

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Performing Black Rock City: Theatre of Affect and Burning Man

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

in

Drama and Theatre

by

Heather Lee Ramey

Committee in charge:

University of California, San Diego

Professor Marianne McDonald, Chair  
Professor Richard S. Cohen  
Professor Nadine George-Graves  
Professor Emily Roxworthy

University of California, Irvine

Professor Stephen Barker  
Professor Anthony Kubiak

2014

©

Heather Lee Ramey, 2014

All rights reserved.

The Dissertation of Heather Lee Ramey is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2014

## EPIGRAPH

And now, I, the amazing Mumford, will pull a rabbit out of this hat. First, I wave my magic wand and say the magic words. Ah la peanut butter sandwiches!... Nothing. This trick never works.

*The Amazing Mumford, Sesame Street*

The heart of a place is the home, in the heart of the home is the fire pit, the hearth. All tentative explorations go outward from there, and it is back to the fireside that elders return.

*Gary Snyder, Practice of the Wild*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page.....	iii
Epigraph.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Figures.....	vi
Acknowledgments .....	vii
Vita .....	xi
Abstract.....	xii
The Burn Event Nutshell Photo Essay.....	1
Introduction: The Commons and the Production of Culture.....	15
Chapter 1: Welcome Home: Performing the American National Project at Burning Man.....	32
Chapter 2: Hot Theatre: Fire and Catharsis at Burning Man.....	90
Chapter 3: Mutating Black Rock City: Documentation, Simulation, and Cultivation. ....	125
Chapter 4: Ah La Peanut Butter Sandwiches! or the Psychonautics of a Theatre Artist at Burning Man.....	161
Glossary.....	201
Bibliography.....	210

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Photo Essay.1: Photo: Amanda 8000 feet above Black Rock City. Photo by Thom van Os.* .....	1
Figure Photo Essay.2: Scooter arrives in Black Rock City. Photo by Heather “Scout” Ramey .....	3
Figure Photo Essay.3: Art Map from <i>What Where When Guide</i> 2010.* .....	5
Figure Photo Essay.4: Photo: Splinter sets up camp Photo by Heather “Scout” Ramey.* .....	6
Figure Photo Essay.5: Photo: Scout Dust Gear Selfie. Photo by Heather “Scout” Ramey.* .....	8
Figure Photo Essay.6: Photo: <i>The Man Burn</i> 2011. Photo by Heather “Scout” Ramey.* .....	10
Figure Photo Essay.7: Photo: <i>The Temple Burn</i> 2009. Photo by Heather “Scout” Ramey.* .....	12
Figure 1.1: Photo: <i>The Gypsy Wagon</i> by Beany Calloway. Photo by Scott Williams.* .....	60
Figure 1.2: Photo: <i>Wonder Wagon</i> by Tom Bates and Gretchen Roosevelt. Photo by Heather “Scout” Ramey.* .....	68
Figure 1.3: Excerpted from the book: "Burning Man Live: 13 years of Piss Clear, Black Rock City’s alternative newspaper” edited by Adrian Roberts. (Roberts)...	78
Figure 1.4: Excerpted from the book: "Burning Man Live: 13 years of Piss Clear, Black Rock City’s alternative newspaper” edited by Adrian Roberts. (Roberts)....	79

\*All images published with permissions from the Burning Man Project and Black Rock City LLC.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My heartfelt thanks to the entire faculty of the Drama and Theatre joint doctoral program at UC San Diego and UC Irvine for admitting me into this excellent program, and to the professors who directly guided me through the process of coursework with generosity: Drs. Stephen Barker, Jim Carmody, Jorge Huerta (Emeritus), Nadine George-Graves, Anthony Kubiak, Marianne McDonald, Ian Munro, John Rouse, and Emily Roxworthy. I am also grateful to have encountered the works and guidance of the remaining faculty members of the joint doctoral program: Ketu Katrak, Daphne Lei, Bryan Reynolds, Janet Smarr, and Frank B. Wilderson, III. All of these scholar-professors have shaped my thinking, my scholarship, and my overall life in different ways and through the process I have grown in directions I could not have expected.

I also want to thank the UC San Diego Theatre & Dance staff and faculty from other disciplines without whom I would not have made it through this process. In particular, I want to thank Eva Barnes, Allyson Green, Tara Knight, and Robert Castro each of whom took time to discuss my ideas and encourage me in my work and journey through graduate school. Thanks go to staff members Mark Maltby for his constant support, and to Marybeth Ward for her love and the many conversations about my work and the process of dealing with the ups and downs of graduate school. My thanks also go to the Theatre Forum team for publishing my article “Framing Metropolis: Performing Theatre of Affect at the Burning Man Project, 2010” and specifically to Jim Carmody, and Ted and Adele Shank for their thoughts and stewardship. I also want to give special thanks to Gabor Tompa for his lengthy and interesting discussions and for including me on his production team for *Tonight We Improvise*. My deepest thanks to

Kyle Donnelly and Gregory Wallace for the incredible gifts they have given me as a practitioner, and for taking so much of their precious time and energy to guide me through the often difficult process of navigating the spaces between practice and scholarship. I cannot begin to describe the depth of my gratitude and love for their unprecedented kindnesses and for including me in their work. Lastly, I would never have written this dissertation without the gentle and continuous encouragement of Jim Carmody our department chair. Our conversations and his faith in me have helped me believe in myself as I forge this practitioner-scholar pathway and for that I am forever grateful.

I am indebted to my dissertation committee: Stephen Barker, Richard S. Cohen, Nadine George-Graves, Anthony Kubiak, and Emily Roxworthy for their inspiring and frank conversations about my work, and to my chair Marianne McDonald for steadfastly guiding me through this often arduous and challenging process with patience, grace, and fortitude. She nudged me at the right times with just the right amount of push, and she consistently supported me with generosity, love, and joy throughout the entire process for which I am grateful. Also, I specifically want to thank Emily, Richard, and Marianne for their direct feedback and insightful conversations on different chapters, and Tony and Nadine for holding long discussions with me and sending me useful resources. This committee has been truly stellar and I am continually motivated and inspired by them.

A special thanks to Julie Burelle and Lily Kelting for forming a writing group with me, for their useful and insightful feedback, and their friendships throughout our time in this program. Thanks also go my fellow grads and dear friends Jade Power Sotomayor and Jaye Austin Williams for the enlightening conversations that have



shaped me and my work these six years. Many thanks to several of my other fellows: Patrice Amon, Laura Brueckner, Matthieu Chapman, Jason Dorwart, Sonia Fernandez, Rai Genna, Grace Jun, Melissa Minniefee, Naysan Mojgani, Kara Raphaeli, Joy (Li-Wen) Wang, and Aimee Zygmanski for their discussions and friendships. I am a better person for knowing all of you in one way or another.

My gratitude to the Burning Man Project and its participants over the years for creating the magical, bizarre, and transformative Black Rock City. To all of the folks who have travelled with me into the experience that is Burning Man: Wonder Camp (my tenfold thanks), 8Pod (Dingo, Big D, Star, Nicole, Dina, Ellen, Miranda, LensCap), Devachan (Tabby, Mara, Steve, Cindy, Nigel, Margie, & Sadu Two Hat), Toodle Town (Parks, Rec, Sherf, & Scooter), and Whispering Bottles (Dog, Guggles, Walkness); my friend Jesse Gros, and to my mom and dad, my brother Dan, Lara, and Gabriel thank you with all my heart. Special thanks to my friend Michel Emkhe for gifting me my first ticket to Burning Man—a gift that has kept on giving. Both on and off the playa, my heart to Gabriel Troche for walking with me these six years; to Lily Kelting for her incredible friendship and brilliant mind; and to Walker Hare for making me laugh and lifting me up in the midst of chaos. My thanks to Richard Cohen for including me in his art team for *At the Violet Hour*, *In the Goldhorn Shadow*, and for his openness in conversations that have made me a better scholar and person. Thanks to John Halcyon Styn for taking the time to interview with me and for his kindnesses; to Lily, Walkness, Jesse, and Anonymous for sharing their stories in this dissertation; and to Lee Anna Mariglia at Media Mecca for her quick responsiveness during the image approval process and throughout my years working with her.

I give my thanks to the following people who are my soft place to fall. Thanks to my friend and neighbor Jennie Samples Breeding for helping me decompress over glasses of wine. My heart and gratitude goes to my Ubuntu Theatre Project family and our future work together, in particular: Michael Moran, Colin Blattel, William Hodgson, Tesiana Elie, Walker Hare, and Toby Onwumere who consistently inspire me to create thoughtful and risky practical and scholarly work, and are true friends. My deepest thanks and love to my long-time crew Donna Krch, Shannon Kase, Staci Arriaga, Michelle Swan Packer, Michel Emkhe, Monica Hall, and Kimberly Moreno Salsman for their love, laughs, and support through the entire process of grad school. I thank them especially for taking my phone calls, their connections to spirit, and being the net that catches me while cliff jumping. Lastly, to my immediate and extended family for their inspiration; to my Aunt Ellie Markhart for our long conversations about my waking and sleeping dreams; to my brother Daniel Ramey for his unwavering support and love (and for always fixing my computer issues); and to my parents Karen and Charles Ramey whose love and support is too beautiful to describe. Throughout this process they have helped me emotionally, financially, and personally. They have kept me laughing and held me crying, and they have read every word of every draft of this dissertation. The words thank you are not enough to show my gratitude and love for them.

## VITA

- 1996 Honors Bachelor of Fine Arts, Acting, New York University, New York, New York
- 2007 Master of Arts, Theatre Arts, California State University Northridge
- 2008-2014 Teaching Assistant, Department of Theatre and Dance, University of California, San Diego
- 2013-current Associate Artistic Director, Ubuntu Theatre Project Oakland, California
- 2014 Doctor of Philosophy in Drama and Theatre, University of California San Diego

## PUBLICATIONS

“Seafoam Sleepwalk Experience” and “Rimini Protokoll’s Reality Theatre: Statistical Reality and Theatrical Reality.” In “Without Walls Festival Casebook.” *TheatreForum* (Issue 44, 2014).

Rev. of *On the Edge of Utopia: Performance and Ritual at Burning Man*, by Rachel Bowditch. *Theatre Journal* (Dec. 2011).

“Framing Metropolis: Performing Theater of Affect at the Burning Man Project, 2010.” In *TheatreForum* (Issue 38, 2011).

“Kathleens of Ireland: The Feminist Contributions of Augusta Gregory, Maud Gonne, and Helena Molony to Irish Nationalism and the Irish Theatre.” Masters Thesis. California State University, Northridge. August 2007.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Performing Black Rock City: Theatre of Affect and Burning Man

by

Heather Lee Ramey

Doctor of Philosophy in Drama and Theatre

University of California, San Diego, 2014

Professor Marianne McDonald, Chair

When heading out to the Black Rock Desert to participate in the manifestation of Black Rock City—otherwise known as Burning Man—images of the vast desert, interactive installation art; dusty, naked, or costumed people bicycling; all manner of parties, unusual encounters, and large structural fires float dream-like through the mind. Only a few of these images can be activated without the host space of the desert. In 2013, the Burning Man Project launched its non-profit organization in an effort to spread Burning Man cultural ethos on a global scale by using the Ten Principles to guide their organization. *Performing Black Rock City* examines the cultural production of Burning

Man from two points of entry. It illuminates an ecocritical discourse about the ways environmental affective flows shape the culture. It also examines how these affects are framed via performance creating what I call Theatre of Affect.

*Performing Black Rock City* argues that because there are “no spectators” at Burning Man every participant is both a spectator and an actor—spect-actors—who access scenarios available in what Diana Taylor defines as the repertoire, and create what I call encounter-scenes. Specifically, it reveals how Burning Man participants are ghosting nineteenth century expansionist discourse through cross-temporal gestures that performatively frame the affective flows of the desert; and how large-scale art burns, and psychonautic consciousness explorations activate personal catharsis and contribute to the narrative that Burning Man transforms lives. Lastly, it reveals that Black Rock City is not an ephemeral performance as many suggest, but instead is a nomadic city that mutates throughout the year into regional, cyber, and other spaces returning home to the Black Rock Desert annually to reify and cultivate Burning Man culture. *Performing Black Rock City* asserts that if the culture is birthed from the city—then the Burning Man Project faces the paradoxical conundrum of how to manage the loss of the desert, fire, and psychonautic affects used to create the culture present in Black Rock City, as they transition into the playa-adjacent world.

## The Burn Event Nutshell Photo Essay

The Burning Man event takes place on a flat alkali salt bed in the Black Rock Desert which is about seventy-five miles NE of Reno, NV. As of 2013, approximately 65,000 people gather in the desert to create Black Rock City, or to “go to Burning Man.” The event is a week long and is held annually the week before Labor Day. The event ticket is generally \$380 with a variety of other tiered ticket opportunities. While thousands of burners arrive weeks before the event officially begins the majority of the population arrives on Sunday night or Monday to setup camp. People drive, bus, caravan, carpool, fly, and skydive into Burning Man.



Figure Photo Essay.1: Amanda 8000 feet above Black Rock City. Photo by Thom van Os.

If you are a first-timer/virgin/newbie you are officially welcomed home by a greeter and get to ring a bell to announce your arrival. In a way, it is an acknowledgement of entering the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ) where one takes on the Ten Principles. This happens usually after a long drive, hours of waiting in a line to get in, and being checked for tickets, stowaways, weapons, and whatever else the Gate crew check for. This is my friend and campmate Lily “Scooter” Kelting who arrived on the playa in 2010 and shares a story in this dissertation. For us it was only a 2.5 hour drive from Carson City that morning but that was our second stop on the journey up the 395 from San Diego, CA.



Figure Photo Essay.2: Scooter arrives in Black Rock City. Photo by Heather “Scout” Ramey.



There are a wide range of living set ups including simple camping, small group camping from ten to thirty people, Theme Camp camping (usually groups of forty to a hundred people), and Villages (groups of camps that come together to make a Theme Village which usually consist of one hundred to three hundred people). The city is set up on a clock face from two o'clock to ten o'clock with an open section from ten to two called the keyhole that lets the participants include the expansive view of the desert into the city. *The Man* is the pin in the center of the clock, Center Camp is at six o'clock, and *The Temple* is at twelve o'clock. The streets range from A to M titled after an overall event theme such as Rites of Passage where B street was named Birth. The times on the clock face are the streets that lead to the playa where a majority of the art installations are placed for viewing. The entire event is surrounded by an orange plastic trash fence to delineate the space in the shape of a pentagram.

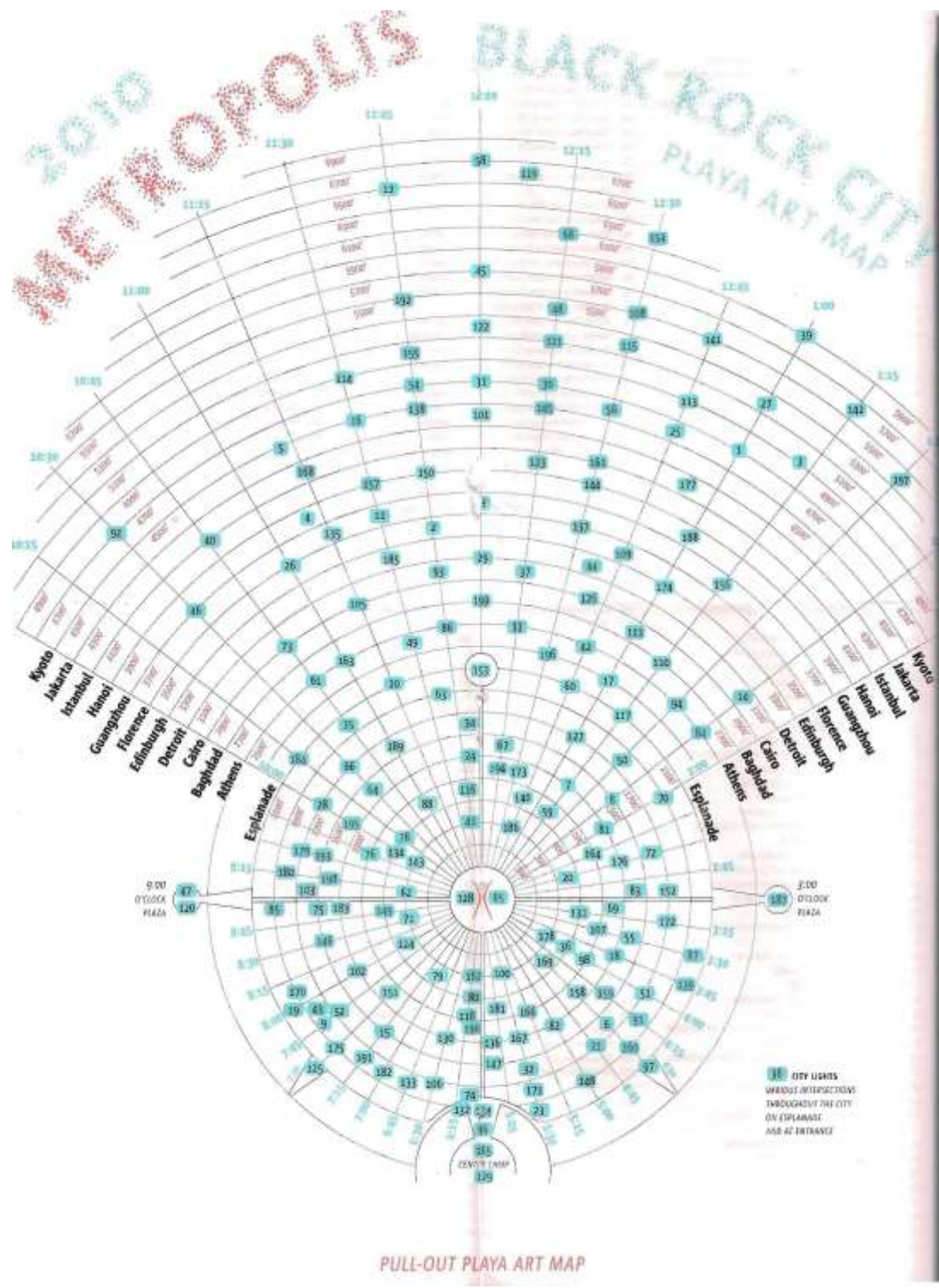


Figure Photo Essay.3: Art Map from *What Where When Guide* 2010. (Gazetas, 2010).

This map is a grid of where the art is placed in the open desert space.

People put up all kinds of structures for shelter, shade, and activity space. These range from giant geodesic domes that host huge raves, to parachutes, scaffolding, tipis, yurts, and a plethora of inventive and simple structures. This is a photo of one friend and campmate Splinter, who created this small dome as his sleeping quarters.



Figure Photo Essay.4: Splinter sets up camp. Photo by Heather “Scout” Ramey.

After set up the city begins to ramp up. There are countless activities, art installations, parties, and other things to experience. The desert usually heats up, though in my six years I’ve experienced two big rain storms and two full double rainbows. The heat can get up in the hundreds but is usually in the nineties during the days. Every year I go there, with the exception of the mysterious 2011, there are dust storms. They can go on for minutes or hours, and they can be mild or full blown white-outs. Many burners prepare for these dust storms with goggles and dust masks so they can continue to enjoy the festivities. I once attended a hug art car party where the incredible Afro-Funk band

Albino from Berkeley, CA played a legendary set through a massive dust storm where people danced with ecstatic joy and whooped with support for the musicians. This is a self-portrait from the ten hour storm of 2010.



Figure Photo Essay.5: Scout Dust Gear Selfie. Photo by Heather “Scout” Ramey.

After four days of psychonautic explorations, personal insight, partying, and silly shenanigans, The CORE Project is burned on Thursday night. This is the Circle of Regional Effigies that are placed around *The Man* and they are all burned at the same time so from afar or above *The Man* is in a ring of fire. Friday night there is usually another large-scale burn of a different art installation every year. My first year it was a stories-tall mock oil derrick with huge metal cable human figures in positions of worship facing it. They exploded it into flames with a mushroom burst of propane. It is called *Crude Awakening* and is legendary among burners. On Saturday night *The Man Burn* happens at 9pm. It is the official culmination of the event and has a carnival and Bakhtinian feel to its party.



Figure Photo Essay.6: *The Man Burn* 2011. Photo by Heather “Scout” Ramey.

Many people pack up and head out after *The Man Burn* for various reasons including avoiding the mass exodus on Sunday and Monday. I always stay for *The Temple Burn* on Sunday night. For me this is the culmination of the event, as it is for thousands of others. In contrast to *The Man Burn* this burn is done in relative silence and has an air of sacredness. It has offered me some of my most intense transformational experiences—some of which you will read within. After *The Temple Burn* the city packs

up and disperses. The photo below was one of my favorite burns to date because the lotus-like petals slowly opened. These are the *very* basics of Burning Man (and the Ten Principles below) in a nutshell.





Figure Photo Essay.7: *The Temple Burn* 2009. Photo by Heather “Scout” Ramey.

**The Ten Principles as explained by the BMP** ([burningmanproject.org](http://burningmanproject.org))

Our values, mission, and vision are rooted in these Ten Principles.

**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.

## **Introduction: The Commons and the Production of Culture**

The Burning Man Project (BMP) is working to change cultural consciousness on a global scale—some participants call it creating a global counterculture. At the most recent Burning Man Global Leadership Conference (GLC) Jon Mitchell reported that Burning Man Co-founder Harley Dubois said, “no, Burning Man the desert festival won’t change. The whole point of the transition is to help build a global culture based on the model we’ve already created on the playa” (Mitchell). This is a seismic transition for the Burning Man Project that has been in conversation for several years. Having made the recent official transition into a non-profit, and having now made the Black Rock City LLC a subsidiary, the challenge of building a global culture based on the Black Rock City model is underway.

Mitchell also reported that BMP managing director Heather White describes their business strategy: “BMP’s model is ‘servant leadership.’ Heather listed deep listening, empathy, foresight, stewardship, and concentration on the growth of people as the qualities the Org wants to cultivate for itself” (Mitchell). He also reports they plan to, “...handle the overhead of strategizing and coordinating, so Burners themselves can handle the execution. It will do this work in conjunction with other organizations where necessary” (Mitchell). This intention stems from the twenty or so years of practice they have had protecting Black Rock City from commercial enterprises and corporate takeover. They have announced that we (the culture) are moving out of the desert and into the default world, but bringing with us the culture we have cultivated. Bringing it into our daily lives has been encouraged for years, but it is now part of the business of

Burning Man—part of its mission and values. We can keep returning to the womb of Black Rock City for inspiration, but it's time to share with the world because the world is curious.

In fact the shift has been happening for several years already. BMP's belief in art as a base for inspiring creativity and innovation is sought after by CEOs and inventors at big corporations such as Google, Zappos, Zynga, and a host of other high powered companies. It has also inspired new businesses such as Black Rock Solar, Burners Without Borders, Black Rock Arts Foundation, clothing stores (including San Diego's Frock You vintage clothing), Insight Adventures (a life-coaching business that uses travel as a means of personal insight), and several others. It has the potential to be an agent of humanitarian change based in art because it values art as a central tenant of living, which as a theatre artist I wholeheartedly support. People who have been personally transformed at Burning Man make significant changes in their lives: they start businesses, invent new technologies, change careers, create outreach projects, become artists and activists, write books (and dissertations), develop legal teams, adjust how they treat others, organize events, and form communities because of their experiences at Burning Man. This is the case for a large portion of Burning Man participants including myself. Of course some come and just have a great party, but that is not who I am focused on in this dissertation though I think the party aspect of Burning Man is also a key element of the culture that helps manage the other intensities that arise.

As burners we live in two worlds, our playafied culture and our default world culture, and now those are beginning to merge. Those making the merge are trying to

live in what Gary Snyder terms the *commons* of the worlds (the BMP organizers particularly). Snyder writes, “The commons is the contract people make with their local natural system.” The etymology of the word has Greek (*koinos*) and Latin origins (*communis*).

Snyder adds:

But the Indo-European root *mei* means basically to “move, to go, to change.” This had an archaic special meaning of “exchange of goods and services within a society as regulated by custom or law.” I think it might well refer back to the principle of gift economies: “the gift must always move.” The root comes into Latin as *munus*, “service performed for the community” and hence: “municipality” (Snyder 33-34).

Snyder focuses on how human cultures relate to (and *are*) the biosphere, but in many ways Black Rock City is a *city of commons* because of the Ten Principles—particularly the principle of gifting. Participants come prepared to share a gift with the city—to create the city. They spend thousands of dollars and hours of volunteer time practicing these principles with fellow burners. They develop commons between small camps, group camps, theme camps, villages, public works, center camp, art installations, the BLM, the police, the Burning Man Project (BMP), each other’s personal worlds, and the Black Rock Desert environment (hence the burner phrase “In Dust We Trust”). These may not all be “natural” systems in the sense of the ecological environment but they are systems in the nature of the city. Black Rock City is thus a commons of experience cultures that is largely dependent upon the commons shared with the desert.

Then Black Rock City is, in a certain way, answering a call to action Snyder announces in *The Practice of the Wild*:

There will be no “tragedy of the commons” greater than this: if we do not recover the commons—regain personal, local, community, and

peoples' direct involvement in sharing (in *being*) the web of the wild world—that world will keep slipping away. Eventually our complicated industrial capitalist/socialist mixes will bring down much of the living system that supports us. And, it is clear, the loss of a local commons heralds the end of self-sufficiency and signals the doom of the vernacular culture of the region (Snyder 39).

This slipping is already happening as evidenced by the destruction of the amazon and the phenomenon of peak oil. It is also happening to human cultures as Wade Davis points out in *Light at the Edge of the World*, “Today, of the roughly six thousand languages still spoken, fully half are not being taught to children, meaning that, effectively; they are already dead, and only three hundred are spoken by more than a million people” (W. Davis 6). This is what he calls the death of the *ethnosphere*—or the human cultural component of the biosphere. These phenomena lead toward the conclusion that diversity is important to the health of the planet, which is a concern for many burners.

Burning Man culture is being issued from American countercultural impulses in the incubator of the desert. Caveat Magister writes in the burning blog:

All across the West, people are looking around them at a world dominated by abstract entities that cannot be reached or reasoned with, and asking “How do we stop?” Liberals, conservatives – no one likes the way the world is going, and everyone feels powerless to do anything about it. We see Western culture’s rapacious appetites, its political ineptitude, its incapability to steward either natural environments or human culture, and shout “How do we stop?” from the rooftops.

Burners, on the other hand, whether at the Global Leadership Conference or in their own communities, are trying to make the 10 Principles and “burning” a bigger part of their lives and asking “how do we start?” How do we get this thing going? (Magister).

In a way, Burning Man is a return to the practice of the commons Snyder is calling for us to regain.

While I am a proponent of working to create a world that is more conducive to humanitarian concerns, I argue that by spreading the culture beyond the desert, or what I call deplayafying it, a significant part of the culture is obscured and lost over time. The scale of the art against the vastness of the desert, the dust ancestors and storms that bring people together, the length of time in the wilderness, the multitude of scenarios created for spontaneous play by such a variance of people, the amount of fire in one place—specifically the large-scale burns in the open space, the permission to be naked, and the high volume of psychonautic consciousness exploration occurring in one place are all lost or significantly decline. It is my contention that these things frame affective flows that create the culture, which is the basis of the explorations in this dissertation along with how those are mediated into the default world. The Ten Principles are certainly one of the most powerful and important frameworks that help create the culture, but they work in symbiotic relationship with these other affects and the subsequent culture is defined by the contracts made between the people and the environment—between the commons.

That being said, Black Rock City shares a bigger commons with the default world and this move into a non-profit is merely acknowledging that the line Larry Harvey drew in the desert dust all those years ago when they first arrived and said, “On the other side of this line everything is going to be different,” is just a line in the dirt to define a Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ). (Brown). That the space between the worlds is a commons that must be acknowledged and negotiated not just with the state but with the culture as well.



As mentioned, the BMP has been negotiating with this system for over twenty years, and they too feel the effects of deplayafication. Mitchell reports:

By the morning session of GLC day two, it was clear that something fundamental has shifted in Burner culture. Enough of us were feeling uncomfortable with the term “default world” that it had to be acknowledged from the stage. “Say ‘playa-adjacent world’ instead,” GLC producer Rosie Lila told us, and the room felt relieved (Mitchell).

However, the challenge they face is that the default world does not recognize the commons *as a commons* because the “playa-adjacent world” system is based in what Snyder calls the “enclosure movements” from fifteenth century Europe—a movement that “ignored social and ecological effects and served to cripple the sustainable agriculture of some districts” in the name of efficiency and higher production. (Snyder 34). Creating a commons with this system is necessary to maintain Burning Man culture because the culture is nomadic as I discuss in chapter three. It occupies space as long as it can before it is forced to move by the state. The BMP non-profit is the organization’s attempt to acknowledge that the culture of Black Rock City is a shared one because it literally navigates within mainstream culture creating spaces it can survive, but all of these alternative spaces are deplayafied to a certain extent forcing the culture to be readily adaptable for survival but losing the benefits of its shared commons with the desert as a result.

In addition to the loss of the desert effects on the culture (which are significant but unavoidable for the BMP) there is another concern with this transition; about what they will support and deem official Burning Man activity. As soon as there is a business entity that governs whether or not I (and all the other non-official burners) get to officially use the icon/trademark of our co-created culture, the old sayings *Corruptio*

*optimi pessima*—the corruption of the best is the worst, and Lord Acton’s *power tends to corrupt* come to mind. These conundrums are a product of the American National Project discussed in chapter one of this dissertation. They are the groundwork of American Exceptionalism, and the Burning Man Project must constantly negotiate the creation of a commons with the monolith that is American capitalism while simultaneously being subjected to its laws, which do not just govern the body and its practices but also influence consciousness. The dangers of this negotiation are financial, social, personal, and potentially self-destructive.

In an interview with founder Larry Harvey, Suzy Khimm of the Washington Post reveals:

Most recently, he’s been talking with Tony Hsieh, the CEO of Zappos, who shares his vision of revitalizing Las Vegas, one of the cities hardest hit by the recent housing bust. “Urban renewal? We’re qualified. We’ve built up and torn down cities for 20 years,” says Harvey. “Cities everywhere are calling for artists, and it’s a blank slate there, blocks and blocks. ... We want to extend the civil experiment — to see if business and art can coincide and not maim one another.” (Khimmm).

Urban renewal is associated with gentrification, displacement of people from their communities, and the demolition of homes and other structures, for the purposes of public use, but at the expense of the loss of community based cultures. This is not a negotiation that maintains the practice of the culture cultivated with the Ten Principles as I have come to understand them. This is not respecting the survival and needs of the communities being displaced. Now, if the BMP is working directly with the communities to help them fund their own self-expression and creation of public spaces the way Burners Without Borders (BWB) purports to do then it is not urban renewal. It is similar to humanitarian work in an effort to serve others. This is the fine line the BMP

is currently walking. The questions remain: will it fund urban renewal projects or humanitarian work? What constitutes the Ten Principles and how are they largely defined? These are being explored by the BMP and by burners ourselves.

What is happening out there in the Black Rock Desert is powerful to be sure, but anything that begins to affect change, which Burning Man is beginning to do (particularly in the Bay Area), needs its participants to critique it—to hear their voices and consider their opinions. As an artist, a scholar, and frankly an American, I believe critique is important and necessary for any culture to be self-reflective in order to maintain its value system in a healthy way. It is with this in mind that I offer my dissertation's discourse and its critiques to the community of Burning Man as a gift, and to those in the playa-adjacent world as a playafied scholarly investigation into theatre studies, performance studies, affect theory, Burning Man, and the uses of critical autoethnography.

I love Burning Man, it has shifted my consciousness and allowed me space to have deep personal insight, but I am not a sycophant and many of the participants feel this same way. My ambivalent relationship to Burning Man makes it possible for me to write critical discourse about it and be a part of it at the same time. The Burning Man Project agrees. They are creating a Philosophical Center within the non-profit with the following vision:

The Philosophical Center will serve as a think tank to do scholarly research about, and to prepare and publish materials that explain the Ten Principles, and how they have been and can be successfully and practically implemented in many fields of human endeavor. The Philosophical Center will guide the interpretation and application of the Ten Principles in The Project's operation. It will elucidate the Ten Principles by means of a precedential approach that examines how these

principles have been effectively used to solve past problems and answer questions. Its study shall also include spontaneous cultural practices and initiatives that have arisen within the Burning Man community independently of any institutional mandate (burningmanproject.org).

As the BMP is deplayafying the culture issued in Black Rock City they also have a call to thinkers to participate.<sup>1</sup> However, upon reading the language describing this Philosophical Center I am concerned that the interest in the philosophical work does not encourage critique. Perhaps because they have had enough critique and are uninterested in discussions about critical awareness that might challenge the paradoxes inherent within the principles, but since Heather White, quoted earlier, assures me that the organizers are practicing “deep listening, empathy, foresight, stewardship, and concentration on the growth of people” I remain hopeful that constructive and self-reflective critique is welcomed.

I have been contributing to the creation of Black Rock City for seven years (2014 will be my seventh Burn) and I feel like I am a part of this community, but I do think that the culture emerging from Burning Man does not often live up to its own Ten Principles, and that the practice of critical self-awareness in conjunction with scholarly research and critique can help with that. I cannot write this from an outsider’s position, or from an ethnographic or anthropological standpoint. As a burner, I have to write about it from the inside, which means writing about it from personal experience, and from being a part of the community. I am also a practicing psychonaut, theatre artist, and an emerging theatre scholar. These are how I function in the default world, on the playa,

---

<sup>1</sup> “The Burning Man Project provides infrastructural tools and frameworks to support local communities in applying the Ten Principles through six interconnected program areas: Arts, Civic Involvement, Culture Education, Philosophical Center, Social Enterprise” (Burning Man Project non-profit).

and in the commons between worlds—so I write from these impulses. I believe that using critical autoethnography allows me to do this and supports the critical discourse about Burning Man in a more provocative and powerful way.

### **Critical Autoethnography: Stories, Culture, and Theory**

The use of critical autoethnography as a methodology is an uncommon one in theatre and performance scholarly research, but it is one that offers a unique and useful form of critical analysis and awareness. Robin Boylorn and Mark Orbe write, “Culture is made possible through lived experience..., and autoethnography is inherently a cultural practice. Our stories are instrumental in constructing our identities and they help inform our interpersonal relationships.” It is an examination of others through self and through our co-created experiences. Their book *Critical Autoethnography* approaches it thus:

We talk about autoethnography as a critical method by using three central features of critical theory, which include: to understand the lived experience of real people in context, to examine social conditions and uncover oppressive power arrangements, and to fuse theory and action to challenge processes of domination. [...] While contributors were urged to write their personal narratives, we also encouraged them to reflect on the interpersonal, intercultural, and intersectional aspects of their stories, folding in theoretical frameworks to their experiences. (Boylorn 20).

This unpacking of the term highlights my intentions for using this method to dissertate on Burning Man. It allows me to research through self-reflection and critical analysis, which serves the dual purpose of critically investigating Burning Man from my participant perspective and continues to cultivate the culture through my critical awareness as artist and scholar. It serves as a bridge between my *practice* as a burner, a theatre artist, and my *scholarship*.

I have also included other people's stories. At first, I wanted to avoid ethnography in my dissertation all together because I often find it fraught with misinterpretation. Also, I did not want to use other people's stories because I find Burning Man to be so personal and did not want to subject their stories to what Burning Man means to me, but I discovered that through reading and including their stories the culture became clearer throughout my research. I did not interview these contributors directly. I asked them to send me a story in their own words for inclusion if they felt moved to do so. Each contributor is aware of my work and has a strong sense of my personal experience at Burning Man, or is from a published source. I have found that sharing stories, rather than traditional ethnographic interviewing is both a way burners connect to each other and create community, and places my autoethnographic narratives in a useful cultural context.

### **Chapters: Desert, Fire, Technology, Psychonauts, and Theatre of Affect**

In Lee Gilmore's book *Theatre in a Crowded Fire*, she rarely discusses theatre (her book is on ritual and spirituality) but she does connect it to Victor Turner's *From Ritual to Theatre*. She also writes, "...Burning Man constitutes a theater for individual and collective spiritual expressions and experiences, as situated within broader narratives of cultural production" and that, "When ritual tools are skillfully employed and the lines between audience and performer are artfully blurred, really good theater can—like a really good Burning Man experience—change the course of human lives and cultures" (Gilmore 16, 164). While I had hoped to find a deeper exploration into these ideas, I learned that her inspiration for this title came not from a theatre perspective, but from hearing a young man shouting "Theater! Theater" in the crowded

fire of *The Man Burn*. His behavior inspired her title, but I am curious if this man was having the same epiphany I had standing in those crowded fires—that Burning Man is actually a new, transformative form of theatre.

Not just performance of everyday life, or identity performance, or ritual, or festival, or a politically inspired counterculture but theatre—theatre that is at the roots of theorists like Artaud, Grotowski, Brook, Meyerhold, Brecht, Fo, Boal, and Kantor—theatre that inspired the Greeks, the Rasas, the Dadaists, the surrealists, the situationists, and the contemporary practices of site-specific theatre, flash mobs, parkour, and cirque—theatre that is generating an artistically inspired cultural movement. Black Rock City is based in art, which means it is a city based in representation. It is also produced in a federally managed wilderness area, which is a designated area for visiting uninhabited (by humans) land and imagining the American past and future—which I discuss through the lens of ecocriticism and wilderness studies in chapter one. Burning Man is presenting a city from a different, often decentered, artistic consciousness that is influenced by its environment, its participants, and their modes of cultural production which are namely artistic. This dissertation is an investigation into how theatre, performance, and the environments Burning Man occupies (mainly the Black Rock Desert) are producing Burning Man culture.

