular because dark forms of play seem a more

grown-up option than safer forms of play. Under the influence of alcohol a person may act silly, childish, and playful, but still feel like an adult with a grown up beverage in his or her hand.

Drinking and drunkenness are learned behaviors. It takes time and practice to learn how to drink. It starts with learning how to acquire a drink, how to consume it, and what to do while drinking. One also had to learn how to feel while drinking, and also what it means. Even if a person has learned how to drink in one context, they may need to relearn how to drink in a different context and what it means to drink there. Neuroanthropologist Daniel Lende, in his work on addiction, argued that we ought to attend to exactly how drugs and alcohol become salient to particular individuals in particular contexts as they become motivated to use by linking certain cues with certain actions and rewards (see Lende 2012 on "incentive salience"). A neurologically informed anthropological understanding of drinking and intoxication calls for attention to the ways in which culture and context shape drinkers' subjective experiences and train their particular mind-brains to experience the world in a certain way over time.

In the United States, as young people approach or reach the legal age for drinking, learning how to drink can be a rite of passage, an opportunity to transform oneself into an adult, who engages in riskier, adult forms of recreation. According to Heath, alcohol often holds a mystique in societies where drinking is restricted—a promise of sexiness, power, social skills, and other qualities that result in young people drinking too fast, too much, and for unrealistic reasons (Heath 2000). Anthropologist Peter Stromberg studied college students playing drinking games in an American university setting and he conceptualized drinking alcohol as a form of play (Stromberg 2008; Stromberg 2009; Stromberg 2012). In many college settings, drinking alcohol is associated with getting out-of-control, acting foolish and stupid. It is a culture of drinking characterized by extreme impulsivity. Stromberg outlined a psychocultural process in

which young people who consume legal drugs in the US can become caught up in pretend play, enacting fictional selves that valorize cultural symbols and emphasize specific cultural patterns, facilitating their reproduction over time. Immersed in drinking games that tied the student's consumption of alcohol to some other activity that made the drinking compulsory, students "create anew the cultural conviction of alcohol being a substance that can override the will of the drinker" (Stromberg 2009:133). Stromberg interpolates a connection between the exercises involved in these drinking games and the belief in the US that people's appetites can become insatiable. Alcohol is believed to have the power to assume control over the user's agency and cigarettes are an additional prop that have the power to transform a person into someone who is sexier, tougher, and more mysterious (Stromberg 2008). These are powerful beliefs in the power of drugs to alter the mind and transform the person. Such lessons, once learned, are likely to be transferred to other drugs, including illegal ones.

In this chapter, I will present several narratives about the practice of drinking at Burning Man and how the culture and immediate context shaped the informants' subjective experience. For some, drinking alcohol and using other drugs at Burning Man can be a rite of passage, an opportunity to transform oneself into a person who goes to Burning Man and takes part in risky behavior in a public setting. During our interviews, informants compared their experiences drinking in various cultural settings. Two informants, Stan and Dean, related very positive experiences at Burning Man, and the other two, Gary and Cynthia, were more ambivalent. As I present details on this chemical play practice, I will conduct a close reading of the person's experience as they navigated the sociocultural realities that seemed possible to them at Burning Man. People, including people who drink together, construct *intentional worlds*, sociocultural realities that depend upon participants' beliefs, mental representations, cultural models,

idiosyncrasies, and intentions of the people in the immediate vicinity (Shweder 1990). Within the Burning Man context, people select particular occasions for drinking and particular drinking partners for reasons that are particular to that person's life story. Over time the practice of drinking together can facilitate socialization into a particular social group and the exploration of *possible selves* that might inhabit group (Markus and Nurius 1987; Parish 2008).

Drinking is a cultural practice that can transform a person—both in the short term and in the longer term—as the person uses alcohol to play with various possible selves and intentional worlds until they find a good-enough fit. None of these are stories about people who were intentionally experimenting with becoming a “drunk” and none of them were transformed into alcoholics during the year that I interviewed them. Rather my informants told subtler stories about the incentives for using or not using alcohol in this particular setting for one week out of the year. Those who were new to the event had to figure out in a relatively short period of time how to comport themselves, and quite quickly it may have seemed to some of them like common sense to experience the world in a certain way—with a drink in one's hand. In this chapter, I am hoping to slow down this psychocultural process and examine how a particular pattern of comportment is learned and embodied, before it becomes habitual and predictable.

Drinking in public may be a new experience for those who visit Black Rock City for the first time. Other than in the French Quarter of New Orleans, there are few cities in the US where a person can drink openly on the streets, appear drunk, and pass out in public. In the US, most adults learn to confine their drinking to specific domains for recreating and for socializing, such as bars, clubs, and beer gardens, or inside one's home or backyard, if available. Not much has changed since anthropologist James Spradley published his ethnography on urban nomads in the US and called for a reevaluation of the institutions that criminalize public drunkenness (Spradley

1970). Most people in the US, including many of my informants who drink in public at Burning Man, would want to avoid being associated with those labeled as “drunks,” such as the men in Spradley’s study who drank in public and were considered a nuisance. When alcohol is relegated to more private spaces, the authorities may attempt to contain and control drinking behavior; in so doing, they legitimize some ways of drinking and being drunk over others. Furthermore, owners of drinking establishments can maximize profits. Additionally, underage drinkers can be kept out of places where adults are drinking and are likely to be observed in a sloppy mood of play. But poor and nomadic people do not always have access to legally designated spaces for drinking and acting drunk. In most cities, those who drink on the street risk arrest. They are more likely to be discovered if they express themselves loudly, if they drink alone and during the daytime, or if they fall asleep in public. At Burning Man, however, drunken and otherwise playful behavior is not a crime. People in many different states of consciousness are permitted to roam the streets and to sleep wherever they happen to fall. By tolerating a wider range of comportments, the authorities in Black Rock City show greater acceptance for adults who have managed to get themselves caught in a mood of play and feel like expressing that mood publically. Being in a mood of play in public, drunken or otherwise, can be a radical experience, one that suggests that a larger cultural transformation is emerging. The playful ethos of Burning Man is one in which adults learn that it may be okay to act out their playful urges in public and express themselves more boldly.

Stan

“When you walk into a bar in Amsterdam,” Stan told me, “people notice you. And when you walk up to the bar, someone starts talking to you.” This was the opposite of his experience in

Los Angeles, which is where he was from. I interviewed Stan in his home office in a condominium in West Los Angeles that he shared with his wife Linda. (You may remember Linda's old lady costume from Chapter Four.) Often he scheduled our interviews in the evening after a long day of working in a government office downtown. Sometimes, before we got started, he poured himself microbrew beer from a bottle into a pint glass and drank it during our interview. During one interview, he got to talking about the social atmosphere in bars. He told me that in bars in the US strangers do not talk to each other and they try really hard not to bump into each other. At the end of an evening going out in Los Angeles, he would sometimes realize, "Wow, I spent the whole night at this bar and didn't talk to anyone. I'm all alone." When envisioning what he wanted to create for his camp at Burning Man, Stan imagined a place where an introverted person, such as he felt himself to be, would have an easier time talking to people.

Stan was 37-years-old and had been to Burning Man eight times when I started interviewing him. The first time he went with his older brother in 2001. He and Linda started going together in 2002, before they were married. They immediately became avid burners. Eventually, two of Stan's siblings, his father, and their partners all became burners as well.

At the time that we conducted our interviews, Stan and Linda camped with a camp based out of Los Angeles called the *Fantastical Freaks*.⁶ They looked forward to spending time with these friends during the event each year. Theirs was among the larger and more ornate camps at Burning Man. They had 75 camp members in 2009. Working year-around over several years, the camp's members invested their time and money into making the camp a special place. One of the main features of the camp was a beautifully constructed and well-decorated bar. When Stan and Linda joined the camp, they spearheaded improvements to the bar in order to attract more

⁶ Informants' names, playa names, and the names of their camps are all pseudonyms.

visitors and make sure that they had enough bartenders scheduled and sufficient alcohol on hand. Stan was intent on making their bar “kick ass,” as he put it. It took a great deal of planning, work, and collaboration among his campmates in order to make the camp a success, a place where friends and strangers gathered and played together.

One afternoon in 2010, I arranged to escape my own camp and parental duties, so that I could visit the Fantastical Freaks during happy hour and participate in their festivities myself. I rode my bike to the corner of 3:00 and D. I stopped and visited another informant’s camp, which happened to be across the street. From there I could see the massive, multi-story camp and a large metallic sign that read “Fantastical Freaks,” which Stan had proudly told me about building the previous summer. Stan was standing in front of the camp with a megaphone in hand. He was using it to invite passersby to come inside and have a drink. Stan was certainly playing the extrovert that day. When I walked over he greeted me with a big smile and a hug, but was sad to inform me that Linda was very sick. He led me through the camp to visit her in their RV.

The sun was unrelenting, so I was grateful to duck under the scaffolding and into the shade. The space was well designed, with high ceilings, lots of light and ventilation. Rather than a huge square space as I had imagined finding, the bar area was rather small, with narrow passages and nooks, such that the 50 or so people who were there were forced to bump into each other. But it was not overly crowded. There was a band playing and everywhere there were people dancing, talking, and laughing. We wound our way through the public space and ducked into the back of the camp, where tents, RVs, and the kitchen had all been arranged beneath the enormous shade structure. Stan introduced me to a couple of his campmates along the way. I rather enjoyed the flirtatious way one particular man looked at me and spoke to me. Stan let me know that he was under the influence of something a little stronger than alcohol. Stan walked me

to the door of his RV and then left. Inside I found Linda in bad shape. She had been vomiting all day. A kind friend was there keeping her company and making her tea. My visit with them was very brief.

I was glad to return to the party and hoped to bump into the friendly man again. I walked back through the camp and up to the bar, which looked much like the one that I had seen previously in a backyard in the San Fernando Valley, when I had attended the camp's planning meeting, as well as a bar I had seen a few times at the Decompression event in Los Angeles. Behind the bar was a wooden cupboard that I recognized from a photo that Stan had shown me, after he had found it at a yard sale in Los Angeles. It was now decorated with a cluttered array of curiosities, which Stan had also described to me during our interviews. Here it had all come together in the desert and it looked like a marvelously chaotic Steam Punk saloon.