My first chapter “Black Rock City: Performing the American National Project at Burning Man,” is about the way American narratives (particularly narratives of the Western Front) are performed at Burning Man revealing it as a microcosm of fractured American identity. This brings an awareness to the community’s attention about its white western blind spots through an ecocritical lens and the use of affect, theatre, race,

and performance theories. Additionally, this chapter looks at how Burning Man produces spect-actors to create what I call encounter-scenes that shape Burning Man culture through Theatre of Affect—and therefore the personal experiences of participants. I do this with an examination of Augusto Boal’s understanding of the spect-actor, Diana Taylor’s concepts of scenarios and the repertoire in *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Rebecca Schneider’s concept of touching time through the performing of remains in *Performing Remains*, Elizabeth Grosz’s analysis of Gilles Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of affect in *Chaos, Territory, and Art*, Teresa Brennan’s *Transmission of Affect*, along with a few other insights into affect theory.

Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg in their introduction to the *Affect Theory Reader* write:

Affect arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon. Affect is an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation as well as the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or intensities. That is, affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves (Gregg 1).

I argue that Theatre of Affect is the framing of these intensities and flows of affect with scenarios inspired by the art, ritual, performances, gestures, environments, and interactions available to the participants through Taylor’s notion of the repertoire. Further, that these affective framings are triggered by hypertexts that create epiphanies, collisions, insights, and connections of transformation that in turn cultivate Burning Man culture.



My second chapter “Hot Theatre: Fire and Catharsis at Burning Man” is about the process of setting art on fire as a means of personal catharsis, transformation, and community building. Further it examines how the historical narratives and scenarios of fire interconnect with the rituals performed, and reveal fraught and paradoxical relationships between western rationalism and the biosphere. I use the case studies of the two main burns at Burning Man: *The Man Burn* and *The Temple Burn*. I use historical discourse on fire in conjunction with Gaston Bachelard’s *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* and affect theory to discuss the way fire scenarios emerge from these large-scale fire art installations, and theories of catharsis including Aristotle, Artaud, Brecht, and Anthony Kubiak’s discussion of *katharsis* and terror in *Stages of Terror* to analyze the way these performatively create community and profound personal transformation. This then sets Burning Man up as a place where ecocritical discourse is playing out between a performed city and its relationship to the desert and to fire ecology. The cathartic transformations and community cultivation achieved through these large-scale burns are an inherent part of Burning Man culture that is deplayafied in the merge of the culture with the playa-adjacent world.

“Mutating Black Rock City: Documentation, Simulation, and Cultivation” is my third chapter about how technology is used to create immediacy and presence and how this mediation affects the culture and perpetuates it as a nomadic culture using cyberspace as a home. Through a discussion of the new official documentary *SPARK! A Burning Man Story*, the virtual burn in *Second Life* called BURN2, and John Halcyon’s use of video chat rooms and social media to create Hug Nation, I theorize how Black Rock City occupies virtual space to survive throughout the year when it is

not in the Black Rock Desert making it a unique kind of nomadic culture. I claim that these mediated versions of Burning Man are continuing and cultivating the performance of Burning Man and therefore its culture. I argue that performance is not ephemeral because of the circulation of representations, and that documentation and recordings are not separate from the performance but actually continue it through their mediated interactions with spectators. I do this through an analysis of liveness, representation, documentation, ephemerality, and interactivity. I use Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked*, Diana Taylor, Rebecca Schneider, Philip Auslander's *Liveness*, Suzan-Lori Park's concept of Rep & Rev, Marshall McLuhan's *Medium is the Massage*, and Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*.

My final chapter "Ah La Peanut Butter Sandwiches! or the Psychonautics of a Theatre Artist at Burning Man" is about the affective ambiance of BRC and how the psychonautic culture (meditation, yoga, ritual, visionary substances, and theatrical play) creates affective flows of transformation that are framed through art and performative encounters that explore consciousness in a radical way. I use critical autoethnography, collected stories, Brennan, Grosz, Hakim Bey, Daniel Pinchbeck's *Breaking Open the Head*, Artaud, Walter F. Otto's *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*, theories about hallucinations; and my concepts of scenarios, hypertexts, encounter-scenes, and collisions to discuss the politics of consciousness, their relationship to Burning Man culture, and the importance of psychonautic exploration to cultivate awareness for the survival of Burning Man culture and arguably the survival of humanity.

Burning Man is different to everyone. This common phrase could not be more valid. My experiences at Burning Man have transformed how I see the world. I have a

deeper awareness of social structures, of interpersonal relationships, of how consciousness creates the world, and how the practice of the commons is vital to human survival. I approach my work as a theatre artist with more awareness of these things and think more critically and with more depth. This is a result of my personal experience and the negotiation between my inner worlds of Burner culture, psychonautic exploration, and theatre practice and scholarship.

### **My Drop into Burning Man**

My first year at Burning Man was a particularly unique year. Upon arrival on Monday, I go visit *The Man* base-pyre to orient myself to the city, and not long after we return to camp *The Man* is set on fire. Someone commits arson and sends a wave of intense response through the city provoking shock, anger, pain, laughter, pride, cheers, tears, philosophical discussion, and teamwork. *The Man* crew rebuilds it throughout the week so the community can perform its annual ritual as planned. The main questions that buzzed around the city were: Is this radical expression? What is Burning Man without *The Man*? And what are *you* going to do about it? The arsonist is arrested (he was wanted for arson in another state too), but he does provoke thought and discussion within the community in a radical way. Although my experience of *The Man Burn* that year is powerful I often wonder what would have happened in its place if the BMP and *The Man* Crew would have provided an opportunity for the community to create something in its place—enacting the principals of communal effort and participation.

The year would have been unique just because of that incident but it also was the only year that I am aware of when someone committed suicide. A young 22 year-old man hangs himself in a tent. This is two blocks away from where we are camping.

Again the information spread quickly. His suicide shocks many burners and provokes more conversations about the consciousness of our culture and global culture at large. These two acts of violence shape my first burn in a very specific way. They make me realize how intensely personal Burning Man is and that for all of its ignorant, naval-gazing, wasteful, ego-driven, white privileged, and often idiotic activities it is also a transformative, insightful, heartwarming, awe inspiring, joyful, funny, artistic, playful, fun, profound, and magical experience, and the more negative symptoms ought to inform our culture rather than us treating it like a plague. My belief is that cultivating awareness is not a practice of relegating the unwanted to the discard pile but to accept it as part of our co-created world and begin from there. This dissertation is not working to define Burning Man—to say “what Burning Man is.” I am rather interested in how it works, in what happens there that makes people decide to change their lives or return year after year to create it. I am interested in exploring how it will change in the future now that the BMP is working to go global. I do not pretend to be an expert on the BMP—I am not one of the organizers nor have I had conversations with them (which is a conscious decision because that has already been done),<sup>2</sup> or several of the topics included. Though I have done quite a lot of research in an effort to offer a useful and insightful dissertation to the fields of theater and performance studies, ecocritical studies, and Burning Man, I have come to realize that this dissertation is a beginning—so here we go...

---

<sup>2</sup> See Bowditch, Chen, Gilmore, and Van Proyen.

## Chapter One:

### Welcome Home: Performing the American National Project at Burning Man

*Touching time against itself, by bringing time again and again out of joint into theatrical, even anamorphic, relief presents the real, the actual, and the raw and the true as, precisely, the zigzagging, diagonal, and crookedly imprecise returns of time.*

~Rebecca Schneider *Performing Remains*

*The form that dominates the American West, and doubtless all American culture, is a seismic form: a fractal, interstitial culture, born of a rift with the Old World, a tactile, fragile, mobile, superficial culture –you have to follow its own rules to grasp how it works: seismic shifting, soft technologies.*

~ Jean Baudrillard *America*

A lengthy drive to the Black Rock Desert means leaving civilization behind, and entering “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain,” and where there are, “outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation,” as described by the Wilderness Act of 1964 (Congress). This is an environment where the body is tricked and challenged, creating altered states of consciousness. The eye sees refracted light effects. The heat rapidly wicks the body of its moisture. Extreme sun exposure burns and tans the skin. The alkali dust dries out the skin, nose, mouth and lungs. Driving out to Burning Man however, is not just a typical American wilderness experience in the Black Rock Desert. It is an adventure into the myths of the desert; into what Hakim Bey describes as a temporary autonomous zone (TAZ)—into a consciously created artistic space where a city will be built and a culture practiced.

Our story begins... we (my campmates and I) head into the wilderness to build a home where we can express ourselves the way we choose to, where we do not have to

adhere to the conventional conservative values of our society, where we can bear the brutalities of the wild desert and survive by working together against all odds. This gesture to create a new home in the “free” space, preserved for us by our forefathers, is mimetic of nostalgic white colonial scenarios of the Western Front, and their desire to reimagine antebellum America. It is a gesture buried deep in the layers of American myth, and the uniquely American construct of wilderness experience. We are in fact, performing the American national project by ghosting nineteenth century expansionist discourse through cross-temporal gestures in a consciously defined theatrical space. To clarify, I define the American national project as the ongoing process of creating U.S. American national identity.

As my crew and I travel on the gesture digs deeper into American identity construction. We are going to build a home where we can get away from the imposition of commercialism and the constraints of money. Accepting the fact that we pay \$380 per ticket to do it, and pay money to get there, eat, survive, bring costumes and lighting for the nighttime, and provide a gift for the community (e.g. art installation or mutant vehicle). For my camp this costs an average of \$700-\$1000 per person plus the gift (which varies—the camp that brings *El Pulpo* the fire octopus mutant vehicle spends \$2000/night solely on propane for their fire art, and my first year I performed six poems for many groups of participants). But we forget about that cost—you’ve got to pay-to-play as they say—we are going to live in a world where everyone voluntarily contributes to our home with seemingly well-intentioned airs; where everyone encourages and celebrates radical individualism; where everyone picks up after themselves, and respects the environment; and everyone is welcome to participate. Here our gesture grows to

encompass the political roots of left-coast liberals, which is no surprise since Burning Man was started by a radical group of artistic San Franciscans.

In many ways, we are trying to embody the utopian American fantasy of a world where everyone is welcome, happy, free, and equal. However upon arrival, it is clear that our world is largely white (with an increase in various Asian populations over the past several years), and an influx of international participants. It is also mostly liberal and independent (with a peppering of conservatives), heterosexual (with a decent-sized LGBT population), and is largely middle-upper class, and everyone here does seem welcome, happy, free, and equal for the most part. Yet, I am critically aware of this lack of diversity in this place where we are supposed to practice *radical* inclusion.<sup>3</sup> This is especially pertinent because of the current agenda to go global. As of now, Black Rock City (BRC) is not radically welcoming financially, physically, or culturally for a majority of non-white, non-heterosexual, or disabled peoples. Of course there are exceptions, but overall this is not a diverse population, so the Burning Man Project's claim on its website that this is a "widely applicable way of life" is an audacious one because the culture is created and cultivated by a majority of heteronormative, well-off, white people (Burning Man Project non-profit). That said, we are radically inclusive of quite a diversity of personal expressions within that population, and the resulting transformative experiences and awe inspiring art is palpably satiating. In fact, several art installations are placed in communities in the default world to their delight. All this

---

<sup>3</sup> The 2012 BRC Census reports 84% white population, 80% heterosexual, and a median income of 40-42K with approximately 1 in 5 participation in the survey (Heller).

is to say, that my experience of Burning Man is a deeply ambivalent one, yet as an artist, scholar, and psychonaut I return every year because it profoundly inspires me.

The principle states, “Anyone may be a part of Burning Man. We welcome and respect the stranger. No prerequisites exist for participation in our community,” but this is not *radical inclusion*. Just because Burning Man is technically a private event that does not turn anyone with a ticket away and encourages acceptance does not make it radically inclusive. It is not just about access, though that certainly plays a part, it is also about social climate. When I think about being a part of cultural movement that presumes that our culture cultivated in the deserts by this demographic is a “widely applicable way of life” I am immediately concerned about the probability that this is a mimetic gesture of American Exceptionalism and therefore denies the validity of other cultural epistemologies. After twenty-seven years of practicing these principles the culture being cultivated in BRC is largely white, heterosexual, and middle-upper class. A considerable counter argument is that access to the desert, monetary, and mobility requirements to make it to BRC are a reason for creating the non-profit, and offering the use of these ethos to participants in other places and communities is going to ameliorate this issue—that taking it out of the desert and asking the participants to bring the culture into their default world communities will shift the culture toward a more radically inclusive one. Yet, the influences of the desert and the radical self-expression allowable in the TAZ there are not necessarily transferable—so in many ways the culture is lost in the transfer.

I wonder at the losses that will inevitably occur in this cultural shift as my campmates and I forge on into the desert—our expansionist gesture takes a turn toward



ritual, theatre, and spectacle bending across time toward historical concepts of Bakhtinian carnival and ancient fire festivals. It also reaches into imaginary new worlds performing a particularly American brand of appropriating various cultural scenarios and mashing them up into neo-tribal rituals and Hollywood-sized spectacles that create the community and culture. The desert, then, becomes a site-specific theatre space where we perform these gestures in an effort to generate personal experience and an alternative culture. We are going to create a place where art reigns supreme, especially if it is on fire—where we will dance, chant, risk, spin and spit fire, and rave as the desert-ancestors whirl through the city. We are here to make a world vastly different from the one we live in, and practice the gestures of freedom inherent in the American character denied us by the confines of our regular lives.

I want to include an important note here, “the American character” is better described as the ~~white~~ American character. The strike-through is representative of the common absence of awareness about the white constructs that govern the concept of American nationalism. While I do discuss it, this chapter is not explicitly an exploration of race theory at Burning Man. However, to not acknowledge this fact perpetuates an ignorance I am uninterested in. I want to reiterate here that this event is based in a white western “liberal” vision for humanity and it is—not surprisingly—unaware of that fact. Suffice it to say that when I discuss the concept of the American National Project throughout this chapter, I mean ~~white~~ American.

Our story continues as we pilgrimage into the desert—we are not anarchists, though we might be seen that way. We are going to Burning Man, and we’ve come to party, to be sexual, to explore altered states of consciousness, to create, to be in

relationship with like-minded people, to connect and reconnect to each other and ourselves, to survive in this arid desert, to give and receive, to explore the extremities of what it means to be alive and free: in other words—to *burn*. “Welcome Home!” says the greeter as we cross through the gates, acknowledging our collaboration in the creation of the city. We set up our camp, assemble our mutant vehicle, don our costumes, take on the Ten Principles, and enjoy the fruits of our labor.

The critical autoethnography in this brief introduction exposes hidden paradoxes in several idealistic scenarios largely apparent at Burning Man. This chapter unpacks the ways in which the Frontier myth of Manifest Destiny, the scenarios of American Exceptionalism and The American Dream; and white west coast liberalism are performing the American national project at Burning Man. It unpacks key elements of what I call Theatre of Affect and how this phenomenon creates culture. Throughout, this chapter also takes an eco-critical look at how the ecology of the desert space and the construct of American Wilderness contributes to, performs, and defines the affective theatre of Burning Man as particularly American, and even Californian. I begin here with a discussion of the first Burning Man Theme Camp—Christmas Camp.

### **The American Dream and Christmas Fairy Trickery**

In *The American Dream: A Cultural History*, Lawrence R. Samuel mentions an interesting use of the term American Dream from the 1930s. The *Los Angeles Times* reported on a Christmas display at the home of Robert McLaughlin. It was a model village he called “Sunnyville,” and the *L.A. Times* called it “American Dream Village.” The scene included:

...a church (with a steeple bell that rang), a schoolhouse (with logs outside as firewood), and a depot with an adjoining coal chute and water tank. Miniature people gathered at the general store, fed tiny animals on a little farm, and sang carols in front of neighbor's log cabins. Snow (bleached cornflakes) covered the scene, and if you looked up you could see Santa Claus approaching from the sky over a gold mine in the hills that surrounded the town (Samuel 12-13).

He and his brother-in-law built the village themselves. It was an artistic expression of hope for the future in The Great Depression era. This envisioning of the American Dream *as a city* highlights an unacknowledged impulse that sparks the annual development of Black Rock City—the desire to re-create the American Dream or create a new culture through the artistic performance of a city. While, this is not part of the Burning Man Project's narrative of the event, and many participants may disagree with me, in many ways this is what it is doing—providing a space for the re-imagining of American culture. The fact that the Burning Man Project non-profit is dedicated to spreading Burning Man culture evidences this impulse. They want to use the Ten Principles to foster more artistic, interactive, and civically engaged communities. Of course, the expression of the Ten Principles in BRC also generates a lot of self-serving spectacles and money-wasting activities similar to the way that Christmastime consumerism is generally celebrated in the U.S.

Christmas in the U.S. is not just a religious holiday, just as Burning Man culture is not just its ethos. Though many Christians of various denominations celebrate Christmas with religious activities (and many burners attend Burning Man as a sacred rite) the holiday is subjected to excessive consumerism, particularly in the United States. It is as if a Christmas fairy descends and casts a spell on the masses through sales, commercials, twenty-four hour Christmas carol stations, Christmas display cases,

movies, performances, fairs, mall Santas, city tree-lighting celebrations, and the intensive bombardment to—Buy! Buy! Buy!—until the very last possible minute before Santa arrives and the significance of the holiday often gets lost. The Christmas consumerism fairy’s goal is to mystify the buyer with holiday magic in an effort to turn a profit. The country is mesmerized by these spectacles and embodies a bizarre version of McLaughlin’s “American Dream Village.” This is similar to the structure of Burning Man though the intention is not necessarily to turn a profit (though they do), or to be commercial (which they are not), but the intention to mystify the consumer so they are inspired to keep buying is present. Approximately 65,000 people per year buy this product because Burning Man is heralded as both an incredible party and a profoundly moving experience for many participants, just as Christmas is for many people. Yet simultaneously we participate in excessive consumerism dedicated to producing the Burning Man culture just as Christmas consumerism produces a Christmas-oriented culture. This paradox—or what Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping calls “the Devil”—creates an ambivalent environment at Burning Man. Its narrative wavers between a radical countercultural movement (more closely associated with the San Francisco Cacophony Society who were largely responsible for originating the event) and a new values-based non-profit organization that works to shift mainstream values through the Ten Principles (the current Burning Man Project trajectory).<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Statement of Belief from Reverend Billy & the Church of Stop Shopping, “Let’s talk about the Devil. Corporate Commercialism has sped up to a roar, virtually unopposed. Consumerism is normalized in the mind of the average person, sometimes we even refer to ourselves as consumers forgetting that we are also citizens, humans, men, women, animals. We forget that we share many resources, public spaces, libraries, information, history, sidewalks, streets, schools that we created laws and covenants and governments [sic] to protect us,, to support us, to help us... The subjugation of these resources and

It is interesting that the first theme camp at Burning Man was Christmas Camp. The ritual and religious sacredness, the celebration of excess, and the choice to turn it on its head by placing it in the desert were all encompassed in that first camp. Of course, the roots of Christmas are not only in Christianity but also in Pagan cultures that Christians appropriated in an effort to spread their “way of life”, which is also similar to what Burning Man is doing (this is explored in relationship to fire ritual in chapter two). Certainly Burning Man does not subscribe to any religious doctrine, but it is curious that the integration of Christianity into the cultivation of American myths still permeates the production of American nationalism, even in countercultural activities such as Burning Man.

### **Into the myths of The Western Frontier...**

It is the desert’s expanse that beckoned Burning Man into its current form just as the Western Frontier scenarios promised free land for the taking for those willing to make the journey. The Burning Man legend goes... in 1986 Larry Harvey and his friends burned an eight-foot tall effigy of a man on Baker Beach in San Francisco, CA. This was the beginning of an artistic solstice celebration that happened for the next four years. In 1990, the S.F.P.D. had to stop the burn because there was a crowd of six to eight hundred people gathered on the adjacent hill to watch. Of course, they had come for the spectacle and chanted, “Burn the fucker... burn it, burn it. Fuck you, burn it.” This mob-mentality cheering developed into a tumultuous and violent incident where

---

these laws to the forces of the market demands a response. (Billy). Reverend Billy regularly performs at Burning Man and often comically and brilliantly indicts his audience as they cheer him on.

the crowd rushed the structure and tried to light it on fire. The artists who had constructed it tried to stop them and what resulted was the disheartening realization that:

...a lot of those people had nothing invested in what we'd done. They'd come for a spectacle. They'd just heard in town that there was this big man, they're gonna burn it. They hadn't worked with us. We hadn't been conscious of ourselves as a community, we were just doing it (Harvey).

It was this experience that sent Harvey and the future Burning Man community to the Black Rock Desert.

In many ways, this move echoes the ideological and geopolitical intentions behind Manifest Destiny—to believe in their personal right to have space to practice their art, and to venture into the wilds of the west and build a new world. The phrase Manifest Destiny, coined by journalist John Louis O'Sullivan, was inspired by Andrew Jackson's egalitarian democracy, which implies a kind of hyperbolized passion for an idealized America. O'Sullivan writes, "...And that claim [to Oregon] is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us" (Johannesen 9). While this myth is largely connected to a Christian doctrine the gesture is a geopolitical one, and one connected to a kind of personal hope that mirrors the creative cultural intentions behind Burning Man.

While the Burning Man Project (BMP) is not interested in nation building, they are interested in creating a values-based community that can revolutionize the world. This echoes the expansionist's desire to settle and reform new territory according to their values and beliefs. Their territory is not a physical one but a psychological one. Geopolitically, Manifest Destiny's idealized hope and belief in a God-given right to

land ownership led the expansionists west to conquer the territory from the Mississippi river to the Pacific Ocean. Burning Man is not claiming land per se, but is rather *performing* the claiming of territory in a space provided by the Wilderness Act of 1964. This act of congress delineated sections of the claimed territory with the intention of preserving it for the sole use of experiencing wilderness. This claiming gesture is inherent in the construction of American wilderness experience, which is the conscious choice to enter into these wilderness areas and camp, hike, fish, hunt, or pack, in an effort to experience “primitive nature,” which I will discuss a little later in this chapter.

The performance of burning *The Man* on Baker Beach generated a small community that had practices that were no longer welcome in San Francisco. Like the expansionists, their needs were practical but also deeply personal. Certainly, the intention of moving the event to the Black Rock Desert was to find a place where they could burn their art without interruption—a place where they could practice their newly discovered community’s tradition of burning *The Man*. This initial move has seeds of Manifest Destiny’s mythology, but the process of the city’s growth is where the myth flourishes. In a Gold Rush-like manner, the fever and exhilaration of the experience of going to Burning Man caught on by word-of-mouth and through various media outlets including the internet, which launched around the same time as Burning Man moved to the desert (a subject I return to in chapter three). The number of people who made the annual pilgrimage to Black Rock began to grow. It grew from two hundred and fifty people to one thousand people in three years, and grew to fifteen thousand over the next five years. Currently, approximately sixty-five thousand people travel from the U.S. and many of the world’s countries to attend Burning Man annually. This population growth

developed rapidly and led to a negotiation with the state in order for it to continue because it manifests itself as a cultural event rather than an anarchist group ready to take land for a new home. Manifest Destiny led to the settling of the Western U.S. and the creation of the “wild west” label of west coast American identity and culture. Burning Man is performing a similar gesture in an effort to cultivate a new art-based culture. Of course, those who settled the west needed to create commerce in order to survive, and Burning Man faces a similar challenge.

### **Enter Capitalism and Left-Coast Liberalism...**

The population growth also exceeded the originators’ ability to control the crowds and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) threatened to shut the annual burn down. (This threat is a consistent one for the BMP still today.) The originators were also hemorrhaging money because their “pass the hat” technique to fund the event had not worked.<sup>5</sup> Eventually this, among other things, led to the creation of Black Rock City LLC, which stages the annual event. The conscious decision to create a business to facilitate the growth of their community further complicates the paradoxical relationship between the seemingly lefty-liberal countercultural narrative of Burning Man’s history and values, and its actual American capitalist business structure. The intention behind selecting an LLC over a nonprofit structure was, “...for its flexibility and protection against liability, even though their primary purpose was not for profit.” (Chen 46). In order to maintain the opportunity to create their art and community using public lands they had to organize the event in some way to avoid shut down by the BLM, and for the

---

<sup>5</sup> See Bowditch’s *On the Edge of Utopia* chapter 1 (Bowditch, *On the Edge of Utopia: Performance and the Ritual at Burning Man*).



first eighteen or so years they chose the structure of an LLC with intentions of eventually moving it over to a non-profit. The BMP also uses this move to further shift the concept of Burning Man “as an event” to Burning Man as a “way of life.”

The recently launched non-profit organization, which has now taken over the production of Black Rock City by making Black Rock City LLC a subsidiary and is its only shareholder. The non-profit also has additional intentions that reflect their new brand of culture. Their “mission and vision” website section states:

#### Mission

The mission of the Burning Man Project is to facilitate and extend the culture that has issued from the Burning Man event into a larger world. This culture forms an integrated pattern of values, experience, and behavior: a coherent and widely applicable way of life. The survival and elaboration of this culture depend upon a cultivated capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.

#### Vision

The Burning Man Project will bring experiences to people in grand, awe-inspiring and joyful ways that lift the human spirit, address social problems and inspire a sense of culture, community and cultural engagement (Burning Man Project non-profit, 2013).

While this clearly leads to a discussion about the entitled reaches of American Exceptionalism, I first want to address two key facets of how this culture “issued from the Burning Man event.” I will discuss the concept of participation—or “no-spectators”—because it highlights the amount of volunteer-labor participants who contribute to the creation of the culture. I will address that in more depth a bit later. First, I want to discuss how this labor feigns to give participants a sense of ownership of the culture but materially it does not.

### **Who Owns Culture**

The culture is owned by Black Rock City LLC (which is now owned by the non-profit). This illusive ownership supports a peculiar kind of capitalism that dupes many participants into spending large amounts of money and time to create a product where their ownership is imaginary at best. This format simulates American capitalist business structures while hypocritically telling their participants that they *are* the culture. Of course that is true, yet paradoxically the participants *are* also the product—meaning the culture cannot live without being embodied by people, and if what is “issued” by the event is Burning Man culture then that cultural identity is owned by the LLC/non-profit. Said another way, the BMP is selling countercultural experience as a product at the event by using the Ten Principles and the Burning Man icon as a trademark.

This narrative that the participants *are* the culture is also troublesome because if that is true then they are saying that they own us—by owning our cultural participation and ideals. They govern who gets to share in their ideals through a business structure, which is antithetical to some of the Ten Principles particularly gifting, radical inclusion, and decommodification. If burners want to claim Burning Man culture in any public way (especially any way that might generate profit) then we must obtain approval from the LLC/non-profit to do so. I cannot even publish my own photography in this dissertation without express permission from Burning Man, and I am happy to get that permission because I have bought into the culture for over six years and believe they use these rules to protect the community (e.g. they don’t want anyone to publish a photo that would incriminate or expose a participant in a negative or damaging way)—I pay my dues. However, that does not mean I cannot be critical of the structure as many

participants and organizers are, which is why they made the move to the non-profit structure.

Their website states, “Our mission has always been to serve the community, and a non-profit public benefit corporation is the most socially responsible option to ensure and protect the future of Burning Man” (Man, the burning blog). Though despite their good intentions they cannot escape the separation they are making between ideals and participants bodies. In some sense all of the Burning Man participants become donors and volunteers who help create the culture by going to the Burning Man event or participating in other activities done by the non-profit. Yet, the line between who owns the culture is still one of flesh vs. ideals, which reflects the Western construct of mind/body separation.

Even though the people who create the culture using these ideals are paying to use those ideals the culture generated is not separate from the people who create it. If that were true then every culture would pay their leaders whatever they charged for the use of their belief system, which BMP does. If burners use their ideals (as we are encouraged to do so) outside of the event then we are liable for their use, or at least for saying they are connected to the BMP, because they are a BMP product. In other words, the BMP considers Burning Man culture intellectual property, and they do this by saying that the culture is issued from the Ten Principles. A majority of the participants acknowledge Burning Man as a decommodified commodity, which codifies their participation as a business transaction; albeit one that is transformative and powerful but a literal buy-in nonetheless.

I want to note here the importance of the Black Rock Desert's influence and interconnectedness with the issuance of the culture. The way that the desert defines the culture is largely ignored by the organization, which creates a fracture in the culture they are trying to spread. As previously mentioned, this fracture is inherent in the American character and is birthed from the expansionist scenarios of the Western Front. Further, the use of the desert as a temporary home, and the BMP's belief that this culture is spreadable, mimics the ignorance of the Western epistemology that claims that humans and their cultures are self-contained—separate from the environment. It re-performs the concept that American cultures are mobile and “seismic [...] born of a rift with the Old World,” as mentioned by Baudrillard in the epigraph of this chapter, while simultaneously denying the influence and dependence on the ecological environment. An eco-critical lens reveals the integral connections between the desert and Burning Man culture, and exposes the gesture to spread Burning Man culture as a distinctly American entitlement.

These concepts are key support for my argument that Burning Man is not a “way of life” as the Burning Man Project claims, but rather a business that sells the opportunity to use the ideals (Ten Principles) of a unique and “free” art-based culture to practice an idealized America via performance. Further, the use of TAZs, the influence of the desert, and the artists, in conjunction with the Ten Principles are what create the culture, and that creation is largely done through performance. I consider this performance a new kind of American theatre, a Theatre of Affect.

### **Participation: The Spect-Actor and Theatre of Affect**

Attending the Burning Man event means you are choosing to participate in the act of creating Black Rock City. Tickets are sold by the week. If you come for a day you still pay the week-long price, which indicates that the BMP conceives Burning Man as a week-long event. Participation means building, living in, and deconstructing BRC. A key component of this participation is the adage that there are “no spectators.” If you are there, you are not just *in* BRC—you *are* Black Rock City. Even the laziest participant, who pays extra money to a *turnkey camp*, is unprepared, and claims his/her gift to the city is “their presence” or “their love,” is playing a role. That person is likely to be labeled a *sparkle pony*, but the act of labeling him/her frames him/her within the performance of the city. A person who simply takes a bus in from Reno for a day and rides on a mutant vehicle for an art tour and then returns to their Reno hotel is cast as a *tourist*. They have no gift and are largely frowned upon by many community members, but they are not turned away because of the principle of Radical Inclusion, they are assimilated into the performance of the city. Participants are both actors and spectators co-creating a world under imaginary circumstances that continually develops the Burning Man culture. This phenomenon is the basis for what I call Theatre of Affect. It draws on affect theory, performance theory, and various theatre forms which I discuss throughout this dissertation.

Augusto Boal’s Invisible Theatre uses what he calls the spect-actor. In this theatre form, actors perform situations in site-specific places such as restaurants, with the intention of inspiring unsuspecting bystanders to participate. The spectators feel free to participate because the “theatrical rituals are abolished; only the theatre exists, without its old, worn-out patterns” (Boal 126). For Boal, “The spectator frees himself;

he thinks and acts for himself! Theatre is Action! Perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself; but have no doubts, it is a rehearsal of revolution!” (Boal 135). Critics of Invisible Theatre argue that this theatre is coercive because the bystanders do not know that they are participating in an imaginary situation. The sentiment of using tactics like this to break the bonds of passive spectatorship has a long history. Many theatre practitioners have searched for ways to encourage audience participation in an effort to create a more direct and transformational experience. Boal’s spect-actor may be coerced into participating, but he/she is also more readily affected by the imaginary circumstance because the veil of separateness between actor and spectator is lifted.

I propose that at Burning Man every person consciously enters into a state where they are both Boal’s actors and spect-actors. They are actors who create the play-space of the city, *and* they are spect-actors who have committed to living in this unsuspecting state. They work together to create what I call encounter-scenes. These are encounters that occur between individuals/groups and the environment and/or art in which a theatricalized improvisation based in Diana Taylor’s concept of the *repertoire*—and the *scenarios* that spring from the repertoire, and hypertexts of those scenarios—is played out by the participants. For example, when the French Maid Brigade<sup>6</sup> comes upon participants walking the streets of BRC and offers to dust them off because they are “sooo dustzee” they expect that the participant will likely comply to be the receiver of this theatricalized feather dusting. Another example is the congregation of sea creature

---

<sup>6</sup> The French Maid Brigade is an annual “march” where participants dress up as French maids and dust off anyone and anything they encounter. There are many similar marches with various affective intentions such as the *Critical Tits* or *Dicks Bicycle Rides*, and the *White Procession* to the temple.

and boat-shaped mutant vehicles that circle at the end of *The Pier* (an art installation of a long wooden pier that arrived in BRC in 2010) to either go fishing or be fished, embodying simple scenarios of fishing activities. Some encounter-scenes improvisations are pre-planned such as those in the *Billion Bunny March*, which plays from the repertoire of protest.

Here I need to define my use of the term hypertext. A hypertext is a computer term that describes a phenomenon I see happening in encounter-scenes. A hypertext is defined by Merriam-Webster as “an arrangement of the information in a computer database that allows a user to get information and to go from one document to another by clicking on highlighted words or pictures” (Webster). Dictionary.com defines it as, “a method of storing data through a computer program that allows a user to create and link fields of information at will and to retrieve the data nonsequentially” (Dictionary). I see a phenomenon happening where participants at Burning Man access pieces of scenarios, which Taylor says, “frame and activate social dramas” and the repertoire, which she describes as, “...performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge” (Taylor 20).<sup>7</sup> For my purposes, hypertexts are the highlighted images or gestures a performer/participant mentally presses to link from one thing in the repertoire to another, or to a scenario, or a piece of a scenario—they are the connections/links between the disconnected stories that meet each other in encounter-scenes, and they are often nonsequential and seemingly not related by anything other than the hypertext.

---

<sup>7</sup> See Taylor’s concept of scenario pgs. 28-33. (Taylor).

For instance, a shark mutant vehicle drives by *The Pier* and a participant in a swim suit pretends to be stalked by the shark vehicle, and someone yells a line from *Jaws* connecting the scene of *Jaws* to the gesture of the shark swimming near the art installation of *The Pier*. The swimmer screams, runs from the shark, and is pulled out of the water by a nearby boat vehicle. The shark scenarios collide with *The Pier* and boat scenarios, and the *Jaws* narrative connects to them via the hypertext of the shark swimming nearby. An example of a seemingly unrelated hypertext is seen in a story of the way the gesture of the same shark vehicle driving by hyperlinks to the notion of surveillance.

If you get caught jumping over the Trash Fence you could be kicked out of the event and not allowed to come back in. There are apparently enforcers who sit in vehicles with binoculars and infrared goggles whose job is to catch people sneaking into the event or people who jump out over the fence. Just after dusk my campmates and I were out by the Trash Fence playfully “breaking the law” by jumping over the fence and running around for a minute before jumping back to safety, or straddling the fence to test boundaries like two-year-olds. Just after we had finished playing with the Trash Fence we were sitting in a circle contemplating the nature of surveillance when the shark vehicle drove by hundreds of feet away. The circle got quiet and we watched the shark stealthily swim by, “Fuckin’ shark,” I said under my breath, “Sharkin’ the fence.” I was performing the scenario of the hidden criminal using the hypertext of the shark swimming by as a link to the metaphor of shark as predator—as if the shark was on surveillance for illegal activity. We were pretending to be both on the playa with the enforcers and in the ocean with the shark. We all cracked up laughing at my bizarre



hypertext connection, but nonetheless for a moment we were performing the scenario of being undercover criminals. Of course, this method of moving between stories and gestures etc. (or data) in the repertoire includes the scenarios of the Western Frontier and colonialism that connect to the performance of the American National Project I am discussing in this chapter.

### **What is in a Name: The *Billion Bunny March* and the Scenario of Protest**

A more in-depth example, which highlights the exploration of the American scenarios being explored in this chapter, is the *Billion Bunny March to Protest Humanity*. This is an event where participants dress up like bunnies and march across the desert in the shape of a “really pointy carrot” to *The Man*. The 2012 Facebook page publicizes the march as the “grandest and fluffiest march in BUNstory! [...] Why? Because the humans have gone too far and the world will be much better when it is ruled by BUNNIES!!!” (Lapine). The bunnies are encouraging each other to procreate in an effort to take over, and performing protest scenarios such as call and response chants, picketing, and celebrating their identities as bunnies. Other protest scenarios are prepared and performed by participants who dress up like carrots, coyotes, and Animal Control such as counter protests, violence, and incarceration. The march is performed with a great deal of joy and sexy playfulness, and is often accompanied by a marching band or two as well. While this title is clearly a microaggressive appropriation of the Million Man March on Washington for Civil Rights—the appropriation where the racist underpinnings remain unseen by the majority of the participants—in other words, the name matters. Barring the title, the protest scenario is a playful anthropomorphic objection to the treatment of bunnies by humanity and could be seen as connecting to

animal rights but in general is considered joyful silliness and fun interactivity. But because of the title the protest is directly linked to Black Civil Rights and becomes a large-scale microaggression toward blacks. Dr. Derald Wing Sue describes microaggressions:

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership. In many cases, these hidden messages may invalidate the group identity or experiential reality of target persons, demean them on a personal or group level, communicate they are lesser human beings, suggest they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and intimidate, or relegate them to inferior status and treatment (Sue).