I stood at the bar and before long the bartender approached me. He cheerfully asked if I had any identification on me. He wanted to give me a drink, but insisted (apologetically) that I had to prove I was 21. I told him that I did not have any identification on me. He asked me if there was anyone in the camp who could vouch for my age. Of course, there was. Stan breezed through at one point and was able to make the proper introductions. Eager to give me a drink, the bartender then asked me for my cup. But I, like an idiot newbie, had forgotten to bring one of my own. Looking at me sideways, the bartender pulled out a plastic cup, filled it with vodka and orange juice, and handed it to me. Gratefully I finally drank my drink.

I wandered away from the bar. There was nowhere to sit down. I contemplated dancing, but was not yet feeling up to it. Instead, I stood near the entrance, bobbing up and down. I noticed the woman who happened to be standing next to me. She was wearing a very short, green dress. She had dark hair and a voluptuous body. I immediately and easily started up a

conversation with her. I asked her the typical questions one asks a stranger at Burning Man: “What is your name?” “Where are you camped?” and “Have you been to Burning Man before.” I found out that her name was Lyn, she was camped with a group of performers, and this was her first time at Burning Man. I introduced myself as the Countess, and said that my camp was in Center Camp at the Census, and that this was my eleventh burn. She said that she was on her way to a camp down the street that had advertised a workshop on sadomasochism in the *What Where When*, but thought that she would duck into this camp and check out the party. As we stood there chatting, a man walked up to her and started talking to her. He was intent as he spoke, looking directly into her eyes, communicating that he wanted to get to know her better. Yet he was friendly and upbeat. He went away after a few minutes, so we resumed our conversation. Eventually, we got around to discussing our default world lives and identities, discovering that we had many interests in common.

Stan eventually took a break from his promotional work and found me there near the entrance still talking to Lyn. He invited us to go for a ride on the camp’s elevator. This was a novel invitation, as I had never heard of an elevator at Burning Man before. Stan explained how proud he was that they could take people in wheelchairs up to the top level of their structure to see the view. The elevator was a small platform just a few feet across, attached to a rope and a motorized pulley. I was quite anxious as we rode up. The elevator vibrated and tipped slightly. Keeping in mind that there are no building codes at Burning Man, I could not be certain that this contraption was entirely safe. But I decided to enjoy the adventure—taking pleasure in the risk and the feeling of butterflies in my stomach. We left the party behind, slowly passing each level of scaffolding until we got to the top. The view was magnificent and my mood had certainly changed. It was a rare opportunity to see the city and the playa from this vantage point. Black

Rock City was spread out in an arch around us. We were four blocks back from the Esplanade, and past that was the open playa, with the Man in the center. I did not feel as tipsy anymore. I felt in awe of this city that we had all created together, which would be gone in a week.

Stan was very conscious of the experience he was trying to replicate for himself, his campmates, and others at Burning Man. He had imported this model of a friendly neighborhood bar from Europe. Stan had spent nine years living as a student in Amsterdam, and he might have stayed longer if he had been able to secure a work visa. During our first interview he compared life in the US with life in Europe, painting a much more positive picture of the latter. He used the phrase “tooth and claw” to describe life in the US as an intense struggle for survival and success. He expressed dissatisfaction with a middle class lifestyle of homes, jobs, credit cards, and TV. He described the US as more socially constrained, because there are no opportunities for a person to step out of those constraints. Burning Man appealed to him because it was stimulating, titillating, and “a place where you can really be free,” he told me. He called Burning Man a “natural response to life in America,” where people (with enough time and resources) can start to ponder existential questions about the meaning of life and explore more meaningful ways of connecting to others and expressing themselves than is possible in their everyday lives. When he first went to Burning Man, it reminded him of the communal feeling he experienced in Europe—a sense of social togetherness. Based on my own experience, I felt that the Fantastic Freaks were very successful at replicating this model of social togetherness.

After several years of organizing a very successful bar with the Fantastic Freaks, Stan and his wife burned out. They were tired of all the chaos and cleanup involved in catering to drunken people. Perhaps not all of them adhered to the model of drunken comportment that Stan

wished to foster there. In 2012, the couple split-off from the Fantastic Freaks, forming an adjacent camp geared toward welcoming newbies and helping them to adjust to life on the playa.

Also Stan took up a new hobby—brewing beer.

Cynthia

Shortly after Burning Man in 2011, I conducted a follow-up interview with Cynthia. She was 30-years-old at the time. She had just participated in her second burn and it had been her fiancé's fifth burn. That year she had also brought her younger sister and they all camped at the same camp with Molly and Anna (whom you may remember from previous chapters). In the following excerpt from the interview, Cynthia expressed ambivalence about her experiences at Burning Man.

*...maybe Burning Man just isn't for me.
Like maybe I am not emotionally, like,
strong enough.
Because like, it does feel like
some people are able to go and just—
that's the time of their life.
And that's 100% what its about for them.
For me, its like...it is, like,
a great time.
But it is also a difficult time, in some ways.
And, like, I don't know...
I guess I'm just not fully able to be
like, its always fun,
like, 100% of the time.*

In this reflection on her Burning Man experience, Cynthia criticized herself for not being emotionally strong enough to handle the event. She compared herself to others who are able to enjoy themselves the entire time, and concluded that there may not be a good fit between herself and the setting.

Cynthia described what I think is a common and unreasonable expectation that one can maintain a mood of play the entire week of Burning Man. This expectation is reinforced by the ways that some people have learned to use alcohol and/or drugs to control their experience—to synchronize their moods, timing the onset and intensity of a shared mood of play. Many of the people that Cynthia was camped with, some of them my informants, were able to use alcohol in this way. They were also better than Cynthia at masking their negative emotions whenever they were having problems. Cynthia, on the other hand, was prone to depression, self-doubt, panic attacks, and feelings of isolation. During her parents' recent separation and divorce, she struggled with an eating disorder in which she completely lost her appetite for food. Cynthia compared herself to others she observed at Burning Man and she felt incapable of meeting her expectation that she should enjoy herself at the event "100% of the time." At this point in her life at least, Cynthia seemed to be having a very difficult time entering into a mood of play, sustaining it, and expressing it in the ways that her peers did.

Cynthia was working to overcome her difficulties. At the same time she was trying to figure out how to fit herself into the Burning Man setting, specifically into the theme camp where her fiancé fit in so well. Cynthia brought her sister and had expected to spend her second burn with her, showing her around and helping her adjust. But her sister seemed like a "fish in water" when she got there, and seemed to have none of the same challenges adjusting to life at the event and fitting in with their campmates. Consequently, Cynthia's self-criticism increased. Her criticisms of her sister also increased, as she wondered if her sister had a problem with drugs and alcohol. Her sister had learned how to binge drink, use psychoactive drugs, and to embody the unruly drunken comportment that many US students learn in college. Cynthia, on the other hand, seemed to have learned a more reserved model of drunken comportment from her Italian

parents, who often drank wine with dinner but did not act drunk. When Cynthia clumsily tried to voice her concerns about her sister's risky behavior, they had an argument. Cynthia was accused of being a wet blanket, who did not know how to go with the flow. This added to the hurt that Cynthia was feeling over the fact that her little sister did not need her help at Burning Man and did not want to spend all her time together. Differences between the sisters were magnified in this context.

Cynthia very much desired to learn how to go with the flow. In fact, she had arrived at Burning Man that year with a very clear intention to transform herself into a person that would and could loose control. She designed a series of ballet-themed costumes based on the movie *the Black Swan*, which she wore over the course of the week that were supposed to symbolize her transition from the white swan to the black swan (Aronofsky 2010). Cynthia had studied ballet, and much like Natalie Portman's character in the movie, she had been rigid and unyielding in her dancing. Because of this, Cynthia ultimately decided that she did not have what it took to become a professional and she stopped dancing. She related very much to Portman's character, who played an impeccable white swan, but was expected to learn how to embody the dark swan. The dancer had to learn how to loose control, thereby becoming more like another member of her company, a sexy young woman and experienced drug user, who was much looser in her comportment—both on and off the stage. Portman's character ultimately succeeded in loosing control and becoming the black swan, but killed herself during the performance. Cynthia, like the character in the film, wanted to embody the black swan and be liberated from her perfectionism. But she was unable to make this transformation in a week. Despite all her preparations in making the costumes and articulating her goal to embody the black swan—next to her sister she ended up feeling like an “odd duck.”

Dean

Dean (who you may remember from Chapter Three) slept very little during his first time to Burning Man. There was so much to see, do, and experience. He drank alcohol, and smoked marijuana a few times. Sometimes he thought about doing more intense drugs, like MDMA. No one pressured him to partake, but occasionally he thought, “Should I?” Then he decided against it. Dean was always careful about his drug and alcohol consumption, because his mother had a severe drinking problem. In high school and most of college, Dean avoided drinking any alcohol, even though he was sometimes around people who were drinking. After his mother tried to get sober, Dean began to experiment with moderate amounts of alcohol. But he told me that he had no interest in becoming drunk.

Dean had been to Burning Man only once when we met in 2009. I interviewed him in his apartment in the San Fernando Valley. He gleefully showed me his “burning bowl,” a large bowl filled with stuff related to Burning Man—his ticket, a blinky-light ring, a cork from a bottle of wine, a copy of the *Survival Guide* and the *What, Where, When*, a post card from the Burning Man organization announcing the theme, and a lei. During the event Dean wore the red, white, and blue lei in honor of the American Dream theme. But other than that one costume item, he didn’t focus too much on the theme. “I was just trying to find my place,” he said about his first year at Burning Man.

Dean was a delicate, shy, anxious young man. In the corner of the room was his fold-up bike, which he did not plan to use, lest it got stolen before the next burn. It was a prized possession and all the dust had been painstakingly removed. Months later, in a different apartment complex, he dared to store it outside—and it was stolen. I considered that maybe there

were good reasons for some of his anxieties. During our interviews, Dean told me about his racing thoughts, uncontrollable fears, and efforts to overcome his anxieties, which he referred to as PTSD-like symptoms. He told me about being traumatized by the effects of alcohol abuse in his childhood home and bullying in high school. I noticed that he apologized incessantly, over trifles. I was tempted to count the number of times he said “sorry” to me in an hour. Yet, even the day I met him he displayed an unabashed enthusiasm about Burning Man that seemed to shine through all those worries and insecurities. He claimed that the one trip had already begun to change his life. His account suggested that a more vibrant, engaging young man was potentially emerging. Trapped in a frail, tight shell, his mind inundated with fears, I believed that Dean was struggling mightily with all his resources to defeat these racing thoughts, to calm his mind, and to enjoy what life had to offer him. And Burning Man had provided him with a new set of resources and a place to develop his confidence.