My encounter with the *Billlion Bunny March* first occurs out on the open playa when I witness the collision between the bunnies, the coyotes, and Animal Control. People are chasing each other, smiling, and laughing within the mock protest scenario. Then I see two signs at different points that become obvious hypertexts for me. The first is a sign carried by a young man-bunny that says “Bi-racial and proud,” and the second is a mockup of Obama’s now iconic Hope for Change poster. Obama has bunny ears and a Burning Man lapel pin on and the wording says “Hop” across the bottom. These sign become a direct hypertext to the Million Man March for me, and further complicate the microaggressive behavior, and shows how the title and its scenarios are incorporated into the behavior of the event in a direct way. The title alone mocks the intention behind the famous Black Civil Rights march and these signs are clearly referencing the connection. I begin to wonder how aware these two protesters are. Both signs are carried by white men in bunny costumes, and I question what they are performing exactly. I

hear afro-pessimist scholars speaking their claims to me as I assess what is going on around me.

First, that “Blackness is predicated on modalities of accumulation and fungibility, not exploitation and alienation” (Wilderson III 59). The *Billion Bunny March* is using the fungibility of blackness by racially reinscribing black bodies protesting for civil rights as bunnies protesting against humanity. This reinscription performs the denial of human status (another claim of afro-pessimism) and represents black bodies as cute yet angry vermin. When the participants animate blackness by embodying bunnies protesting against humanity’s treatment of them, they are: blindly reifying the antiblack antebellum American gesture of disappearing black bodies by using the mask of anthropomorphism; and illuminating the pitfalls of the white neoliberal gesture of multiculturalism... and they have no idea they are doing it. I wonder if the men with the signs are thinking that by using the anthropomorphic skin of a bunny costume they are erasing racial tensions, or forwarding some kind of multiracialism.

In *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* Jared Sexton writes, “...the blanket injunction against situating multiple forms of oppression has become articulated with the neoliberal containment strategies of multiculturalism, wherein cultural diversity is managed as a depoliticized term of experience” (Sexton 247). The mock protest performance of the *Billion Bunny March* certainly depoliticizes cultural diversity by symbolizing civil rights protests—and particularly Black Civil Rights protests—as non-humans against humans through anthropomorphic performance. Even if the participants are aware of this, and claim

some kind of critical blackface performance they are still using anthropomorphism to perform blackness as a part of multicultural progress, which locates their performance deeper into the scenarios that perpetuate antiblackness. Sexton explains he finds that the principle effects of multiracialism are, "...the reinforcement of longstanding tenets of antiblackness and the promotion of normative sexuality" (Sexton 1). However unwittingly, the *Billion Bunny March* enacts this antiblackness tenet.

There are those who would argue that the title is not making a mockery but is simply an unintentional play on powerful words. I argue that because the title that is taken from such a politically potent, powerful, and deep seeded history it cannot help but include those scenarios of subjugation and subjection as part of the new performance. The scenarios associated with Black Civil Rights protests are also evident in other parts of the protest performance, which I will discuss shortly. Even if the title is an unconscious and unintentional decision it only further reveals the denial within the mockery, and is an example of the continued American erasure of black history and humanity, often through microaggressive behavior and lack of awareness. This performance ties back to American scenarios of slavery and subjection, and reveals current structures of racism. They could have called it the Hare March, or the Funny Bunny March and skipped the reference all together, but instead they appropriated the title from a Black Civil Rights march that happened within the lifetime of a majority of the participants. This is not to call the participants racists but to show the way hypertexts of protest gestures, the sign props, and the appropriation of the title reveal scenarios of American antiblackness. By culturally appropriating this title it re-imagines the Million Man March as a fun, harmless, human-less, politically pointless event. In addition, it is

an encounter-scene that ignorantly perpetuates antiblackness through the performance of emancipatory scenarios of Black Civil Rights protest. As Frank Wilderson notes of Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*, "...Saidiya Hartman argues, emancipatory discourses present themselves to us as further evidence of the Slave's fungibility: "The figurative capacities of blackness enable white flights of fancy while increasing the likelihood of the captive's disappearance" (Wilderson III 19). Certainly the *Billion Bunny March* is a white flight of fancy imagining that colorblindness or depoliticized multiculturalism has fixed or will fix racism.

As I mentioned the performed scenarios in the march further reveal this deep seeded American ignorance. There are three groups who descend on the *Billion Bunny March* in order to defy their protest through creating encounter-scenes. The coyotes and Animal Control which I witnessed, and there are also carrots. The carrots demand that they are not food for bunnies. The coyotes are predators who perform attacking and eating the bunnies, and Animal Control comes to arrest, tag, and incarcerate them. The hypertexts of these anthropomorphized metaphorical gestures reveal the bunnies are reinscribed as black men marching for civil rights. The carrots represent the American Dream denying them food/opportunity. The coyotes are direct hunters of their prey, and Animal Control is representative of the state/government/police who use force to control the over-population by tagging bunnies and putting them in cages. As part of the march the bunnies also take over the *Thunderdome* (a Mad-Max style battle dome) and cheer on the "fuzzy" fight as two participants dressed as bunnies beat each other with foam rubber bats. These behaviors highlight how the *Billion Bunny March* plays out the racist social structures entrenched in the American character and national scenario. The title

codifies the behavior—that is what is *in* a name. The fact that this implication is unintentional by the participants further supports the afro-pessimist claim that civil society disappears black humanity by making blackness invisible—they do this by reinscribing Million with Billion and Man with Bunny and then performing the gestures of taunting, killing, and incarcerating within the frameworks of protest scenarios.

These encounter-scenes are also often hyper-sexual and reveal how the women in the march are generally objectified, or “made bunny,” in the name of kink—some consciously subvert this objectification, some embrace it with pleasure, and some are unaware. It is particularly evident when a female bunny is captured by Animal Control and imprisoned. I watch a young woman be captured laughing and pretending to fight it. She slapped at her captor and verbally mocked “no! no!” as she rubbed her body against him. As I watched I thought, this is a bizarre and kinky performance of what Saidiya V. Hartman terms “the property of enjoyment.” She unpacks the term enjoyment as synonymous with possession in regards to slavery. The use of the bunny metaphor becomes a kind of blackface mask in which the white (and some non-white people) enjoy exploring blackness, or what it is like to protest against government power structures as a non-human.

Hartman illuminates this desire to explore black suffering in her discussion of the popularity of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Octoroon*:

In this case, the figurative capacities of blackness and the fungibility of the commodity are directly linked. The fungibility of the commodity, specifically its abstractness and immateriality, enabled the black body or blackface mask to serve as the vehicle of white self-exploration, renunciation, and enjoyment. Therefore, the ability to put on blackness must be considered in the context of chattel slavery and the economy of enjoyment founded thereupon (Hartman 25-26).

By performing the *Billion Bunny March* participants are both aligning themselves with black suffering (enjoying the self-exploration of empathetic experience), and fetishizing black bodies by performing scenarios such as exotifying, hunting, tagging, fighting, imprisoning, and “fucking like bunnies.” All of these are done under the mask of animal rights activism, which forwards old racist tactics of dehumanizing black people to maintain white power structures. This particular encounter-scene uses Theatre of Affect to make these experiences a spectacle of entertainment. It specifically highlights the way several interactive events at Burning Man hyperbolize and reify American neuroses. After participating in the Compton Cookout Protest at UC San Diego in winter quarter of 2010, I found it uncanny that this was the same year I first encountered the *Billion Bunny March*, even though it has been happening annually since at least 2006. I slowly walked away from the protest performance heavy with thought.

### **Performing the Myth of Freedom on the Western Front**

Of course there are encounter-scenes that explore the neuroses of America in interesting and more informed ways. In 2008, the theme of Burning Man was American Dream, and artist Bob Noxious created an installation titled *Trash Fence*:

A large American Indian tipi is adorned with every nation’s flag, Old Glory flying high above the rest. Every dream is as individualistic as the dreamer, however, the collective dreams of Americans contain a common element: freedom. Freedom is not without sacrifice; for every freedom realized another is given up. The tipi and all its flags will be burned, but two unadorned tipis will remain, at one with the spirit of native Americans, where freedom is not sacrifice (Noxious).

When walking through this series of tipis I am struck by the conscious choice to cover the largest one with flags from around the world, with the U.S. flag at the top.

When I learned that the artist was planning to burn it and leave the remaining tipis (which were not covered with flags) I realized its political intentions. Burning the flag tipi, which is symbolic of the cultural appropriation of the home of Native American peoples, is representative of the violent destruction of Native American culture. By using an act of violence (burning), the artist gestures toward both a liberal white gesture of empathetic explorations of suffering, and a meditation on the originating violence itself. The encounter-scene I experience while interacting with *Trash Fence* further highlights the ramifications of American destruction and taking of Native American land and culture.

When I walk up, an inebriated tanned man pokes his head out of the flag tipi, he is either repairing it or finishing it. He doesn't see me. I watch him slowly attach a few flags to the tipi. He is working hard, it is hot, and he is exhausted. He looks over at me and consciously decides not to engage in interaction. I am affected by the dilapidated state of the art and the disarray of the tipis, and the political gesture of the placement of the flags. My thoughts moved to the Paiute tribe whose land I am standing on and then to the inebriated state of this man as a symbol of the plague of alcoholism within Native American reservations, which is a symptom of white oppression. He is not Native American but his drunkenness becomes a hypertext that connects news reports and statistical research to the scenarios being performed by the art. I slowly move passed the installation, thinking heavily on the American Dream theme.

Another installation that superbly highlights the American National project and the myth of freedom, via Western Frontier scenarios, is *The Gypsy Wagon* in 2013. The encounter-scene I perform here is transformative for me because it asks me to perform



the *remains* (in Rebecca Schneider's sense) of the Pioneer mentality from an unusual perspective.



Figure 1.1: *The Gypsy Wagon* by Beany Calloway. Photo by Scott Williams.

Upon arrival there are two typical placements for interaction with the art installation. The first is to pretend to steer the wagon across the desert as the man in the above photo is doing. The second is to climb into the back of the wagon and gaze out onto the desert behind you laying on comfortable pillows and blankets. I try both of these encounter-scenes and enjoy imagining the various scenarios attached to them. Then I realize I can stand within the metal bones of the horse. I can see what this ghost horse sees. The installation is positioned in the deep playa facing west so there are few other pieces within my vision. It allows me to imagine the open expanse that this horse

sees, which seems to be representative of the horses that carried the first Western pioneers across this desert. The American Frontier scenario is being provoked fervently. The artist's choice to make the horse of bones and to use a skull as its face is largely responsible for this provocation, along with the desert's history that is part of my learned memory. The skull and bones become hypertexts between: imaginings of how many horses died or were driven into the ground by the pioneers, the spirit world of horses, and a pathway to the time of the Western pioneers through the concept of death. The bones ask me to recognize its suffering and have perspective on its meaning at the same time. I think about the wild horses that likely inhabited this desert in the time that the Paiutes did, which highlight concepts of domestication of both horses and Native American peoples. I actually seem to be touching time through the affective experience of this art piece as Rebecca Schneider suggests in her book *Performing Remains*.

Then a serendipitous thing happens. In the midst of my contemplation I see there are smooth handle-like pieces at the shoulder joints of the horse. I place my forearms on them to lean into the vision I am meditating on and the horse actually moves a little. When it moves there is a metal clinking sound that sounds surprisingly like the cart moving. I am excited, the artist is actually rewarding me (the participant) who works as the horse with the sound of the installation. I can actually pretend to be this horse through play because the sound and movement animate it. I get to animate this art piece—puppet it in a sense. I imagine this horse's experience by accessing all of the hypertexts available to me: through my education, the desert environment, the scenarios of the art, the two women driving the carriage, my friends riding in the back, and the ghosting of the history of the art provokes. I begin moving the bones at a trotting pace

to see how sturdy and flexible the artwork is. It is quite stable and I begin to imagine what it might be like to be this animal pulling a pioneer wagon through a pristine desert space relatively uninhabited. I am performing the wilderness experience that the Wilderness Act of 1964 preserves for me. Then I begin to perform this ghost horse with gusto. I push hard as if I am running and I let out several long yells in a row in celebration of my imaginary speed as this horse. I am running so fast and I can feel the weight of the wagon behind me. I feel as if I am running so fast that the wheels of the wagon catch up to my speed and the cargo becomes lighter. Suddenly, the tongue of the wagon drops off the yolk and hits me in the calf muscle hard. I stop. I feel *as the horse* that I am free of my wagon. I think as the horse, “should I go back for my people?” The process of domestication is not just within the body of the horse, but also in my imagining of performing the horse. The moment I imagine I can keep running without the wagon, highlights the dependence the pioneers had on horses, and my understanding of the innate wildness of horses. More profoundly, it asks me to question the very notion of freedom: from domestication and oppression. This anthropomorphic performance made me aware of the work the art piece was doing through physical exertion and the hypertext of bones. It asks me to ruminate of the concepts of land occupation, the hardships of the trail, the paradoxes inherent in the American character (including white oppression); because my imagined pioneers are white. The artist allows me to explore these subjects through a performative experience of the non-human—and an altered state of consciousness through play.

I step out of the bones of the horse to sit with my experience. A second later my friends who were in the back come running up to me yelling, “That was amazing! It felt

like we were actually travelling across the desert!” We all realize that the movement of the horse did not actually moved the wagon much, but the sound with the minor movement actually allowed us a visceral experience. The affective qualities of the art, the desert, and my understanding of the American Frontier scenarios all contribute to a powerful and political encounter-scene that I performatively experience while animating this ghost horse. One of my campmates shared the story this way:

***The Horse by Walkness***

Late one night, we came across this old stagecoach out in the deep playa. I can't remember if that was a magic mushroom or a pot brownie kind of night, but I think we kind of jogged over to it. It was so cool, the metallic horse lit up in the night. I jumped in the back with Mad Dog and a couple joined us in this tiny little covered wagon. We were laughing and telling each other our life stories, when all of a sudden the entire carriage started to convulse. At first, I was cracking up and then a little confused. I popped my head out to see Scout holding onto that horse like it she was possessed. Grunts and moans and visions of the old west raced through my head. I was transported to another time. Was it the mushrooms? Was it the sleep deprivation? Or perhaps the hours spent dehydrating in the sun? Or magic? I think I was magic. It was magic. Oh yeah, definitely magic. That magical combination of all the things that makes Burning Man so difficult, so unique, so inspiring and surreal. Scout took us on a ride. If I remember correctly, she said she was possessed by the horse's spirit. I think the horse was possessed by hers... (Walkness).

His description of being transported to another time while the installation was being activated, and his conclusion that the horse's spirit was possessed by me highlights Schneider's concept of performing remains as well. Through my performance as the horse Walkness and Mad Dog were also transported because they were interacting by being inside the wagon. The title of the piece, *The Gypsy Wagon*, indicates itinerant peoples, travelers who move from place to place with no land a home. The title is evocative of the theme in 2013 which is Cargo Cult, and it is a hypertext linking the

itinerant culture of Burning Man that I discuss in chapter three. For this theatre artist/scholar, *The Gypsy Wagon* asks me to look deeply at the complex and haunting past of the American Frontier, and the current American National Project through an embodied performance that touches time through *affect*, which I will discuss shortly, to bring about awareness of these ghosts that haunt the city.

### **Theatre and the Framing of Affect**

This critical auto-ethnographic account shows how the participant demonstrates a willingness to be affected by the conditions of Burning Man and to use them to affect others. This affective interchange is the keystone of Theatre of Affect. It connects a multiplicity of performances, which are part of a matrix of hypertexts that inform this theater. These include the Frontier scenarios discussed in this chapter framed by the desert space, the various histories and imaginings inspired by the artwork, and personal scenarios of the participants. This is why it is common to hear, “Burning Man is different for everyone.” My analyses and experiences of the *Billion Bunny March*, *Trash Fence*, and *The Gypsy Wagon* are all subject to my experience as a theatre artist and scholar, which is how I envision Burning Man as theatre—not theatre in a theater building—but theatre birthed from the artistic framing of affective collisions, planned or unplanned. Taylor’s concept of the scenario shows this, “...scenarios, by encapsulating both the setup and the action/behaviors, are formulaic structures that predispose certain outcomes and yet allow for reversal, parody, and change. The frame is basically fixed and, as such, repeatable and transferable” (Taylor 31). Scenarios collide in Black Rock City connected by hypertexts to create Theatre of Affect. It is a theater that constantly affects the organism in BRC because BRC is a city embodied in

a TAZ, and because affect is, as social scientist Margaret Wetherell describes, “...always ‘turned on’ and ‘simmering,’ moving along, since social action is continually embodied. But, affect also comes in and out of focus” (Wetherell 12).

Affect *as* flow is always already happening, and it only *seems* to be linear because we (Western civilization since the Enlightenment) believe we are separate from nature, and that time is contiguous.<sup>8</sup> We live under the Cartesian pretense that we exist because we think—*cogito ergo sum*. The mind-body binary that developed from this deludes us from recognizing our complicity in our symbiotic relationship with the biosphere, of which we are a part. This binary is challenged by the desert and the social contract accepted by Burning Man participants. This is not to say that the act of thinking is not a part of the biosphere’s affective flow, but rather it becomes a framing tool used to survive the constant chaos of the affective flow as suggested by Deleuze and Guattari. Elizabeth Grosz describes, “Philosophy, art, and science are three among the vast planes—Deleuze and Guattari call them “brain-becomings”—we throw over chaos in order to extract an element, a quality, a consistency from chaos, in order to live with it” (Grosz 27-28). In other words, these tools are used to create society. So, Theatre of Affect is predicated on the notion that creating BRC is a conscious act of using framing tools such as philosophy, art, and technology to play with flows of affect, which include the matrix of hypertexts I just mentioned.

---

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that affect theory is seemingly appropriating many of its concepts from Eastern thought particularly Rasa theory and Buddhist philosophy, but that is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

If affect is constant, then I want to clarify how Theatre of Affect is different than the performance of everyday life or social performance. In her book on theatrical reenactments, *Performing Remains*, Rebecca Schneider describes, "...affect *as* inquiry" (Schneider 2). She uses this to reveal the relationships between embodied performance, environment, materiality and memory. The very idea of using affect to inquire, places intentionality into the relationship between affect and performance. That intentional gesture to investigate, which uses artistic framing tools such as the scenario, is largely what differentiates affect artistically framed from affect in the performance of everyday life. The hypertext links between the use of scenarios and the repertoire often occurs across space and time.

Schneider's insight into performing *remains* of time through performative gesture in reenactments highlights the flexibility of time and, "...the attempt to literally touch time through the residue of the gesture of the cross-temporality of the pose" (Schneider 2). Her idea that the gesture of reenacting a pose gives rise to a cross-temporal living of the residues of the events of Civil Wartime is useful when considering Theatre of Affect and Burning Man. The notion that there is liveness or livableness in the residues of stories, clothing, photographs, memories, logs, and guns—the materials and immaterial bodily labors of the past—posits her idea of reenactment in the uncanny position of being the past, present, and future simultaneously, or rather, intertwined with them, and destroys the social construction that time is sequential. She further proposes the possibility that these residues "can be accessed *live*<sup>9</sup>" (17).

---

<sup>9</sup> Emphasis in the original.

When this access happens, “time touches against itself,” presenting the “real, the actual, the raw and the true as, precisely, the [...] crookedly imprecise returns of time,” as repeated in the epigraph at the top of this chapter (16). In another way, the reenactments produce *something*, an imagined and actual experience that is *not* the past, but rather, evokes or *re-lives* the past; and reinterprets, repeats, and reshapes it into a new form that, “...trips the otherwise daily condition of repetition into reflexive hyperdrive, expanding the experience into the uncanny” (14). I suggest that this uncanny experience, had with other reenactors, is a basic tenant of Civil War reenactment subculture, and of Burning Man culture. It is this *something* produced that becomes the generative material for the culture, or how the culture is “issued from the Burning Man event” as discussed earlier. One useful example of accessing the residues through live enactment can be seen during a night out on the playa in the *Wonder Wagon*.



## Touching Time through Intentional Affect



Figure 1.2: *Wonder Wagon* by Tom Bates and Gretchen Roosevelt. Photo by Heather “Scout” Ramey.

Comparatively, this is a relatively small mutant vehicle that has been a part of the BRC aesthetic since 2008. As shown in the photo above this is a horse drawn carriage. It is built by Tom Bates and Gretchen Roosevelt of Tacoma, WA. Its base is a 2001 Global Electric Motorcar (GEM). The artists moved the steering column up so that it could be driven from a seat atop the vehicle. They flipped the back seats, and opened up the bottom of the vehicle so that riders could easily step into the carriage. This allows for weary walkers to rest their feet as they ride, which is a requirement for Mutant Vehicles to be licensed to drive on the playa. It also functions like old stage coaches did—taking passengers from place to place. The wagon is drawn by eleven children’s

toy Wonder Horses that light up at night with dim golden lights. By using them Bates and Roosevelt provoke child-like memories of riding plastic horses. The *remains* and hypertexts attached to the memories of those who rode these as children are sparked and affect participants. They even rig one Wonder Horse so that a participant can ride it as the carriage is rolling to further facilitate the affective experience of that particular type of memory. Participants often ride the horse in elated wonder and perform roping gestures and whoop and holler various phrases connected to horse riding scenarios and the Old West. The *Wonder Wagon* is also equipped with LED wire lighting that outlines the carriage features at night. It has a stereo system to help create the ambiance, and three flame effects. One of which shoots a twenty foot flame into the air at the push of a button, called the *poofer*. When the flames are not being activated they create a dull glow that lights the driver's way, and when the driver activates the poofer the flame bursts into the air creating immediacy (one of the Ten Principles) and warms anyone near the wagon. The magicalizing of an old Wild West stagecoach plays on the *remains* of desert scenarios and Western Frontier scenarios discussed thus far.

For example, a common occurrence that happens when riding in the wagon is that participants ride alongside the wagon on their bikes and put their dust masks up over their mouths like bandits and play the role of stagecoach robber. They point finger-guns and yell, "Stick 'em up!" "Give me all your loot!" or "This is a robbery!" The participants are provoked to perform by their memories of television shows, films, and stories told about the Wild West. They are also equipped by the desert environment because it is a conventional setting for many of these scenarios and they have dust masks (often bandanas) to help shield them from inhaling too much alkali dust. The affective

flow of the desert, the art, and their scenarios about the Wild West are ignited when they encounter the *Wonder Wagon*. This exemplifies how performing the gestures of the *remains* of Wild West scenarios produces a cross-temporal experience.

This encounter-scene performed by the spect-actors connects the participants through art. This experience is the basis of Burning Man culture, and is also how the culture “issues” from the event but those encounters and their subsequent effects cannot be owned because they are acquired through personal experience and performative encounter-scenes. Community *is* created through these modalities at Burning Man, and because this is couched in the performance of the city it is subsumed into that larger scenario that defines BRC. So, BRC comes alive because of its participants *and* the effects of the desert. The Black Rock Desert is then the playing space, or theatre if you will, in which these performances take place.

### **Wilderness Experience: The Black Rock Desert Affect**

The wilderness itself is socially constructed as performative space. It is a theatre in which citizens are welcome to perform/experience (act/witness) “primitive” and transformative behaviors and environments. Wilderness areas have previously been used as site-specific theatre, but this form usually indicates a site that is unintended for theatre. While wilderness areas are not theatre buildings, yet I argue that the original intent of the construction of American wilderness is certainly a form of theatre space for social performance. The land preservation movement, and the Wilderness Act of 1964, have encouraged performative reenactments in an effort to preserve the gesture of national expansion by creating a theatrical space where this gesture could be repeated,

reenacted, and performed. It is a framework within which the *remains* of the scenarios of the Western Front are contained and accessible.

Having a wilderness experience, or adventuring into the “great outdoors,” is embedded in the American character, particularly in the Western U.S. In his seminal work, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Rodrick Frazier Nash discusses the emergence of this construction:

Americans sought something uniquely “American,” yet valuable enough to transform embarrassed provincials into proud and confident citizens. Difficulties appeared at once. The nation’s short history, weak traditions, and minor literary and artistic achievements seemed negligible compared to those of Europe. But in at least one respect Americans sensed that their country was different: wilderness had no counterpart in the Old World. Seizing on this distinction and adding to it deistic and Romantic assumptions about the value of wild country, nationalists argued that far from being a liability, wilderness was actually an American asset. Of course, pride continued to stem from the *conquest* of wild country, but by the middle decades of the nineteenth century wilderness was recognized as a cultural and moral resource and a basis for national self-esteem” (Nash 67).

This is reflected in famous songs such as *America the Beautiful* and Woody Guthrie’s *This Land is Your Land*, and in the nature writings of people like Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Edward Abbey. The scenarios and narratives of the American national project are decidedly intertwined with wilderness landscape. Additionally, by romanticizing wilderness they define these ecological spaces as transformational or even entheogenic. Burning Man certainly capitalizes on this national scenario.

In the “What is Burning Man?” section of the Burning Man website, Molly Steenson describes “the experience” of attending Burning Man:

You drive slowly onto the playa, the 400 square mile expanse known as the Black Rock Desert. And there you've touched the terrain of what feels like another planet. You're at the end — and the beginning — of your

journey to Burning Man. [...] You're here to survive. What happens to your brain and body when exposed to 107 degree heat, moisture wicking off your body and dehydrating you within minutes? You know and watch yourself. You drink water constantly and piss clear. You'll want to reconsider drinking that alcohol (or taking those other substances) you brought with you — the mind-altering experience of Burning Man is its own drug. You slather yourself in sunblock before the sun's rays turn up full blast. You bring enough food, water, and shelter because the elements of the new planet are harsh, and you will find no vending. You're here to create. Since nobody at Burning Man is a spectator, you're here to build your own new world. (Steenson).

Her description is intended to provide context for the newcomer, and is echoed in several first person scenarios written and told by burners. By using the metaphor of the desert expanse feeling like another planet, and by codifying the trip to the Black Rock Desert as a journey, Steenson places the Burning Man experience into the wilderness experience category. Further, she poses that Burning Man is *mind-altering* and *its own drug*, which alludes to it as entheogenic which I discuss in more depth in chapter four.

Curiously, the concept of wilderness is a social construction. In *Uncommon Ground* William Cronon expounds, “It is not a pristine sanctuary where the last remnant of an untouched, endangered, but still transcendent nature can for at least a little while longer be encountered without the contaminating taint of civilization. Instead, it is a product of that civilization, and could hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made” (Cronon 69). The American scenarios of the Western Frontier “civilize” wilderness by cording it into large sections, and readily denying Native American tribes their humanity and epistemologies. They are lumped into the “wild” category, equating them with non-humans that must be eliminated, controlled, and/or cultivated properly for the benefit of “mankind.” By sweeping away all that interferes with the creation of a pristine wilderness area that is “untrammeled by man,” the conquerors “civilize” wild

nature and deem it a place where one might access the scenarios and remains of an antebellum Frontier experience, or the remains of an imagined world where humans are separate from nature. According to Cronon:

...in the myth of the vanishing frontier lay the seeds of wilderness preservation in the United States, for if wild land had been so crucial in the making of a nation, then surely one must save its last remnants as monuments of the American past—and as an insurance policy to protect its future. [...] To protect wilderness was in a very real sense to protect the nation's most sacred myth of origin (Cronon 76-77).

By constructing wilderness as a territory in which one can experience “true nature”, or experience what it was like to “first” set foot into the Western U.S., the conquerors are not only constructing wilderness; they are constructing a theatrical space. A site-specific theatre of sorts in which the civilized people of America and visitors from abroad can enter the performative space and experience the “true” America. This is evident in the preservation of the Black Rock Desert.

Named for its large black limestone rock formations, the Black Rock Desert was once a part of Lake Lahontan that stretched from southern Oregon and eastern California into a large section of Nevada. It is part of a much larger endorheic area, now called Great Basin. Before *conquistadors* and American colonial pioneers arrived, it was home to myriad Native Americans, mainly the Northern Paiute tribes. Starting in the mid-1800s, only ten years after first contact by the Northern European Americans in 1848<sup>10</sup>, Northern Paiutes were confined to reservations. Several were shipped to Oregon until the Pyramid Lake Reservation was established in western Nevada. The brutal and

---

<sup>10</sup> First contact was made by frontier explorer Peter Lassen for whom Lassen County, Lassen National Forest, and Lassen Volcanic National Park are named. See Chapter 3 of Wheeler's *The Nevada Desert*.

myopic takeover of this land by the colonial pioneers of the Western Front is decidedly missing from the definition of American wilderness.

The Black Rock Desert is now delineated as a thirty-five mile alkali flats region of the Black Rock Desert High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area located in southwestern Nevada. This National Conservation Area (NCA) is one of the subsidiaries of the National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS) overseen by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM)<sup>11</sup>. The NLCS manages the conservation of approximately twenty-seven million acres of the “West’s most spectacular landscapes” (Bureau of Land Management). The history of the American national project is not only dependent on these areas, but also on those associated with the early Conservation Movement in the United States such as the National Parks System and the US Forest Service. Since its construction, the Black Rock Desert has hosted at least two world records for land speed, several amateur rocketry records, glider races, longest-golf-shot tournaments, and military training exercises in addition to more traditional camping and wilderness activities. Of course, none of these reach the scale of Burning Man.

The BMP has had regular government relations with the BLM in order to host the event. This relationship has been contentious at times due to population growth. Of course, Burning Man is not just using the desert to perform “primitive” wilderness experiences, but is actually performing the settlement of a society and creation of a culture. This threatens both the ecological habitat, which is why Burning Man has such

---

<sup>11</sup> The BLM was officially instituted in the Department of the Interior in 1946.

a rigorous Leave No Trace (LNT) policy, and the basis for the very construction of the wilderness area in the first place—that it is preserved or unsettled nature—or a place “untrammelled by man.” The creation of BRC, even for only a week, rebels against the ideology of how wilderness is supposed to be used. Instead of honoring the nature-culture binary where humans are separate from nature, it roots itself in the space and generates *something* from it—Burning Man culture. This is why the BMP acknowledges that the culture was born in the desert and simultaneously believes that it exists without the desert, which of course a form of it does. This fractured sense of culture is distinctly American. It is well captured in Baudrillard’s *America*, “The whole foundation of America is a response to this dual operation of a deepening of the moral law in individual consciences, a radicalization of the utopian demand which was always that of the sects, and the immediate materialization of that utopia in work, custom, and way of life” (Baudrillard 81). This is one of the reasons Burning Man is radical.

Another key ideological construct of American colonial epistemology that challenges the nature-culture binary is the concept that culture is portable. The expansionists who used Manifest Destiny to conquer the Western Front carried their culture with them and in an empiric gesture imposed it on those they encountered. This reveals a paradox in the American national identity; one that is lodged between the use of wilderness landscapes to define something as American, and the idea that culture is not tied to the land. Its assumed separateness produces a fissure in, and neglect of, that always already symbiotic relationship between humans and biosphere. The expansionist’s desire to use the wilderness to define American national identity attempts to mend this fissure and reimagine American culture as interconnected with its new



*conquered* territory, but this act of claiming only reifies its separateness. This is not to say that the practice of culture on conquered land does not foster a symbiotic relationship to that land, but it is one that is defined by the act of colonizing violence. Unlike nomadic cultures, the American version of portable culture is directly linked to this gesture of land and cultural appropriation and readily denies this aspect of its identity. Further, by separating the mind from the body and identifying the self by that mind the self is no longer considered a part of the biosphere either—it is of another world. This social construct of self ignores the sensorial body and deems all sensory information unreliable, which contributes to the denial of symbiosis. Yet, it is painstakingly clear that these notions are false ones. Affect theory seeks to engage with this notion, and helps to clarify the idea that self is not separate from the body or its environment.

In *The Transmission of Affect*, Theresa Brennan cracks the nature culture binary open by discussing the way affect is transmitted through the sensorial body. She argues that, "...the transmission of affect, if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject. The "atmosphere" or the environment literally gets into the individual" (Brennan 1). Interestingly, Native American epistemologies highlight a similar homeostatic relationship with local ecological environments. This leads to the recognition that the deserts of Great Basin play a large part in shaping the cultures of the Northern Paiute. Because their culture was deeply interconnected and sustained by the land of the Great Basin confining them to reservations not only took their land but largely destroyed their cultural livelihood by discarding their epistemologies. This also highlights the probability that Burning Man culture is largely interwoven with the Black

Rock Desert. This is evident in the structures, costumes, and art installations brought to manifest the city. Schneider adds to Brennan's notion that the transmission, or jump (quoting Kathleen Stewart), is also cross-temporal, cross-spatial, cross-geographic, cross- and/or contra-national (Schneider 36).

In these depictions mocking typical burner fashion printed in *Piss Clear*, a Burning Man alternative newspaper printed onsite for over thirteen years, the typical costuming indicates the desert environment as an integrated part of the culture.

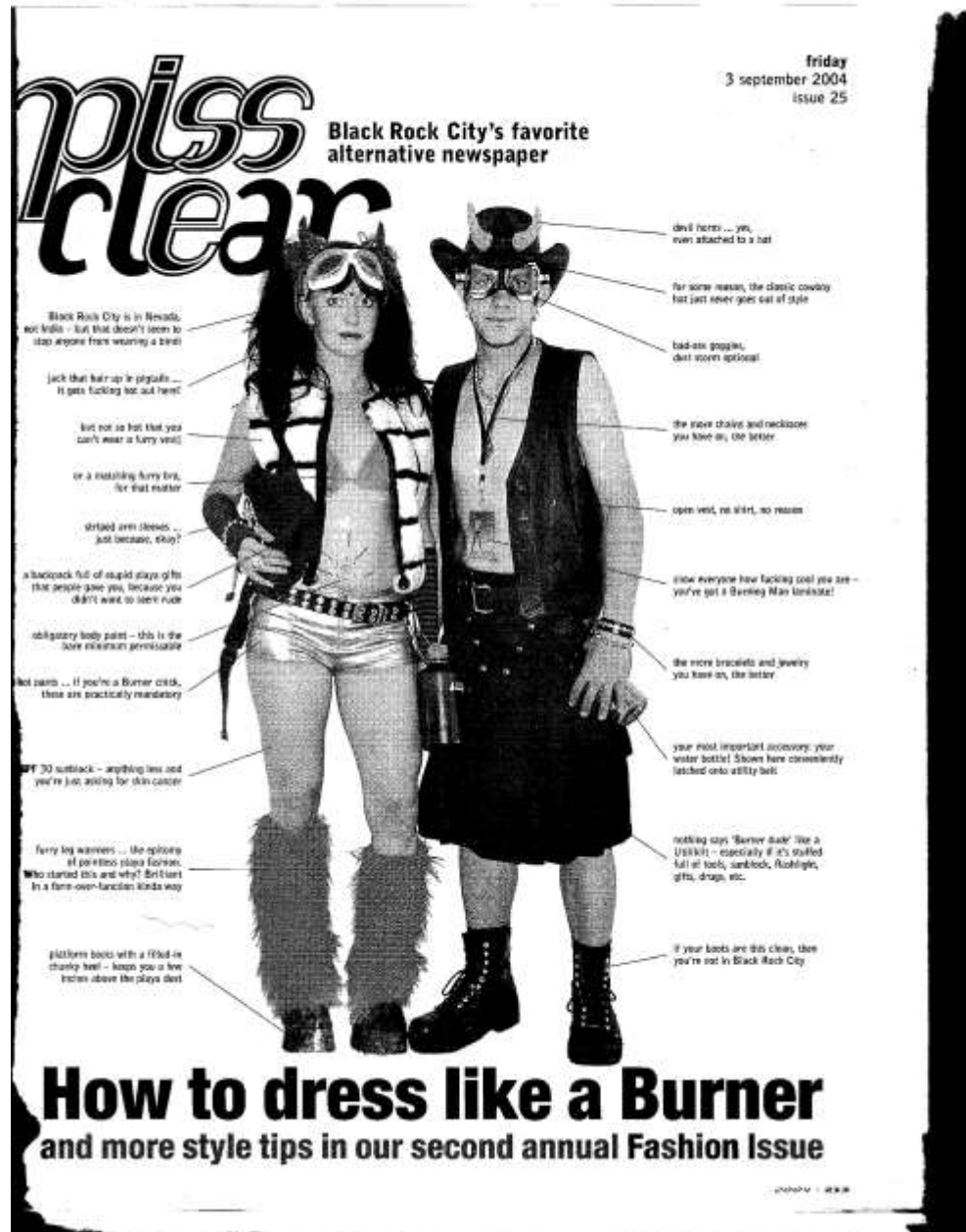


Figure 1.3: Excerpted from the book: "Burning Man Live: 13 years of Piss Clear, Black Rock City's alternative newspaper" edited by Adrian Roberts (Roberts).