Dean did a lot of research before making that first voyage to Burning Man. He carefully read his copy of the *Survival Guide*. He found out about Solo Camp online, a minimalist camp for people who go to the event alone and want to camp with others. Solo Camp had no camp dues, no official leaders, and no organized meal plan. There was a communal shade structure and a makeshift kitchen where people sometimes opted to share food, such as pasta and chili. He began emailing members of the camp and decided to join it. It was a good decision for him. Within a day of being at the camp, he felt like this group of strangers had become his community. He said, “It barely took long for us to all totally bond. And that sense of community that I’ve always heard of, I discovered it for myself. Wow, that was dramatic.”

Dean traveled alone to Burning Man in 2008. He spent Sunday night in Reno. He woke up early and drove alone into Black Rock City, arriving at 9am on the Monday before Labor Day

weekend, which is the first day of the event. After passing through the Gate, he arrived at the Greeter's Station. A Greeter wearing a "crazy hat" and orange and pink fur on her bra and panties approached. Through his open window, she greeted him warmly by saying, "Welcome Home." Dean had heard about the Greeters' Station already, but the experience of being greeted was more dramatic and moving than he had anticipated. She introduced herself as Crazy Lady. She initiated Dean in the usual way—ordering him to get out of his car, make angels in the dust, and ring the virgin's bell. Dean choked up as he told me about his reception and virgin's ritual. The Greeters successfully assuaged some of his anxieties upon arriving in this strange, forlorn place, and afterward he felt that Black Rock City might actually be his home.

Dean described his first day as "dramatic" and "nerve-wracking." After erecting his tent in Solo Camp, Dean got on his bike and rode out to see the Man. He rode in circles around the structure, just looking up at the towering figure. The Man was 40 feet tall that year and stood atop a 50-foot tall obelisk. This was the tallest Man to date. Adorning the outer walls of the Man's base were flags from every nation on earth (except the United States) in celebration of the theme—American Dream. The idea behind the theme was that there are a multitude of dreams in the US, not just one. Dean ascended the stairs of the Man base. Just as Dean reached the top, a dust storm hit the city. He did not have any goggles, so he squinted his eyes to try to protect them from the blinding and suffocating dust. As the dust enveloped him, the obelisk rocked at the mercy of the wind. There were others at the top of the platform with him. They smiled at him, and held on to the structure tightly. He felt a connection to these other humans who endured the dust storm with him, but he also felt vulnerable, as he was confronted with the unbelievable intensity of the elements his body was facing.

Eventually Dean learned to love the dust and to cope with the dust storms, but at first it was quite daunting. “Wow, this is gonna be a challenge,” he worried. Contemplating a week of unpredictable storms like that one, Dean considered leaving Burning Man. He was not sure he could endure it. When the storm abated, Dean walked down the steps and headed back toward the city. He walked along the Esplanade, the circular street on the edge of the city that faces the open playa and has an unobstructed view of the Man. Dean came across a bar, where he was invited to have a drink, and he accepted their offer. The bartender filled five shot glasses that were glued along a ski. Dean and four other people simultaneously raised the ski and drank the shots. Dean repeated the game three times, and “got a good buzz going.” Thus fortified, Dean went on his way.

Before returning to his camp, Dean went dancing and acquired his own crazy hat at the Costume Cult. Then he ventured back to Solo Camp. He was nervous and self-conscious as he entered the camp. More people had arrived. Many were sitting under a newly erected shade structure. Reticently he “wormed his way into the back” of the group, as he put it. He feared that everyone would stop and stare and look at him, as if to say, who are you? “That’s not going to happen,” he assured himself. He forced himself to think, “Most of these people are alone here, too, and in the same situation.” He sat down and made himself talk to people. He made friends. They went out that night—drinking and dancing until sunrise.

Dean articulated the kinds of anxieties and discomforts that many newcomers face, but even more so. In addition to drinking alcohol, he participated in other cultural practices, including wearing costumes and going dancing. Later in the week, he also participated in a workshop on Emotional Freedom technique, in which he was shown how to gently tap his body with his fingers in a way that is meant to bring attention to one’s emotions and work through the

feelings that emerge. Back in Los Angeles, Dean continued to try to heal his psyche with this technique, and he met people through the Emotional Freedom community. Dean did not become a regular drinker, but he did become a regular participant in other community-oriented forms of play. He participated actively in the Los Angeles Burning Man community and I often saw him at meetings and events. He also maintained his friendships with people from Solo Camp, who lived in various parts of the country. He also participated actively in Flashmob, a group that engages in performance art missions. He participated in a Flashmob that was a mass pillow fight in a public square in downtown Los Angeles, and another in which a group of people swarmed through pedestrian lights in Santa Monica singing Auld Lang Syne as if it was New Year's eve each time the lights counted down to zero. Dean had found ways of expressing himself quite boisterously in public without any help from alcohol.

Dean became better at eliciting a mood of play and expressing it in certain supportive settings. At Burning Man Dean learned to love the dust, to regard Black Rock City as his home, and to regard his camp as his community. In contexts oriented towards play, community, and healing, Dean could explore healthier selves, and find temporary relief from his fears. However, Dean continued to struggle with anxiety at work. As I described in Chapter Three, the playful person he was able to embody in the context of Burning Man did not seem to translate to the work context. Trapped in a work environment with male coworkers who teased him unceasingly, he was thrust back into a high school self, who suffered daily at the hands of bullies and was unable to escape. Eventually, he was laid off from his job. He moved several times over the next two years, each time being very optimistic about his new community, but finding himself unable to thrive in a work environment.

Conclusion

Previous research on drinking conceptualizes drunkenness as learned behavior that varies by cultural context, distinguishing between drunkenness as a simple physiological response to alcohol and as a culturally constructed practice situated within particular occasions for drinking. In this paper I argue that drinking at Burning Man is practiced as a form of play, one of many play practices available to those who go to the event. Drinking alcohol is a primary, salient, and expedient way that many adults enter into a mood of play. By drinking openly and sharing alcohol, people often display their intention to participate in the collective mood and tolerate strange behaviors.

Once participants at Burning Man experience this mood in this play-oriented context, they often become more willing and eager to try other cultural practices, especially those that might help them to sustain the mood and feel like part of the community. We often think of alcohol as chemically lowering one's psychological defenses, but another conceptualization is that drinking can clearly signal playtime. It provides a person with an embodied practice for entering into a mood of play and inviting others to share in the mood. Play practices, including drinking, reduce the salience of dominant cultural models that are suitable to ordinary, non-play contexts. A person may then feel freer to experiment with alternative ways of being, becoming more willing to learn new cultural practices, take risks, and become transformed by their sociocultural context.

Drinking alcohol is a common social practice at Burning Man in which participants share beverages with the intention of altering their mood in concert with one another. Some people drink a little, some a lot, others not at all. Nonetheless, alcohol is considered a highly desirable and acceptable gift—a public good. It is often a communal practice—a way of being together,

playing together, and becoming a part of the community. Drinking alcohol is a socially acceptable way of entering into a shared mood of play at Burning Man, but it is certainly not the only way. A wider range of comportments seems to become socially acceptable as groups of people enter into a mood of play together. Yet there are cultural patterns to which a novice must habituate. Cultural models are imperfectly shared, however. In this chapter I presented two accounts in which the practice of drinking at Burning Man helped to elicit feelings of belonging in my informants, and two accounts in which the informants experienced interpersonal distance among others who were using alcohol and drugs.

Rather than simply describe a general cultural model for drunken/intoxicated comportment that everyone adopts at Burning Man, I have asked that you attend to the individual's learning process over time as a person selects occasions for drinking and develops his or her own ways of participating (or not) in the various play practices, including drinking, which are available at this event. I have offered ethnographic examples that explore the learning process involved in developing a particular way of drinking over time. Many in the US learn how to drink among their peers in high school and college, adopting a model of drunken comportment that is characterized by foolishness and extreme impulsivity (Stromberg 2008). Many who drink at Burning Man share this model, but have also been exposed to other cultural models of drunken comportment in other contexts during their lifetime. For example, Dean had learned about uncontrolled, solitary drinking from his alcoholic mother at home, which made him very cautious of becoming drunk and out-of-control in front of others. Stan learned a highly social style of drinking in bars in Amsterdam, and sought to recreate that model in his camp. Gary had learned how to not to drink in Alcoholics Anonymous, and had to navigate the gift economy very gingerly in order to stay committed to his program of recovery without disrupting

the playful, gift-giving of others at Burning Man. Cynthia had learned one model of drunken comportment from her more reserved Italian parents, but wanted to emulate her sister and her campmates ability to relinquish control of their actions, while seemingly remaining in control of their emotions. This person-centered approach highlights the variations in the cultural models that people bring to the practice of drinking alcohol at Burning Man, and the work that must to be done in order to learn how to drink (or not drink) in a particular manner in this particular context.

In a more general sense, drinking alcohol is practiced at Burning Man as a form of adult play. It is a play practice that often entails playing with possible selves, especially in the early stages of a drinking career, as a person experiments with novel ways of participating in a novel drinking occasion. Gary, a recovering alcoholic, did not use drinking for anything anymore, because his drinking self had become bent on self-destruction. But Dean, who was relatively new to drinking, used alcohol along with other psychocultural tools as he tried to develop a less fearful self—one who does not feel judged by others and can regulate his emotions successfully. Stan, who sees himself as an introvert, used the drinking occasion to play an extrovert in his camp and hoped to help those like him to do the same when they came to drink at his camp's bar. Cynthia attempted to become the type of person who can loose control, but she had great difficulty making this transition, preferring instead to limit her consumption, as she struggled to cope with her emotions and the demands she experienced in the Burning Man setting. This person-centered approach highlights the variations in the ways that people select play practices in order to make transformations to their personhood. At least in this cultural setting, people are often actively trying to become more resilient persons in the world. Stan even went so far as to

critique the world he inhabited, which seemed to be holding him back, and attempted to construct a new one.

Since being playful often makes an adult appear silly—like a child—riskier forms of play can be attractive to many adults. Adults in the US live in a cultural context that is ambivalent about adult play. The dominant culture is particularly ambivalent about adults having unstructured, unproductive, free time. One solution to this problem is to drink alcohol while playing, thus fill this free time with an acceptable adult activity. Adults who are drinking are given more leeway to enter into a mood of play and express that mood in front of others. Adults at Burning Man have to play against the cultural model of play as a safe, child's activity, if they want to maintain their developmental capital. To ride a tricycle may seem silly and childish, but if there is a cooler full of beer on the back, it is most definitely not a child's vehicle. A lemonade stand may evoke nostalgia for one's childhood, but if the lemonade is spiked, then it is most definitely not a child's lemonade stand. Wearing a silly costume may also seem childish, but if a person is drunk then they are not being silly in a childish way, they are being silly in a cool, adult way. Alcohol drinking reframes such practices as adult activities and pushes them closer towards dark play.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Working

If you walk down the streets of Black Rock City during the weekend preceding Labor Day weekend, you see people working intensely—day and night—to prepare for the event. Perhaps you come across a group of misfits clad in goggles and work boots, who are frantically trying to finish building their theme camp or complete their mutant vehicle before the event officially begins on Sunday night. Perhaps they look bedraggled and anxious, seeming to have a plethora of left hands and none of the tools they need. Or perhaps they look like they really know what they are doing, and are happily chipping away at some rather daunting tasks, like welding metal palm trees to an island-shaped art car or erecting a giant alien head over their stage.

On Saturday night you might decide to take a much-needed break from building your own camp to bicycle out onto the playa and get a preview of the art. You bike up to the Temple, or the Man, or some other major piece that is nearly finished. The project is easy to see from the distance, because huge work lights flood the area with bright white light. You stop when you get to a line of tape that designates a perimeter around the construction site. You stand straddling your bike, watching other people work. It is cold out there in the middle of the desert, but you somehow feel soothed by the loud hum of the generators, the high-pitched whine of the lights, and the occasional staccato of a nail gun. One worker is operating a crane, and another a forklift, as they maneuver huge steel beams into place. At a safe distance from the main construction site, someone else is painting a mural on large pieces of plywood. And another person is welding two pieces of metal together, and there are sparks flying all around her. The workers you see are all working serenely and methodically. The people watching also seem absorbed in the work, as if

they were watching some kind of slow-moving Butoh performance art. One of the workers walks towards you. As he slips under the tape, you ask him if he is a professional and gets paid to do this work. He proudly says “No. I am a volunteer.”

Perhaps you are already a volunteer and got involved in a project before you arrived on the playa. Perhaps you have already been helping for months by contributing time, labor, space, or materials in the preparations for your theme camp or an art project. Now at the event, you finally get to see all that work coming to fruition. Or perhaps you have not done any volunteering yet, but seeing all the efforts of others you become inspired to get involved.

On Monday morning, you walk into Playa Info to get out of the hot sun. Perhaps you take a look at the bulletin boards and see postings on the board about volunteer opportunities with the Burning Man organization. Maybe you decide to volunteer for a few shifts at Camp Arctica, where ice is sold. Your job is to lift heavy bags of ice out of the refrigerator truck and onto the counter. Somehow it hardly seems like work at all. The ice is cold and the people are friendly. People even give you gifts as you work. At the end of your shift, you go back to your camp with many new bracelets and trinkets, having made a dozen new friends.

Perhaps you are already a burner and have been volunteering for a few years now. Somehow you have found yourself in charge of a large project. Maybe you have become absolutely sick of this thing that has been occupying all your time and attention for the last six months, causing you untold amounts of frustration and anxiety. So on Monday night you get dressed up in your playa finest and you ride out onto the playa to get yourself some much needed playtime, away from all the drama that you have created for yourself. As you approach the Man, you see dozens of medium sized sculptures in a circle around him, each so different from the next. These are the Core projects, the circle of regional effigies. Each was built by a different

regional Burning Man community and will all be burned together on Thursday night. You ride half way around the circle and observe that most of them are finished. But one project is still being constructed, so you stop and watch a busy group of people swarming around a giant wooden bull that is crawling out of the earth. They are dipping odd-shaped pieces of stiff fabric into some kind of paste. They are massaging the wet fabric onto the bull's body. It looks kind of fun and you ask if you can help. Clearly they have been working for a long time and they are very grateful for the reinforcements. You take off your nice coat and roll up your sleeves and make yourself useful. The paste is cold, wet, and sticky. They offer you some rubber gloves, but you turn them down. It feels so pleasing and gratifying to wrap a piece of burlap onto the bull's leg and massage it until it finally adheres. It turns out that you are really good at burlap-maché and everyone praises your work. They offer you beer. They thank you profusely for helping them. Before the night is out, you have acquired a dozen new friends from Houston and have fallen in love with the bull. During the week, whenever you are close enough to see the bull, you point to it and tell people that you helped with the project. And when the bull is burned a few nights later, you are excited to meet up with your new friends from Houston. They lift the line of tape to invite you inside the safety perimeter and together you watch your beautiful bull burn to ashes.

Figure 9. Respondents' income in 2011

These results from the Black Rock City Census were based on a selection of respondents, a representative sample of all census forms collected in 2012 (n=2054). The population estimates were then adjusted using data from the random sample. (95% confidence intervals given)

What was your personal income in 2011 before taxes?

No income	4.4%	(3 – 6%)
\$14,999 or less	17.0%	(13 – 21%)
\$15,000-34,999	15.9%	(13 – 19%)
\$35,000-49,999	11.0%	(9 – 13%)
\$50,000-74,999	14.2%	(12 – 16%)
\$75,000-99,999	10.8%	(9 – 13%)
\$100,000 or more	17.5%	(15 – 20%)
No answer/unclear	<u>9.2%</u>	(7 – 11%)
	100.0%	

Thank you to Drs. Megan Price and Patrick Ball for generating this sample, and their help in designing the sampling and sorting procedure.

Thank you to Dr. Dominic Beaulieu-Prévost for analyzing this data, producing the adjusted population estimates, and his help designing and conducting the Census in 2012.

Work as play

In the US people work really hard for pay; the ethos of Burning Man is one in which people work really hard for play. Consequently, the value placed on various forms of labor is entirely different. Before, during, and after Burning Man, many participants invest a tremendous amount of labor to make the event happen, to create art and performances, and to clean up afterward. People do the same for regional events and smaller gatherings as well. Those who identify with a specific camp, project, volunteer group, or regional community are very proud of the work they accomplish together. Working is a primary and salient way that they prove themselves as active participants in the Burning Man community. The community benefits from the free labor, and the individual benefits when he or she experiences a mood of play and feelings of belonging while working with others.

As I argued in the introduction of this dissertation, people can experience a mood of play while performing a wider variety of activities than those actions people happen to label as “playing” in any particular culture—even while working. I write against a definition of play as the opposite of work, unreservedly rejecting the work/play dichotomy that is a product of the Protestant work ethic. In this chapter I will demonstrate how work and play come together in the Burning Man community. I argue that working on Burning Man projects can be a form of play, a play practice that transforms the Protestant work ethic into an ethos of play.

My first point is that working can be a path to a mood of play. Working on Burning Man projects can be a play practice, by which a person can enter into a mood of play. A change in one’s mood is certainly not the only thing that working accomplishes. Working is more than “just play,” since it is a means to many different types of ends. Regardless of the intended ends, however, my point is that when working leads to a mood of play, even for a moment, it can ensnare a person’s mind and body in the process. In a mood of play the mind becomes focused

on the present moment and the task at hand, and everything flows easier. These moments are rare, but powerful. A mood of play is like a net that catches a person. If easily caught up in the work, a person may wind up committed to a project and to a team. Once felt, this mood can motivate a person to keep working on the project, to try out new skills, to cultivate new relationships, and to keep at it despite the difficulties that arise. Participants often find or create positions working on Burning Man projects, where they can feel challenged and useful as they work. If the work then leads toward some beneficial outcomes, such as meaningful relationships forged with others who have had similar experiences, then a person is likely to become more serious about working with this particular team, camp, or project. All of this can start even before a person gets to Burning Man.

Working can be a path to *communitas*. Burners often like to get together to work, as well as to play together, throughout the year. The community benefits from the products of this free labor, and the individual benefits when they experience a feeling of belonging in a group where their contributions are valued. These positive feelings often build up slowly through positive feedback received during the long hours spent working on projects together in garages, driveways, living rooms, backyards, and studios, as well as sitting alone at a computer, using it to make plans and to connect to others through email, social networking sites, and other webpages. Over the course of the year, there is great anticipation and build-up towards the reunion in Black Rock City. Connected through both virtual and face-to-face activities, a person's connections become more salient as the event approaches. The number of Burning Man related emails and phone calls increase. The pace of the work becomes more rapid, even frantic at times. The anticipation of "going home" becomes even more palpable while packing, loading tents and other supplies, covered with a residue of playa dust from previous years. Finally the

pilgrimage begins again. Feelings of togetherness rise up, as one sees fellow burners along the freeways and at rest stops—strangers with the familiar mark of the Man on their trailers and pick-up trucks, piled high with bicycles, PVC piping, and other signs of creative works. These feelings of *communitas* peak during the Burning Man event, and especially when a communal art project is burned. Powerful emotions are often felt and cathartically released during burns as everyone stands next to each other and watches the fire together. And then, when the event is over, and the desert has been evacuated, and its floor scoured to remove every last nail, indelible lines remain in people's brains and inboxes. These feelings can be reactivated through recollection or with the click of a mouse, and especially as a person starts imagining new plans for the following year.

The products of people's labor are temporary and ephemeral. Much of the collectivity's efforts are destroyed in fire, consumed by people's bodies, or packed up, hauled out, and stored until the following year. Previous researchers have compared Burning Man to a Native American potlatch, events that operated according to generalized reciprocity in which valuable objects were given away, destroyed, and consumed in conspicuous displays of generosity (Kozinets 2002; Kozinets and Sherry 2005; Sherry 1983). Some potlatches were described as competitions, and observing anthropologists concluded that the purpose of these gift-giving systems was the redistribution of wealth and the accrual of status for the most wealthy, generous givers. Burning Man's gift economy also operates through generalized reciprocity.