## Benchmarks of the Burning Man hierarchy

by **NAMBLA THE CLOWN** and **ADRIAN ROBERTS**

**E**very established organization has its implicit hierarchy. Burning Man is **NO** exception. Below are the benchmarks and self-life signs of one's climb up the Black Rock City LLC political ladder, in escalating order of (self-)importance:

1. **Bottom rung:** You're almost nobody. You only get a generic official staff laminate.
2. **Next rung up:** You get a small, mementary ticket to Burning Man. Woo-hoo!
3. **You're official!** You get a staff laminate with your name and photo on it.
4. **You got 'em!** Next you get a laminate with the word "MEAL" on the back, entitling you to be fed as the Black Rock City commissary. (When? You didn't know there was a B-Morg commissary?)
5. **Next is an invitation** to the Burning Man staff holiday party.
6. **Roger that!** You get a staff radio for the duration of the event.
7. **Now everyone can know how cool YOU are!** You get a name/observing-team.com e-mail address.
8. **Finally! The big score!** You've got golf cart privileges! Woo-hoo!
9. **Well aren't you "It"?** You've got Larry Harvey's personal e-mail address or home phone number.
10. **Here's where it gets annoying** though informative. It's mandatory attendance for you at the on-site senior staff meetings.
11. **You, as a mere mortal,** can only look longingly at the 100 ring of the B-Morg ladder membership in the Black Rock City LLC. (owners of Burning Man and its assets). There are **ONLY SIX** people here -- and you're not one of them!



Nambla the Clown shows off his radio and the golf cart for the reporters.

## About volunteering for profit corporations

So this dumb-ass books a cruise, a microcosm of paradise set in the middle of the ocean, far away from the rest of America, with 39 its commercialism, and profitability. After he returns with a big check for the trip, he scans the deck for eight hours a day, this adding bigger profits to the Cruise Cruke LLC. Un-lucky-behaviorist! What kind of mental model are you're using vacation time to a big profit company?

Do you... a Burning Man volunteer?

Did I mention that Burning Man is most definitely NOT a non-profit organization?

Stupid if they kept the price of your ticket lower it would be a good idea, right? Or maybe if because of your selfish actions, the company lowered everybody else's ticket price, it'd be cool? Well, we all know that's well what they've changed all the while this year. Good thing there are volunteers searching websites for people speaking in -- after all, who would't join them to raise ticket prices, would you?

It's all for abstract, don't get me wrong. But this attention is towards genuine charitable groups and not for profit companies. 500(c)(3) status, baby! I like what is the Big Green, but I don't kick my own team at McDonald's.

- Tiger Watson

## Burning Man dress-up doll



Figure 1.4: Excerpted from the book: "Burning Man Live: 13 years of Piss Clear, Black Rock City's alternative newspaper" edited by Adrian Roberts (Roberts).

In particular, each image indicates a few key items that are fashionable because they demonstrate preparedness. These are goggles, dust masks (commonly used for protection from dust storms); and water bottles.

Further, the participants are doing this through producing a culture that expands into contemporary society by appropriating other spaces for events like regional burns and decompression parties, and by mimicking the tentacles of a new *frontier* in virtual worlds of the internet, which I discuss in more depth in Chapter three. For now it returns us, finally, to Burning Man's performance of American Exceptionalism.

### **American Exceptionalism: Burning Man Everywhere...**

The term American Exceptionalism is grounded in the nation's effort to differentiate itself from other countries, and specifically to define itself by an ideology as opposed to an aristocratic history. It is inspired by Manifest Destiny and lays groundwork for the myth of the American Dream. As described by Seymour Martin Lipset in *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*, it is generated from the American Creed: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire. He also discusses the term's relationship to America's resistance to socialism, which is attributed to its already implemented egalitarianism (Lipset 19). It certainly defines the U.S. as different, but it also privileges American epistemology as better than others and promotes a false sense of entitlement, which plays into the creation of the myth of the American Dream. In *The American Dream*, Samuel discusses the coining of the term in 1931 by James Truslow Adams. He quotes from Adams' book *The Epic of America*:

The dream is a vision of a better, deeper, richer life for every individual, regardless of the position in society which he or she may occupy by accident of birth. It has been a dream of a chance to rise in the economic

scale, but quite as much, or more than that, of a chance to develop our capacities to the full, unhampered by unjust restrictions of caste or custom. With this has gone the hope of bettering the physical conditions of living, of lessening the toil and anxieties of daily life (Samuel 13).

This definition birthed during The Great Depression still holds today, and is undoubtedly integrated into Burning Man's ethos—in particular, the vision of a better life for every individual. This was most evident in 2008 when the Burning Man yearly theme was American Dream mentioned above. The premise of the theme asked participants to consider how they define or would re-define the American Dream.

Another important facet of these American myths is that they intend to spread their ideology everywhere, which is mirrored in the Burning Man Project non-profit's mission and vision. As burners everywhere perpetuate the structures and values of the Burning Man Project, the ideological and epistemological implications of this culture beg critical investigation. Each year after Burning Man many participants including myself are passionately ready to make changes in their lives. Feeling transformed by the intense synergy of participating in the making of and living in Black Rock City they bring palpable fresh ideas home in an effort to continue their practice of Burning Man principles (whatever that means to them) with their local community. They share it with other interested parties and implement it into their daily lives. Many participants do this by creating what are called Regional Burns. This effort to grow the community is encouraged and monitored by the Burning Man Project (BMP).

### **Spreading Culture: Regional Burns**

Regionals are officially recognized events set up by volunteers that follow a certain protocol overseen by the BMP. The Regionals history page of the Burning Man website states:

It is clear that Burning Man is no longer confined to the Black Rock Desert. Dozens of satellites orbit the Mother ship; each and every one possesses a unique flavor and character. Burning Man as a cultural movement is still in its youth. The seeds have fallen to the ground, taken root and sprouted. How we nurture this new growth will define the future evolution of the Burning Man movement (burningman.com).

Regionals are intended to be service-oriented events where burners can connect and “keep the flame alive” in their year-round communities. Originally, the intention was to alleviate the sensation of what burners call decompression (a loneliness or depression that arises during re-entry to the “default world”) by helping participants connect with other like-minded burner-folk in their local communities. Instead of simply helping participants find each other, Burning Man LLC decided to facilitate official events—official “satellites” branded with their name.

Currently, Regionals do serve as outreach for people who are new to the community, or people who cannot afford to attend the main Burning Man event in Nevada. Anyone who organizes such an event, who wants to use the Burning Man name or trademark to advertise their event, must work with their Regional Contact. This person is a volunteer, “bound by a Letter of Understanding that expresses their agreement to assume the responsibilities of the role, as well as their commitment to Burning Man's Ten Principles, which represent the core values that define Burning Man culture” (burningman.com). Further down in Schedule B, the contract reads:

b. Regional Contact will not reproduce, distribute, use or otherwise exploit any Burning Man intellectual property, or proprietary

information, including its name, trademarks, and proprietary technology, without Burning Man's prior written permission to do so on a case-by-case basis for specifically agreed upon uses and periods of time" (burningman.com).

This sets the volunteer up as a kind of regional manager for the BMP so that they can ensure the integrity of the organization and protect the values of their community. It also means that anyone who wants to practice the culture cannot use the moniker of *The Man*, which is the central symbol of the culture. This is inherently contradictory, and eliminates the possibility of simply creating a Burning Man-inspired community event that does not wish to "orbit the Mother ship." Though the BMP does not receive any of the money from any Regional event, they do ostensibly determine and control the branding of the cultural movement.

Further compounding this awkward conflict of interest is the fact that the community is largely created by those who have participated in the desert event. Regional volunteers are also bound by their experience-product. Though technically they do not need to have been to BRC in NV, these regional contacts often use their years of experience in BRC as proof of their ability to live differently than they did before—to be a Burning Man-inspired "model citizen." This means, if you have not *been there*—then you cannot know, which is contradictory to the BMP's other claim that Burning Man culture can be nurtured anywhere, further proving that the desert space is integral to the culture. Volunteer positions are carefully scrutinized, and it is unlikely that someone who has never been to Black Rock City would be chosen at this point in the community's growth. This is because they have become affiliated with the Burning Man community through their physical and emotional participation in the



event, and I argue through the power of performative participation. Further, he/she has chosen to dedicate his/her personal time to cultivating the official Burning Man brand of community.

This is standard practice of any values-based volunteer organization such as the Boy Scouts of America or the Red Cross (both of which are protected by Title 36<sup>12</sup>). What differentiates the Burning Man community from these other values-based organizations is not just that they are a “cultural movement,” and not a Title 36 organization, or that their values are unconventional, but that the Burning Man community is created by *people who buy a ticket*. The “citizens of Black Rock City” do not vote or nominate their organizers and leaders. They do not participate in a democracy. They participate in an experience project staged by a business. Burning Man sells tickets... to a performative experience of make-your-own idealized American counterculture, American Exceptionalism, American Dream, and Manifest Destiny *based in art*, which in turn produces an intentional community (or culture) that voluntarily spreads its values system throughout the world by cultivating Burning Man-inspired art hubs, community activities, social media, and commerce. Burners are actually reimagining America through affect based performance in the theatre of the desert.

A section of the “Letter of Understanding” contract signed by volunteer Regional Contacts reads:

A Regional Contact’s (sometimes referred to herein as “RC”) role [sic, missing is] to build a Burning Man community in a local area. An interest in attending Burning Man is not necessary for someone to be a member

---

<sup>12</sup> Title 36 offers Federal Government protection to a few major patriotic and national organizations.

of a regional community. While Black Rock City during Burning Man is a physical and temporal manifestation of the community, it is by no means the entire experience. It is a way of life, and a way of looking at the human condition, and is not limited to the yearly gathering in the desert” (BMWT, 1989).

In other words, anyone is welcome to be a part of the community.

This idyllic notion is admirable when considering community building strategies. Many values-based organizations, or other cultural movements such as the Rainbow Gathering, hold this same open stance. The difference is that the majority of the Burning Man community has, at some point, bought a ticket to the main event or to a Regional event at minimum. Also, they are not free to perpetuate the “official” culture without permission of the owners. Their attending these events fosters the community and feeds the Burning Man business enterprise. Those who have been to Black Rock City acquired their understanding of the community culture there, and many, including myself, go back annually to help create that manifestation of the community and renew their experience-based values. This renewal, or *burn*, is like a cathartic rebirth for some participants. It is so vital to the culture because it is when they rekindle the spirit beaten down by living in the default world during the rest of the year. The T.A.Z. is part of the culture and the BMP does not include that as part of the culture—that is where the radical part of the ethos lives most intensely. If the production of Black Rock City ceased to exist the tentacles of the Mother ship would lose their control center and morph into another form of culture all together—it loses something in the move.

This structure smacks of consumer capitalist conventions, which manipulate customers into getting their Burning Man fix every year in the desert, generally spending upwards of five hundred dollars each year in an effort to get them to voluntarily generate

new community members who will more than likely buy a ticket to attend again. Of course, this is all based on a typical supply and demand business model and is not much different from theme parks or all-inclusive resorts, except for a few blaring clashes. First, the event *actually* creates a community that is interested in applying what they experience there to their lives. For many, it is not like going to a theme park, it is intensely personal and a life altering experience—this is my experience. Second, these capitalist structures are antithetical to those values purported by the Ten Principles, which are curiously evocative of the chiefly American identity myths of Manifest Destiny and American Exceptionalism, both of which are thoroughly intertwined with the brutal and violent history of the appropriation of the Western Frontier.

The fact that BMP has embraced the expansion of its culture through corporate branding structures is both necessary for the event to survive in its current form, and for it to transform into its next phase in the non-profit organization. This is not particularly surprising, the BMP has long desired to move to a non-profit structure, but needed to protect itself in ways a non-profit status was unable to do. The non-profit Burning Man Project, “...provides infrastructural tools and frameworks that will allow people to apply the Ten Principles in many communities and spheres of endeavor” ([burningmanproject.org](http://burningmanproject.org)). Now calling itself a catalyst for creative culture in the world, this organization will use the Ten Principles discovered in the dust of the desert to mobilize their culture globally. The main Burning Man event is now merely one of the events that the Burning Man Project hosts. It is moving its monumental center away from Black Rock City and back to San Francisco. It is assimilating itself into the default-world with excitement and vigor.

## Goin' Back to Cali...

Blogger burnersxxx responds to Ezra Klein's 2012 WonkBlog interview with Larry Harvey for the Washington Post. It reads:

“Urban renewal? We're qualified. We've built up and torn down cities for 20 years,” says Harvey. “Cities everywhere are calling for artists, and it's a blank slate there, blocks and blocks. ... We want to extend the civil experiment — to see if business and art can coincide and not maim one another.”

Harvey points out that there's been long-standing ties between Burning Man artists and to some of the private sector's most successful executives. Its arts foundation, which distributes grants for festival projects, has received backing from everyone from real-estate magnate Christopher Bently to Mark Pincus, head of online gaming giant Zynga, as the *Wall Street Journal* points out. “There are a fair number of billionaires” who come to the festival every year, says Harvey, adding that some of the art is privately funded as well. In this way, Burning Man is a microcosm of San Francisco itself, stripping the bohemian artists and the Silicon Valley entrepreneurs of their usual tribal markers on the blank slate of the Nevada desert. At Burning Man, “when someone asks, ‘what do you do?’ — they meant, what did you just do” that day, he explains. (burnersxxx).<sup>13</sup>

The notion of Burning Man as a microcosm of San Francisco illuminates some of the ways in which Burning Man is identifiably Californian. Burning Man is not only connected to California by its roots and now its non-profit, but the headquarters have always been there as well. It generates commerce for California, mainly in the Bay Area, and works with many local businesses all over the state.

Not only is it practically connected to California it is also metaphorically connected. It mimics the curious oddities that comprise the Californian character. As Erik Davis describes the state:

...the granola state, the land of fruits and nuts, the space-case colony with a moonbeam governor that collected, like a dustbin, everything in

---

<sup>13</sup> Larry Harvey is the founder of Burning Man.

America that wasn't firmly rooted down. We Californians are still routinely mocked for our flakiness, our self-obsession, our fondness for fads and health regimens and strange notions. But the familiar jokes also reflect something much more substantial about the place: its intensely creative and eccentric spiritual and religious culture. [...] –an altered state, for sure, or, better yet, a visionary one (Davis 7-8).

This well describes the ambivalence of the various descriptions of Burning Man that range from it being a transformative spiritual experience, to the biggest, most radical party you've ever been to, to Matt Taibbi's critical and candid article in *Rolling Stone* which says, "It is educated upper-middle-class white people rebelling against nothing they can put their fingers on" (Taibbi). Burning Man is not only distinctly performing the American national project it is also performing California identity.

### **Going Global**

Despite its best intentions, the Burning Man Project is oddly mimetic of the white-Western-liberal American national project while simultaneously, trying to redefine it. This paradox is situated in the history of land appropriation by colonial pioneers of the Western Frontier, the social construction of American wilderness based in a false ideological binary between nature and culture; and the transformative power of performance. A ticket to Burning Man is a ticket to a particular experience—an extreme, artistic, participant-driven, wilderness experience. In another way, it is a ticket to perform or spect-act the reimagining of an idealized America in the theatre of the Black Rock Desert through the use of affective framing tools in an effort to create a transformative cultural practice. The result of this product is a consumer base that purports that the product is essential to its community's identity. So, by using Black Rock City as an example, Burning Man Project will now go into communities and foster

this kind of creativity worldwide. This is a particularly audacious brand of the American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny that is evident in the spreading of American monoculture and Burning Man is now a part of that—just reconfigured. It assumes that Burning Man’s cultural principles should be implemented throughout the world just as the pioneers of the Western Frontier assumed they were bringing enlightenment to the Native Americans, and the spreading of McDonald’s restaurants across the globe. This is a typically white American endeavor stemming from the performance of Black Rock City itself. Whether intentional or not they are branding and selling a cultural movement. The owning of the event in the Black Rock Desert leads to “owning” Burning Man culture. This is decidedly mimicking corporate American business structure, which is antithetical to Burning Man values. This phenomenon happening to the Burning Man Project is mimetic of the fracture inherent in the American national project. Of course, the BMP and many burners themselves would take great offense to my analysis. As a burner myself I do not even like writing it. I wish this was not what I see, but it *is* what I see us doing and my radical self-expression as an artist and scholar comes in the form of this critical awareness.

## Chapter Two: Hot Theatre: Fire and Catharsis at Burning Man

*This universe, which is the same for all, has not been made by any god or man, but it always has been, is, and will be an ever-living fire, kindling itself by regular measures and going out by regular measures.* ~Heraclitus

*It [theatre] invites the mind to share a delirium which exalts its energies; and we can see, to conclude, from the human point of view, the action of theater, like that of plague, is beneficial, for, impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall, reveals the lie, the slackness, baseness, and hypocrisy of our world; it shakes off the asphyxiating inertia of matter which invades even the clearest testimony of the senses; and in revealing to collectivities of men their dark power, their hidden force, it invites them to take, in the face of destiny, a superior and heroic attitude they would never have assumed without it (1958).<sup>14</sup>* ~Antonin Artaud, *Theatre and Its Double*

Heraclitus says that fire destroys and creates the universe. Ecologically, it wipes out acres of forests, and kills or scorches all life within its path. After it burns, the earth is replenished with essential nutrients that generate new growth and maintain ecological balance. It is no wonder that humans have ritualized fire. Trans-culturally, fire is considered a great healer and great destructor. It is venerated and feared. It is used to comfort, cook, and warm; and to violently threaten and kill. It is the only classical element that instantly threatens the body by touch, and the only one that is created by a chemical reaction. We breathe air, drink water, and put our feet on the earth, but fire is elusive—held only with the help of a mediating material. It poses a constant threat of becoming dangerously out of control, and it mesmerizes. When fire's flames are present (not posing an imminent threat to the body) humans are drawn to them. It is this fascination, in combination with its abilities of creation and destruction, that give fire its power and motivates humans to control and mythologize it.

---

<sup>14</sup> Artaud (1958), p.31-32.

The theatre's *invitation* Artaud speaks of in the above epigraph, is birthed from an intense investigation and an unrelenting reflection on one's relationship to the world. Artaud writes about a kind of catharsis that is produced out of cruelty—out of violent imagery, trance, and what he calls *poetry of the senses*. This kind of theatre produces experiences in which the spectators and actor's beings are hurled into a "delirium." They are undone and then reconstituted with a new understanding of their relationship to the world. This kind of catharsis is not simplistic or rational. It is a radical disorientation of the self and a seemingly disembodied experience that stems from altered states of consciousness, a phenomenon I discuss further in chapter four. In Artaud's view, this may lead the spectator or actor to take a "heroic attitude they would never have assumed without it." This process presumes that a personal transformation occurs by way of self-reflection—they "see themselves as they are." I stipulate that catharsis is a metaphysical death of the ego—through this radical disorientation—that forces the self to recognize its interconnectivity with the biosphere. Then during the reorientation process the self is forced back into society's structures with this awareness—and therefore their complicity in the creation of those structures. The ego is then rebuilt from the ensuing fear of the return.<sup>15</sup>

It is often argued that Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty is impossible to create because he is talking about involuntary catharsis and theatre is representational. I would argue that it does not occur in contemporary theatre because it requires the spectator to either

---

<sup>15</sup> Though there is certainly a discussion to be unpacked here between definitions of the ego and the self I have chosen to not include that here. For the purposes of this chapter I am considering the ego a facet of the self.



be shocked into it or that they voluntarily participate in co-creating the trance-like state needed to have the experience—they have to choose it, but most contemporary audiences are passive. Aristotelian catharsis as it is performed in contemporary theatre is not particularly intense, nor is it transformational. The stories being told about contemporary theatre are about how “good” and thought provoking the stories are, or skillful excellence—they are not about transformation (though there are always exceptions). Overall, dramatic catharsis is not necessarily cathartic in Artaud’s sense in contemporary theatre, so the status quo is easily reified through these mild versions of catharsis.

Michel Foucault and others have argued this process does not create actual transformation, but rather reifies the status quo by obscuring the cruelty itself. I stipulate that the taking on of the heroic posture is what reifies the status quo. The posture is connected to the myth of progress and to the epistemological and environmental structures framing the cathartic experience, rather than catharsis itself. There are many who have a cathartic experience and do not take on a heroic posture, or in fact take on an antihero or rebel posture against the status quo. The drama paints their actions as uncivil and tragic through empathy. So no matter what posture is taken, the status quo is reified because it is the dominant power structure. However, catharsis in dramatic structure rarely, if ever, represents those who do not take on a heroic posture. Non-dramatically framed cathartic experiences may inspire spiritual or other kinds of practices for dealing with the death of the ego. For instance, Chögyam Trungpa connects this kind of experience to cultivating awareness about the development of ego—or the I and the other—or what he calls *the cosmic joke*. Nonetheless, both Aristotelian and

Artaud's concepts of theatrical catharsis are present and available at Burning Man, and are readily activated by large-scale fire art.

The various uses of fire at Burning Man reveal the complex, paradoxical, and fraught relationships that civilization (particularly the U.S.) has with the biosphere. I use this ecocritical lens to explore the relationship between catharsis, western rationalism, and symbiosis. Using critical autoethnography and theories of social construction of space, ritual, catharsis, affect, and performance, I argue that the affective experiences of these artistic burning rituals form experiences of transformation through personal catharsis, and experiences of community, which in turn generates Burning Man culture. While I do briefly touch on fire performance and fire ceremonies at Burning Man, I focus more specifically on the two most attended large-scale burns *The Man Burn* and *The Temple Burn*.<sup>16</sup> I also use an ecocritical lens to discuss how cathartic space affectively illuminates perceptual pathways between the biosphere and its diverse cultures, which simultaneously reify and slowly salvage the mental and emotional disconnects between white western epistemologies and the biosphere. Together, these transformative experiences reorient participants' relationships to themselves and their environments. In particular, I discuss how the use of fire is a catalyst for these experiences.

### **Ritual and Spectacle**

The day the spectator's rushed *The Man* structure on Baker Beach in San Francisco (discussed in the first chapter), Larry Harvey and crew witnessed the

---

<sup>16</sup> These two are symbolic of the masculine and feminine in a way. *The Man* on fire as a hot torch and *The Temple* as a circular or kind of cooler fire.

transition between ritual and spectacle. The people on the hill were there to watch the spectacle—the *burn*. Fire had tantalized them to form an audience. For Harvey and the rest of his crew, the actual construction and burning of the art is a ritual, though they discovered that in the midst of the chaos that ensued. Spectators' separation from art depersonalizes it, which is why the principle of participation—or “no-spectators”—is implemented at Burning Man and the potential for transformation is more readily available. Fire provides the violence needed in Artaud's theory to provoke catharsis, but without personal investment in the art the fire becomes spectacle entertainment and the potential for catharsis is lessened because the presence of terror is presented as spectacle.

Guy Debord's explanation of this separation in *Society of the Spectacle* is particularly useful here:

The spectacle originates in the loss of the unity of the world, and the gigantic expansion of the modern spectacle expresses the totality of this loss: the abstraction of all specific labor and the general abstraction of the entirety of production are perfectly rendered in the spectacle, whose *mode of being concrete* is precisely *abstraction* (Debord no.29).

Those spectators watching *The Man* burn from the side of the cliff are living in a state of abstraction, according to Debord. The separation between the specific labor done by those who constructed *The Man*, and the abstraction of that labor by those who arrived on Baker Beach to watch it burn, shows this phenomenon of the modern spectacle. The potential for catharsis or any kind of personal transformation is diminished, maybe impossible, because the spectator lives in a state of abstraction until she/he develops a personal investment in the labor. The spectator believes she/he is dislocated from the art, and simply watches and consumes. She/he does not admit participation in the

activity, or ascribe deep personal meaning to it. This phenomenon led Larry Harvey, his carpenters, and the San Francisco Cacophony Society to find a safe space to conduct *The Man Burn*, and the desire for everyone who experiences *The Man Burn* to be a participant had begun.

Debord's claim that spectacle is generated from the "loss of unity of the world" highlights the link between participation and community, and recognizes the white western values of consumption and accumulation as a result of this loss. At Burning Man, there is a unique paradox at play because the desire to avoid spectacle is only partially achieved. The cathartic possibilities generated by the art and fire are in tension with the dislocation of American culture and its tendency to make art a spectacle. One of the ways the specific labor of *The Man* art is abstracted is by making it a symbol or an icon for the culture. While the icon is a powerful way to build community, it relies on the power of affiliation and belief. This made the act of the man who committed arson in 2007, mentioned in the introduction, a radical one. The physical labor is gone for all but the few who build it, and the personal investment is limited to those who choose to affiliate themselves with the icon. It is interesting that *The Man* art installation is one of the less physically interactive installations at Burning Man—a culture built to value interactivity. The base-pyre usually is climbable and at times has other art pieces within it but for the most part it is museum-like rather than interactive.

Marshall McLuhan's concept of hot and cool media helps define the way the level of participation connects to catharsis. If a spectator is experiencing hot media she/he will participate with ease. The media enhances a single sense so much that the spectator participates easily. Cool media take more effort on the part of the participant

such as looking at a photograph. I would add that the hotter the intensity of the participation becomes the further it is driven away from spectacle and toward transformation. Burning Man has a lot of hot media—it is hot theatre.

Harvey and the BMP assert that *The Man* is a blank canvas on which participants are challenged to create their own meaning. First, there is already meaning endowed because it is called *The Man*, not The Person, The Human, or The Figure, but The Man. The title is already a hyperlink to the slang term about the position of oppressive power, and to the scenarios surrounding the practices of actually *burning* men, which in the U.S. evokes images of lynching. It is also linked to scenarios and narratives of effigy burning such as Wicker Man and other fire festivals abroad, which I discuss later in this chapter. The idea of *The Man* being a blank slate is already denying its cultural meaning in the default world from which Burning Man participants orient themselves.

*The Man* is actually the monumental center, in Henri Lefebvre's sense, of Black Rock City (BRC,) especially when it is on fire. Lefebvre describes, "Monumental space offered each member of a society an image of that membership, an image of his or her social visage. It thus constituted a collective mirror more faithful than any personal one" (Lefebvre 220). *The Man* icon is put on stickers, t-shirts, coffee mugs, posters, key chains, necklaces, magnets, and all manner of other trinkets displayed by participants. This is a conflation of the trans-cultural practice of monumental iconography as a symbol of societal affiliation and corporate branding practices, and it is used to create Burning Man's cultural identity. The BMP sells only posters and tickets with the icon as they purport the principle of de commodification. This principle is meant to "...preserve the spirit of gifting [and]...create social environments that are unmediated

by commercial sponsorships, transactions, or advertising” (Burning Man Project). However, the trinkets created and gifted by the populace during the event create the illusion that the icon is simply a cultural or cult-like symbol and not a brand, but the trinkets actually do the work of branding in the default world. The culture is branded by the art piece of its inception—it is its curse, or its *anathema*. This unavoidable conflict occurs because Burning Man is a decommodified commodity as discussed in my first chapter. It is an event, with no advertising, or sponsorships etc., that invites people to buy a ticket by using the icon of *The Man* to affiliate its participants and inspire them to perform the culture they *buy*-into both financially and personally in the default world. They participants tell their stories of the experiences and share their new-found culture, which attracts more participants who want to buy a ticket. *The Man* icon has what Joseph Roach calls the It-Effect:

Public intimacy describes the illusion of proximity to the tantalizing apparition; synthetic experience, the consumption of its spun-off products such as plays, magazines, or movies, and the It-Effect, its deifying reception. It It-Effect, in turn, intensifies the craving for greater intimacy with the ultimately unavailable icon. Constructed both through the publicity manipulated by celebrities themselves or their acolytes and through the imaginative contribution of their fans, [sic] (Roach 44).

This cycle works because the icon is a symbol of belonging, and does shift the consciousness of the group to a communal one for those who affiliate themselves with the symbol. This makes the BMP’s control of the use of the icon such a slippery slope when it comes to who gets to be affiliated. While, only the few people on *The Man* Crew participate directly in building and burning *The Man*, a large part of the population contributes to building the city each year. These participants (many who call themselves burners) associate *The Man* as a symbol with their participation (and labor) in creating

BRC and Burning Man culture. It is a collective mirror as Lefebvre claims, but only for the converted, and converting requires affiliating oneself with the community and culture.

Of course, many Burning Man participants do not make this affiliation and so, *The Man Burn* is also a spectacle in Debord's sense. The loss of unity he writes of is principally what Burning Man ethos are trying to ameliorate, and the use of fire, particularly the large-scale burns, is a keystone to fulfilling that intention, but without intense personal affiliation and participation the fire is relegated to spectacle. This illuminates this central paradox of Burning Man; between unity and abstraction—community and separation—ritual and spectacle. Yet, the performativity of fire art and rituals is one of the profound ways that transformation occurs at Burning Man.

### **Hot Theatre**

At Burning Man, many trans-cultural scenarios of fire such as: power, home, sex, terror, and purifier, are appropriated and mashed-up into neo-tribal rituals that performatively create the community and culture. These rituals include campfires, fire ceremonies, fire performance, fire art, effigy burning, and large-scale art burns. They are done for myriad purposes; the breadth of which I cannot possibly investigate. It is not *the why* of doing these rituals I am concerned with in this chapter, but rather *the how* of what happens within the doing—or performing—of them, and what happens because of that doing. *The Man Burn* creates both spectacle and catharsis as discussed above, but I argue that the *Temple Burn* has more potential for catharsis because of the level of intensity of participation. Additionally, these neo-tribal rituals create encounter-scenes that illuminate my concepts of Theatre of Affect. These rituals are developed to directly

affect the participants and engage them in performative behavior. However, they are not framed within the boundaries of traditional theatre, nor are they in a traditional theatre space, so codifying them as theatre requires clarification part of which I will discuss here.

In its twenty-seven year history the desert event has been difficult to frame. It has been called a festival, an event, a project, and the largest party you've ever been to. The BMP is adamant that it is not a festival, which I attribute to the fact that it is not birthed from any particular culture or religion, nor is it solely done for entertainment. It is an experiment that uses ritual, art, and environment to create an experience from which a culture has birthed as discussed in the first chapter. This process lives within the frameworks of theatre—within the concepts of: catharsis, ritual, performance, character/identity, scene/scenario, and the relationship between actor and spectator. It intentionally creates a specific affective environment. This is the very basis of theatre. The neo-tribal fire rituals at Burning Man exemplify this burgeoning form of theatre. The use of fire, and fire scenarios, incite personal transformation through terror-based catharsis, and recall ancient Greek theatre rituals—or what I call *proto-theatre* rituals—performances that create or reconstitute community.

The rituals at Burning Man are also, without question, largely done for pleasure.

According to Brecht this qualifies them as theatre:

Theatre may be said to be derived from ritual, but that is only to say that it becomes theatre once the two have separated; what it brought over from the mysteries was not its former function, but purely and simply the pleasure which accompanied this. And the catharsis of which Aristotle writes—cleansing by fear and pity, or from fear and pity—is a purification which is performed not only in a pleasurable way, but precisely for the purpose of pleasure. (Willett 181).



If Brecht's notion is accurate, then certainly the neo-tribal rituals at Burning Man cease to be rituals and become theatre. In her book, *Theatre in a Crowded Fire: Ritual and Spirituality at Burning Man* Lee Gilmore investigates the ways in which:

Burning Man's ritual pastiche [...] cracks these categories wide open by inviting all participants to redefine and reinvent their relationships with concepts such as religion, spirituality, ritual, art, authenticity—among the many others explored here—but on their own terms and by means of their own performative engagements (Gilmore 165).

She refers to Burning Man as a kind of “theatre for spirituality, self-expression, communal bonding, and cultural transformation,” but she does not discuss how it is theatre (Gilmore 165). Gilmore's realization about the man shouting “Theatre!” being in a “crowded fire” in the “chaotic” moment after the collapse of *The Man* discussed in the introduction, points to the oscillation that happens between the experience of dramatic catharsis through the ritual and the spectacle.

As Gilmore explores, the functions of these rituals are intentionally nebulous, promoting an individualistic epistemology, while seeking a generally pleasurable communal experience. This is also how theatre often functions even if the performance elicits a painful emotional process, the affect is a pleasurable one because of the personal insight (and plausible healing) received by the spectator. Theatre artists express themselves in a communal effort to affect themselves and the audience, often incorporating the process of catharsis. However as mentioned above, the kind of catharsis available in traditional theatre seems more akin to Brecht's concept does create community at Burning Man. It is seen in the gathering of people around campfires and in the awe of fire art installations or vehicles such as *El Pulpo* (mentioned in chapter

one) or *Crude Awakening* mentioned in the introduction. This is a lower intensity, or cooler form according to McLuhan that does not commonly host the kind of power that Artaud's, or even Aristotle's, concepts of catharsis do—making most theatre performances more spectacle and less ritual.

### **Catharsis: *I am on Fire***

In *Stages of Terror*, Tony Kubiak relates Aristotelian cathartic experience to a sense of dis-location brought on by terror:

Terror, then, and in a different sense, *katharsis*, are neither objective nor subjective phenomena, but are instead the manifestation of a fundamental and violent expulsion or disappearance of the subject and his pain into another locus—either the repressive Other or the Real. The intensity of this disappearance produces a loss of identity: the collapse of the subject/object into a third term, an Unnamable. *Katharsis*, then, is an expulsion inaugurated within the field of terror. Generated by the terror born of fragmented consciousness, *katharsis* is what it produces—a perpetual unlocatability, a continuous *aphanisis*, an infinite series of displacements, disgorgements, emeses that serve in the end to eradicate all sense of a vulnerable, locatable self [...]” (Kubiak 19).

I contend that Kubiak's description of the fragmentation of consciousness that causes this terror-based catharsis is produced through exposure to the chaotic experience of the symbiotic relationship humans have with the environment—the interconnected web of the universe and its inherent animism. This is Debord's unity of the world, or Heraclitian flux. Fire ignites this specifically because it threatens to kill the body-consciousness.

The concept of oneness, or interconnectedness is often made pretty because of its unity, but that unity is also anxiety producing and irrational because Western epistemology locates its center in the rational. It is cast off as unprovable by science—though string theory is getting close. The philosophy of mind-body dualism that structures Western civilization protects one from understanding the concept of *self* as a

constructed frame for dealing with chaos. So, in the midst of catharsis, the actor or spectator's consciousness is fragmented because she/he is exposed to the unrelenting reality that there is no self; illuminating the terrifying death of the constructed *self*.<sup>17</sup> If the actor/spectator experiences this chaos long enough to become aware of her/his interconnectedness with the universe rendering her/himself dead, then the assumption is that when she/he is returned to a state of assumed separateness in the constructed world, she/he is motivated to heroic action, having gained some awareness of her/his complicity in the creation of society as mentioned earlier. However, there is an inherent problem within this process.

The attention of the spectators is shifted from the terror to the hero, obscuring the cruelty and purportedly "healing" the experiencer. The "healing" is actually a relief, an act of ignoring the terror by focusing on their pity *as action*—which is often animated by the hero. The pity then relieves the actor/spectator of her/his awareness of their complicity in the creation of the world by creating a "healing" affect. This is particularly effective when following a hero's journey because the actor/spectator identifies with the hero character as *self*. This is a cyclical white western ideology that feigns progress and maintains the status quo by reinstating a separatist framework. In other words, she/he is no longer directly responsible to society because the *pity-action*, in combination with separatist framing, relocates the actor/spectator outside of the cruel reality of interconnectedness. Kubiak illuminates the academic trajectory of this, "While Artaud saw in cruelty/pity the possibility of a complete reconstruction of consciousness,

---

<sup>17</sup> See Kubiak's article "Becoming-Lucid". It is a comparative discussion about Tantra and theatre.

Nietzsche, and Foucault following him, saw the union of cruelty and pity the means by which pain and punishment have been objectified, reified, and economized as crucial elements in the irruption of a “merciful” and just law” (Kubiak 19).

A danger of the concept of interconnectedness is that it is often attached to the deceptive liberal assumption that if we all just accept this as reality then all humans will collectively desire to care for each other, which is simply not knowable. At Burning Man the hero’s journey is in some ways self-determined though certainly encounter-scenes look to decenter those determinations. If the participant imbues *The Man* effigy with her/his own meaning then she/he is responsible for the narrative of *The Man* and therefore Black Rock City. Because *The Man* is the monumental center of the culture, the multiplicity of meanings ascribed to *The Man* defines the culture. This multiplicity is *united* by fire. When *The Man* burns, all meanings endure the burn. A brief look at the history of effigy burning is useful here.

### **Effigy Affect**

Effigy burning is commonly considered an act done in political protest. This practice stems from the medieval agrarian form, which is historically intended to banish or rid the represented figure of “evil.” However, oppressive Christians, and urbanized psychologists and philosophers who historicized these practices, misinterpret these rural peoples’ use of fire’s ecological properties in their narratives. The practice was seen as an act of heathenism, an ungodly act of ignorant sacrifice, rather than a fertilization or healing process. In *Vestal Fire*, Stephen Pyne reveals this in his discussion about the shift from Need-Fire to Vestal Fire in early European cultural history.

Need-Fire is fire used for maintaining agrarian life in rural communities. The burning practice was called swidden or swailing (sweal/swale in Middle English) and is now more commonly known as slash-and-burn, or controlled burning. This trans-cultural practice is essential to the creation and survival of agrarian societies and civilizations. In the West, ancient harvest festivals such as Samhain, Beltane, and Midsummer Festival formalized and celebrated this process. They burned large sections of land such as fields and hillsides because fire actually purifies land. It creates healthy soil, new growth, and promotes ecological diversity. It was also common practice to walk themselves and livestock through smoke. Ecologically, smoke fumigates the bodies from mites and ticks. They also burned diseased livestock to keep disease from spreading. Pyne argues, “This [need-fire] was not primarily a symbolic act but an intensely practical one, without which the land was uninhabitable, and a potentially hazardous one, if the fires were set poorly. Clearly, regulation was necessary; no community could long tolerate promiscuous or random burning” (Pyne 70). Regulation took shape through rituals, which developed into various harvest festivals. The practice of effigy burning was a part of these rituals as well. While interpreted as merely a symbolic act to rid evil from their society, it may have held a more practical purpose.