There is mild social pressure to contribute in one way or another—to earn the right to call oneself a “participant” and enjoy the event, thereby reaping the rewards of other participants' contributions. A person may also experience an internal pressure to contribute, to find a way to get involved in the process, and to eventually attach oneself to a theme camp, a sculpture, a

mutant vehicle, or a performance. In this gift-giving context, a generous, hard-working person may accrue social status and cultural capital for their contributions to the event. Prestige is a real possibility, especially for those working on highly visible projects and theme camps, or other events related to Burning Man. And yet, personal prestige is not supposed to be what motivates people to donate their time, labor, and resources to the Man. Most participants tend to minimize such personal benefits and instead they emphasize feelings of belonging to a group of people who worked together on a project and earned approbation together. This is an important ideological distinction, in which social climbing is considered quite antithetical to the ethos of the event. To varying degrees, many who go to Burning Man have experienced life as social outsiders and outcasts, always feeling somewhat on the margin of society or a social group. While there may be an underlying wish to recreate a social hierarchy in the desert with themselves at the top, most people express an explicit wish to create an alternative type of social system—one that does not have a clear top.⁷

Stewarding this heterotopia is the Burning Man organization. Sociologist Katherine Chen studied how organizers of the event work to enable and sustain “creative chaos” and specifically how they manage volunteers working for the Burning Man organization (Chen 2002; Chen 2003a; Chen 2003b; Chen 2004; Chen 2005; Chen 2009; Chen 2011; Chen 2012). Chen described how organizers try not to “over-organize” or “under-organize” the event and the volunteers working on it. I have direct experience participating in this unconventional organization, since I have been working as a volunteer and a manager for the organization since

⁷ The coolest clique on this playground is the Department of Public Works, those who build the infrastructure for Black Rock City, including the Man himself, and then restore the desert to near-pristine condition when the event is over. Because they are in the desert the longest and get really, really dusty, they can claim the most social capital for their work. They also wear black, and comport themselves with confidence and bravado. In their free time, they like to drink whiskey and sing Karaoke.

2004. Almost none of the people in my ethnographic study, however, volunteered with the Burning Man organization, which is based in San Francisco. Most of my informants worked on theme camps or other projects based in Los Angeles. Some worked only on personal projects, such as costumes or performances, and did not volunteer at all. In this chapter I approach working from the participant's perspective. In the absence of external incentives such as money, a person becomes motivated to work in the same way they become motivated to play. When a person selects a project that incites her particular mind to experience a mood of play, she wants to keep working. And when she selects a group project, if others give her positive feedback on her work and she feels that she belongs, then she will want to keep working with them. When this happens a person can become intensely caught up in the world of Burning Man.

Eduardo

Eduardo kept a pair of work gloves in his car, just in case. As an electrical engineer, Eduardo had skills that people wanted for their Burning Man projects. Since his first time going to Burning Man in 2001, he had been back three times, when I started interviewing him in 2009. He was 34-years-old and had recently moved to the San Fernando Valley from the Midwest, where he had been very active in the regional Burning Man communities in Detroit and Chicago. He told me how other people had often asked him to help with their Burning Man projects and he had been "sucked in." He would agree to do some work to help a group plan their electrical system, such as making sure that they had planned for enough wattage and distributed the load properly to run their lights and other equipment. Then he would be invited to camp with them. He talked about getting drawn into a project or a camp through the work and at some point he would say, "like, yah, I'm totally in. Let's do this!"

Often his relationships with his chosen campmates worked out great during the event. But one time the group he selected was too rigid, their humor was too dark, and they did not know how to share with others. The drama in the camp was unpleasant, so he found temporary refuge at a place called Refugee Camp and decided to camp with different people the next time. Similarly in his relationships with women, Eduardo would become drawn in by an initial whirlwind of good feelings and good times, but his emotions never overtook his ability to reason, as far as I could tell. During our interviews, he would evaluate such situations with a level head, and extricate himself if signs indicated that the relationship was a bad fit.

Eduardo valued himself, his skills, his point of view, and his zest for life. He grew up in the Midwest and got in a lot of trouble in Catholic school for asking too many questions and listening to heavy metal music. His Latino family tried to discipline him, but in high school he threw off the reigns. He said to me:

*Once you break free, there's no putting the reigns back on.
And that felt really great.
And...now I do whatever I want.
Which is great.
Because now I'm an adult.
I play music whenever I want to.
I go give hugs all day long at the beach
And there isn't anyone to judge me on those things.
That feels wonderful.*

Eduardo stood out in engineering school as well, where he focused not just on the technology, but also on enjoying life and being social with others. His classmates thought that the things that interested him sounded weird. He was glad to have moved to California, where he thought there was less pressure to adhere to strict social norms.

The man that I got to know during our interviews appeared very confident, extremely playful, and kind-hearted, and he was consciously developing useful technical skills and

relationships with others that shared a healthy play-work ethic. For example, he was taking a class in Java programming in order to learn how to use microcontrollers to program an array of fire cannons, so they could fire off in different sequences. In his relationships, he expressed independence through his words and actions, as well as a strong desire to feel connected to others. He maintained his ties to his Burning Man community in the Midwest by traveling back there for their regional event, Lakes of Fire, instead of going to Burning Man in 2009. New to the Los Angeles area, Eduardo was actively tapping into Burning Man social networks and looking to recreate a sense of community in his new home. He found opportunities to play and to get involved in Burning Man projects as he had done in the Midwest. During the year that I interviewed him, he moved from the San Fernando Valley to the Westside to be closer to other burners he was getting to know and to be able to ride his bike to work and get to the beach more often.

Since moving to Los Angeles, Eduardo had become involved in the Hug Deli (as you may remember from Chapter One). He had first encountered the Deli at a nighttime event, and then volunteered when the Hug Deli appeared along the Santa Monica/Venice Beach boardwalk every couple of months. The Hug Deli is a simple structure, where a person volunteers by donning an apron, working at the counter, and offering passersby one of many varieties of hugs on the menu in exchange for two compliments. Some of the varieties Eduardo told me about were: the warm and fuzzy hug, the long and uncomfortable hug, the bear hug, the gangsta hug, and the clown hug. Eduardo thought the job was great. In general he liked hugging people. He also enjoyed seeing non-burners try to make sense of this strange performance art piece. Some of them “got it” immediately and offered him improvised compliments in order to receive their hugs. Others were suspicious or confused about what this stand was selling or promoting.

Eduardo and the other Deli workers made up sales pitches to attract more pretend business. They would say: “Come on, get your hug!” “It’s recession proof!” “It’s zero dollars!” “Dirt cheap hugs, get ‘em for compliments!” His favorite tagline was “You can afford two compliments!” In the context of the unfolding recession, it was necessary to make more explicit that walking up to the Hug Deli was safe and would not wind up costing a person any money. Eduardo and I laughed as he told me about getting people to smile and accept a hug. He said, “It was just a lot of fun. And I think that’s one of the things people forget. That, you know, you have to enjoy life. And, you know, I plan on enjoying it.”

Transformation

Working on Burning Man projects is often a learning experience. Such experiences can solidify a person’s transformation into a burner, a person who identifies as an active participant in the Burning Man culture and community. Child psychologist Barbara Rogoff wrote about the structures of learning environments in cross-cultural settings and looked at the varied ways that children learn the values and practices that reproduce particular cultures and particular cultural experiences (Rogoff 2003a; Rogoff 2003b; Rogoff, et al. 2005; Rogoff, et al. 2003; Tudge and Rogoff 1989). Formal training is one way that people learn, and participation is another. By paying attention to participation as a path for learning, we can better understand how people are socialized into cultural subjects that possess the practical skills and emotional repertoires that are appropriate to living in a particular time and place. Rogoff’s ideas about participation can be applied to adults at Burning Man, who often learn how to comport themselves as burners while working on Burning Man projects. They may have experiences similar to young children in the sense that they are new to a place and just learning how to participate in the community. At the

same time, burners are all living and working in two places—in the “default world” and at Burning Man—and so their cultural development is more complex.

New participants may be guided by or modeling their comportment on veteran burners, people who have already been to the event and are often leading communal art projects and theme camps. The veterans may guide the newcomer according to values and practices that they associate with the culture of Burning Man, sometimes by teasing or shaming, by giving explanations, or through evaluative statements that draw attention to the newbie’s comportment or attitude. New participants also learn by observing and listening-in on conversations, while participating in shared activities with veterans. Learning through participation is widespread in the Burning Man community, and explicitly recommended as the most effective way to enter into the community’s fold. Learning through participation differs from the transmission of cultural knowledge in more formal educational settings, such as workshops and classes, which also happen at Burning Man. Participants, as they move in and out of burner and default world contexts, must learn how to inhabit two or more cultures simultaneously. Through participation, a person experiments with possible selves, improvising until they find one that can survive in each context. Some lead split lives; others’ lives are more fluid. In any case, a person may have to juggle two vastly different worlds of work and responsibility, but sometimes those worlds come together in surprising ways.

Working on Burning Man projects can expand a person’s cultural toolkit. As adults, people who arrive at Burning Man have already learned ways of being in the world and modes of comportment in other contexts. Some of what they know may be challenged and perhaps have to be *unlearned* in order to develop new skills and emotional repertoires that are suited to the context of living and working at Burning Man. If one were a passive consumer of culture, for

example, that would have to be unlearned. Chen has written about how the Burning Man organization has advocated “artistic prosumption” blurring the lines between production and consumption at the event (Chen 2012). This Do-It-Yourself ethos is also operating in the Los Angeles Burning Man community, where inhabitants of a creative city are often already working for or living alongside an entertainment industry that produces cultural content for the entire world. In the context of working on Burning Man projects, however, these people get to make cultural products for themselves and their friends, and consume it together. One’s labor is thereby reclaimed as a direct investment in one’s own future—marshaled in the construction, reproduction, and shaping of an emerging, grassroots culture to fit one’s own desires and to be shared with a close circle of friends and community members.

Working on Burning Man projects can transform people’s understanding of work in general. American studies scholar Jeremy Hockett described Burning Man as “a society whose organizing principle is based on reasserting the intrinsic value of work” (Hockett 2004:237). Hockett applied Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of “autotelic” experiences to the activities at Burning Man, describing the people at Burning Man as pursuing activities that demand great effort and energy, but provide few conventional rewards (Csikszentmihalyi 1975; Hockett 2004). Echoing Csikszentmihalyi, Hockett lamented that too many people in the US work at tasks that are unpleasant and grim in exchange for extrinsic rewards, such as wealth and prestige. In contrast, participants often make financial sacrifices for Burning Man in order to pursue activities that they find intrinsically rewarding. Hockett wrote:

In this sense [Burning Man] restores a productive, meaningful, and fulfilling relationship between the individual participant and his or her work, and since most of that work is done in concert with others, or at least witnessed and enjoyed by others, it simultaneously exists as a gift whose extrinsic enjoyment by them is intrinsic to the activity of work from its genesis (Hockett 2004:214).

From this perspective I see Hockett as identifying a transformation that can be described as a shift from a commitment to the Protestant work ethic, which can involve grim toil that serves the requirements of God, society, and family obligations, to one of playful communal effort that serves the needs of individuals to reassert ownership of their own labor and to work on projects that confer immediate benefits to the individual and their immediate community. I agree with Hockett that participants often make significant sacrifices of time and money to work on Burning Man projects, and they may even suffer from stigma if they disclose their involvement in Burning Man to non-burners. But I disagree with Hockett, in that I think that some people do desire prestige, and in the context of Burning Man they may feel that they are more likely to be valued for their contribution—the more eccentric the better.