In Teresa Brennan’s *The Transmission of Affect*, which explores how biological and social environments intertwine she argues that, “Visual images, like auditory traces, also have a direct physical impact; their reception involves the activation of neurological networks, stimulated by spectrum vibrations at various frequencies” (Brennan, p10). Considering this probability, and fire’s ecological property of eradicating the un-useful, the sensorial experience of watching a human effigy burn could lead to purification of

the body through this “activation of neurological networks.” While Brennan’s theory leans on a scientific epistemology, of which I do not pretend to be a practitioner, I find it useful to include here. It highlights the connections between the body and its environment by acknowledging things unseen. For example, if the effigy is emotionally imbued with the metaphorical self—or the parts of the self no longer needed or useful as done in traditional Pagan practices—then the fire, ostensibly, eradicates these parts and produces fertile ground for growth. Primarily, this is a felt and unseen transformational experience. There is no official change in status as in rituals like marriage or christening, but rather a change in consciousness. Pyne describes the link to fire’s purificatory properties:

But there [in Need-Fire], more probably, resided the origins of the beliefs that fire could purify and fertilize. The evidence lay all around. If phosphorous and calcium are more accessible after a fire than before; if sunlight strikes burned spring gardens more forcibly; if blackened soil warms faster and grasses sprout sooner; . . . if fires keep wolves and bears away from flocks and homes, then by what criteria does a folklorist or psychoanalyst dismiss the belief that fire destroys unwanted things and promotes desired ones? (Pyne 4-75).

Ritualizing this ecological phenomenon is simply a way to venerate and celebrate its subsequent state of fertility.

The interpreters of Western discourse could not *see* the evidence and therefore painted ritualized agrarian effigy burning practices as heathen and uncivilized, which leans on the ontology of mind-body dualism, and ignores the practical reasoning afforded by the study of fire ecology. As Pyne writes, “For these dialecticians, the mind guided the hand, not the hand the mind; they understood the fire festivals as originating in the murky womb of symbols, archetypes, and the primitive behavior of sympathetic

magic” (74). From an ecocritical standpoint, this colossal misinterpretation sets a precedent that renders controlled burning practices evil, and delimits effigy burning as a threatening act done by commoners to defy the powerful—to protest. These paradoxical ontologies are at the apex of cathartic experience that is possible during large-scale burns like *The Man Burn*. As fire consumes the structure, they collide in seen and unseen ways, disorienting participants, and provoking transformational encounter-scenes. This phenomenon is a kind of theatrical catharsis.

As I discussed in the introduction, Artaud proposes, “...a theater in which violent physical images crush and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectator seized by the theater as by a whirlwind of higher forces” (Artaud 82-83). Large-scale fire does this, and specifically wildfire. Pyne offers that these psychological explanations were due to the fact that these thinkers were urbanized and no longer utilizing Need-Fire. I argue that they were, additionally, formulated from the fear induced by large-scale wildfire, which both terrorizes and hypnotizes the being.

The unpredictable properties of wildfire—its ability to spontaneously combust, to spread over miles within short periods of time, and to jump sections of land creating secondary hot spots—make wildfire a threat to the life of the body-consciousness and therefore terrorize it. Within this terror, Artaud’s notion that violent imagery “crush[es] the sensibility of the spectator” comes into play—creating a kind of hypnotic trance. And if the practice of imbuing an effigy with the metaphorical self does activate neurological networks, as Brennan claims, then burning a forty-foot effigy on a large pyre in a ritualistic manner will likely provide an opportunity for transformative experience in which the body-consciousness—the *self*, or the *I*—is on fire.

The purificatory properties of Need-Fire physically affect the body. This is also dismissed by these thinkers as symbolic performance. If fire warms the muscles, ensnares the senses, and opens the pores of the skin to sweat, then it must affect the psyche as well. There is a physical change that occurs through the experience, which is why it is used ritualistically. This is highlighted by Bachelard in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, “Through fire everything changes. When we want everything to change we call on fire” (Bachelard 57). In this tangled mess of: the way fire affects the body-consciousness biologically; the personal stories of awe, community, and transformation Burning Man participants connect to the structures; the encounter-scenes performed, and the slippery evolution of the Western psyche unpacked by Pyne—lies the key to the process of the affects that the large-scale burns at Burning Man have on participants, and how they create the possibility for personal catharsis.

It is important for me to insert a note here on the violent imagery that large-scale burns provoke, and how it is attached to the American psyche. Controlling fire is one of the ways that Western empires overtook rural communities, and collected people into urban space. Its properties are still used to create firearms, bombs and other warfare artillery. It was used to colonize Native American tribes in the United States<sup>18</sup>, and it was used as a lynching tactic to oppress and terrorize black people in order to maintain a racist status quo throughout American history. This plays an unacknowledged, and at times unseen, part of cathartic experience at the large-scale burns.

---

<sup>18</sup> The Native Americans practiced slash-and-burn techniques and during the period of colonial takeover when tribes were confined to reservations, their practices were confined to smaller areas than they had previously migrated over, forcing them to change their agricultural practices and therefore their overall culture.



### *The Man Burn*

The first time I watch *The Man Burn* I am viscerally shocked by the intense heat and the sheer scale of the fire. As I take off my coat, I think about the mythology attached to effigy burning, and how it symbolizes ancient pagan practices of purgation, but I also have images of the witch trials, and racist lynch mobs flashing through my mind. This experience is not necessarily the kind of joyous rapture I had been expecting. The fire and the raucous crowd provok me to sift for images to contextualize what I am experiencing—like I am caught in a series of hypertexts. I am being stimulated by the vibrations of the imagery, the heat, the smells, the sounds, the desert, and the danger of the sparks floating over the crowd. What is interesting is that the images that come up are ones given to me by the media, by the words of history books, alongside images I have in my personal memory. These include when my friend's house burned down the street when I was a girl, and the wildfires on the ridges of Los Angeles County that forced me to evacuate my home. I am using my abstracted existence to try to frame my experience of *The Burn*. My only image of a large fire that had a semblance of ecological purification was a patched together version of a famous wildfire that burned through Yellowstone National Park in 1988 and eventually led to the current practice of allowing wildfires to burn naturally unless they threaten structures of human life. By sifting through these images I am facing my relationship to them, including the formidable parts of my (white) American heritage. In one sense, it does impel me to see myself as I am, and strike a heroic position, as Artaud speaks of, because I re-conceive myself as someone who includes these images, images *I* had not associated *myself* with but am transported to none-the-less through the hyperlink of the art image to scenarios of a

human figure on fire. The visual of the fire is affecting my thought process, it challenging me to think about death by fire. All the while people are dancing, spinning poi and other fire performances, running, chasing, laughing, chanting, singing, talking, and hundreds of art cars are loudly pumping music—the amount of sensory information overloads me and I feel like I am high of drugs even though I am stone-cold sober. I think to myself, “What is going on here? This is weird and cultish. Freaky.”

After *The Man* falls, I join thousands of others and move closer to the fire, the images flashing, shifting, and my body heating up from the massive fire. Several hundred people circumnavigate the flames playing music and chanting; appropriating some nostalgic notion of ancient festival—or of Carnival, or Mardi Gras. I sweat from my close proximity to the fire and the other bodies. As I join the circling, the flames quickly draw me in and threaten to burn my skirts—my skin. My breath syncopates to the rhythms vibrating through me. The circling movement of our bodies, the mix of sonorous vibrations, the imagery (actual and imagined), and heat of the fire produce a hypnotic trans-like state of consciousness. One that is more permeable than usual—a fire affect. I am consistently negotiating my clothes and my body with the edge of the hottest fire I have ever come this close to in my life. I am trusting the rhythm of the group to not accidentally shove me into the fire. I cling to the fear of being burned and I am afraid, yet I am fascinated by the fact that every time I am close to its edge a space of safety opens up for me to step in. The people around me are aware of my presence and the group as a whole is in synch like an incredibly well-executed Grotowski exercise. This is the moment that I can choose to radically recognize my interconnectedness with the biosphere and my immediate society; leading me to become

intensely aware of the suffering of the world; and according to Artaud, be moved to strike a heroic position through this cathartic experience. Or, I can deny that these images inevitably attach me to the web of the universe and simply go on partying into the night. I allow myself to continue to feel the flow and I am moved into an altered state. I feel as if *I* am metaphorically on fire; as if my body-consciousness is being unhinged and the lines between *myself* and the universe are blurred, like I am the air when it waves in extreme heat. I give into the awareness and let go of my preconceived ideas of what is supposed to occur.

I circle for about an hour. I am not sure actually time seemed to suspend. After circling I slow to a halt, sit, and just stare into the flames into the night. After a while I lay my head down on the playa next to my coat and my camelback. The ground is warm and feels cozy like a campfire. Images of my family percolate through my thoughts as I rest a while. Upon waking I see a naked couple slow dancing in an open spot in the flames. The music is all gone at this point and the fire has died down quite a bit. A couple near me smiles at my waking, and I feel the sense of home the greeter welcomed me to when I passed the gate. I am grateful for *The Man Crew* who worked tirelessly all week so I could have that experience. It was a good first Burn.

While I concede that few Burning Man participants may enter these trance states where they are transformed because they are ensnared by the cumulated environment; a majority of those claiming personal transformation at Burning Man consciously choose to engage in radical personal reflection at the event through experiences like mine described here. Simultaneously, *The Man Burn* is also a spectacle. Many participants do not affiliate with the unity produced by the monumental icon of the culture but rather

experience *The Burn* in a state of abstraction. The creation of this ritual also relates to historical acts of creating space for experiencing fire's powerful transformational properties.

### **Building a Fire Place**

On the day *Burning Man* begins, Crimson Rose (*Burning Man's* Managing Art Director), creates a fire from the sun and lights the eternal flame that burns in a cauldron in front of center camp all week. This is the fire used to light *The Man* on fire Saturday night, and is the symbolic hearth of the event. In 2011, I attended this commencement ritual. There are approximately thirty people gathered around the cauldron near center camp. Two people hold either side of a metallic dish that reflects the sun's heat and lights Crimson Rose's torch. She is bare breasted dressed only in a long black sarong skirt with flame print on it and work boots. Once the torch is lit, she ceremoniously circles the cauldron, she speaks about the importance of the eternal flame; how it is kept burning all week until it is transported to the center of the city to light *The Man*. It takes approximately twenty to thirty minutes for the process to complete. Most of the time is spent waiting for the fire to ignite. The lack of immediate gratification tests my, and other participants', patience. I debate leaving. The appropriation of the Greek eternal flame mythos evokes a white western scenario from the start of the week, and though it subsequently makes me think of the Olympic flame I feel as if I am disconnected—abstracted. Nonetheless, I think about the city as a place intended to host fire practices.

From the Vestal-Fire pits of the West (places where the eternal flame was kept), to the Hiwatari Matsuri (Japanese Fire-walking Festival), to Las Fallas in Valencia, Spain (a traditional festival where political art is burned), to Homa (the famous Vedic

fire ceremony in India); the process of building a place where fire is to be revered is a trans-cultural practice. At Burning Man this *place* is the city itself. It frames the ways citizens encounter each other, the art, fire, and the desert. In *Chaos, Territory, Art*, Elizabeth Grosz writes about the Deleuzian concept of framing in relationship to visual art:

The frame is what establishes territory out of the chaos that is the earth. The frame is thus the first construction, the corners, of the plane of composition. With no frame or boundary there can be no territory, and without territory there may be objects or things but not qualities that can become expressive, that can intensify and transform living bodies (Grosz 11).

Her theory, that the evolutionary human tendency is to use this framing process as a tool for survival, which she draws from Deleuze and Guattari's notion of *refrain*—compliments Henri Lefebvre's idea that the social work of humans is to practice producing space. It is possible then, that Burning Man is an attempt to gather artistic framers in an effort to create transformational spaces where participants act as both the performer and the spectator in an effort to affect—and be affected by—the variation between smooth and striated space—between the desert and the city.<sup>19</sup> The city space itself is designed to foster interactivity between participants, the anthropogenic *and* non-anthropogenic environments, and between the participants themselves.

The City Design section of the Burning Man website delineates the city structure and territorializes, through Grosz's notion of framing, the desert landscape. Beginning

---

<sup>19</sup> See chapter 14 of *A Thousand Plateaus* for Deleuze/Guattari's definitions of smooth and striated space I am working from.

from the golden stake<sup>20</sup> where *The Man* is constructed, the rest of the city is marked with sign posts that have a nomenclature based on a clock face and alphabet letters as mentioned in the photo essay. Also mentioned, the radial streets are named for each half hour from two to ten o'clock with *The Man* at the center, the *Temple* at twelve o'clock, and center camp at six o'clock. There are no streets or encampments from ten to two o'clock. This space is called the keyhole and is intentionally left open to include the chaos, or smooth space, of the desert. Only installation art is sparsely placed in this area of the city to striate the space. The variance of striation frames the way in which the participants navigate the space both tangibly and psychologically—it is a sensorial experience.

*The Man* serves as a visual navigational tool for the citizens as a way to map where they are on the playa, and as a monumental space as mentioned earlier. *The Man* icon is also representational of Barthes's description of the city center in *The Semiotic Challenge*:

... the center-city is experienced as the exchange-site of social activities and I should almost say of erotic activities in the broad sense of the term. Still better, the center-city is always experienced as the space in which subversive forces act and are encountered, forces of rupture, ludic forces (Barthes 200).

This proves to be evident at Burning Man. It is a hyper-sexualized environment and promotes ruptures in normative thinking. The naked couple I awoke to in the early hours after The Burn are a testament to that.

---

<sup>20</sup> "The entire city radiates out from this single, metaphysical point in space. At the beginning, an ordinary wooden stake was used to break ground but soon the builders began to ceremonialize the action, using a 'golden' stake to make the axis mundi" (Harvey 2008b) (Bowditch 278).

*The Man* structure at the city center is used as a hub for social activity and becomes the hearth of the city at the official end of the event on Saturday night—*The Man Burn*. Designers zone the streets so that the various camps are encouraged to congregate in the center which stimulates community activity, or Lefebvre’s spatial practice. Among the various activities many marches (including the Billion Bunny March from chapter one) go through *The Man* base at some point in their performance. *The Man Burn* then, takes on a meaning to the participants. It becomes the hearth Gary Snyder describes in *Practice of the Wild*, “The heart of a place is the home, in the heart of the home is the fire pit, the hearth. All tentative explorations go outward from there, and it is back to the fireside that elders return.” (in the epigraph of this dissertation) (Snyder 28). This hearkens the common phrase used by Burning Man participants to greet each other, “Welcome Home.” It also becomes a commons between Burning Man internal communities.

By navigating the artistically territorialized smooth desert space the participant develops a constant practice of oscillating between the experience of striated and smooth space. This experience provokes Brennan’s notion of the transmission of affect through vibrations, along with the desert’s biological demands placed on the participants’ bodies, to create a heightened awareness of the interdependent relationship between the body and the environment on a less intense scale than the fire trance described above. *The Man* is built specifically for this purpose—to create community through pleasurable activity. He is made of wood and neon, then lined with highly flammable burlap soaked in wax. It is designed to burn continuously. The pyre is built to aid the process. BRC itself is a fire *place* that ignites from its center in an attempt to *swail* its citizen’s souls.

Of course, this is largely dependent on the principle of participation at Burning Man. The encounter-scenes that ensue in this monumental center use both the Brechtian and Artaudian forms of catharsis. These seem antithetical to each other but in fact they produce different intensities of transformation. This is what McLuhan might call hot and cool theatre.

### **Participation Congregation**

As mentioned, radical participation requires an affiliation with community even if just for the week. This is achieved through Lefebvre's notion of monumental space, neo-tribal performance, and a shift in the participant's consciousness from spectator to congregant. Roy A. Rappaport's *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* delineates between ritual/congregation and drama/audience. He asserts that audience members do not participate in drama, they watch and listen, and though they may be emotionally moved they are not transformed (in status). However, the congregation does participate in ritual and may be transformed. This difference is important because, as he notes, there are certainly dramatic forms that engage audience participation; the passion and mystery plays, and experimental theatre such as Schechner's Environmental Theatre. Though Rappaport does not consider these to be particularly successful:

Success has been limited, perhaps because it is very difficult to transform audiences composed of strangers whose status as such is protected by rules of etiquette to such a degree that to address a person in an adjacent seat is regarded as forward, into congregations. Congregations are usually composed of people who know each other but even if they don't they can make certain assumptions about each other from the mere fact that they are participating together in a liturgical order with which, in contrast to the situation of an audience watching a drama, they are usually thoroughly familiar. They can assume that they stand on common ground and as such are members of a common community (Rappaport 41).



By simply choosing to attend Burning Man the participant is subsumed into the city space and is considered a congregant even if they deny that charge. They are there and they are creating Black Rock City even if they only play the role of the tourist. Those that readily accept the Burning Man ethos lean more toward Rappaport's notion of congregation. This participation in the ritual performances then provokes the Artaudian inspired action of theatre discussed earlier. Another *fire place* at Burning Man where this is quite evident is *The Temple Burn*.

### ***The Temple***

Visionary David Best designed the first *Temple* in 2000. Rachel Bowditch's 2005 interview with him, in *On the Edge of Utopia*, tells the following story. On his way to Burning Man that year, a young man who worked with him named Michael Heflen was killed in a motorcycle accident. Best had brought materials to build something during Burn Week, which became a structure dedicated to Michael. During the construction, over eighty people volunteered to help him, and it became a site for the release of grief and loss. He called it the *Temple of the Mind*.<sup>21</sup> He has since designed temples for the playa in 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2007, and 2012—all of which have served as a place for mourning, among other activities. As shown in my personal narrative below and in chapter four, the Temples consciously invite participants to write messages on the walls to be burned in relative silence on Sunday night, the final night of Burn Week. Participants often write messages of grief for the loss of a loved one, or leave ashes, letters, photographs, personal items, and tributes. Some Burners refer to the

---

<sup>21</sup> This group of volunteers became known as the Temple Crew over time.

*Temple* as “the mausoleum,” and is a place for reflection. Some other messages left in the *Temples* include those of: love, joy, politics, forgiveness, celebration, nostalgia, peace, and countless others. There are often humorous comments, in protest of the seriousness, or sacredness of the space, which is typical of the ever present (and commonly celebrated) subversive behavior at Burning Man. Also, participants perform traditional sacred rites at the *Temples* such as getting married. Some are legally binding marriages and some are performed for fun.

There are camps that offer ceremonial services for those who wish to be married at Burning Man. When a marriage is being performed at the *Temple* participants who are not a part of the ceremony will likely join in the celebration provoking the play of the art of the *Temple*—this play is generally welcomed. Some even perform the roles of supportive family or friend. The participant may not know (or care) if the marriage is a legally binding contract, or simply a performance of the rite of passage. In fact, a respondent to one of Lee Gilmore’s online surveys describes this happening at his wedding at the *Temple of Joy*, “We exchanged vows and were blessed beneath *The Temple* and amongst friends and people we didn’t even know but who were right there with us, some in tears, as we were” (Gilmore 97). This activity merges theatrical performance with ritual and blurs the lines between the two. This blurring is evidence that *The Temple* is an artistic site for performative utterances, speech acts, and for Judith Butler’s notion of performativity. Further, because of this blurring, the affective qualities of the performances are enhanced, particularly because the participants are interacting—they are spect-actors. These are basic components of the Theater of Affect highlighted by *The Temples*.

The years that Best did not design, other Burners took up the task. This supports the argument that many citizens feel that *The Temples* are a necessary and important part of BRC. A *Temple* has been installed and burned each year since 2000. The population reached 25,000 that year, and as it increases (69,613 in 2013), *The Man Burn* becomes more of a spectacle. I agree with Gilmore's assessment about the function the *Temples* serve. She writes:

...given the direct invitation, participants are now much more likely to leave their personal offerings and sacrifices at the Temples rather than at the Man, as was once a common practice. That interactive and personal ritualization is explicitly encouraged at the Temples, whereas interactivity with the Man is generally restricted to the artwork of its elaborate base, also produces a more powerful, immediate, and moving experience at the Temple's bonfire than at that of the Man. [...] A key difference here, I believe, is that participants are given just enough direction regarding the structure's meaning to remain free to devise their own individual experiences and interpretations, unweighted by the constraints of dogma (Gilmore 93).

Interacting with *The Temple* is both private and public. By assigning meaning, they are performing a ritual drama, which might afford them a more Artaudian cathartic experience, or at least one that is deeply moving. This was the case for me in 2007, 2008, and 2013.

### **Burning the *Temple of Forgiveness* 2007**

On Sunday night, a few thousand people gather around *The Temple*. I sit in silence waiting for the fire to burn the words and intentions I had inscribed into the structure earlier in the week. I had lost a relationship of seven years, and I had asked for forgiveness for my cruel and mean behavior toward the end of it. After walking through it and being moved to tears several times throughout the week, I choose to use *The Temple Burn* ritual to burn away the guilt and anger I had developed toward myself. As

flames crawl up the walls, an opera singer sings “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” highlighting the emotional resonance of those gathered, and reminding me of my childhood. I had been in *The Wizard of Oz* five times as a child the hypertext, which is of course Dorothy’s like “There’s no place like home,” is resonating through the crowd, but it takes me further into thinking about the narrative of the story because I had performed it so many times. I recall her heroic journey to squelch the flames of the Wicked Witch set her up as a hero to protect her friends from getting killed—the Scarecrow from getting burned. The metaphors resonate as I play a concoction of the film and different actors I had worked with as the vibrations and tones of her singing pulse through me. I am also flashing on family Thanksgiving celebrations where watching the film on television is a pastime. This, in combination with the heat and visual of the flames shift the rhythms of my heart and affect my senses. I am reminded that Grosz examines this process of the transference of vibrations, through art, as energetic forces which affect the body:

The relation between systole and diastole is precisely definable in terms of rhythm, not as measurable or mathematically definable external and finalized form but as duration, uncountable, always in process, open-ended. Rhythm is the force of differentiation of the different calibers of vibration that constitute chaos, the body and sensation, and their interlinkage (Grosz 84).

The affects are palpable but the catharsis is yet to come. The structure stands aflame for quite some time before it collapses. I begin to release crying loudly and heavily. I realize others around me are emoting as well. A man yells, “I love you! I love you!” in a voice cracking with tears. I hear sniffing noses, and a few people sound as if they are keening. This gives me a sense of safety, and a confidence that I am supported

in the midst of my personal undoing. I need the people around me because I feel a bizarre nausea from the thick sense of ugly and embarrassing self-pity I feel. Yet, I know that I need forgiveness from myself more than I did from my ex. I begin to visualize the community's collective performative ritual. I think, "this theater at its roots—this is *proto-theatre*." This *Temple of Forgiveness* is art collectively created through materials, participants' interactivity/performance, and fire.

Then a miraculous thing occurs; a moment of Victor Turner's *spontaneous communitas*. A wave of vocal release begins pulsing around the crowd, like 'the wave' in a baseball stadium, but instead of a joyful cheer and standing with arms in the air—thousands of us yell loudly, screaming cathartically, using our voices to transform our suffering as the wave circles through the crowd surrounding the flaming *Temple*. I suddenly am aware that my suffering is communal. That we are all suffering in different ways and this is some kind of group expulsion through vocal release. This unites the crowd with a sense of healing, and is a communal acknowledgement of the possible cathartic release *The Temple* offers; making it one of the more venerated rituals performed in Black Rock City (BRC)—the collision of the various affect frames is intense—hot theatre indeed.

After the structure collapses I walk to the inner circle with thousands of others, and begin circumnavigating the flames like I had the night before for my first *Man Burn*. It is hot—really hot. The heat is so intense that I began to wonder if my skin would burn. As we walk around fire a man next to me is playing a stringed instrument I don't recognize and another man is throat singing. I feel faint and the bodies around me look as if they are warping in the heat's waves. I allow my body to move to the rhythms

surrounding me as I had the night before, and I feel my facial skin crisp-dry from the heat. I let loud sounds come out of my body as I move, and some of them are percussive. I feel myself again in special relationship to the others around me. I practice Grotowski's techniques again, and begin to use the sounds to release the physical tension that had been constricting my heart for the months after I lost my relationship. I start to circle around myself as we move in the larger circle around the fire further appropriating Artaud's assessment of the Balinese trance dancing he writes about in *The Theatre and Its Double*. The dizzying affect makes me nauseated and I begin to cry and yell again. I yell at myself, at my anger and guilt until I am about to throw up. I stop spinning and step out of the group and fall to my knees. I am brought back to my rational self-judgment because I know this experience of catharsis is not provable. I know it is faith based. I know it will seem self-centered and I feel an overwhelming sense of embarrassment. I start to consciously slow my breath to avoid throwing up and I slowly begin to steady. I hear someone play *Taps* on the bagpipes, which completes my cathartic process and returns me to rational consciousness. By allowing myself to embrace the performative aspects of the *Temple* art installation, I am radically participating in Burning Man as an event, and that level of participation is required for this kind of catharsis. This *Temple Burn* experience also included a lengthy narrative of the loss of my Grandmother who I had watched pass just months before but I have chosen to reserve that part of the experience in this dissertation for personal reasons, but suffice it to say that the intertwining between the loss of my relationship and the loss of my grandmother brought on an awareness of what Buddhists call *emptiness*.

### **Temple Space Production**

Creation of sacred space for public rituals related to death and transformation is practiced in many cultures, and temples are particularly prevalent structures for these activities. I argue here that participants' general, even nostalgic, conceptions of the functions of temples in the default world frame the performance of personal dramatic rituals in *The Temple* at Burning Man every year. Walter Burkert's argument in his essay "The Meaning and Function of the Temple in Classical Greece" is useful when examining the various mementos that participants leave in the *Temple* (Fox 27). He writes that Greek temples and sanctuaries were built from the, "reflections on the ancient and widespread custom of 'setting up' gifts for the gods," but that additionally they were, "...public places designed for the display and preservation of *anathemata*." (Burkert 43)<sup>22</sup>. He writes, "A Greek temple is the sumptuous and beautiful *anathema* by which a *polis*, yielding to the divine, demonstrates to herself and to others her existence and her claims" (44). A kind of permanence is achieved by placing objects in the temple. It connects the unites the community in a kind of communal suffering and works to combat the abstraction of spectacle. Because *The Temple* is an art installation, and publicly displays people's messages and tributes, it does link to Burkert's assessment. However, the objects are intended for consumption by fire. This acknowledges impermanence and/or a form of transcendence, which is more akin to Vedic or Yamabushi fire rituals. The Burning Man fire rituals are often compared to those of Beltane, Guy Fawkes Night, Zozobra, and the burning effigies of Ravana at the

---

<sup>22</sup> Burkert defines *anathemata* as "a form of display, of public show-off which, in contrast to other such forms, does not raise rivalry or envy because the objects are no longer private property, while remaining documents of pride and abiding fame." Ibid. p.43. Anathema also indicated a curse. There is an investigation into these variant definitions that is not within the scope of this chapter.

Dussehra festival. While the Vedic tradition does include a rite of passage where a temple structure is built and burned, these other festivals focus on the burning of effigies.

Another festival that bares similarities to Burning Man is the *Las Fallas* festival in Spain, where political art is burned all week, culminating in a central burn on the *Nit del Foc* (Night of Fire). Xavier Costa describes the experience of the *crema*:

The *crema* is unstoppable in this *Nit del Foc*: the art becomes fire again, and it glorifies the return to its origin. The fire and lights of man, as art, transform the fire of the world, of its materials. The sculptures, as well as those already tired *falleros* and *falleras*, mysteriously return its figure and energy to the earth: they generate infinite new forms in the flames until they become ashes. This is the experience of the finale. A *fallera* said: “You wish you could stop time but you cannot.” A *fallero* insisted: “It is a renewal, that night; we all have died (Costa 288).

The use of fire to burn words and symbolic objects fuels the probability of catharsis as described in this personal account. This description is more akin to the experience of *The Temple Burn* than *The Man Burn*.

Both burns create community albeit through different forms of catharsis—some more transformative in a deep personal way (Aristotle or Artaud) and some that create community through Brechtian pleasure. The deeply personal process available in the large-scale art burns activates the specific labor Debord mentions that is lost in the spectacle. This shifts the consciousness of the participants into a ritualistic and performative mode of being. *The Man Burn* practices the power of effigy burning and monumental symbolism in order to cauterize the community. By building BRC in the desert and enacting these fire practices, participants are also requiring themselves to radically interact with their symbiotic relationship to the biosphere, which counteracts



their false sense of separation from nature illuminating new pathways of connection.

Whether those pathways are actively taken is another discussion.

### Chapter Three:

#### **Mutating Black Rock City: Documentation, Simulation, and Cultivation**

*It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours.*

~ *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard

*It is not realistic to propose that live performance can remain ontologically pristine or that it operates in a cultural economy separate from that of the mass media.*

~ *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, Philip Auslander

*The people are the city.*

~ *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare

Burner, Kim Chihuly writes:

This year's man was amazing. It was created by the team of Debbie Trilling, Elfod Nemeth and Gypsy Paz on building and scripting, with Lorin Tone on the sound effects, with help from Aleeta Zelin. It too [sic] 800 primis to build him 71 meters tall at the highest point (2011 Burn) (Chihuly).

She is not describing *The Man Burn* in the Black Rock Desert. She is writing about *The Man Burn* in *Burning Life*, which is a virtual version of Burn Week in the online world *Second Life*. This virtual event is an official regional burn according to the Burning Man Project (BMP), and it takes place in real time. The BURN2 website reads, "The BURN2 Team spreads Burning Culture and Burning Man Ten Principles year round in Second Life, culminating in an annual major festival of community, art and fire in the fall - a virtual echo of Burning Man itself" (burn2.org).

Burning Man grew up with the internet, which launched in the early nineties around the same time that Burning Man moved to the Black Rock Desert (1993). Many early burners were computer savvy, hailing from the Silicon Valley including a contingent from Google. In fact Fred Turner writes in his article "Burning Man at Google: a cultural infrastructure for new media production," "In 1999, for example,

Google's founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, decorated Google's homepage with a Burning Man logo to alert users that they and most of their staff would be going to the festival; both have attended regularly since then." (F. Turner 75). So it is not surprising that *Burning Life* was created as an extension of the desert event. I am interested in what *Burning Life* and other mediated events reveal in discourses of liveness, documentation, and performance.

It is my contention that Burning Man culture is generated via the framing of affect—or Theatre of Affect, as discussed in chapter one. The attempts at documenting Burning Man experience through technological mediums such as writing, photography, film, and video inevitably fail because replicating the live performance through recording devices is not possible because the process drastically alters it in form. However, I assert that these kinds of copies or documentaries are not simply part of the archive, but are also continuing or cultivating the performance—not separate from it. Further and maybe more obvious, computerized mediums (webcasting and virtual worlds specifically) used to simulate Burning Man experience are also doing this. Paradoxically, the archive works both as a *stagnant* space of historicization and as a *live* space of performance. Two conflicting epistemologies create this phenomenon, the historicization space uses a linear time frame and the performance space uses a divergent one. Through a discussion of the recently released documentary *SPARK A Burning Man Story*, BURN2 in *Burning Life (Second Life)*, and Hug Nation (a webcast by burner John Halcyon Styn), this chapter examines the use of recording and virtual technologies as mutations of the Burning Man Project that continue and cultivate the live performance, making BRC a unique nomadic city performance. Further, this

chapter seeks to broaden the traditional ontology of live performance to one that embraces divergent time/space theories. I begin by situating this idea within the discussion of the nature of live performance, documentation, and representation.

### **The Discussion**

Peggy Phelan's well-discussed interventions into theatre theory in *Unmarked* prove a useful place to begin my discussion. She writes:

Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance (Phelan 146).

I agree with Phelan that live performance cannot be saved or replicated exactly, but recorded documents are not "something other" than performance. They are part and parcel to the event they have recorded. They are the performance continuing albeit altered and not often intending to continue it, because the photographer, filmmaker, or other artistic creator becomes part of the collaborative performance whether his/her participation is intentional or not. Their participation counteracts Phelan's notion of disappearance bringing it to the forefront of the conversation.

In 2003, ten years after Phelan publishes *Unmarked* (and ten years of internet development), Diana Taylor argues that performance "as ritualized, formalized, or reiterative behavior" does not disappear, but is apparent in what she calls the repertoire, but still she asserts that a recording of a performance is not performance. In *The Archive and the Repertoire* she writes:

The live performance can never be captured or transmitted through the archive. A video of a performance is not a performance, though it often comes to replace the performance as a *thing* in itself (the video is part of the archive, what it represents is part of the repertoire.) Embodied memory, because it is live, exceeds the archive's ability to capture it (Taylor 20).

Claiming the video's content alone is "part of the repertoire" sets up the live performance as a kind of 'original real representation'—because it is embodied—indicates that video recordings and other documents are not embodied, and that the content is separate from the form. I will return to the notion of embodiment and liveness, but first I want to discuss how this idea of 'original real representation' fits into the circulation of representations.

From Jean Baudrillard's point of view there is no 'original real,' there is only representation. In this sense, live performance is something that is constantly moving through various forms, and is also a process of accumulation. The nebulosity of the circulation of representations leads to defining performance by its form or medium, which supports Taylor's claim. However, if there is no 'original real' to form a representation from then live performance cannot be an 'original real representation' either. The notion that there is an 'original real representation' is steeped in the assumption that mediated forms are disembodied and therefore less valuable than experiencing the body-to-body performance. It also dislocates the body of the filmmaker, videographer, photographer, etc. from the live performance by assuming that the intention of recording renders her/him not a part of the live performance's audience.

Both Phelan and Taylor's arguments are latent with the idea that the *intention* to save, capture, or replicate live performance through recording technology indicates what the recording actually does, which in Phelan and Taylor's view is archive it into the annals of history. I argue that regardless of intention the practice of recording is more akin to the concept of "Rep & Rev" forwarded by Suzan-Lori Parks in her essay "Elements of Style," than to saving or capturing it. Parks describes Rep & Rev as, "...a structure which creates a drama of accumulation" (Parks 9). While her work is an examination of dramatic structure and race theory the concept, taken from Jazz music, highlights the way in which repeating and revising phrases evolves and transforms the structure of history through performance. The *intention* to replicate, placed in the act of recording, does not negate the properties of performance or participation inherent in the making and viewing of these documents. Instead, the recording repeats and revises the performance adding the recording to its overall representation—it accumulates through form, not passing through form—form is not stable.

To claim that recordings are not part of the live performance they record is to deny the performative qualities of these mediums and the interactive experience of the spectator. When a film is made of a performance the medium repeats and revises that performance. The filmmaker chooses angles, he/she zooms in or out, or stays static. Whether it is a "good" performance is not my topic of investigation here, but am instead focused on the recording *as a performance* that extends the performance. The filmmaker chooses where to focus, and which content will be recorded or hyperbolized by close ups or other specific camera shots. This process connects the archive to the repertoire because it is an embodied experience both to record and to interact with the recording.

During the recording experience the filmmaker participates in the live performance as they record. They participate in the performance by using the camera to transform and shift it into a new format. It becomes a tentacle or mutation of it—connected to it—alive with it. The *liveness* of the live performance is mutated through technological tools, but it does not disappear, nor is it saved. Each time an audience member interacts with the recording the experience is created anew. In fact, in certain instances this particular mutation is preferable to the body-to-body live experience.

For instance, many sports fans prefer to watch games live on television because the camera angles allow a kind of close-up experience that is not physically possible when attending the game in the stadium or arena. The televised medium allows for playback, slow motion, extreme close-ups, and other camera angles that make the performance of the game often more visceral than the experience of “being there.” In fact, stadiums began inserting jumbotron in the stadiums and arenas to include the excitement of the televised representation. The expansion of the audience through television technology is considerable enough that it alters how the game is played: making time during the game for commercial breaks, new rules using instant replay where the referee has a more accurate call based on the recording of the athletic performance, and half-time entertainment to name a few. The impact of the technological mediums transform the live performance, highlighting pathways of interconnectedness. This brings up the discourse of *liveness* as real-time experiences versus recorded ones (or live-to-tape). The invention of DVR recording technology further transformed this experience by allowing the television audience to start their experience at a later time, fast forward through commercials, and interactively use

rewind to replay part of the experience. The fact that the audience is able to actively participate in how they experience the performance through technology calls into question what it means to be live and present.

Of course live artistic performance has already begun to incorporate this level of interactivity with technology. In examples such as the *Olympic Opening Ceremony* and live television shows like *Saturday Night Live (SNL)*, which tapes with a live audience, the studio audience's experience is certainly transformed through the cameras, but this transmutation does not lessen it, nor does watching from another location, the technology simply allows for a variety in forms of audience experience. The value of these experiences is subjective and determined by the audience members themselves.

These two examples are useful because the *Olympic Opening Ceremony* would occur despite the television audience, though likely on a smaller financial scale, but the production of *SNL* might not. It is largely dependent on its mediated audience and this is where the proverbial line may be drawn defining the *Opening Ceremony* as a recording of a live performance and *SNL* as television. They are defined by their medium, not their content. This is where the recording seemingly "comes to replace the performance as a *thing* in itself" as Taylor argues above. When attending a taping of a live production like *SNL* the audience is aware of the camera's participation, which positions them as part and parcel of the performance itself. Their experience, particularly their laughter, is now *recordable*. While this is true with the Olympic audience as well it is not presented as such. Whether in a sports game, a televised live performance, or a taping of a live performance, or at a play that is being recorded; the



actors, the audiences (live and mediated), camera operators, and editors are all participating in the creation of the live performance, which returns us to Baudrillard's circulation of representations as something constant and accumulating not linear. This winds the discussion toward the topic of liveness and time.

Much of performance studies discourse privileges human body-to-body presence over audiences' experiences with recordings or mediated events by making it precious because live performance is seemingly ephemeral, and because it is tied to a linear time structure and a corporeal experience of place. Phelan continues:

The pressures brought to bear on performance to succumb to the laws of the reproductive economy are enormous. For only rarely in this culture is the "now" to which performance addresses its deepest questions valued. (This is why the now is supplemented and buttressed by the documenting camera, the video archive.) Performance occurs over a time which will not be repeated. It can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as "different." The document of a performance then is only a spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present (Phelan 146).

For Phelan, performance is bound and delineated by linear time and human body-to-body presence.

Taylor's repertoire is comprised from enactments of embodied memory. She writes that the repertoire:

...enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge. [...] The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by "being there," being a part of the transmission." (Taylor 20).

I argue that live performance is not more valuable because it is 'ephemeral,' it is valuable because it is participatory. Further, its liveness is not defined by linear time or by 'being there,' it is defined by interaction and the intertwining of experience between

performer, performance, and spectator. Performance's *life* is in interaction, and that liveness is cultivated through mass participation via recording and simulating devices, not disappeared or disembodied.

In *The Medium is the Massage*, or *Mass-Age* as he often reframes, Marshall McLuhan famously writes, "Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men [sic] communicate than by the content of the communication" (McLuhan).<sup>23</sup> He then uses the example of the mass participation via television in President Kennedy's funeral as an example of the power that television has to "involve an entire population in a ritual process" (McLuhan). Here, McLuhan shows not only the way the medium transforms the live event but how it is participatory. In other words, how the mediated performance is not antithetical to live performance nor does it separate itself from the performance to become something else, it simply restructures and extends it. The idea that technological tools usurp or replace the live-performance is imbricated in the discussion about the power of the recorded image.

In *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* Jerry Mander writes, "Once television places an image inside your head, it is yours forever." He then takes his reader on a mental exercise:

Try to remember a time when you first read a book or heard a radio show and then later saw a film or television program of that same work. [...] You created your own internal image of the events described while you read or listened. [...] ...when your self-produced image was made concrete for you, your own image disappeared. [...].

In any competition between an internally generated image and one that is later solidified for you via moving-image media, your own image is superseded (Mander 241-242).

---

<sup>23</sup> The word message was misspelled in the printing of the book and McLuhan decided to keep the title, though it is commonly referred to as *The Medium is the Message*.

While a mediated image seemingly usurps the imagined one, what is happening in Mander's scenario is not the surrogating of the imagined image, but the mutation of performance through the mediation of image-based technology. Mander's argument is that this process blunts the human imagination. His exercise would also occur if the reader saw a live performance of the book, heard a radio show, or another representation of the scenario. In fact the book itself is already a representation. Participation and affect create the process he is discussing and the technologically produced images simply concretize them in a longer lasting format. It is also commonly argued that body-to-body live performance is *recorded* mediation itself, which I will touch more on a bit later. Even though the mediated image concretizes an imagined one (imagined by the filmmaker for instance), it does not destroy it. Mediated images like imagined images also fade from memory, the image only returns when the spectator interacts with the representation again, which creates a repeated and revised performance through the act of participation.

Phelan also addresses a concept of loss in her chapter on portrait photography

*Developing the negative: Mapplethorpe, Schor, and Sherman.* She writes:

The "unconscious" image behind what is displayed gives the photograph the illusion of an interior. Thus to return to the distinction between the gaze, the eye, and the lure: the "given to be seen" of the image is seized by the gaze but the eye remembers the negative underneath it (the eye's own self-portrait cannot be seen). The lure is the possibility of joining the two together, a lure encouraged by the ontological joining of the negative and the developed image. The reproduction of the photograph, like the reproduction of sexual difference, takes two and makes one. That one is the impression left on the photographic surface; the one left unmarked/undeveloped is the negative image (Phelan 65-66).

The ontology of photography unpacked here by Phelan illuminates the participatory nature of the medium of photography—of how photography performs. The gaze (both the photographer and the audience of the photograph) imagines the interior of the subject. This is not so different than imagining the life of a character or a performer in a live performance. I am not disagreeing with Phelan about the politics of what is lost in the interpretation of the negative, or that there is a loss of information within the seeing of the image, but there is always already information lost in any representational form including live performance as my discussion of Mander highlights. Phelan, and Mander's, concern over the loss of the original real is more a product of Baudrillard's idea of the "catastrophic implosion" of meaning and medium and an attachment to linear time structures, than the limitations of photography, television, or other image-based mediums.

Baudrillard writes:

The media carry meaning and countermeaning, they manipulate in all directions at once, nothing can control this process, they are the vehicle for the simulation internal to the system and the simulation that destroys the system, according to an absolutely Möbian and circular logic—and it is exactly like this. There is no alternative to this, no logical resolution. Only a logical *exacerbation* and a catastrophic resolution (Baudrillard 84).

The catastrophic resolution leads only to the meaningless beginning of the same system in Baudrillard's assessment. The real is versional, and live performance operates within the same cultural economy as mediated performance as noted by Phillip Auslander in the epigraph of this chapter.

The threat that seemingly faces body-to-body live performance is a fear of a loss of presence, that somehow it has a purity in form more valuable than forms that are re-

*ording* it. The etymology of the word record comes from the concept of learning by heart, or recitation by heart (*cor/cordis* is heart), to re-present it again from memory. *Cor*, the Latin for heart, indicates an embodied systolic rhythm quality to the word *re-cord*. When someone says, “I’ve got to record this” it is commonly in a situation where the systolic rhythms of the heart are elevated, which accounts for the large volume of recordings performed at Burning Man. A youtube.com search for Burning Man yields over 700,000 results. Recording then, is a way to *re-present* the heart rhythms connected to the experience of the thing being presented or imagined. *This* is the ontology of performance, it is the process of framing interaction and affect—and pushed to its limits—posits the idea that the heart rhythms represented in live performance are the repertoire from which recordings perform and are experienced. A mediated *re-cording* of a representation is just as subject to that ontology as a body-to-body performance. Its mediation, or mutation, does not turn it into something else. It is a different framing device but the rhythms, the beats, are evident and shape the form as much as the form shapes the content, like Parks’ Rep & Rev changes the form of history.

Phelan’s argument for performance being defined by disappearance is predicated on the idea that we are bounded and separate from each other, which is antithetical to the idea of liveness itself, as it is connected to the interaction of rhythms—to participation. As Rebecca Schneider reveals in *Performing Remains*, “For all their apparent disagreement, both Phelan and Auslander position the body performing live as not *already* a matter of record. Neither is it a means of recording” (Schneider 92). As discussed in chapter one, Schneider goes on to discuss the way gesture and performance are cross-temporal and are therefore records based in a divergent time structure. She

writes, "...mimesis and its close relative theatricality are not threats to authenticity, but, like language itself, vehicles for access to the transitive, performative, and cross-temporal real" (Schneider 30).

The gesture to reproduce or document *liveness* does not "betray and lessen" the ontology of performance, it simply re-*records* it. It is not a gesture of destruction or an undervaluing of liveness or presence. On the contrary, it is to cultivate it, savor it, and to put it into one's heart in an effort to re-perform it through a mediated form. When a spectator or viewer interacts with the document she/he is experiencing the performance and therefore continuing its liveness through their participation. In this sense, documentation *is* representation and reproduction, making the difficulty Phelan is examining more about politics of loss through mutation rather than loss *because* it is mediated. This is predicated on the ambivalent nature of the archive as it is both a space for historicizing and a space for interaction. This ambivalence and the discussion of performance, documentation, and liveness presented here came to my awareness (in relation to Burning Man) during my experience watching the most recent "official" documentary *Spark! A Burning Man Story*, as recorded here.

### **Documentation: SPARK! A Burning Man Story**

In 2013, I read about this documentary in the *Jack Rabbit Speaks (JRS)*, which is an e-newsletter sent to Burning Man participants. While the film's title indicates that it is simply one story of many the film is promoted as an "official" documentary in that it chronicles the behind-the-scenes work of the BMP. I click on the link and go to the film's website. A quote from *The New York Times* is on the cover of the splash page for the film, "An oasis of creativity blooms in Spark. Since we can't all attend Burning

Man, we can be thankful for Spark, which is probably the next best thing!” This quote positions the film as an experience of Burning Man, not the “original” but definitely an experience *of* it. It is commercially luring the spectator by comparing it to “being there.” Upon reading this, I immediately feel an essentialist panic. I fear that this documentary will dictate “what Burning Man is” to the audience, and since I often privilege the live performance experience myself, I readily feel the loss Phelan talks about. My attachment to the corporeal experience in the desert wants the film to be “good.” I want it to be accurate but it cannot be because accuracy is subjective in the circulation of representations. This is the filmmakers’ contribution to the Burning Man community and culture, and it is birthed from the heart rhythms of BRC as a *re-cording* in an effort to cultivate the culture.

My reaction is also a recognition of the process of historicizing. I think about Suzan-Lori Parks’ “Great Hole of History,” and the sheer amount of information and material that is not recorded by anyone—let alone those in power. The loss Phelan discusses in *Unmarked* and simultaneously Baudrillard’s collapse of the medium and message are resonant as I prepare myself to watch the film. I am forced to accept that the BMP is now consciously writing the history of Burning Man as they want it told, and a majority of people’s stories are left out of the official archive, which only compounds the paradox the Burning Man community faces because we are a decommodified commodity as discussed in chapter one. *SPARK! A Burning Man Story* is branding Burning Man culture to the playa-adjacent world and, my fear is that this documentary will adhere to the linear time story, which has already become the authoritative one. It will be easily eschewed as Rebecca Schneider describes, “For those

who invest in linear time as the only time, any event or act re-enacted can be dismissed as “just” or “merely” theatrical—spasmodic, hallow, and inconsequential to the long march of empiric time” (Schneider 30).

The BMP does have space on their website dedicated to stories from participants in blogs and on their youtube.com channel, which is also officially curated. The creation and ownership of this curated archive illuminates the BMP’s “Burning Man Everywhere” agenda discussed in chapter one, and the curated archive then becomes the selected model for further cultivation by the volunteer populace because of Roach’s It-Effect—if their photography or videography is selected then they get cultural capital because they are chosen to represent the culture by the inventors of the culture. As I discuss in chapter one, this is antithetical to one of the main tenants of the event, which is that the city is created by the participants, when in fact the city is created by the people with the approval of the BMP who best represent their idea of Burning Man. If I buy a ticket and spend thousands of dollars and hundreds hours for the opportunity to build BRC then the fact that my work is not included in the archive relegates me to the disappeared that Phelan and Taylor discuss in terms of the officiated cultural history—the archive.

Yet, if the archive is also considered part of the ongoing performance, if it is not bounded and separate from the performance and it becomes part of Baudrillard’s “vestiges that persist” beyond Empire quoted at the top of the chapter, they are simply part of the series of hypertexts that constitute the performance of Black Rock City. The curated archives can then be seen an attempt to sift through the massive amounts of data and metadata produced about Burning Man to create a coherent archive that is



representative of Burning Man according to the BMP. This historicizing also further performs the event because it solidifies and cultivates the narrative for participant access in the repertoire. There are other forms of archives and repertoires for Burning Man—not curated by the BMP—like participants personal photo galleries (actually the walls of one of Google’s buildings is lined with Burning Man photography) (F. Turner 74), art collections, Facebook pages, regional events, webcasts, and build parties to name a few. So to Burners like myself, *SPARK!* became a mutation of BRC supported by the BMP.

The *SPARK!* website details:

*SPARK: A Burning Man Story* is an engaging behind-the-scenes documentary about the dreams and challenges of Burning Man and its unique culture of participatory art. [...] *SPARK* takes us behind the curtain with Burning Man organizers and participants, revealing a year of unprecedented challenges and growth. When ideals of a new world based on freedom and inclusion collide with realities of the “default world,” we wonder which dreams can survive (*SPARK: A Burning Man Story*).

There are several documentaries on Burning Man that have been shown at Burning Man film festivals across the U.S., and a few labeled “official,” but this is the first film with high-end production value to make its way to film festivals. Marshall McLuhan would describe it as a hot medium. The BMP’s participation in this documentary is politically significant to the event because it dictates how the filmmakers portray the specific structure of the narrative of the event. Despite my wariness, I decide I want to see this documentary-story because I am interested in how the filmmakers will craft the narrative of the Burning Man Project. The film is also attempting to make Burning Man more accessible through the film medium, which means that there will be audience

members whose first experience of BRC will be this particular mediated mutation. To be honest, I do not think I would have attended it if I were not writing this dissertation. I knew what it was going to be and though I knew it would be skillfully executed and I would enjoy watching the journeys of the artists and organizers it followed (I did) the story it was going to tell seemed to be geared toward non-burners—or toward gaining new participants—an incredibly beautiful and enchanting film about how Burning Man changes lives intended to entice new converts. It was a recording of a story I already knew in an effort to produce the cultural narrative forward into a more mainstream world so it seems like commercialism though its intention is not to be.

Nevertheless, I look up the information about how I might see the film and discover that I can only see it in a movie theatre, and it will only be in a theatre if enough people from you-name-it town arrange and sell out a screening of it. The filmmakers collaborate with Tugg, which is an internet platform for people to arrange a screening of films they want to see at local movie theatres. The idea that one must interact with the art—and in this case the distribution of the art—is certainly layered into Burning Man ethos. Soon after, I read on the San Diego Burner list serve that *SPARK* is coming to San Diego. The regional community has participated in fashion and I purchase a ticket, which makes me feel like I am contributing to the community because my purchase helps the film screening happen. The Tugg is successful and our screening is scheduled. I begin to wonder about how the burners who coordinated the screening will craft the environment. Will they be in costume? Will they transform the space in any way? Will it be like going to a “default world” movie? How will this compare to other

Burner gatherings? Will the people perform the community and engage others to do so as well?

I arrive and chat with others in line about Burning Man, about whether or not they go, or are going to BRC in Nevada this year. The affiliation with the event invites this conversation and community interaction, but the awkwardness of being in line for a “default world” movie is pervasive. A few people show up in Burning Man inspired clothing but most are in “civilian” clothes for lack of a better term. I hope to feel the sense of community that surrounds other regional events, but this feels disappointingly distant. The screening does not create a TAZ, or feel particularly inclusive, participatory, expressive, or radical in any way—it does not feel like Burning Man culture. I take my seat next to an excited young man who went to Burning Man for the first time in 2011. We have an animated conversation about his personal transformation in BRC and his joy is palpable. He is prepared to engage with the film as a way to provoke his memory as Phelan suggests.

The theater goes dark and the film begins. Throughout the film my neighbor often sighs with delight and mutters “yes... yes.” He oohs and awes at the sweeping shots of the playa desert and the large scale installation art. He coos at the scenes that show the deep feelings of personal connection, and nods his head in solidarity with the stories of the artists who struggle and sacrifice time, energy and money to create the structures of BRC. He asks me if I “saw that” throughout the film indicating various art pieces, meaning did I “see that” in person not did I see it in the film. His interaction connects me to the film in an unpredictable way because it generates conversation between us that is directly connected to Burning Man, to BRC. About half way through

the film he hooks his arm into my arm in camaraderie invoking a level of physical comfort with strangers that is common in BRC. My experience of the documentary/story is one of community, and one of performance because his gesture of hooking arms is a hyperlink to the Burning Man repertoire.

The filmmakers did highlight the conundrum the Burning Man Project faces by filming interview footage about the shift of the event to an LLC and the acceptance of being a radical entity within the dominant power structure. The BMP had to make a decision to become the state—to conform, or to stop and let the federal and NV state government entities control the ensuing anarchy. The experiment of intense radical expression had to be managed because it was not managing itself.

Then an interesting thing happened. Underneath the words of the interview with John Law who chose not to join the organizers who chose to form an LLC to manage the event is saying, “It’s a great event, but it’s anything but a controlled event. It’s a controlled, professionally mounted, corporate owned event which makes money” is the images of *The Man Burn* cycled on the screen, huge fire works, the giant fire explosion, sounds of screaming, shots of participants sitting and spectating in awe, a young woman with a personal camera on the shoulders of another participant. Then the shot pans to the night sky and the sounds fade out as the interview with co-founder Michael Mikel is saying, “During those early days that John Law is referring to, yes, there was a tremendous amount of freedom, and we can always go back to that, to that small group but you’re never gonna go any further than that.” Then the shot pans up from a dark screen to a light shining out of 2011 *The Temple* where there is written memorials and a photo of a grey haired woman sitting on the edge. Then it cross fades to the tattooed

wrist of a young woman's arm to show her meditating posture before panning up to her weeping face. This shot is done to slow pulsing music and another montage of shots of *The Temple* are shown as Mikel says, "In order for us to survive and get along on this planet we need to engage everyone." This is said as the camera pans over the crowd of participants sitting in the center of *The Temple* from above. Then as it pans up to look out of the top of *The Temple* windows he is saying, "We have to engage thousands, millions of people, and I think that, for me, is the most important freedom." Then a wide angle time-lapse shot of *The Temple* slowly pulling back with the crescent moon sets in the back is shown over his words, "This is significant. It's a significant thing. It's important. We have to do it. We are giving our lives to it. It's that important." Then the music continues under a cross fade between two time lapse sequences that close in on *The Man*. Then it cuts to an artist dealing with the buracracy on a personal level, then a shot of her at her art fundraiser. The narrative is selling me the explosions of *The Man Burn* as the representation of "controlled anarchy" and the profound experience of *The Temple* as the image that represents deep personal engagemet and the cultural future of the event, and then leads back to *The Man* icon as a representation of the entire culture. My young neighbor is in tears.

As the film winds to an end I notice that the filmmakers choose to show the culminating event of Burning Man as *The Man Burn* and not *The Temple Burn*. My stomach sinks and my eyes roll in distaste as my fears of the BMP controlling the narrative of the event and perpetuating the facade that the culture is owned and created by the people comes true. While much of the film has left my memory at this point, that deliberate oversight sears into me. It solidifies my fear that the film is a historicizing

document for the “official” archive rather than a performative one. The sinking feeling also happens because this story negates a large and significant part of the Burning Man narrative simply because the BMP relegates *The Temple Burn* as something separate from the Burn Week narrative they create and stage (because it is financially), and while many of the burners who watch the film will know that this is done, those who watch this film as an experience of Burning Man (or “the next best thing”) will be denied a significant part of the story according to the majority of the citizens of BRC. The BMP and these filmmakers who chose to perpetuate their narrative are excluding the “volunteer” addition to the linear narrative which is *The Temple Burn*. The BMP are so attached to the having *The Man Burn* be the culmination of the event that they do not see the citizens work as a part of their creation. They consciously separate themselves from the participants by doing this, which is antithetical to the Ten Principles they hold as the cultural backbone of Burning Man. This is a product of creating a subversive event in a capitalist economy. The environment and power structures co-opt the event.

However, I am particularly interested in the experience of community I shared with my young neighbor. That part of the event is more visceral now than the imagery or stories told in the film. I cannot recall much of the film, a few topics, a few beautiful camera shots, but I can remember the hug I had with my neighbor after watching the film together. I can remember looking into his eyes and smiling at each other and exchanging hopeful words of seeing each other out there. The film event is simultaneously performative and historicizing. It beautifully honors, historicizes, and chronicles the BMP’s story and the stories of a few burners (all who volunteer at an extraordinary level), and it creates a space for Turner’s *communitas* discussed in chapter

one. Both are cultivating the live performance of BRC through linear and divergent time epistemologies. The filmmakers only promoted the film in this way for about a year. It is now available for rental online for \$4.99 or purchase for \$19.99, but the choice to organize a Tugg screening is still available. While, I found the communal screening frustrating at first I now recognize that the in-theatre experience was more interactive, even if it was on a mild level comparatively.

The amount of archival materials on Burning Man is at extensive (largely because of the internet). The materials exist in traditional forms such as writing (articles, books, newspapers, and other various print media), photography, film and video (official and unofficial), and materials such as trinkets and other schwag, costumes, visual art pieces, and memorabilia such as tickets and t-shirts. In non-traditional forms they are evident in blogs, social media sites, Youtube or Vimeo videos, Kickstarter campaigns, and virtual experiences such as BURN2. While participating in the performance of *SPARK* does prove to be interactive and generative of community, the liveness that occurs in BURN2 is visceral in a different way than attending *SPARK*, which I will discuss further, but first I want to address the way in which the interactive experience I had during the showing of *SPARK* is relevant to the concept of BRC as a shape shifting nomadic city space.

### **Nomadic Black Rock City**

In Deleuzian terms, BRC is *becoming-city* through its citizens' use of these media. It travels with them across boundaries of time and space and returns the next year in a similar shape but changed in several ways. BRC is the first nomadic city to travel across temporal and spatial dimensions because it is a city that lives within the

constructs of performance. Put another way, its life is in the participatory performance of the repertoire. Many cities use these media to travel virtually, but BRC does not have a fixed home. The people actually are the city, or more accurately, the people's interactions are the city.

Some of the mediums BRC uses to maintain and cultivate itself are “real” and take place in “real” spaces like: various artistic practices (i.e. installation art, flash mobs, and art cars), decompression parties, and regional events (which occur in multiple places throughout the country and around the globe). Some use written space such as: books, essays, newspapers, magazine articles. And some use virtual spaces including: websites, photo galleries, social networks, podcasts, webcasts, blogs, films, videos. BRC lives within these alternate formats until it returns to the site-specific desert medium during Burn Week the next year where it climaxes and begins again. Its return to the Black Rock Desert lends the performance a calendric structure making it similar to a seasonal rite of passage for many burners. One where they have been, as Victor Turner describes in *From Ritual to Theatre*, “...ritually prepared for a whole series of changes in the nature of the cultural and ecological activities to be undertaken and of the relationships they will then have with others—all these holding good for a specific quadrant of the annual productive-cycle” (V. Turner 25). As the people gather in the desert the electricity of the dispersed city funnels back onto the playa to heat itself up, expire, and rise again ready to shift into another year's cycle of mutation. The annual Burn is an outpouring and ingesting of affective intensity that fuels the community's performance throughout the year, as discussed in chapter two. After this fiery catharsis it mutates and begins again like the turning of the Möbian logic Baudrillard mentions, quoted earlier



in the chapter. This process sets BRC up as a non-traditional nomadic city, and one that is generated via performance.

The performance also bares similarities to medieval cycle plays on pageant wagons, which have a nomadic quality. The ritual of burning *The Man* on Baker Beach was moved (via truck) to the Black Rock Desert. Already there is a mnemonic remain, the vast plane of the ocean is turned to desert. The community builds their chosen contribution, and then moves it to the desert for Burn Week to create the city aesthetic. Many return to their storage spaces to prepare for local decompression events. In this way, burners use their machines, which are commonly transported on large trucks, to perform the city not only on the playa but within their default communities as well. *The Wonder Wagon* mentioned in chapter one attends Seacompression in Seattle, *Abraxas Dragon* (a giant double decker bus based gold dragon vehicle) went to the Jon Stewart rally in Washington D.C. to give a few examples. When the 65,000 or so people make their secular pilgrimage out to Black Rock Desert they come carrying the set of the city in their wagons. This resembles the pageant plays that began in ritual and moved out of the churches onto wagons in order to perform for distant communities.

In the text of *Coriolanus* it says, “The people are the city.” Here, Shakespeare illuminates that the life of a place is in the interactions of the people; that they create the city wherever they are. In the case of BRC, the citizens create the city with a variety of technology. In *On the Edge of Utopia: Performance and Ritual at Burning Man* Rachel Bowditch writes:

The Burning Man community is very active online and participants often record their experiences to share with others, creating what I call the ‘affective history’ of Burning Man. Many theme camps reconvene

through blogs and websites soon after they disperse, to coordinate and organize their camps for the following year. Participants record and document their experiences on personal websites, e-playa (the Burning Man message board; [eplaya.burningman.com](http://eplaya.burningman.com)), or Tribe.net [now closed], a widely used site within the community, full of photographs and personal anecdotes. If you googled ‘Burning Man’ on 1 November 2008, 7,610,000 results would lead you to personal websites and blogs, group websites, media reviews, interviews, and more. Burning Man’s official website [...] is a thorough blueprint of the entire community with hundreds of pages, links, photo and event archives, Ember Reports, bios, personnel lists, rules and regulations, questionnaires, Regional Network listings, a chat board, and many other community-related items. Navigating the site is like navigating the playa—full of sensory overload. In addition to the virtual community, live communities continue to spring up and grow (Bowditch 309).

If the community only physically lives together for one week a year, then when they part, the city parts with them. It disperses, mutating itself into their images, videos, films, art, structures, virtual environments, decompression and precompression parties, regional events, and other forms of interaction throughout the year.

BRC during Burn Week is considered to be a home by many burners, but in many ways that home travels with them so they may set it up in other spaces such as the virtual world of *Second Life*. BRC is constantly moving through various forms and spaces including but not limited to the Black Rock Desert—it is accumulating in Baudrillard’s sense. Its survival depends on mutation. It cannot stay in one form for very long. It cannot exist in the Burn Week form without the desert as I claimed in the first chapter, so it mutates, and the desert is transported in mnemonic devices and codes, making its home in simulacra, simulations, and the repertoire.

Forwarding an ideology through mobile performance is part of the way BRC survives. Its transitory time in each location, and its desire to maintain a community, help define its nomadism. For instance, it can only sustain itself for a short amount of

time in the Black Rock Desert before it is forced to find alternative ways to survive. It is nomadic in the sense Deleuze and Guattari describe:

The nomad distributes himself [sic] in a smooth space; he occupies, inhabits, holds that space; that is his territorial principal. It is therefore false to define the nomad by movement. [...] ...the nomad is one who does not depart, does not want to depart, who clings to the smooth space left by the receding forest, where the steppe or the desert advances, and who invents nomadism as a response to this challenge (Deleuze and Guattari 381).

BRC is forced to move from the Black Rock Desert both because of the State apparatus and because resources are limited. It then occupies alternative spaces such as: allocated storage areas, warehouses, vacant lots, campgrounds, and virtual spaces on the internet. These spaces host the BRC interactive environment in its dispersed form. It is deterritorialized and then reterritorialized in found spaces using different mediums. In this sense, it is always already transmuting in and out of various spaces that are tangible and haptic, as well as virtual and affective, but it has no permanent location, hence the desire to use virtual space to perform it. Spaces are demarcated and given agency for the manifestation of BRC. I must clarify here my use of the term agency.

In Chris Salter's introduction to *Entangled*, he puts forward Karen Barad's notion of *agential realism* as a consideration for understanding the, "complex entanglements among natural, social, technological, and corporeal forces that help shape the world" (Salter xxvii) He describes her theory:

According to Barad, if we are to ascribe agency to nonhuman things we must not see agency as a property of things as ANT and Pickering's material dance do but as a performance in and of itself, much like Butler depicts the performance of gender. As an "ongoing reconfiguration of the world" writes Barad, "agency is a matter of *intra-acting*: it is an *enactment*, not something that someone or something has" (1999, 7) (Salter xxix-xxx).

Using Barad's notion of agency to reexamine the ways in which media entangles with performance, Salter highlights "...situated models emerging in the form of flash mobs or location-based media that strategically aim for an embedding of performances into the urban context, thus transforming the city into a temporally demarcated event space" (Salter xxxv). This demarcation happens online as well and describes the way that BRC is affective within the confines of virtual mediums.

In order for BRC to maintain its life force it must be nomadic, agential, and affective. The participants use media tools to demarcate space and reterritorialize it with their creations. Because they can only do this as long as their resources last, or the State apparatus allows, they simply deterritorialize, and find another space to reterritorialize. If "the people are the city;" meaning their creations and connectivity perform the city then its structure is a performative and nomadic one, and one that lives in more than one space at a time. For instance, the San Diego Decompression Burn (Youtopia) was held the same weekend as Seacompression in Seattle. There were also BRC events in Boston, Chicago, Virginia City and Saskatchewan that weekend. The two weekends prior events were held in Texas, Pittsburgh, Oregon, New Zealand, San Francisco, Georgia, Wisconsin, Vancouver B.C., and in *Second Life*. The weekend after, there were events in London and San Francisco. Each of these cities had space carved out of them for a short period of October so that BRC could occupy it. They occupied it for as long as the regional contacts negotiated with the state apparatus. These manifestations in physical real-world space highlight Salter's theory about transforming urban space into event space but BURN2 created a virtual world that is accessible year around online, one only

needs to be able to build an avatar, so the ease of access is debatable but none the less, it is a space for performing BRC. The virtual world of *Burning Life* is a second home for some burners and the fact that it is in virtual space allows for a different and hyperbolized participation.

**Simulation: BURN2**

In his article, “The Art of Interaction: Interactivity, Performativity, and Computers,” David Saltz writes that interactive computer art installation artists present “...the interactive environment as a work of art in its own right” (Saltz 124). Saltz offers a clarification between what he calls *staged interactions* and *participatory interactions*. He defines staged interactions as works in which, “...performers interact with the system while the audience looks on...”, and participatory interactions as works, “...in which the audience interacts with the system directly.” He asserts that a live performance (staged interaction) occurs when, “The audience regards the performance as an aesthetic object in its own right,” and that participatory interactions, “...are performative when the interaction itself becomes an aesthetic object, in other words participatory interactions are performative to the extent that they are *about* their own interactions” (Saltz 123). Burners intentionally produce a great variety of participatory interactions, like the encounter scenes and regional events discussed in chapter one. Some burners create staged interactions like *Spark* and the participatory interactions occur because the community gathers to engage with each other as spectators. In BURN2 participatory interactions define the art as something that is about the *act* of generating Burning Man. It is in the participatory interactive art that BRC’s liveness

flourishes and the city mobilizes into existence. While staged interactions like *Spark* certainly cultivate the performance of BRC, creations like BURN2 do this more clearly:

BURN 2 is an extension of the Burning Man festival and community into the world of Second Life. It is an officially sanctioned Burning Man regional event, and the only virtual world event out of more than 100 real world Regional groups, and the only Regional to burn the Man!

The BURN2 organization spreads Burning Culture and the Burning Man Ten Principles (<http://burn2.org/ten-principles>) year round in Second Life, culminating in an annual festival of community, art and fire in the fall – a virtual echo of Burning Man itself...so BURN2 (BURN2)<sup>24</sup>.

*Second Life* is an online interactive 3-D virtual community created by Linden Lab. Personal avatars are used to navigate a world created by the participants. Philip Linden began developing the prototype Linden World that became *Second Life* in the late 1990s. In 1999, Linden went to Burning Man. Inspired by his experience, he changed some of the structure of his creation. In 2003, the burners at Linden Lab created a virtual burn, called *Burning Life* (now BURN2), because they could not get out to Burn Week in the desert that year. It became an official regional event, and was transferred over, from joint ownership between the Burning Man Organization and Linden Lab, to a volunteer run regional event in 2010. It still uses *Second Life* software support, but is technically run by burners (BURN2)<sup>25</sup>.

BURN2 burners use their virtual abilities to do humanly impossible tasks such as looking up into The Man Burn from inside the fire. BURN2 burners also create videos of the virtual regional burn, which further record and archive participants' interactions. This is a link to a collage created by BURN2 burner Pia Klaar: [machiniacollage](#) (If you

---

<sup>24</sup> <http://burn2.org/about>, accessed Oct. 2011.

<sup>25</sup> <http://burn2.org/burn2-history>, accessed Oct. 2011.

are connected to the internet you should be able to hold the ctrl button and click this link to see it. If not this is the URL:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOC99f04bk0&feature=youtu.be>).

In this video, many aspects of Burn Week are hyperbolized through virtual technology. Unlike a video game, each avatar is representative of a live-human burner logged on to the site. It is a virtual community, a performance of BRC that is an interactive environment. In this forum, each participant can build their own camp, art piece, or mutant vehicle, and they can help others build parts of the city. They can sign up to perform, DJ, or spin fire. BURN2 takes place in “real” time, and burners are able to chat with each other both with text and voice forums. In the video by Klaar, many of the on-playa images are re-created such as: bikes lit with LED wire, fire spinners, DJs spinning, marching bands, people encountering installation art, the road entering the city, stilt walkers, dancing to electronic music, and theme camps. These are specifically altered in BURN2 in many ways. For instance, an avatar can have a body of an animal, human, vehicle, or robot. The human avatar can have a specially designed skin, or choose to fly, such as the woman spinning with the word Burn. Burners can create floating art such as the spinning sphere near the beginning of the video. This takes the principle of radical self-expression to a different level and the participants use *Second Life* tools to Rep & Rev BRC. The building of the simulated self becomes a work of art that invites interaction. Then during Burn Week in NV there is a camp dedicated to the participants who meet in *Burning Life* where they have the opportunity to meet the other virtual participants in person.

These videos are crafted and shared by BURN2 burners on *youtube.com* in a similar fashion to those made with digital photographic images and recordings of Burn Week in NV. The city becomes a digital vortex of simulated representations and challenges the claim that live performance is ephemeral because is participatory and hosted in virtual space. Further these embodied simulations blur the lines between the mediatized and the live as discussed in the above introduction. While BURN2 burner uses simulations to record, represent, and generate BRC in virtual space, many burners use virtual space in the form of social media to cultivate the performance of BRC.

### **Cultivation: HUG NATION**

I recently watched a webcast created by a fellow burner John “Halcyon” Styn. The webcast I watched was recorded, since I missed the live status time. In the webcast, he asked that I perform the action of taking several deep breaths to center myself, and embrace the community that had come together. He asked that I do so whether watching this live or recorded. This request presents a question about the authenticity of the liveness of this performance. If the webcast is not a real-time interaction, where Halcyon and I can see each other through our webcams, then many would argue that it cannot be considered to be live as discussed above. However, I assert that in the context of BRC as a nomadic city, the status of the hybrid spect-actor confounds that traditional structure as discussed in chapter one. For example, when I interact with this webcast recording I engage with the ethos being put forth in the webcast because I am a BRC citizen, and therefore I am continuing the performance. If I am in *my* present moment acting as a participant, interacting with a recording that is intended to cultivate Burning Man ethos, I argue that it is a *live* performance and one that fosters community building. It is live



because I am creating the performance with Halcyon's video (which has agency in Barad's sense) for myself as the spectator, and to add to the number of people who have viewed the webcast. By adding to the number I am showing that I am part of the community participating in this form and adding to the accumulation of representations that constitute the BRC performance. I consider myself to have participated in that webcast directly even though I was not logged in in "real" time. This particular use of internet and video is different from using the medium to document the past Burn Week, or from social media sites like Facebook for the archive. It is using the medium as a frame to affect the participant, and cultivate Burning Man ethos within the default world. Even the participants who are not burners contribute, knowingly or not, to the performance of Burning Man because they participate in a gesture that links them to Pink Heart Camp. Here's the story.

In 2007, San Diego burner, Halcyon created Hug Nation, which is a motivational webcast that creates, what he terms *digital intimacy* with a weekly virtual group hug. This is a webcast that people logon to and hug themselves while envisioning their connection to the others who are also interacting with the webcast. His audience is comprised of approximately half burners and half non-burners. During Burn Week, Halcyon is the main organizer of Pink Heart Camp. This camp creates events such as the Pink Ride (a bicycle parade for those who love to express themselves in pink); the distribution of coconut milk vegan ice-cream, and a non-virtual Hug Nation hug. The webcast is spiritually inspired by his participation in Burning Man, and his late grandfather Reverend Caleb Shikles. He uses video and live chat to cultivate the

Burning Man Project ethos. He travels in the Hugmobile, which is a twenty-four foot pink RV with painted wings that did a six-city tour to spread love and hugs in 2007.

That being said, he is also the author of a burning blog (Styn, the burning blog), which includes a series of videos about ways of engaging with the Ten Principles, and camping tips specifically for Burn Week. He has created eight websites including: *cockybastard.com* (for which he won a Webby for best personal website); *hugnation.com*, *lifestudent.com*, and *anybeat.com* (now sold) as a way of communicating his message and his curious and impassioned cult of personality. His use of these mediums is not an attempt at documentation of the Burn Week event. Instead, he uses photography, video, art, and costuming from Burn Week to create digital interactive environments that allow participants to cultivate the community, and therefore the city. In one of his photo essays he writes:

When I try to explain Burning Man to people, they sometimes say, "*I'd really like to see that.*" But if that's your attitude, then it's not for you. Enjoy the pictures and stories, but the playa is not a place to "*see.*" It is a place to *be* (Styn).

The majority of Halcyon's websites are interlinked. When entering any of these personal websites (which does not include Anybeat) the viewer encounters a photo of him in his burner aesthetic. For instance, on *lifestudent.com* the main photo near the website title is a photo of him hugging himself with pink hair, goggles, and a long black tee shirt that reads "love more, fear less" on the arms when they are placed in the position of hugging himself. This image is created with the BRC aesthetic, and he uses it to forward his message. He proudly proclaims his Burner status, and uses it as personal inspiration to create his webcasts, et al. By doing this he is demarcating BRC space in

the metaverse for the performing of BRC. The fact that the webcast does not use the narrative of Burn Week challenges the idea that this is a continuation of BRC, but by using the gesture of the hug Halcyon is certainly mutating Black Rock City through an encoding process. He is taking the people's interactions from the Black Rock Desert and reterritorializing them in the smooth space of the virtual world via chat room webcast.