I have argued that a person becomes motivated to work on Burning Man projects because it is an environment that immediately rewards that person with a mood of play and positive feedback that can result in feelings of belonging. Additional meanings can also be layered onto these emotional experiences, forged through narratives after the event, which may extend and prolong the satisfaction that can be derived from one's work. In the context of capitalism, money is the conventional reward for one's labor. But from a wider anthropological perspective, meaning is the conventional reward for human endeavors; typically this is what motivates people around the world to donate their labor in all kinds of cultural production and other causes. In this regard, burners are typical humans, pursuing rewarding emotional experiences, meaning, and even prestige.

I acknowledge that social and cultural capital of an arguably conventional type may be garnered through working on a Burning Man project. People respect those who work hard and especially those that produce innovative interactive art and cutting-edge performances. Some

projects are highly visible, especially the large scale art projects, which are often photographed and documented in newspapers and online. There is also a chance that a piece of art may be solicited by a museum. A person may find a job through someone that they meet at Burning Man or make a career change as a result of an experience that they had there. However, such beneficial outcomes are usually not the primary reason that motivates a person to come to the event and build a camp or an art car or a sculpture for it. However, in a discussion of transformations that result from the event, such possibilities must be acknowledged. These outcomes are usually considered synchronistic occurrences, rather than a predetermined goal, part of the “magic” of Burning Man. A person may learn how to tap into synchronicity by adopting the right attitude—when they learn how to embody the playful ethos of the event, becoming acclimated to unpredictability, and detached from outcomes. A person who works without expectations of anything in return often gravitates towards work that they enjoy doing, for which their particular mind and body is suited. Automatically, they are rewarded with a positive emotional experience, and inevitably they are able to layer this experience with additional meanings, and sometimes they may garner prestige as well.

Burners often become very skilled at infusing their work with an ethos of play. This work-play ethic prioritizes creating positive feelings and forging shared meanings over efficiency and external incentives. As a person fosters meaningful commitments to a small team of volunteers and a larger community of Burning Man participants, they may find themselves playing and working in different ways. Oftentimes the hardest-working volunteers sacrifice time and effort that would have otherwise been spent “partying” in order to get their work done. Someone usually assumes a leadership role in order to keep chaos from overwhelming the

communal effort. The following stories are about two such people. In these narratives, playing and working intertwine and are transformed simultaneously.

Mick

“I am a Temple builder,” Mick told me with pride as we stood beside *Seraphim*. (You may remember his Valentine’s Day story from Chapter Five.) The structure he had worked to build and burn, and build again, was the Los Angeles regional Burning Man community’s effigy for the Core project in 2012. The structure was a 20 by 20 foot wooden pergola (a gazebo without a roof). Four angels of four different ethnicities adorned its four corners. In the center was a 25-foot tall vortex, shaped like an ice cream cone, which was designed to hold a secret angel, the “human spirit,” made of steel, which would be revealed when the structure burned. The project cost \$10,000, \$250 of which came from the Burning Man organization in San Francisco, and the rest was donated by burners in Los Angeles. Mick was the lead builder. Fifty or so volunteers built the first Seraphim in seven months and burned it among the other 33 regional Core project effigies at Burning Man. Mick was then asked to build a second one in time for Decompression, which took place in a park in downtown LA in October. He and seven other volunteers built the second Seraphim in just five weeks. Just before the event, however, the fire department revoked the event’s burn permit. So after the event, they put the structure into storage.

In March of 2013, the time had come to burn the angels again. Mick came to my apartment for a follow-up interview. And the next day he was going to drive to a private campsite near Joshua Tree National Park to reassemble the second Seraphim. The Los Angeles Burning Man community had organized many spectacular regional events, but this would be

their first regional burn. It was a big deal for the community. One thousand tickets were available and the event was expected to sell out. Mick had rented an RV and was taking his family—his daughter, his mother, his sister, and his nephew. I was also planning to go and to bring my young daughter camping in the desert.

During the interview I asked Mick how he became involved in the Core project. He said that several years prior he volunteered to help clean up at Decompression. In order to deconstruct the floor of the Black Rock Roller Disco, he and the other volunteers had to load 40 or 50 sheets of plywood into a truck. He remembered that everyone was struggling with the 4 by 8 foot sheets of plywood. But he had construction experience, so he was carrying a sheet of plywood with one hand and dancing around with it. He made it look easy. People noticed. Several months later at a Burning Man film screening, he heard people talking about the new Core project and he asked to get involved. A woman named Topless Betty remembered him and his dancing plywood, and said that she wanted him on her team. “And that was pretty much my resume, was how well I danced with sheets of plywood,” he told me. He was given the job of leading 60 or so volunteers to build the first project, which was in the shape of a Taco Truck. He made many new friends and his feelings of belonging to the community strengthened. Having proved himself that first year, he was again chosen to lead the volunteers working on Seraphim, which was a much more ambitious design. Mick explained that over the past few years he had experienced a transformation. He used to be someone who just goes to Burning Man to party for a week. By working on the Core project, he had become an active participant in his regional Burning Man community.

As the lead builder, volunteering was no longer as carefree and easy as it had been when he was dancing around with plywood. But he was in a position to impart his “carpentry dance

moves” onto others. By keeping the mood light and laughing as they worked, he offered his volunteers the opportunity to have transformative experiences themselves. Mick described to me one moment when he was teaching two young women how to use a nail gun. They were very intimidated by it, but he showed them how easy it was to use. They held it awkwardly, squealed the first time they tried it, and the gun ricocheted out of their hands. Rather than being negative or disappointed, he laughed with them and put the gun back in their hands. He built up their confidence and in ten minutes they were nailing pieces of wood together all by themselves. Mick told me how much he enjoyed watching people do things outside their “realm of normal” and to see that “glimmer in their eye and that certainty in their face,” as they conquered their fears and learned a new skill.

Mick had assumed a great deal of responsibility as the lead builder on these projects. He put a lot of work into managing volunteers and dealing with the drama that so often occurs in these collaborative projects. Fortunately, it sounded like he was really good at being a leader. He worked with people—skilled and unskilled—and tried to make the job seem easy. He was able to make executive decisions and give orders, while keeping everyone feeling heard and feeling happy. But in his absence, the team that was supposed to assemble the structure at Burning Man had all quit. When he arrived on playa two days before the event started, he had to finish the project by himself. Yet, Mick suspected that his team might come back together when he put the call out for volunteers to build the next project. When I asked him why they would come back after things fell apart in the desert, he said:

*Like so many of us,
they are social outcasts and misfits,
and these are their friends.
It gives them a purpose.
It gives them something to do on a Saturday,
instead of sit around and watch TV.*

*You know.
And its gives an avenue for new people,
virgins,
to come and actually be a part of something.
Instead of just, you know,
going up there to party.
I mean, it gives them a family...*

And later in the interview, Mick gave reasons for his own participation in the project:

*The best thing about it
is not the piece.
It's not the burn.
It's the amazing relationships that I've made.
And the new friends,
and the comradery.
That's why I would do it again.
It has nothing to do with the piece.
The piece is temporary.
The piece is just a memory.
The relationships are going to last.
And that is what is important.*

Mick called the process of working on the Burning Man project a “crucible,” a container into which all these different personalities are poured. In the end either these relationships would hold together or they would break apart.

Linda

Linda (who you may remember from Chapter Four) underwent a very clear transformation—a career change—during the year that I interviewed her. When I met her, she was a social worker working with homeless populations. I observed how the frustrations she experienced in trying to help her campmates harness their creativity mirrored her frustrations working with homeless people; both were individuals with self-destructive tendencies in a context that amplified their chaotic, unhealthy ways of being.

In the context of her Burning Man camp, Linda often played the roles of therapist, hostess, and camp director. Linda described to me how she was making a conscious effort to do less work counseling her campmates and more work organizing them. Many of her campmates were creative, hard-working artists, who worked in the entertainment industry. They applied their skills and their passion to designing, building, and decorating an impressive theme camp, where adults drink alcohol and socialize. However, like many artists, they could be emotional, and even egotistical and narcissistic. They were often in a state of crisis and frenzy as they worked on the camp. They were unable to distinguish between decisions that could and should be made independently and those that needed to be made by the group. Expenses always went over budget. Linda had her hands full trying to get the group more organized and to stick to the budget. Linda and her husband Stan took charge of email communications, collecting camp dues from members, registering the camp, and trying to neutralize potential disagreements and conflicts during the planning process. They were somewhat successful.

During the year that I interviewed her, Linda moved into an administrative position working for the city manager. Linda was relieved of the stress of working everyday on a depressing, seemingly intractable problem in a community that appeared unwilling to make bold changes to fix the situation. In her new position, she assumed significantly more power and responsibility, and her influence extended to a much broader range of social issues. Her career in public administration seemed a promising one, where she could continue to use her abilities to do good work in the world.

Linda might have made this career move in any case, but her experience managing this particular theme camp at Burning Man gave her a place to develop herself in a leadership position and eventually to see herself as a more powerful, capable woman. Ultimately, Linda had

to find a position in both worlds where her skills were put to best use and she felt content with her contribution. Eventually, she recused herself from much of her camp's organizing, so that she could focus on her new job in city government. And yet the camp needed her, and they were like her family. So each year she allowed herself to get sucked right back in.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described how working on Burning Man projects can inspire a mood of play and feelings of belonging, when the individual found a good fit with the work and the group that they selected. In the right context, working can be a play practice that can transform a person. Other play practices may start the process, but working often finishes the transformation into a burner. Through work a person learns a work-play ethic that is shared by many in the Burning Man community in which experiencing positive feelings and forging shared meanings are more important than efficiency and monetary rewards. Participating in the construction of a camp, an art project, or a performance art piece, a person explores possible selves that may influence other parts of their lives as well.

The ethos of Burning Man is one in which people work really hard for play instead of pay. People in this community value labor that is offered freely and/or makes a valuable contribution to the event. Working is a primary and salient way that they prove themselves as active participants in the Burning Man community. A person's contribution may take the form of art that helps others get into a mood of play or a community service, such as restoring the desert to the way it was before the event. Participants and paid staff invest a tremendous amount of labor to make the event what it is. People do similar work at regional events and smaller gatherings throughout the year.