In my interview with Halcyon he talked about his process of discovering that chat rooms—particularly video chat rooms—actually create space. He was working for citizenx.com on the creation of webcam communities when he realized the power of virtual community. He finds that people feel a level of comfort being in a virtual space because their identity can be crafted by using an avatar or a fake name, and they can leave at any time without feeling the awkwardness of leaving a tactile room. While this may be debatable, it certainly proves useful in a virtual community like Hug Nation. His audience can access the webcast at any time because it is recorded and they can also log on and experience it in “real” linear time. My feeling a part of Hug Nation's weekly hug while watching the recording reveals the power of Rebecca Schneider's cross-temporal gesture. By performing the hug in tandem with Halcyon's video I am not just hugging myself. I am participating in a group activity that uses recordings to include those unable to log on in “real” linear time. By doing this Halcyon is accessing what Schneider calls syncopated time, where time is not tied to ephemerality, it is not a progression but rather a constant. In her explanation of *performance of the past as now* she reflects on how technology illuminates a divergent time construct:

All of this might reflect the fact that in a daily world of screens and wireless proximities to everywhere, we are rarely exactly “in time” or “in place” but always also capable of multiple and simultaneous elsewheres, always a step or more behind or ahead or to the side, watching through open windows being watched, performing ourselves performing or being performed (Schneider 25).

In this sense, when I log into Hug Nation’s weekly hug I am crossing space and time to participate in a gesture that links me to the virtual community of Hug Nation. Simultaneously, I am participating in the continuation of BRC through performing the gesture of the hug because this hug performance is part and parcel of Pink Heart Camp’s giant group hug at the end of its annual Pink Ride. Schneider describes how Civil War reenactors do this with the past, “It is as if some history reenactors position their bodies to access, consciously and deliberately, a fleshy or pulsing kind of trace they deem accessible in a pose, or gesture, or set of acts” (Schneider 37). The Pink Heart Camp burners who regularly participate in the virtual Hug Nation hug have access to this kind of mnemonic relationship to the hug gesture through Halcyon’s virtual community. He uses the repetition of the gesture to continue and cultivate values that are largely influenced by his experiences at Burning Man, and through this repetition he is generating a palpable and honest experience of love and joy because of the gestures’ power to create these emotions. Just as I experienced with my neighbor when I watched *Spark*.

Hug Nation welcomes anyone into the community and because many of the participants are burners—and if the people are the city—then Hug Nation is, in this sense, cultivating the performance of BRC. Hug Nation is not tied to the narrative of Burn Week as seen by *Spark* or *BURN2*. It is about the affective interaction of the people

who forward its ethos, which I argue is creating the Burning Man culture in a non-linear way.

It is my contention that all of these examples are mutations of BRC that help constitute its ongoing performance making it nomadic. The fact that there is a large body of representations that perform BRC through multiple mediums makes BRC nomadic. The documentation made for a more traditional archive such as *SPARK* is just one story of the millions of stories that define BRC, though it is one that illuminates the paradox between Burning Man ethos and its capitalist structures. Yet, the gathering of the community to experience the staged interaction carves out a space and provokes interaction through imagery and memory. The simulated performance of BURN2 demarcates virtual space to specifically host the participatory community of BRC, including the BMP and the citizen's narrative of Burn Week in NV. The social media community building activity fostered in Hug Nation cultivates the performance of BRC through repeated performance of gesture making BRC continually alive through performance in divergent time and space.

**Chapter Four:  
Ah La Peanut Butter Sandwiches!  
or the Psychonautics of a Theatre Artist at Burning Man**

*...before Burning Man is an art festival or a ritual of radical self-expression, it is a party— an uncorked hoodoo bash.*  
~Erik Davis, *Nomad Codes*

*Perhaps we are terrified to discover that our “rationality” is itself a kind of faith, an artifice, that beneath it lies the vast territory of the unknown.*  
~ Daniel Pinchbeck, *Breaking Open the Head*

A tall young man in a purple body suit runs up to us waving his arms. I remember talking to him in his raft shaped art car when they gave us a ride to the port-a-potties. “Hey! Hey!” he yells. “Hey! You guys *walked* all the way out here?” he asks in shock. We had taken a long walk out to the deep playa, about 2.5-3 miles from our camp and he had ridden out in his art car. I say, “Yeah, it’s not that far actually.” With emphatic concern he says, “You guys could have died out here!” He hugs us all and expresses his thankfulness that we are all alive. A huge smile crosses my face as I realize his consciousness is being affected by the desert expanse and the heat, and while we know the distance we walked is not life threatening the combination of desert-death scenarios and the vast landscape are playing out in this young man’s behavior. I have no idea how his state of consciousness has been altered. I can only guess: drugs, sleep-deprivation, heat exhaustion, or just plain old Burning Man affect, and it doesn’t matter because his experience encompasses us and we were all affected, and that affect shows itself in a group laugh and numerous hugs. We hug him as if we had been in danger and we reassure him that we have indeed survived.

Curiously, when we set out to walk those miles to the deep playa we had taken on a persona. We discussed how we were like desert walkers, nomads, or wanderers. It

was an embodiment of fantasy, and we were prepared to make the journey safely. We had water, food, comfortable walking shoes, hats, and light-weight shawls to protect our skin from sunburns. We too were playing a hypertext of a scenario inspired by the desert's landscape. So, when he came running toward us our scenarios collided and what transpired was an encounter-scene of reunion and relief.

This interaction between the desert expanse, heat, repertoire of desert scenarios, people, and possible intoxicants are a product of what Teresa Brennan terms the transmission of affect. Brennan claims she is:

...using the term "transmission of affect" to capture a process that is social in origin but biological and physical in effect. The origin of transmitted affects is social in that these affects do not only arise within a particular person but also come from without. They come via an interaction with other people and an environment. But they have a physiological impact. By the transmission of affect, depressing energies these affects entail, can enter into another (Brennan 3).

Within this framework, the affects of the emotional state of the young man in the purple suit are transmitted into us via our social interaction and vice versa, and the desert's affect is working on us all. The vastness of the visual landscape and the heat are at the forefront of these affects, and the ludic forces of BRC invite us to play out encounter-scenes based in desert survival scenarios. The culmination of these affects are enhanced by altered states of consciousness (be it the desert expanse, sleep deprivation, intoxicants, or what have you). If he had been in a normative state the encounter-scene would not have occurred.

The way this young man is affected exemplifies the way that Black Rock City's ambiance affects participants' states of consciousness. As I discuss in my earlier chapters, it is my contention that spect/actors at Burning Man frame affective flow

between bodies (human and non-human) and environments with scenarios (or hypertexts of those scenarios, explained in chapter one) from the repertoire, and in turn create encounter-scenes that performatively cultivate the culture and event space. This particular encounter-scene is heightened to a mildly irrational state and embodies a hypertext from the desert-survival scenarios of the repertoire therefore creating Theatre of Affect. Encounter-scenes such as this one are common in BRC, and the city is consciously designed to cultivate them. In many ways they grow out of what I call the psychonautic affect, or said another way, the affect created by the large section of burners who come to BRC to explore the limits of human consciousness.

Stories of transformation abound at Burning Man and I am exploring how the psychonaut culture contributes to this phenomenon in this chapter. Psychonautic experience has an undeniable presence in BRC. Everyone who goes is subject to altered states of consciousness whether they choose to be or not; not just because of the extremes of the desert and fire discussed in earlier chapters but because Burning Man, in many ways, is a culture of psychonauts. In a blog post by Reverend Dr. Malcom Clemens Young titled “Religion at Burning Man” he writes, “I talked about God with Vedic priestesses, Unitarians, yogis, Quakers, entheogen voyagers, Episcopalians, Hindus, Roman Catholics, shamans, atheists and Zen teachers” (Young). These are just a few of the gamut of psychonauts who gather at Burning Man. Not that all participants are psychonauts themselves, but that the resulting cultural impetuses are a product of the psychonautic affects of those who are, and of the subsequent environment they create. Burning Man, according to the BMO, is dedicated to shifting the consciousness of the status quo to one that reflects Burning Man’s cultural ethos. The choice to have the



event in the Black Rock Desert annually is certainly the most obvious example of using the event to shape experience, and therefore consciousness.

Let me clarify my term more specifically, a psychonaut (from the Greek *psychē* and *naútēs*) is a sailor/navigator of the mind/soul. It is a common slang term originating in the 1960s and 70s for a person who uses various conscious-altering techniques such as ingesting psychedelics, hallucinogens, entactogens/empathogens (substances that produce empathy, love, and desire for tactile sensation), and entheogens (substances used to explore the divine or spiritual realms); meditation, trance, lucid dreaming, sensory deprivation, and shamanic ritual to explore human consciousness. In the case of Burning Man, I would add *play*—or theatrical encounter-scenes—to this list of conscious-altering techniques because when a participant reaches into the repertoire and embodies a scenario through play they are choosing to explore an altered state of consciousness through the process of pretending, playing—acting. Just as many meditative and ritual practices employ the use of imaginary circumstances to access altered-states (such as the Buddhist practice of *chöd* discussed later), when a participant performs an encounter-scene she/he is using imaginary circumstances to permit her/himself to perform behavior that is outside of her/his everyday practices (drama therapy relies on this). The bike riders who pretend to rob the *Wonder Wagon* discussed in chapter one are exploring the consciousness of a stagecoach robber from the Old West. This is not to say that these states are as intense as hallucinations, Shamanic ritual or the like, but they can be. The harder they play the more radical their participation and the more transformational their experience. This is all to say that psychonauts are not just people who use illicit substances—in fact most of the techniques are legal—but

because the phrase is generally connected to the use of illegal substances, I wanted to clarify my broader use of the term here. Another important distinction is that the intention of psychonauts is to explore consciousness, not to “escape” their world. I would like to note here that by rational I a state of consciousness that is dedicated to problem solving, logic, and defining what is “good” for the production of Western culture. There are so many participants who claim to go through personal transformation at Burning Man—or because of their participation in Burning Man—that I cannot help but think that the ambiance of BRC more readily supports personal transformation than normative spaces.

Of course, intoxicants do play a part in socializing BRC as a place for psycho-activity. In *Stairways to Heaven: Drugs in American Religious History*, Robert C. Fuller discusses the way that social space for what he calls “*unchurched*” spiritual exploration has historically been created around intoxicants. For example, he discusses the importance of coffeehouses to the Beat poets and the counter-cultural activities of the 1960s and 70s. They were places for discussions of such topics as metaphysics and existentialism. The draw to coffee as a stimulant for spiritual and counter-cultural conversation created gathering places for these discussions. Fuller claims:

...caffeine clears the way for the brain’s own stimulants—neurotransmitters such as glutamate, dopamine, and the endorphins—to do their job without interference. [...] Caffeine enables us to appreciate the exhilaration that emanates from nature itself; this, in turn, enhances our aesthetic rapport with our surroundings in such a way that we might see common things in a new and more vibrant way (Fuller 135).

It is interesting to note that the Black Rock Café, which is located in Center Camp is one of the only things you can purchase with money at Burning Man (the others are ice and RV pump service).

The creation of social spaces dedicated to exploring consciousness at Burning Man is widespread. Some obvious examples are the Fractal Planet, Hee Bee Gee Bee, and Sacred Spaces villages, which offer classes such as “Shamanic Death & Rebirth Ceremony,” “Partnered Breath Work,” “What is Tantric Sexual Healing and Is It for You?” “Psychedelic Medicine: A Path to Prescription Use,” and “An Introduction to Archetypal Cosmology.” These examples are listed in the *What Where When* guide for Burning Man 2013 (Gazetas, 2013). The variety of psychoactive activity in these spaces and other city spaces, including the installation art such as *The Temple*, cultivates an overall ambiance of transformation.

In this chapter, I unpack the ways in which the psychonautic affect creates this ambiance of transformation—or affective flows of transformation—at Burning Man using affect, performance, and theatre theories; psychonautic research and literature; and collected personal stories (auto-ethnographic, and otherwise). Yes, the stories are long but they are the evidence and must be given their due respect. Further, I argue that this psychonautic ambience is a catalyst for transformative experience and therefore a major contributor (for better or worse) to the cultural milieu of Burning Man. This is not to say that everyone who goes to Burning Man has a life-changing experience or participates in psychonautic activity, nor is it to say that all of these transformative experiences are positive and happy, it is rather an investigation into the creation of psychonautic Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZs) as defined by Hakim Bey:

The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself before to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, *before* the State can crush it. Because the State is concerned primarily with Simulation rather than substance, the TAZ can “occupy” these areas clandestinely and carry on its festal purposes for quite a while in relative peace (Bey 99).

The whole of BRC might be considered a TAZ but I would argue that the presence of the NV State police prevents that. The TAZs I am investigating here are the ones created by psychonauts: the weird, the hee bee gee bee, the magical, and the intoxicated—the ones that seek to disrupt the status quo approved consciousness on psychic and metaphysical levels. To do this with some structure I am looking at three categories of affective framing: the meditative, the substance-induced, and the playful/theatrical. These TAZs are the ones that “fill the air” with the possibility of personal and cultural transformation. Though meditative and play/theatre activities have certainly challenged the status quo consciousness historically, just including the category of people who use of illicit substances requires defense.

### **Setting the Psychonautic Precedent and the Politics of Consciousness**

The difficulty that U.S. based psychonauts who find value in the use of these illicit substances for academic research face is the demonization of them. As Daniel Pinchbeck explains:

In the mid-1960s, most of the known psychedelics were outlawed, and the mainstream vogue for consciousness expansion ended soon after. In the next decades, the media repeatedly associated psychedelics with blown minds, wasted potential, and social chaos. The notion persists that to dabble in psychedelics, to trip, is to risk madness (Pinchbeck 2).

A majority of the academic research on the use of conscious-altering substances has been done in anthropology, religious studies, and sociology because of its investigation

into Shamanic cultures that use them ritualistically and entheogically, such as in the works of Mircea Eliade, Jeremy Narby, Wade Davis, and Paul Devereux to name only a few. Robert C. Fuller's book, mentioned above, is among a handful academic books that look at the social use of drugs in American culture. The research has also been kept alive in the famous controversial work of psychologists such as Ralph Metzner, Timothy Leary, and Richard Alpert (Ram Dass) who were fired from Harvard for their investigations. Clinical psychiatrists such as Rick Strassman (*DMT: The Spirit Molecule*, the first study of psychedelics in a generation), neuroscientists such as Oliver Sacks (*Hallucinations*), and non-profit research organizations such as the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) show the continued interest in the properties of these chemical and natural psychedelic substances in the empirical sciences. A particularly provocative study done by cognitive archeologist David Lewis-Williams argues the connections between Paleolithic cave art, Shamanistic altered states of consciousness (including intoxicants), and the evolution of human consciousness. Of course another main body of fertile research, if you'll permit me to call it that, is in non-academic literature, experiments, and subcultures focused around the use of these substances. It is in the psychonautic explorations of ethnobotanists and pharmacologists such as Alexander Shulgin and Terrence McKenna, poets and story-tellers such as Aldous Huxley, Dale Pendell, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Tom Wolfe, and Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters (the group that formed around Ken Kesey and experimented with psychedelics), and Hunter S. Thompson. It is also evident in the more recent (1990s-current) rave, festival, and teknival subcultures, of which Burning Man is certainly a part. All of these researchers have been met with

backlash and labels of “disreputable research” because the work itself destabilizes what Graham Hancock calls the “alert problem-solving” state of consciousness.

Now, Burning Man has groups of psychonauts that practice one or many of the conscious-altering techniques mentioned above, but it also has a large section of participants who do not carry this intention to explore consciousness with much seriousness or even at all. As Erik Davis says in the epigraph of this chapter, Burning Man is a party—“a hoodoo bash”—therefore the seriousness often associated with techniques of consciousness exploration is intertwined with the ludic forces of play and the unabashed seeking of pleasure (including, as Brecht would say, the pleasure of Aristotelian catharsis).<sup>26</sup> It is also intertwined with the mainstream’s devaluing of unapproved altered states of consciousness. However, Fuller discusses the importance various drugs play in modes of social bonding in the profane sphere. Bars, dance clubs, coffeehouses, and hookah cafes are examples of places created to foster social bonds and are allowable as long as they are responsibly used to contribute to a productive workforce. So even the consumption of these approved substances within the context of Burning Man could be considered egregious by mainstream society.

Of course, I am facing several other challenges in this examination, aside from the mainstream’s demonization. First, the amount of intoxicant experimentation and/or other altered state practice at Burning Man is not calculated or measured so making these claims depends on the general acceptance that a large section of the participants partake in these practices and have some kind of transformative experience, which is

---

<sup>26</sup> See #4 in Brecht’s “A Short Organum for the Theatre” in *Brecht on Theatre*. (Brecht 181)

not provable. Also, because of the mainstream judgment and legal repercussions participants are reluctant to admit to these practices in any formal way. So, I am arguing this chapter based on this common generalization.

Second, few authors have dared to delve into the role the psychonautic affect plays at Burning Man creating a lack of previous research done by Burning Nerds (the self-given nickname for scholars who write about Burning Man). The use of ritual at Burning Man in regard to transformative experience has been well explored by Lee Gilmore in *Theatre in a Crowded Fire* and Rachel Bowditch in *On the Edge of Utopia* but not the use of conscious-altering substances. Erik Davis's chapter in *Nomad Codes*, which is also published in *Afterburn*, (an academic essay collection) and Daniel Pinchbeck's chapter in *Breaking Open the Head*, which reaches to an academic audience but wouldn't be considered a strong academic source, are the only academic examinations on the psychonauts who use illicit substances at Burning Man I've found in my research. Partially, that is because there is no clearly defined data about its use so it is difficult to quantify, and partially because the BMO discourages representations of Burning Man that focus on drug use (and rightly so) as a legal and social protection for the community from mainstream society.

However, I am interested in examining this topic specifically because the "cult of intoxicants," as Erik Davis calls them, has a profound effect on a majority of participants at Burning Man. He writes:

Even those hewing the straight edge launch into their evenings like trippers, packing supplies and opening their psychic gates to a diverse but strangely coherent stream of synchronicities, fractured archetypes, visual phantasmagoria, and unsettling transhistorical implications—the

bulk of which will not be recalled the next morning. Wandering the playa in any state, one is simply no longer lord of one's house (Davis 326).

In other words, to be at Burning Man one is always already subject to altered states of consciousness because of the ambiance. This cult's affect is certainly an important contributor to the city's climate and Burning Man's cultural milieu. Without these psychonautic explorers BRC could not exist in its current form. It would attempt to live only in the socially acceptable Western materialist rational consciousness that it seeks to undermine. As a scholar, this proves challenging.

As I mentioned, academics have skirted the topic thus far. They mention it as a presence, or in relationship to law enforcement, but do not examine it per se. Gilmore writes in her introduction to *Theatre in a Crowded Fire*:

I should also state at this juncture that I have chosen to forgo a specific examination of the consumption of either licit or illicit consciousness-altering substances at Burning Man. Although such activities are for some an undeniable aspect of the festival—and at times the subject of gratuitous media attention—my observation has been that drug use is by no means a universal practice in this context. I therefore concluded early in the research process that although there may indeed be some connection between the use of substances that have been called “entheogenic”—that is, engendering an awareness of God or the divine—and participant's reports of transformative or spiritual experiences in this context, a focus on these questions would shift attention away from the inquiries into ritual and cultural performance with which I am primarily interested here... (Gilmore 6).

Of course, ritual (sacred or profane) is not a universal practice at Burning Man either, but it is certainly considered more acceptable by mainstream culture and the academy. This is the general codifier used to acknowledge that the use of conscious-altering substances is a considerable investigation but one that is yet to be done, and one that should be done cautiously.



The problem with writing about conscious-altering substances in the context of this dissertation is that the frameworks in which drug use is legitimized are either religious (like *ayahuasca* rituals in the Amazon regions of Peru), considered “spiritual hippy-antics” (Terrence McKenna, Timothy Leary, Ken Kesey, and other 60s and 70s psychonautic explorers), or are demonized by the psychology of addiction (which perpetuates the misguided status-quo opinion that using these substances will *more often than not* lead to addiction, madness, and therefore the destruction of one’s life). I am not saying that drug addiction is not a valid and important research topic. I am saying that research on conscious-altering substances (particularly non-addictive hallucinogens) is forced into these frameworks by mainstream culture and must either subscribe to, or deflect against, the monolithic question of legitimacy. As Erik Davis notes in *Nomad Codes*, “Anthropologically speaking, though, it’s hard not to see the question of legitimacy as anything other than a mechanism of cultural power through which religious [and I would add government] institutions and lineages define and police their borders” (Davis 190). This is the basis facing the discourse on what is now categorized as the politics of consciousness.

As a person who experiences the world as a theater artist, I cannot help but see the way that these substances shift the playing space of Black Rock City, and therefore work to combat what Graham Hancock calls the *War on Consciousness*, lending a radical anti-mainstream scenario to Burning Man’s milieu. Hancock says in his now infamous TEDx Talk, which TED “deleted the talk from the TEDx Youtube channel [...] where it had accumulated more than 132,000 views, and relegated it to an obscure section of its website surrounded by prejudicial statements intended to bias viewers

against it from the start and ensure no harm was done to the "TED brand" (Hancock web). In his talk he claims:

There's a war on consciousness in our society and if we, as adults, are not allowed to make sovereign decisions about what to experience with our own consciousness while doing no harm to others including the decision to use responsibly ancient and sacred visionary plants, then we cannot claim to be free in any way, and it's useless for our society to go around the world imposing our form of democracy on others while we nourish this rot [society's allowance of global pollution, nuclear proliferation, and the specter of hunger, which he mentions earlier in the talk] and we do not allow individual freedom over consciousness, it may even be that we are denying ourselves the next vital step in our own evolution by allowing this state of affairs to continue and who knows perhaps our immortal destiny as well (Hancock, The War on Consciousness TEDx Talk).

So, while I have a deep respect for the BMO (however much I critique their work), I will proceed to explore the psychonautic affects—licit and illicit—present in Black Rock City in an effort to elucidate the way they cultivate transformative experience, and therefore Burning Man culture. I argue that the psychonautic affect of BRC (including the use of illicit substances) is vital to the production and maintenance of Burning Man's counter-cultural scenario. Fuller writes:

The nation's fierce commitment to competitive capitalism and its Puritan religious heritage have combined to extol the virtues of efficiency and productivity [...] ...the profane dimensions of American culture foster a deep suspicion of nonutilitarian modes of thought or life. A culture that places paramount importance on the repression of spontaneity has no normative place for aesthetic delight, the enjoyment of emotions or sensations for their own intrinsic value. And thus the pursuit of intoxication through the use of botanical or chemical substances has always been viewed with suspicion in the politics of profane American culture. Drug use can be sanctioned as long as it ultimately serves the greater causes of economic efficiency and orderly control (e.g., coffee consumption at the workplace, moderate alcohol consumption to unwind and regenerate oneself for the next business day), but not when it interferes with these prime values of our secular culture (Fuller 11).

The word radical is included in four of the Ten Principles of Burning Man (Radical Self-Reliance, Radical Inclusion, Radical Self-Expression, and Radical Participation). Radical means both going to the root of something and favoring extreme changes in normative habits, conditions, political views, etc. In many ways, my choice to include a discussion of illicit substance use for psychoactive purposes is aligning myself with these radical principles. The BMO must negotiate with the State at all times because they are on the front lines of Hancock's *War on Consciousness* though it is not part of the organization's scenario, nor could it be for fear of being shut down. If the vision of the Burning Man Project is to be a catalyst for creative culture and to "bring experiences to people in grand, awe-inspiring and joyful ways that lift the human spirit, address social problems and inspire a sense of culture, community and cultural engagement" (Project) then they are looking to shift mainstream consciousness and must consistently evade the suspicion of the "alert problem-solving state of consciousness" and its subsequent illegalization of radical conscious-altering substances. So, in an act of radical self-expression I tell the following story.

### **The Deer Hunter: Communing with the Dead**

As *The Temple* burns and collapses to the ground giant funnels of smoke peel off of the fire and rise into the sky. Some burners call them ancestors. Out of these funnels flickering embers turn to ash, which makes its way across the desert night. Memories of my uncle begin to fill my mind. He had passed just a few months earlier and my family and I had put a memorial to him in *The Temple* earlier in the week. I feel the intense heat of the fire and my stomach begins to feel queasy. I am overwhelmed by a sense of terror. The crowd is buzzing with low toned chatter, sounds of crying and

deep breaths, the crackle of the fire, and a few people near me are humming on an Om. In a space where I would normally feel a deep sense of peace, I am instead terrified. My heart is pounding, my breath is quick, my nausea intensifies, and I begin shaking. Though I know it is likely from the naturally grown psilocybin mushrooms I placed in my mini peanut butter sandwich earlier<sup>27</sup> with the intention of having an entheogenic experience, I blame the heat of the fire, walk far out of the crowd, and lay on the desert floor to breathe through my nausea. I feel the coolness of the playa on my hands and cheek. I remember that I know exactly where I am even though *The Temple* fires had begun to take me up and out of my body. I think, “I know this path of transformation.” I remember it from previous experiences and from the tales of others. Thinking of both my desire to write about this here in my dissertation and to be able to somehow rationalize this most irrational of experiences, for a split second I repeat, “I can’t explain this. I can’t explain this.” Of course, I continue to try.

I feel a deep sense of terror and fear that I might lose my rational mind but the sensation of the cool playa holds me together. I remember this fear is common. Aristotle talks about it in the context of cathartic experiences. Artaud describes it in *The Theatre and Its Double* when he talks about the *Daughters of Lot* and about the crisis of self that is a necessity for his Theatre of Cruelty.<sup>28</sup> He writes about it in *The Peyote Dance*:

A European would never allow himself to think that something he [sic] has felt and perceived in his body, an emotion which has shaken him, a strange idea he has just had and which has inspired him with its beauty, was not his own, and that someone else has felt and experienced this in his own body—or else he would believe himself mad and people would probably say that he had become a lunatic (Artaud 24).

---

<sup>27</sup> Yes, this refers to the Amazing Mumford quote in the epigraph of this dissertation.

<sup>28</sup> See chapters one, two, and four of *Theatre and Its Double*.

I sit up and decide to head back to camp thinking it will give me a sense of safety. As I walk I suddenly realize that a dust storm is headed straight for me. They don't happen often at night. It encircles me and swirls around me fast like a hurricane. It is huge and I am standing alone in the eye. A flash of Artaudian thought races through as I am spinning around and around seeing the gigantic walls of dust. I am hallucinating. My spinning feels like a trance. I specifically think of his theory of violent imagery and his thoughts on Balinese trance dancing. The expulsion of the self—that burst forth—that happens when one has an out of body experience is eminent. I think of the splitting of the being that consciousness explorers talk about when the *I* becomes *us*—or what Martin Buber calls the I/Thou relationship which transcends ego. I cannot see anyone else. Usually at Burning Man you can see a person near you even if they are hundreds of yards away because the space is so vast and there are 60,000 people or so within a 5 mile diameter. But I am alone, no one for hundreds of yards in any direction, and again, I feel myself being pulled up out of my body like a bolt of lightning. There is no stopping it now. The death of the *self* is happening. I say, “Ashes to ashes” as some kind of secular ritualistic gesture.

Boom! I am flying up the walls of the hurricane and realize that the wisps of dust and smoke at the top have formed into the shapes of blue-white deer antlers gently ghosting the top of the hurricane. At that moment, staring at the massive dust antlers, I realize I am in an altered state of consciousness, it feels like a lucid dream—and I realize that I am walking with the ghost of my uncle—who was a Vietnam veteran and a deer hunter. I cannot shake myself out of this state; I cannot wake myself up from this trance,

but the fear passes, and I settle in to my journey. I look further up at the blanket of stars in the sky. It is pulsing with intensity like some kind of visual sonic frequency, and I say to myself, “This is why they are called the heavens.” My rational mind fights to regain control by judging my state of bliss, by flashing images of sitting in a classroom listening to one of my professor’s talks about Longinus, Schopenhauer’s *World as Will and Representation*, and Kant. Then I remember reading Joseph Roach’s *Cities of the Dead* and think about the classroom as a *vortex of behavior*, and how it is invading and shaping my current experience because I am accessing it in a mnemonic way and performing it again through the gesture of admiring the starry heavens of which I feel that I have become a part. I am not me. I am disappeared yet aware of that experience. Then I think that my experience cannot be real, or considered real by sensible and logical standards so it must be discarded as merely imaginary and therefore insignificant. I weep for the loss of whatever experience built the myths of the world because this feeling must have been a part of that. They must have been much more interconnected with the world than we are now. I wonder if the ancient Greek cult of Dionysus experienced this state of consciousness. I wonder what cultures and epistemologies have been lost in the void of undocumented history. This lengthy series of thought, experienced in a period of seconds because time is malleable, leads me to stand in a stupor staring at the hurricane’s antlers and the heavens—still floating—amidst the chaos, but disembodied, as if I am part of the chaos looking down on my body below. I am having an out of body experience. It is unexplainable yet I keep trying. Walter F. Otto fittingly describes it in the arrival of Dionysus:

The world man [sic] knows, the world in which he has settled himself so securely and snugly—that world is no more. The turbulence which accompanied the arrival of Dionysus has swept it away. Everything has been transformed. But it has not been transformed into a charming fairy story or into an ingenious child's paradise. The primeval world has stepped into the foreground, the depths of reality have been opened, the elemental forms of everything that is creative, everything that is destructive, have arisen, bringing with them infinite rapture and infinite terror. The innocent picture of a well-ordered routine world has been shattered by their coming, and they bring with them no illusions or fantasies but truth—a truth that brings on madness (Otto 95).

I wonder if this is the madness of the Maenads described by the Greeks.

Then, I then have an auditory hallucination as I hear my uncle's voice say, "You'll walk where I walk tonight... with the ghosts." For a moment I wonder if I heard it or if I made it up, and then I realize that I do not seem to know the difference. In his book *The Archaic Revival* Terrence McKenna corroborates my experience, "When one confronts these dimensions, one becomes part of a dynamic relationship relating to the experience while trying to decode what it is saying. This phenomenon is not new—people have been talking to gods and demons for far more of human history than they have not" (McKenna 35). I laugh at myself, at how irrational and affected I am. I look down and see myself laughing. My body is jolting with laughter. My mouth salivates, I plummet back down into my body. I fall to the ground and I laugh hard... for a long while. For the rest of the night everyone I encounter is ghostly. My psychonautic experience shifts my consciousness, my behavior, my heart rhythms, and my ways of interacting for several hours. It also transformed my way of seeing the world in my sober "alert problem-solving" state.

My experience is just one of many similar psychonautic events occurring across the playa that night. In her assessment of the work of Stephen Reicher in *Affect and Emotions: A New Social Science Understanding*, Margaret Wetherell writes:

Shared identification makes actions and affect intelligible and forms the basis for the construction of the discursive territory of ‘reasonable’ versus ‘unreasonable’, ‘rational’ versus ‘irrational’, ‘mad’ versus ‘sensible’. [...] Shared identification and the social practices associated with that identity not only determine how mass affect is seen, it also guides the crowd’s affective action, the way it flows, the objects it takes, the kind of affect displayed, and so on (Wetherell 148).

A large percentage of participants at *The Temple Burn* participate in a ritualistic experience just by having participated in the installation itself. The contingent beyond that who use chanting, trance, dance, meditation, or psycho-active substances to explore consciousness during *The Temple Burn* is significant enough to guide the crowd’s affective action as Wetherell describes.

### **Back Near the Fire Vesuvius Has Exploded...**

To share my identification, in his book *Inspired Madness* Dale Pendell tells his story of *The Temple Burn*:

The flames engulfed the structure quickly and it became a huge fire. A giant column of sparks and embers rose hundreds of feet into the sky. Then the wind changed and suddenly the flaming embers were falling all around us.

The crowd leapt to its feet and surged back. Embers were falling everywhere. Someone rushed by me and said, “Move! Don’t just sit there!” I ignored him.

I looked up. It was the most amazing sight I had ever seen. Swirlings and swirlings of embers and fire spinning out of the sky. It was like being in Pompeii. It was entrancing. Embers would land on me and I would brush them off. Big ones and small ones. Some of them mere sparks and some of them burning pieces of charcoal. There were thousands of them and I was engulfed by the heat of the fire.

Somewhere a gear slipped in my brain and all of a sudden everything was in slow motion and the background of the sky was black, in an



absolute sense, like it had been painted black, a full unit blacker than it had been before, whatever units are used for blackness. It was cinematic. And something slipped again and it changed and I was a giant Buddha sitting cross-legged in dust in the Takla Makan or somewhere in Central Asia and there were hundreds of little campfires scattered out for miles around me and then I looked up again and saw the Vortex.

“Where else in the world?” I thought, “Where else wouldn’t I be arrested for my own protection, where else wouldn’t the powers of insularity have prevented me from experiencing one of the most beautiful spectacles I’ve ever seen—this event of surpassing beauty.”

That’s why Burning Man is a miracle. It’s a miracle that it exists at all. It’s what Hakim Bey calls a “temporary autonomous zone”—a place where the free spirits gather and are able to play for a while, before the Powers of Hegemony learn of their existence and are able to neutralize them. (Bey 1991) (Pendell 97-98).

Several parts of this story signify the psychonautic affect. First, his experience of his brain slipping into altered visionary states. As he hallucinates the vibrancy of the blackness of the sky intensifies beyond normalcy and then he becomes a giant Buddha.

Oliver Sacks describes these phenomena in his book *Hallucinations*:

The effects of cannabis, mescaline, LSD, and other hallucinogenic drugs have an immense range and variety. Yet certain categories of perceptual distortion and hallucinatory experience may, to some extent, be regarded as typical of the brain’s responses to such drugs.

The experience of color is often heightened, sometimes to an unearthly level, as Weir Mitchell, Huxley, and Breslaw all observed. There may be sudden changes in orientation and striking alterations of size. There may be micropsia or Lilliputian vision (little beings—elves, dwarves, fairies, imps—are curiously common in these hallucinations), or there may be gigantism (macropsia) (Sacks 102).

Many hallucinatory accounts across multiple cultures have these themes and many of them show up in artistic expressions, particularly in visual art and stories connected to other dimensions such as heaven, hell, or other fantastical realms. Some examples are: Euripides *The Bacchae* telling the story of the Maenads tearing Pentheus limb from limb; Alex Grey’s visual art; Lucas van den Leyden’s painting *The Daughters of Lot* (to

whom Artaud devoted an entire chapter in *Theatre and Its Double* mentioned above); fantasy stories like *Lord of the Rings* and countless fairytales; the surrealists—Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, performing artists like the Dadaists. David Lewis-Williams' theory of cave art being directly related to shamanic cosmology and vision quests is another investigation into the connections between art, religion, culture, and altered states of consciousness (particularly visionary plants) from an academic discipline. They also show up at Burning Man in people's stories, art, and encounters. Through these social expressions a psychonautic affective flow is present and represented.

The Burning Man Project does not claim any intention to create this kind of space but many of the participants who go do, and many participants who go hope to experience these entheogenic and radical encounters. Pendell calls his experience a miracle. He calls Burning Man a TAZ and he acknowledges the unique affective ambiance of BRC that allows him the freedom to push the limits of his own consciousness. I intended to explore the divine connected to *The Temple Burn* by eating my mini peanut butter sandwiches before I went to the burn. This is where Burning Man is radical, this one of the experiences it offers that still presses the boundaries of the status quo; where it enters the discourse of the politics of consciousness. Also evident in these stories is the connective tissue of the psychonautic affective flow that taps into the repertoire.

It is no coincidence that Pendell envisions the explosion of Mt. Vesuvius over Pompeii and I envision a hurricane. First, by immersing oneself in the Black Rock Desert with huge fires and large dust funnels certainly invokes the hypertexts of volcanic eruption and hurricanes. These two scenarios are inspired by the hypertexts of

stories from human history about the experience of these kinds of disasters. I've never been in the center of a hurricane and it's unlikely that Pendell has been at the foot of an exploding volcano but we have both already "been there" through story, through art. The floating fiery embers link to Pendell's hypertextual imaginary of volcanic eruption not only through metaphor but through imagination, and the swirling funnels of dust and ash are connected to my imaginings of hurricanes. These hypertexts also connect to the extremes of wilderness scenarios, and to what religious historians call *nature religion*. Fuller describes it, "It is based upon the conviction that God is always and everywhere available to humans, if we but learn to become receptive to the subtle presence of divine spirit in and through natural order." (Fuller 13). This is why the common description of natural disasters as an "Act of God" persists. It is how Otto describes the arrival of Dionysus as the primeval world stepping in to the foreground. Both Pendell and I imagine Acts of God as transitional space, or as a space between the material world and the spirit world or the "higher" consciousness. Then both Pendell and I note the intensity of the colors as Sacks points out. The colors for both of us is seen in the sky, a metaphor of the heavens, and then there is a communion with the other world/divine—me with my dead uncle and he with Buddha.