By studying working in the Burning Man community, we see how people can experience a mood of play while performing a wider variety of activities than those actions people happen to label as “playing.” I have argued that the opposite of play is not work; this dichotomy is a product of the Protestant work ethic. In this chapter I have demonstrated a possible synthesis of work and play. Working on Burning Man projects can be a form of play, a play practice that transforms the person, as it transforms the Protestant work ethic into an ethos of play.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A Story of Transformation

Danny went to Burning Man in the beginning, when it started on Baker Beach in San Francisco in 1986. After the event moved to the Black Rock Desert in Nevada, he went four times in the 1990s. Those were the wild days of his youth. Eventually, he grew up and started a family and a business. Having heard stories, Danny's young son asked his father if he would take him to Burning Man some day. So Danny returned to the desert in 2005 with his son. The next year he brought his wife too. Danny's family drove in a motorhome and camped together with other families in Kids Town. When I started interviewing him in 2009, Danny was 45 years old, his family of three was going to the event together for the fourth time, and it was going to be his twelfth burn.

Danny grounded his life in an ethos he learned at Burning Man and tried to apply it to all areas of his life. He placed a high value on community and had learned how to cultivate feelings of friendship and belonging through face-to-face interactions with members of his community. Danny enjoyed electronic dance parties, as well as gardening, cooking, tennis, and taking his son surfing. Danny and his family were all an integral part of a vibrant neighborhood community. They lived in walking distance from their son's school. Friends, both theirs and their son's, regularly gathered at their house. The doors were always open, and the mood was easy-going.

I interviewed Danny about Burning Man in his home in West Los Angeles once a month for a year. He talked easily and openly about many aspects of his life besides Burning Man. It was 2009 and the recession was taking a toll on their business, a tasteful boutique for couples where they sold toys, books, and videos about sex. Danny's house was in walking distance to the store. Couples gathered at their store for workshops, coffee, and consultations. Danny also managed the website, where they sold the same products and he posted reviews. He also wrote about sex, relationships, and his own marriage. Due to the recession, sales were down 30%. Their online business was still profitable, but unfortunately, rent at the store was very high and so they decided to close their doors. Danny was disappointed to be losing the opportunity to engage in face-to-face relationships with their clients, who were very disappointed as well. The landlord, however, refused to renegotiate the rent, thinking that he could fill the place with a marijuana collective that was interested in the property. In the end, the property stood empty for a year and a half, before a small production company moved into the space.

Three years after our interviews had concluded, I again interviewed Danny to find out what happened to his family during the foreclosure crisis. I had run into his wife at a grocery store and had learned that they had almost lost their home and that she had not been to Burning Man for two years. So I arranged to conduct a follow-up interview with Danny to find out what had happened. In January of 2013, I interviewed him in his backyard. He walked me past two petite camper-trailers in the driveway, which had replaced their gas-guzzling motorhome. Danny showed me his new garden plots and introduced me to his three chickens. One had laid a brown egg. The garden plots, chicken coop, and chicken feed were expensive investments, he explained. These new enterprises were not saving him much money, but the food was definitely organic.

We sat facing the garage, which had been converted into an apartment, where his mother-in-law had lived, and which was now rented out to friends. During the recession, Danny's mother-in-law became very ill and moved in with them. Her care was very expensive and depleted their savings. Including the mortgage, taxes, and insurance, their home cost \$3800 a month. Their mortgage had adjusted up to 7.5% interest; nonetheless, they had not missed any payments. In order to make ends meet, Danny wanted to refinance and take advantage of the low 3% interest rates that were supposedly available. But there was a moratorium on refinancing. He told me how "evil" Chase Manhattan Bank had advised them to go into a loan modification program. The only way to enter the program was to skip a payment—which he did, and at that moment they entered a 14-month period that he described as "the worst hell." The process was incredibly complicated and the bank was short on staff to process the high volume of loan modifications. Chase lost their paperwork three times and three times they had to resubmit the paperwork with changes. Because it took so long, they were eventually served a foreclosure notice.

Danny told me that he had felt like a "loser" when he was served the notice in front of a friend and client, who was visiting at the time. But fortunately this same person was able to put him in contact with a lawyer who specialized in foreclosures. They paid the lawyer \$10,000 to help them do the paperwork and deal with the bank for them. Danny, however, had already resigned himself to the idea that the house was going to be foreclosed. He told me:

*I basically said,
The house is lost.
We are moving.
This is over.
We have no other avenue.
And at that point
my Burning Man instinct kicked in.
And I kind of went, you know,*

*I think that if I keep obsessing
and stressing about this.
That's going to only accelerate the [foreclosure] process.
I think I am just going to throw it
into the Universe
And see what the Universe has in store for me.
And it was all those years
of going to the playa,
and coming out of it
with an I'll-be-okay attitude.
That sort of saw us through.*

Danny's "I'll be okay" attitude was familiar to me. He had summoned it up at the beginning of the recession, when he had resigned himself to closing the boutique. Freed of the daily commitment of being at the store, he imagined taking his family on a cross-country road trip. They did not make the trip, but he did take his son and his son's friends surfing often that summer and he seemed very happy. Danny seemed well equipped to deal with unpredictability and make the most of every situation.

The family did not plan on going to Burning Man in 2011, given all the financial insecurity they faced during the foreclosure. Tickets to the event sold out before Burning Man started, but a friend surprised Danny and let him know that there were two free tickets waiting for them at Will Call. His wife, emotionally drained as she was, decided not to make the journey, but she insisted that Danny go. He needed to go "home." Without his family and without any preparations, he and a friend jumped into an empty truck and started the annual pilgrimage to Black Rock City. They had just two small bags each—"practically naked" was the metaphor he used. When they arrived in camp, everyone was so happy to see him. They gifted or loaned him everything he needed to survive in the desert—food and drink, a spare tent, and an air mattress. He stayed only until Saturday, because he did not feel like watching the Man burn without his

wife. So he collected all the trash from his campmates (and they were so grateful for this). And with a truck full of garbage, he drove back to Los Angeles.

Right after he got back from Burning Man the loan modification went through.

According to the new agreement, their home would only cost them no more than \$2600 a month with taxes and insurance for the life of the loan, which was 30 years. He told me:

*And a year and a half later...
we are still in the house.
And uh, you know, after all that
I just have this sense of calm now.
Like, I am not stressing.
Even if we lost the house,
I figured to myself,
its going to be okay.
We are....meant to land on our feet.
We've been given the tools.*

Before he started going to Burning Man, Danny used to be a cynical, edgy person. It was hard to believe, but that is what he told me. He used to be self-deprecating, and snapped easily at other people. He described himself as having been transformed. He described himself as trying to stay on a "positive current." He had become well integrated into a strong community and established a sense of belonging. He learned how to create this for himself through his experiences at Burning Man. At our last interview, he said that he still had an urge to strike back and he was still standoffish with people until they earn their way into his circle of friends. But he expressed deep love and affection for his friends. He and they knew that he would do anything for them.

I asked Danny if he was angry at the bank that had caused him such hell, and he told me that he was not. He said that he was mad at all the people who had allowed themselves to become prisoners in a system that emphasizes short-term gain over investing in community. He described the great shame that comes with loosing one's house, as if a foreclosure would have exposed some kind of defect in his character. Out of shame and pride, he believed that he and

others remained silent about their struggles, hoping in isolation that something would magically fix the problem. His only regret was that he let the bank advise him. He could and should have asked for help. He could have talked about what he was going through with his friends and gone directly to a lawyer for advice. He wanted his story to be heard so that others would know how to be proactive and ask for help.

I suspected that Danny might be suppressing his anger at the bank. He had called the bank evil at the beginning of our conversation, but he may have been being facetious. And so I repeated my question. My methodology, person-centered interviewing, rarely involved pressing a person for an answer, but Danny and I had good rapport by now. “Aren’t you angry at the bank?” I asked again. He said that the bank had no emotion and was just a thing that existed to make money, and so he did not feel that he could be mad at it.

*This is just what happens.
At the end of the day,
it comes down to individual people
who push the limits,
and do these things,
because they want to make more money for themselves.
So how can I be mad at this
quote unquote entity
called a bank.
When I, you know, I...
The bank is not a human being.
The bank is a corporate entity,
that’s comprised of a bunch of human beings.
And there are plenty of banks,
that have treated me just great.*

Danny would not say conclusively that being focused exclusively on an end goal of making money was evil. But he acknowledged that the system was “fucked up,” and that deregulation of the banking industry had allowed this crisis to happen. Danny did not think that he was

defending the banks, which he felt had not broken any laws. He said that he would have felt mad if they had done something illegal or underhanded.

People were encouraged to get greedy and to “play fast and loose,” Danny said. He told me about a friend, who worked for Bank of America and got commission for signing loans. He considered this person a good guy, who was nonetheless fudging the paperwork to get people loans that they probably should not have received. “We are all out for our own self-interest for the most part,” he said. I was reminded of another of my informants, Linda, who had not been so understanding. As someone who had dedicated her life to serving others, especially the homeless, she held people and institutions accountable to a much higher standard of ethical comportment. She had in-laws that had worked in the banking industry and she expressed to me her criticisms of them for working against the public good in industries that played with other’s people’s lives, gambling on people’s ignorance that the housing bubble must eventually burst. During our interviews Linda expressed anger and outrage to me about those she witnessed getting rich off a situation that led to a global meltdown. She did not consider these to be good people. In fact, she would have preferred to exclude them from her theme camp, but she kept her feelings to herself. By the time the Occupy Wall Street movement erupted, she had become very cynical that anything was going to be done to right the wrongs that had been committed. Linda had astonishing foresight and a superior understanding of the big picture; and in public service she might even change the system one day. Danny, on the other hand, had a forgiving attitude that I also admired, and I predict that he might enjoy a long, healthy life with that flowing, easy-going way of being in the world.

Danny and his family did not go to Burning Man in 2012; he said he would have liked to be there to see *Burn Wall Street*. He was talking about an enormous replica of Wall Street, the

most memorable art project at Burning Man in 2012. The Burn Wall Street project carried on a Burning Man tradition of spirited, creative, cultural critics of corporations and other institutions. The installation consisted of five massive buildings surrounding *Tecate Park*. The largest structure stood nine stories high at 72 feet. One of the buildings was a replica of the New York Stock Exchange itself. Signs on the other buildings identified them as: *Chaos Manhattan Bank*, *Meryl Lynched*, *Bank of UnAmerica*, and *Goldman Sucks*.

The Burn Wall Street project was intended to inspire conversation. The creators had hoped to bring members of the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements together, to funnel their collective anger towards serious conversation about common principles and financial reform. Oakland-based artist Otto Von Danger said that his goals in designing and building it were to see those at the banks responsible for “stealing” people’s money go to jail, to “take the money out of politics” through a constitutional amendment, and to regulate Wall Street (Moze 2012). The project’s website was very educational, as well as incendiary. It included a recent history describing the financial unrest and injustices that inspired the art project. They gave specific examples in which Wall Street was described as playing a seriously dangerous game. “Mortgages wrapped in these bundles are nearly impossible to refinance...It’s a great example of the kind of smoke-and-mirrors games Wall Street has played with the American public’s money, and it’s also the reason we’re burning Merrill Lynched to the ground” (Karl 2012).

Fifty volunteers built Burn Wall Street in two months, at a cost of \$100,000, much of which was donated from the non-profit organization Veterans for Peace (Karl 2012). After the event, one could still witness the burning of Wall Street online, view photographs, and read about it in various articles (Bennett-Smith 2012; Roose 2012). In these articles the authors, as well as the readers who posted comments, expressed support for the sentiments behind Burn

Wall Street. But some also expressed ambivalence about the time, money, and effort put into the project, wondering if it had any impact on those present. Some assumed that the political message was lost on attendees who were high on drugs and that the money spent on the project was wasted.

Those present when Burn Wall Street burned witnessed the largest fire ever at Burning Man, and many claimed that it was the largest intentional fire anywhere, ever. The Burn Wall Street crew was scheduled to burn their creation on Friday night, but failed to do so, having exhausted themselves and their cooperative spirit building the massive installation. The Burning Man organization came to their aid and burned Wall Street on Saturday night, not long after burning the Man. At a staff meeting, Dave X, the head of the Fire Arts Safety Team, told people to spread the word that: “The Burning Man organization had to bail out Wall Street, because it was too big to fail.”

Ethos of Burning Man

A simple characterization would be that life within the Burning Man community is all about playing and achieving a mood of play, while life in the larger American context is all about working and the anxieties around achieving success. But this would be too simple a generalization. In fact, people go back and forth between both places. The result of this annual social experiment is an evolving ethos in which those who go to Burning Man often bring the lessons they learned in the desert into their everyday lives, as they bring their skills, anxieties, habits, and criticisms back to Burning Man. As they reconstruct Black Rock City, they often transform themselves and the emerging culture each year.

In many cases, the pilgrimage to Black Rock City appears to increase a person's psychocultural toolkit. Many of the lessons people learn are related to play. People learn new play practices and try to play more often. People try to find more meaning and creativity in their work—paid and unpaid. People try to create a sense of belonging and community wherever they go. And most importantly a person is likely to have experiences at Burning Man that increase their capacity to experience an intense mood of play in public. In this mood a person becomes more capable of imagining different possibilities and trying them out. People often become better at adapting to unpredictability and to new environments. At the same time this playful pilgrimage involves major costs and various risks. These lessons were learned in an extremely accepting cultural context situated in a brutally unforgiving desert. These lessons can make a person more resilient, better adapted to the precariousness of a market system and an unforeseeable future that is likely to involve major climatic changes.

Anthropology of emotion

Anthropologist Robert Levy, responding to studies of personality in culture, made an argument in favor of an anthropology of emotion in which he demonstrated how a culture may or may not have a schema for describing, understanding, and dealing with a particular emotion (Levy 1982). This impacts the range of expression and the psychocultural resources available to a person developing in a particular cultural context. I have followed in Levy's footsteps by writing an ethnography in which I have chosen not to emphasize the type of person who goes to Burning Man, since anyone is welcome to buy a ticket and go. I have instead provided a schema for understanding a mood that predominates at the event that I think explains why many different types of people report having had transformative experiences there. It is a mood I call play, an

elevated affective state of mind, a feeling of openness that makes a person more accepting, more creative, more credulous, and more likely to take suggestions, to experiment, and to take risks. It is a mood that can be useful for learning, inspiring creativity, and increasing cooperation. It can also be very dangerous.

I have argued that in the United States a mood of play is hypocognized and it is often devalued in adulthood. An adult in this society is supposed to be focused primarily on serious, productive pursuits. They are encouraged to use established methods and pathways within a hegemonic framework for achieving success. Success is often measured in terms of working at a job that does not involve physical labor, which will secure a steadily increasing flow of money and wealth, which can be hoarded in bank accounts and in other fungible forms of property. Money is only supposed to be spent sparingly on playing. Occasionally, under very temporary conditions and in very restricted environments, adults in the US are allowed to venture into playful moods—but not in public. And they are supposed to regard such forays as silly and useless, or else be prepared to argue that such time was well spent as it improved their psychological fitness, made money, or secured a lifelong mate.

In my field site a mood of play is hypocognized as well. People do not have an obvious name for the experience they are trying to elicit, but they know it when they feel it. This mood is highly valued, especially when it involves risky behavior. It is socially induced through a wide variety of cultural practices, including interactive art and performance, mind-body techniques, and chemicals. People work very hard to experience a mood of play at Burning Man and to share it with others. Typically, this mood requires coaxing, emerges rather slowly, and may persist over an extended period of time. It is incited by a host of stimuli, provoked by cultural means, stimulated by contexts and practices designed to foster it—those we usually associate with the

word “play” and seem to have no other purpose. I have discussed a few play practices in depth—going naked, heckling, sexy encounters, and drinking alcohol. I have also argued that play can be induced by working on Burning Man projects, which often involve a lot of creativity, cooperation, time, effort, and money. Burning Man and the things people do there can seem like an inane joke, a frivolous waste of time and money, especially to outsiders and critics from within, who adhere to the dominant culture that says that adult play is silly. By taking risks, by crossing a line from safer forms of play into darker forms of play, people sometimes are able to overcome characterizations of play as silly, childish activities.

One ethnography cannot explain all of what a mood of play can entail, but I have described what it is in my field site for the informants that I interviewed. Participants attributed great meaning and value to the experiences that they worked so hard to elicit at Burning Man, to the indescribable mood that I am attempting to describe using words. People held these experiences and the place that engendered them in such high regard that they became elevated to a sacred status. From this sacred playground, this holy Mecca of play, a diverse set of play-oriented values and practices are spreading. Burning Man missionaries of play may engender stigma when they disclose their involvement in the event and contradict the dominant culture that says that adult play is frivolous. As they spread their bold, risky play practices to other cities, they instigate cultural transformations on a wider scale. And as they spread a mood of play to other areas of their lives, they activate personal transformations at an astonishing rate.

Transformation

My original research question was to ask: what happens to people who go to Burning Man and report having a transformative experience there? I wanted to know what it was about this place that produced so many narratives of personal transformation from so many different

kinds of people. I have presented a parsimonious answer to this question: that which people call “transformation” is a mood elicited by this particular cultural setting and certain cultural practices in which people relax their habitual dispositions, schemas, perceptions, beliefs, and associations and become willing to be influenced by their immediate environment. In this suggestive mood a person may explore *possible selves* and *intentional worlds* (Markus and Nurius 1987; Parish 2008; Shweder 1990). Sometimes a person finds a good fit, especially when that person selected a world that supported the intentions of the individual. Transformations become even more likely when an individual feels that they can reimagine and refashion both the self and the world simultaneously.

By creating spaces for intense play, people who participate in Burning Man and its regional communities construct sacred playgrounds that have the potential to assist individuals in the midst of transformations. Some have taken advantage of this potential to work through specific transitions and crises. In this dissertation I have presented specific examples of individuals at Burning Man who found ways to work on issues surrounding cancer, alcoholism, homosexuality, social anxiety, and romantic relationships. Many informants’ stories revolved around sociality and personhood—trying to fit in with others and finding one’s place in a diverse community. Not everyone experienced a transformation or solved their problems during the year that I interviewed them. Yet everyone was working on finding solutions to the problem of living in a mortal body. The lesson of Burning Man, like the lesson of anthropology, is that there are more solutions to this problem than most people realize.

Anthropologists contend that reality is socially constructed, as well as based in the material world. At Burning Man, participants may learn how to embody socially constructed realities and how to play with them, exploring various pathways on the playa as they explore

various neural pathways in their minds and developmental pathways in their lives. Through practices that involve the body, such as going naked and wearing costumes, a person learns to play with the self as an object or toy with a potentially wide range of possibilities. Through practices that involve others—sexy encounters with potential mates, the joking behavior I call heckling, sharing food, drink, and other gifts—a person learns how to direct their intentions towards shaping their social world. And by working on Burning Man projects, which can become the focal point for a group of people for a period of time, a person can master the power to mutually constitute the social environment and the self—and spread that transformative power to others. By describing these practices in detail, I have outlined an ecology of play in which people's minds can be coaxed into a more experimental mode, the culture can expand to promote more creativity, and the society can be constituted in way that encompasses more diversity.

Some people who go to Burning Man experience not just an immediate change in their mood, they also experience lasting transformations of their identity and attitudes. In this ethnography I have described many informants who became invested in the culture of Burning Man and came to consider themselves burners. These included Molly, Dean, Gabriel, Mick, Eduardo, Linda, Anna, Stan, Moonbeam, and Danny, as well as several informants about whom I have not yet written. Molly and Dean took on this new label after only one visit to the event, because they immediately felt accepted there and motivated to participate in the playful activities. Over two decades Danny went to Burning Man over a dozen times, and not only did he adopt the label of Burning Man for himself, his family, and his business, but also his experiences at the event had become a metaphor that shaped his attitude towards life in general. Those who come to call themselves burners actively chose membership in this community, while others have rejected it. Burners may be people who were already looking for a path towards

transformation and healing, as well as seeking opportunities to play. Consequently, it is difficult to make the argument that Burning Man is entirely responsible for their transformation. Instead, I have argued that Burning Man increased the potential for transformations by providing an open space to explore possibilities. In these contexts people tend to be less judgmental of one another and encourage more audacious behavior than in ordinary public settings in the US. As they play together throughout the year, many participants reimagine their society as a more accepting and playful place, and imagine themselves as flourishing within that society.

If you walk down the streets of Black Rock City, you see lots of people in costumes dressed up like they are superheroes, driving around on decorated bicycles or in art cars shaped like fantastical creatures from children's books. Perhaps you wonder why these people spend so much time creating costumes and vehicles for this fantasy world. People have long suspected that such play helps children learn, but now it seems possible that the same could be true for adults. But just because you have an opportunity to play, does not mean that you will take that opportunity and learn anything from it. And so it is not enough to just go to Burning Man and stand around looking at the art and the strange people. You will need to put on a costume for yourself and dance around in the desert like an idiot until you finally get it—until you finally understand that you are who you pretend to be on the sacred playground, and in life in general, so you might as well become someone great.

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