The similarities of the hallucinations lend credit to the theory that consciousness, might actually be the thing from which we structure the material world, and art might be a vehicle we use to access it. Consciousness in this sense is an awareness of the unknown/chaos, and that the self is a construction we use to frame the experience of being in a body, and art then is a way to express sensations of the unknown. This idea is not new, in fact it is an idea that has been seen across cultures and religions. In *Chaos*,

*Territory, and Art* Elizabeth Grosz highlights this in affect theory, “Sensation is what art forms form chaos through the extraction of qualities. [...] ...so too art, through the plane of composition it throws over chaos, gives life to sensation that, disconnected from its origins or any destination or reception, maintains its connections with the infinite it expresses and from which it is drawn” (Grosz 8).

As discussed in chapter two *The Temple* was originated as a mausoleum of sorts. Its structure as an art installation was inspired by an experience of grief and death. So the affective experience of our (mine and Pendell’s) psychonautic experiences tie into the framing of the art piece, and the scenarios of destruction and the divine. While I am certain the psychonautic affects vary widely across the city during *The Temple Burn* one is hard pressed to be unaware of its burning. Of course many people feel as if they are on the outside of these experiences looking for a pathway in. A friend who I brought out for his first year to BRC told me his *Temple Burn* story. All week he had wanted to have some kind of unique or special experience. He felt distanced, like he was on the outside looking in. When the structure collapsed he went into the center with the crowd and circumnavigated the fire. He watched others participate. He stepped out and began to investigate others behavior more. He saw a man, sitting in just his underwear, meditating very close to the fire. He thought about how hot the man must feel, how the heat must be unbearable, and how he was using meditation to experience the intensity of the heat. He envied the man. He wanted to feel inspired to experience something like that. He did not sit down and try it. He hadn’t had enough practice so he only continued to watch. He never forgot about the man. For him, the psychonautic affect of the man

meditating transmitted into his body through fascination. Meditation is commonly seen at Burning Man and is certainly part of the psychonautic ambiance.

In his article “Dharma on the Playa: Buddhism and Burning Man,” Allan Badiner discusses his experience of his practice of the compassionate state of consciousness in *The Temple* just before it burned:

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a man in his fifties drop to his knees on the soft playa floor and begin to cry out loudly. His moans of pain were heart-wrenching and relentless. I wondered how to move around him without appearing disinterested or unaffected by his suffering. Then a strange impulse came over me. I walked slowly toward him, knelt down, and put my hand on his back. I was afraid that I was thrusting myself uninvited into his situation, that my gesture might seem arrogant, aggressive, or awkward. As my thoughts continued down that track, a young man knelt beside me and placed his hand on the other side of the man’s back. Moments later, another man lent a hand to his shoulder. Then a woman came to his other side with her hand outstretched.

For a few minutes that seemed much longer, the four of us held him in his space and witnessed his repeated cries. Suddenly, the man stopped. It occurred to me how hard it must be to stay focused on your suffering when others were physically demonstrating their compassion for you. After another half-minute we all slowly rose to our feet and hugged each other, one by one, including the man, who now appeared to feel somewhat better. The temple bells began to ring, hastening our departure. We had to leave before the Temple burned (Badiner).

Badiner’s notation of his strange impulse that came over him indicates his attunement to the affective space of The Temple. As a psychonaut of Zen, his practice of cultivating states of compassion framed the affective flow of *The Temple* art installation, and his participation (choosing to act on his impulse) contributed to the ambiance of transformation.

### **The Meditation Affect**

I consider myself a psychonaut that primarily uses meditation as a technique for exploring human consciousness in my default world life. Unlike conscious-altering

substances meditation has a respected and long history of psychoactive hallucinations.

In his book *Hallucinations*, Oliver Sacks mentions:

Meditative or contemplative techniques [...] have been used in many religious traditions—sometimes to induce hallucinatory visions. Studies by Andrew Newberg and others have shown that long-term practice of meditation produces significant alterations in cerebral blood flow in parts of the brain related to attention, emotion, and some autonomic functions (Sacks 247).

While meditative states have been linked to hallucinatory states by neuroscience and accepted in many cultures throughout the world, I am interested in the way meditation is used generally to access altered states of consciousness that promote relaxation, compassion and transcendence. These more general forms breed climates of contemplation and awareness in Black Rock City. The man meditating before the fire for example was likely accessing an altered state of consciousness toward a transcendence of the fire's heat, similar to those accessed by religious firewalkers. His participation in psychonautic exploration exemplifies Brennan's *transmission of affect* and also contributes to the overall affective flow of psychonautic experience being practiced all over the city.

Group meditation sessions are extremely common. Several large theme camps and villages create meditative spaces including larger villages such as Fractal Planet's (formerly Fractal Nation's) Zendo complete with bells and several *zafus* and *zabutons* (Japanese sitting cushions). Another example is a yurt I once encountered in Enttheon Village was set up for meditation with crystals. It had a four-foot tall crystal in the center with several mats and pillows circled around it, and at the end of each mat was a small

alter with a six-eight inch crystal at its center. Many art installations are also meditative spaces (not just *The Temple*).

For instance, in 2012 I worked on an installation project by Richard Cohen and Nigel Brookes titled *At the Violet Hour, In the Goldhorn Shadow*. It is a set of two small domes within which participants are invited to enter and contemplate Brookes' black light art inspired by ancient myth, ritual, and surrealism. Each dome has an audio component and loops specific poems. In the dome facing west the black light art is in black and white and the poem looping is Fiona Shaw performing T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. In the dome facing east the black light art is in color and the poem looping is Allen Ginsberg reading his own *Howl*. The entrances to the two domes also faced each other, and both domes are covered with mud made from the playa which dries and cracks to look like the surface of the ground. This piece was purposely installed near the trash fence to gain optimal quiet and blend in with the desert's landscape offering a cave-like zone of contemplation.<sup>29</sup>

There are also countless scheduled yoga and meditation sessions along with shamanic and neo-shamanic classes. Also many people just sit and meditate out in the desert expanse. Suffice it to say that the psychoactive waves of meditative states of consciousness, however appropriated they are or not, are present in considerable amounts in BRC. This presence affectively permeates the city and is certainly a contributor to its transformational quality of the event. Badiner elucidates this part of the BRC climate in relationship to Zen:

---

<sup>29</sup> It is in the Art Installation Archive at [http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/2012/art\\_brc.html?yy=2012#484](http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/2012/art_brc.html?yy=2012#484)

And while Burning Man is of an entirely different character, it did have its similarities to a Zen retreat: attendees are hoping for a shift in their perspectives; people are, for the most part, on their best interpersonal behavior; and they take on new names, sleep less, and have amazing insights. Unlike the program at a Zen retreat, many people simply come to dance all week, make love, or blow their minds open with psychedelics. But everyone has permission to follow their dreams and pursue what makes them happy, without judgment. And while some found happiness in pursuing sense pleasures, others took solace in yoga, meditation, and intellectual inquiry. The vast variety of intentions and possibilities don't seem to separate Burners from one another; rather, it unites them. On the playa, a playful attitude and an open mind are required—and rewarded (Badiner).

It is a stretch to assume there is no judgment at Burning Man, but the overall feel of his description is certainly common among Burning Man stories. This is part of its transformational ambiance cultivated by the psychonautic affect. At times various affects collide creating profound and unfathomable transformational experiences.

### ***Chöd Pirate: The Affective Collision***

In his essay *Beyond Belief: The Cults of Burning Man* Erik Davis tells a story that best exemplifies how performance/play and meditation affectively collide creating an encounter-scene that induces a state of trance at Burning Man. This collision creates what he describes as cosmic possibilities. He writes:

One particularly vivid moment occurred during the 2002 *Floating World* incarnation of the event. Given the year's aquatic theme, I finally got around to performing a solo shtick I had been planning to do for years, [...] I donned a bathing suit, snorkel, mask, and flippers, and plopped down on a touristy Brazilian beach towel at the edge of the playa, near the Esplanade's main drag. I twisted my legs into lotus position and settled down to meditate for forty-five minutes or so.

As a statement, I guess you could say I was performing my response to Freud's dismissal of the mystic's "oceanic" consciousness as an infantile resubmersion into the womb. Whatever. What really made the act work were the flippers... [...] My snorkel-sit began auspiciously. (Davis 318).



He shrugs off his sense that he is performing but this notation is significant because it shows his recognition of his act as a kind of performance. He goes on to tell how he is auspiciously smudged with sage by an unseen passerby and then hears a band of pirates approach. He describes how he is tackled by a pirate, rolled around, playfully cursed, theatrically decapitated, and then politely returned to his position all the while not breaking his meditation posture. He continues:

I flashed on the Tibetan practice of *chöd*, wherein the yogi offers his body to bloodthirsty, blade-wielding demons in order to separate himself from self-clinging.

I suspect my pirate had no idea of *chöd*, nor of the *mahadavidya* Chinnamasta, a Tantric goddess pictured with her own decapitated head in her hand, as blood spurts from her neck into her own mouth. But no matter: the fellow had split me open. I was facing the hot sun, and the glow behind my eyelids began to intensify, slowly swallowing me into a sad ecstasy. Inhaling and exhaling the light, I felt my heart open to the massive, glorious pain of all the beings in the world. There I sat, with a serene broken heart, the bands of my Donald Duck flippers cutting into my ankles and my magenta Toys-R-Us face mask slowly filling with tears. Gradually the trance passed (Davis 318-319).

In this transformative encounter-scene the unseen smudger is performing a hypertext of ritual practices attributed to Native American, and appropriated by New Age spiritual seekers. The pirate performs hypertexts from the repertoire of Hollywood-style narrations of piracy including the swashbuckling antics of decapitation. Davis's flash on the meditative practice of *chöd* is from his being affected by the pirate *performing the remains* of the pirate scenario and its collision with his own performance and practicing of meditation. His use of the word flash well describes the feeling of the affective transmission process. Grosz describes:

Sensation, as the contraction of vibrations, is that which mediates between the forces of the cosmos—unknowable and uncontainable forces that we experience as chaos—and the (virtual) forces of bodies,

including their potential to be otherwise. Sensation fills the living body with resonance of (part of) the universe itself, a vibratory wave that opens up the body to these underrepresented and unknowable forces, the forces of becoming-other (Grosz 80).

These psychonautic affects collide in the physical realm and in the realm of story—in the hypertexts of the repertoire—and in a gesture that is performed between the two colliding psychonautic affects—play and meditation. This suggests that performance produces vibrations as in Grosz’s description of Deleuze’s sensation of becoming-other—or of Brennan’s affective transmission. The transmissions are physically and metaphorically intertwining. This vibratory collision results in a trance state leading to exactly what the practice of *chöd* is intended for, the decapitation of the ego/self and the subsequent awareness that there is no self. Davis had costumed himself in an effort to perform his meditation radically, which invited others recognize his performance and to participate. He called it an internal experiment, “What happens when you juxtapose such absurdity with serious meditation?” (Davis 318). The affective collision of his meditative state, the heat, the desert expanse, and the pirate’s state of play “split him open” and produced a personal transformation. The pirate also needed to be in an altered state of consciousness because in a normative or “alert problem-solving” state he would likely have not felt compelled to create the scene.

### **Psychonauts of Play**

The state of consciousness that the pirate was accessing is one of the most prevalent at Burning Man, the state of play. As an actress at Burning Man I practice this altered state of consciousness regularly. Considering play—acting *as if* or embodying

characters—an altered state of consciousness needs some attention. In the *Transformative Power of Performance* Erika Fischer-Lichte writes:

The human body knows no state of being; it exists only in a state of becoming. It recreates itself with every blink of the eye, every breath and movement embodies a new body. For that reason, the body is ultimately elusive. The bodily being-in-the-world, which cannot *be* but becomes, vehemently refutes all notions of the completed work of art. [...] The actor instead undergoes processes of embodiment. Through these processes, the body is transformed and recreated—the body happens. (Fischer-Lichte 92).

So, while every body is always already in a process of becoming the actor's art is to frame this process of becoming with story, gesture, and metaphor. The art of acting then frames chaos/affective flow within the body by exploring the various states of consciousness associated with the repertoire of performance scenarios. The level of intensity of the play or acting affects the level of its transformative power. Fischer-Lichte discusses this in terms of presence. She continues:

The actor exemplifies that body and mind cannot be separated from each other. Each is always already implied in the other. This does not just apply to the oriental actors and dancers whom Eugenio Barba witnessed, or the “holy” actor Richard Cieslak. Although their particularly strong, intense presence highlights the erasure of the opposition between body and mind/consciousness, such erasure is true for all performers with presence. Through the performer's presence, the spectator experiences the performer and himself as embodied mind in a constant process of becoming—he perceives this circulating energy as a transformative and vital energy. I would like to call this the *radical concept of presence* (Fischer-Lichte 99).

While certainly mild forms of play might merely place the participant into states of childlike fantasy (which for some participants is a novelty in itself), some states of play can become more transformative, and can collide with other framings of affective sensation to create experiences similar to Davis' *chöd* pirate. Intentional encounter-

scenes are also inspired and welcomed at Burning Man. My friend and campmate Lily “Scooter” Kelting shares the following story:

**Playing Text: Lily the Lacoön**

We were sitting around camp in dusty chairs listening to BMIR. The morning wanders were done, I'd eaten lunch, and the afternoon brought a special kind of idleness. The radio crackled that in half an hour at sunset, the *Trojan Horse* would be dragged from its position on the esplanade into the central playa to be burned. They were seeking 300 volunteers to drag the two-story horse. Presumably, the art crew who brought the horse would come streaming out. We had been to the horse the night before: it was bathed in red light and functioning as a kind of lounge. Those who built the horse were dressed in "Greco-Roman garb" as interpreted by party city: plastic breastplates and crested helmets. The head of the horse supposedly offered great views, but the line was too long and we moved on. At the camp, munching on red vines and swilling Tecate, we batted around the idea of volunteering. It would be fun to see the horse burn, at least, but I was a special kind of burning-man-bone-tired and wanted to conserve energy for the night ahead. Then: like lightning rushed into my tent to grab the bed sheet keeping dust off my sleeping bag and pillow. Grabbed campmates and saddled up bikes. I explained as we peddled a furious mile or two to the horse: I have a degree in classics. What do you do with a degree in classics? Mostly nothing. Get a graduate degree in theatre. I have years of experience in "competitive Latin declamation", memorizing chunks of Greek and Latin and reciting them dramatically in competitions. Like a flash, a speech I had memorized returned fully formed into my memory: Lacoön in *The Aeneid*, standing before the horse and urging, begging the Trojans not to accept the horse into the city walls.

We arrived at the horse as they were gearing up to drag it, about a hundred or so volunteers milled around. Humongous ropes lay on the ground at the ready. A potbellied Dionysus with a wreath of grapes and goblet of wine presided. The fire marshals were standing around talking to each other. We made it! I ripped off whatever I was wearing, and wrapped the bed sheet around me as a toga. The crowd stirred. I took a deep breath. I was a little self-conscious. These people just saw me change. It was show time. Could I remember the speech?

LAOCOON ARDENS SUMMA DECURRIT AB ARCE  
ET PROCUL, "OH MISERI! QUAE TANT' INSANIA, CIVES?  
CREDITIS AVECTOS HOSTES? AUT ULLA PUTATIS  
DONA CARERE DOLIS DANAUM? SIC NOTUS ULIXES?  
AUT HOC INCLUSI LIGNO OCCULTANTUR ACHIVI,  
AUT HAEC IN NOSTROS FABRICATA EST MACHINA MUROS,

INSPECTURA DOMOS VENTURAQUE DESUPER URBI,  
AUT ALIQUIS LATET ERROR, EQUO NE CREDITE, TEUCRI.  
QUIDQUID ID EST, TIMEO DANAOS ET DONA FERENTIS.<sup>30</sup>

The speech tumbled out of my brain, I thundered and roared against the desert and the mountains. The last time I had done this was eight years prior in a Latin classroom in high school. A flash of recognition passed over several faces: they got it. I fear the Greeks, even bearing gifts. They laughed. Some applauded. I slipped, slowly, out of character as I accepted a St. Germaine cocktail from Dionysus and explained that, yes, this is what you do with a BA in classics. The fire marshal gave me a high five. I retied my slipping toga. The horse creaked to life and inched forward. We returned later that night to watch it burn (Kelting).

The fact that she begins the story with the radio transmission that inspired her to play, and follows it with her physical visit to the art piece the previous evening exemplifies the psychonautic affective flow of play that is present. The call of the artists through the mediated radio waves vibrates within her in a specific way because of her previous experience with the archival text and repertoire of the story of the Trojan Horse, and her physical connection to the art piece itself the night before. She “like a flash” (similar to Davis’ flash, Pendell’s slippage, and my lightning bolt) she was moved to perform, to embody the story and delight her fellow classics-headed artists and subsequent looky-loos.

### **Playing Game Frames**

Another form of play common at Burning Man is games. There have been entire camps dedicated to games such as the Playa Put-Put, who installs a miniature golf course and awards those who earn it a green jacket and the Skatin’ Place who host a roller derby. In 2013 Pedalbump installed a pedal-powered bumper car race track. Art installations have included games such as: a giant scrabble board, a giant pool table, a

---

<sup>30</sup> *Aeneid*, Book II, lines 41-49.

giant bowling lane, and the *Charcade* which is a collection of large-scale fire-art arcade games such as *Dance Dance Immolation* (Dance Dance Revolution done in fire-proximity suits because at various points you are sprayed with flames), *Super Street Fire* (Street Fighter 2 where the participants use wii style technology to embody the street fighters and send flame shots toward each other), and *Riskeeball* (Skee Ball with fire shooting from the tops of the ramps as participants compete to get the most points).<sup>31</sup> A child-like sense of enchantment occurs at the *Charcade* but while these games are a lot of fun they not particularly psychonautic or radical. *The Thunderdome*, discussed in chapter one, certainly brings a game that includes a psychonautic play aspect. It asks the participants to perform a gladiator-style environment. The two volunteers play the game and the spectators play the role of the raucous crowd egging on the semi-violent competition. Of course people create their own psychonautic games as well. The following is a story by Jesse Gros, a life-coach and founder/owner of Insight Adventures, in his book *Your Wild and Precious Life: Adventures in Conscious Creation*. This story is one of his transformative moments at Burning Man that changed the course of his life and career.

### **Elevating the Consciousness of the Dance Floor**

Riding through the desert with a group of friends, we came upon a massive open-air amphitheater called The Coliseum. The DJ was playing deep house music and hundreds of people were dancing in full costume. We joined the crowd and danced for a while until I noticed that while everyone was dancing to the music, nobody seemed to be interacting with each other. The DJ set would go all night, and I wondered if this would continue until sunrise.

---

<sup>31</sup> An interview with the creators of *Dance Dance Immolation* is at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PV\\_\\_5uEwio](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PV__5uEwio) (Boing).

As an experiment, I started to play a game I learned in graduate school. I leaned over to a woman standing next to me. “We are playing a game. Do you want to play?” I asked. She nodded yes. The music was loud. Cupping my hand over my mouth, so she could hear, I continued, “I’m going to look you in the eyes until I get a hit, and then I am going to share with you the beauty I see in you. Then you will pass it on to a stranger, using ‘The beauty I see in you is...’ And they will pass it on in turn.”

“Okay!” she responded. “I have just one question. Can I play with more than one person, and can I do it outside of the arena?”

“Absolutely,” I responded. I love people who think big.

Looking into her eyes, I could see a kind and compassionate woman. “The beauty I see in you is...you are a very kind and compassionate person. And sometimes maybe you give too much.” Her eyes started to well up and she reached out and gave me a strong hug. “Now,” I whispered in her ear, “you have one minute to pay it forward.” She stopped and scanned the crowd and then looking back at me as if to say, “Do I really have to?” I pointed down to my watch and smiled back. She gathered her courage and bounced over to a woman with long red hair, dancing by herself. I watched them talk and soon they too hugged and the woman with red hair danced over to a young man with a purple Mohawk to continue the game.

I watched from elevated scaffolding as the game spread for hours over the massive arena. About halfway through, a young guy dressed in neon green fur leaned over to me. “I heard you started this thing. What are you doing?”

“I’m elevating the consciousness of the dance floor,” I replied.

“You are doing what?”

“I’m elevating the consciousness of the dance floor.” (Did I just say that?!) “See all of those people smiling, hugging, and looking into each other’s eyes? Two hours ago nobody was communicating—they were all dancing alone.”

Suddenly a thought crossed my mind. *If we could do this in the arena, what if it spread beyond the 60,000 people at Burning Man?* We danced until sunrise, until nothing but a small group remained. On our bike ride back to our camp, I didn’t see thousands of people looking into each other’s eyes, so it appeared that the game had not left our arena, but who really knows how many people it touched. Beyond the dance floor, it occurred to me that if it’s indeed true that we are all interconnected, then what I was doing that night was elevating the consciousness of humanity—maybe on a very limited scale, for a limited time, but nevertheless it happened. I watched the smiles and the hugs. I watched people connecting with deeper levels of their humanity. I watched it travel around the arena like a love virus.

I think I permanently caught the bug, its major symptom being a newly defined sense of deep purpose:

My purpose is to elevate the consciousness of humanity (Yes, I just said that.) Even if it's just one person at a time (Gros 17-19).

His exaggerated claim is inspired by the shift in consciousness he felt palpably on that dance floor. He uses the game to instigate a state of play in participants. The game gives participants a framework to be present with each other in an intimate way that one is not ordinarily intimate with someone they meet for the first time. It also asks them to consciously seek beauty in the other person. Neither of these behaviors is cultivated in the default-world. I would argue that the overall psychonautic affect at Burning Man allows for a game of this nature to be played with strong participation because the participants are always already more open to being vulnerable as discussed in chapter one. If he had started this game at a club in any downtown urban city U.S.A. the vulnerability of the participants would likely be less available. What it did for him however is particularly transformative. He witnessed his ability to use play to affect consciousness, which led him to changing careers and starting his own business.

### **Affective Collision: Breath of the Goddess**

The last story I will share with you blends multiple affective flows, exemplifies radical participation, and frames them in an intense, radical, and performative encounter. Here Anonymous details an experience of transformation on the night of *The*

#### *Man Burn:*

This is my second time at Burning Man. Though I am fascinated by the playful ethos of the event – a not-so subtle melding of macrocosm and microcosm; of the Nevada hardscape and the California dream; of a terrain where anything is possible and a faith that whatever is possible is real – I am a reluctant outsider. So many folks around me appear openhearted, participatory, ready to embrace a stranger, to enter into the



shameless pleasure of a shared moment, and then to move on without any expectation that this sharing must *mean something* above and beyond the immediacy of touch. I am *in* the city, but do not feel myself to be *of* the city, and I am lonely.

I am also ignorant. Burning Man lasts for one week, with a fortnight needed before and after to erect and remove the city's infrastructure. From the last Monday in August to Labor Day in September there is a ritual structure to this week, the contours of which are not known to me. More crucially, there is a ritual structure to tonight, Saturday, the sixth of the event, also unknown to me. Tonight, the iconic Man at the center of the city – forty two feet of neon, steel, and explosives standing atop a thirty-foot tall wooden platform (also packed with explosives) – will be set aflame and allowed to burn until the platform fails and the Man crashes, spurring the crowd to rush the fire's edge, to begin hours of circumambulation widdershins around the scorching pyre: chatting and dancing and meditating and finding fellowship until the dawn. Saturday night at Burning Man culminates at the edge of a vast open-aired inferno where dust and ash offer graceful release.

Bored, sad, lonely, sober, and not knowing any of this, when the Man falls I allow myself to be swept into that incendiary flow . . .

Here, Anonymous decides to embrace the ethos of the event and participate radically.

The Burning Man website details this principle thus, “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” (Ten Principles of Burning Man). The decision to allow the affective state of *The Man Burn* into his experience in a deeply personal way is radical participation. Note, Anonymous frames his experience as a story:

Once upon a time, not so long ago, I was standing on a playa, beside a bonfire of twisted metal, glass, and wood, when a girl came out of the crowd and began to kiss me. She was a stranger half my age, wearing nothing but a loose buckskin shift. I did not find her attention unpleasant and I kissed her back. Her passion increased. I met her there. Before long we entered into an animal state – rough and tender, wordless yet deeply

connected. I felt myself a bull and she the same. We charged each other, again and again. When we met, we kissed deeply, our bodies tight, and then let go, again and again. A little bad anthropology can go a long way. For in this fugue, I felt us to be performing a mating dance whose elemental delight was unencumbered by limitations of time or place or species.

Then the girl said, *I love you*. She repeated, *I love you*. Puffed her cheeks, blew air into my mouth, and exhaled, *I love you*. And like that, the sensual pleasure of the moment sloughed into a mental morass. What does she mean that she loves me? How do I respond? Just kissing this girl, I already felt guilt at betraying my wife. But to share a lovely moment of intimacy with a stranger is one thing; to pledge my love would be quite another. And to say the words without meaning them? I am just not *that* kind of a boy. It was clear, she wanted me to say, *I love you* too. Though I knew this, and though it would seem to have cost me so little, I could not say it. I called her *devi*. I glorified her as a goddess. I held her to the ground and chanted a Sanskrit hymn in her ear. It was not enough. Whatever force moved me to her was unmoved by these evasions. She had chosen me for reasons beyond my ken. She knew what she wanted, and she knew that I had not yet given it to her. She inhaled deeply, pushing breath from her lungs into mine, again she said, *I love you*. Her words now sounding less like a sentiment than a reproach.

Wildings at play: why try to count how long our bodies alternated charging and grappling, kissing and groping, huffing and blowing; or how long I remained yielding to her touch, yet resistant to her need. In retrospect, my reciprocal need to *not* say *I love you* seems so very monstrous. I want to explain it to myself: something about *integrity* comes to mind, but every word turns to *fear*. For six days I had collected a heap of broken images: strangers giving themselves to strangers in ways that I could neither readily comprehend nor barely emulate, wondering, how should I presume? How should I begin? Looking into the heart of light, I could connect nothing with nothing. Silence.

Then it came, *I love you*. I said it. I meant it, fully, released from my perplexity at its meaning. I had relaxed into her blessing, soul of sweet delight, and found her inside me, unraveling me inside out. I was her creature now, fervent to give love without limit to love. Whether this love would be destructive or sustaining, dry sterile thunder or aethereal desire, it was burning, burning, burning, burning to be love in every way.

. . . la la . . . Or not. Sorry, no details, except to note that truth is stranger than fiction. Whatever you are imagining is probably not what happened. . . . la la . . .

I held her, said *I love you* a final time, and walked away from the fire's edge, across the cracked geometry of the deadland, back to my tent. Several minutes later, alone on the playa, my body began to pulse warmly. I stopped. Body is not really the correct word. The thingness of

me unraveled. Vitality and love remained. No Anonymous. No playa. No Burning Man. No integrity. No fear. Only life and love coequal in radiance. Words fail. Of course. At the heart of light, life and love mean nothing. There was total love; it was all life; it was seamless light. That's it. Meaningless paradox: nothing, and everything, simultaneously, outside time.

Whatever “really” happened and however long it “really” lasted, eventually this coeternity of love/life/light began to reenter time. I became aware of myself and, aware of being aware, I also became aware that I had experienced an experience, and this tangled itself into my consciousness as the experience of spiritual truths: Love/life/light is real in a way that nothing else is real. Love/life/light is the essential actuality of all beings: to treat one species as having greater value than another species is to devalue the whole of life. To kill or harm another living being is nothing less than to destroy the Love essence. I was ashamed at my own half-hearted vegetarianism; a gut of shame and imperative to change. Then I received a final realization, not as deep as the prior truths, but no less sweet for that. I knew this vision to be a gift of the playa. The land itself had favored me with her grace. Deadland? She was beautiful, bounteous, and so alive.

I continued to my tent, changed shoes, and needing no sleep, set out again to the deep playa, where I met yet another unexpected omen. The letters D I S had been attached to a bus – red letters, twenty feet high on a glowing marquee – and from behind the sign I heard perfect ambient beats, laid down by a DJ who understood the dawn. Amused at my learning and my bliss, I thought to myself, “Anonymous, you have loved *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* for many years, now it is your life.” I blessed the playa for her providence, blessed the girl for being, and danced my enthusiasm to the rising sun (Anonymous).

This story is a fitting end to this chapter and dissertation. When Anonymous says that he reentered time—became aware—it is here that the altered state of consciousness reveals itself in the story. Though the play, fire, and her psychonautic explorations lead to that revelation earlier in the story, the feeling of returning to linear time is a common one in the exploration of consciousness. The reflection of the experience of participating and being swept up into the *incendiary flow* as he calls it shows the affective power of the art of *The Man Burn*. The necessity of radical participation is illuminated when he allows himself to perform the story and the mating dance, and his choice to face the

fears of judgment by others and by his own self. Wrestling with himself to frame this psychonautic play affect into story shows his shift into an altered state of consciousness through the trance of performance and dance. And to be met with the intensity of the undoing of the fear-filled self; to feel himself not as himself but as love/light/life—like the release of self-clinging as Davis describes with his *chöd* pirate—the *I* into *us* I felt floating above my body in the deer antlers—Pendell’s experience as Buddha amidst the campfires—all highlight the ways that consciousness is simply an awareness of the unknown and that psychonauts are in fact expanding this awareness. These are the transformative products of the psychonautic affect at Burning Man that work with the commons of the Black Rock Desert and the large-scale fires. They are radical parts of the event because they challenge the status quo who cling to the Hancock’s “alert problem-solving” state of consciousness, or Daniel Pinchbeck’s description of “rationality” as a kind of faith in the opening of this chapter.

I know, I’ve drunk the koolaid. I’m a cult member—a burner. Yet, the argument for this chapter requires a bit of the elixir because these psychonauts hold space—or create TAZs—amidst the ego driven, capitalist, ignorantly privileged, white Western entitled, money-wasting, self-serving spectacle that Burning Man also is. Put another way, as one gas station attendant just outside of Reno said to me, “You know what I think it is?” “No, what?” I said. “It’s a week-a-stupid. That’s what it is.” “You’re right” I said, “In many ways it is.” As I argue in chapter one, this paradox is a mirror of the American National Project.

Truth be told, I’m like *Sesame Street’s* Amazing Mumford quoted in the epigraph of this dissertation, who cannot do the classic trick of pulling a rabbit out of a

hat but always believes he can. I think I can rationalize the irrational, that I can perform the trick of explaining the unexplainable, but however many times I wave my magic wand and say the magic words “Ah la peanut butter sandwiches,” a poof of smoke reveals that the hat is empty. Without the rabbit the trick is impossible, and only the mad follow the rabbit down the hole into wonderland, or through the looking glass—in a lucid dream or an altered state. Story and performance is the bridge between the irrational and the rational, between the unexplainable and the explainable—between the rabbit and the hat.

## **Burning Man Term Glossary<sup>32</sup>**

**Artery:** n. The camp where installation artists check when they arrive in Black Rock City. Here they get art placement on the playa and any support they have arranged to build their art.

**BRAF: Black Rock Arts Foundation:** n. A non-profit foundation that supports and promotes community, interactive art and civic participation. It was established to bring this modality of creating and coexisting with art to the rest of the world, with the vision that community-driven, inclusive, and interactive art is vital to a thriving culture. The foundation received its 501(c)3 status in November of 2001 (Foundation). They fund installation art on and off the playa. They do not fund Theme Camps or the performing arts.

**Black Rock Beacon:** n. The main newspaper generated on the playa about and for Black Rock City.

**Black Rock Café:** n. A café in Center Camp where participants can purchase hot or iced coffee, lattes, mochas, and hot chocolate.

**Black Rock City (BRC):** n. The name of the city created by the participants of the Burning Man Project in the Nevada desert. It is set up in a partial circle and on a clock face with The Man at the center of the clock. The streets go from 2 o'clock to 10 o'clock, and the space from 10 o'clock to 2 o'clock does not have streets or any camping (this space is called the keyhole

---

<sup>32</sup> There is also a glossary on [burningman.com](http://burningman.com) from which some of these definitions are cited. ([burningman.com](http://burningman.com), Glossary).

**Black Rock Rangers:** A cross-section of the Burning Man community who volunteer some of their time in the role of non-confrontational community mediators. Responding to the ever-changing environment, we address within our community situations that would otherwise require outside intervention. By encouraging and facilitating communication, the Rangers promote awareness of potential hazards, from sunstroke to tent fires (burningman.com, participation Black Rock Rangers).

**BLM:** n. Bureau of Land Management, government agency which administers public lands, including the Black Rock Desert (burningman.com, Glossary).

**BMOrg:** n. Short for Burning Man Organization, this term is actually a common misnomer. The actual name for the organizers of the Burning Man event is the "Burning Man Project" (burningman.com, Glossary). Note: I cite them as BMO in this dissertation.

**Burn, (the):** 1. v. To incinerate something with fire. 2. v. To radically participate in the ethos of the event. 3. n. The burning of an art installation such as *The Man Burn*. e.g. "I'm headed out to the Burn." 4. n. Refers to the entire week of Burning Man as in "Are you going to the Burn this year?" 5. n. The actual burning of *The Man* on Saturday night.

**Burn Week:** n. The week of the event, which is always the week before Labor Day.

**Burner:** n. A participant who attends Burning Man who considers her/himself closely affiliated with the event and culture.

**Burning:** adj. Burning describes the experience of the altered state of consciousness created by living and radically participating in the event.

**Burning Man Project:** 1. n. The name the organizers call themselves. 2. n. The non-profit organization that will eventually run the Burning Man event. 3. n. Often considered the event itself or another name for Burning Man.

**Burning Nerd:** n. A scholar who writes about Burning Man who considers her/himself affiliated with the event and culture.

**BMIR:** n. Burning Man Information Radio. The main radio station in Black Rock City.  
Desert Ancestors: Dust funnels that blow across the playa.

**Center Camp:** n. A central space provided by the BMO for participants to gather. The Black Rock Café is here (one of the only places you can purchase something which is coffee.)

**Chöd:** n. A Tibetan meditation practice that focuses on cutting through the ego.

**CORE Project: Circle of Regional Effigies:** n. The circle of effigies around *The Man* created by official regional groups. These effigies represent the official regional network from around the country and the world. This project started in 2011.

**CORE Burn:** n. On Thursday night of Burn Week all of the effigies are burned at the same time creating a giant circle of fire around *The Man*.

**Decompression:** 1. n. A party held one month after Burning Man to give participants a brief chance to return to Black Rock City. Offers relief from the Reality Bends (burningman.com, Glossary). 2. n. The period of time, or process, it takes to readjust to being in the Default World after the event is over. 3. v. *Decompressing* is the process of readjusting to the Default World after the event.

**Deep Playa:** n. The space that is furthest from the city and nearest to the trash fence. The art tends to be sparser and it takes quite a long time to walk or bike out there because



it is in the keyhole of the city structure. Many participants consider it a quiet place of contemplation.

**Default World:** n. The world outside of Black Rock City.

**Deployafy or Deployafication:** v. The process by which a burner merges their culture into a non-desert environment.

**DMV: Department of Mutant Vehicles:** n. This is a place where every art car that wants to drive on the playa must get their license. There are three licensing processes. 1. Day license allows daytime driving. 2. Night license approves the vehicle is lit well enough to be seen and is creative enough to add to the ambiance of the BRC night. 3. Fire license means that the vehicle is approved to safely use the fire equipment they've installed on their vehicle.

**DPW: Department of Public Works:** "...is the group that plans, surveys, builds, and takes down the basic infrastructure of our temporary community in the desert. Since the 1997 event the DPW, hand-in-hand with other departments, has instituted the City Plan, through which roads and basic infrastructure throughout the BRC are gridded and built" (burningman.com, Dept. of Public Works). These volunteers are generally considered the hardest working community members and often perform tough Hells Angels-like aesthetic.

**Earth Guardians:** n. A subgroup of Burning Man participants who work with the BLM to care for the Black Rock Desert. Earth Guardians are trained in Leave No Trace techniques (burningman.com, Glossary).

**EL Wire: Electroluminescent Wire.** n. Cool, glowing stuff used to make moving objects and sculptures out of light. The must-have accessory for the event! (burningman.com, Glossary).

**Esplanade:** n. The street that is between the playa and the first row of Theme Camps.

**Exodus:** n. the process and organization of the mass participant departure from the playa at the end of the event (burningman.com, Glossary).

**Global Leadership Conference (GLC):** n. A conference where over 300 Burning Man community leaders from around the world will gather in San Francisco to connect, share ideas and get inspired about spreading Burning Man values in their local communities.

**Greeter:** n. A volunteer who works at the entrance to Black Rock City greeting people and giving them information and positive energy as they enter. They welcome them to the event, and have any newbie who wants to get out and go through an initiation ritual where they ring a bell. Sometimes they have them roll in the dust and they usually give them a hug.

**JRS: Jack Rabbit Speaks:** n. The listserve that is maintained throughout the year and provides important information to all participants including ticketing information, event information, and important deadlines for things like theme camp registration. It also serves as a communique for participants to announce calls for participation etc.

**Keyhole:** n. The part of the city design that opens up to circle of the clock face to include the desert expanse.

**Lamplighters:** n. The volunteer group who lights kerosene lanterns each night of the Burning Man event to illuminate the esplanade and promenades, providing participants with valuable navigational aids (burningman.com, Glossary).

**LNT: Leave No Trace:** n. The common wilderness camping policy to leave a space the way you found it or better yet cleaner than when you found it.

**Looky-loo:** 1. n. A participant who comes to gawk at the extreme art and people of Burning Man more than they come to participate. They usually wear no or minor costume pieces and also do not bring a gift for the city.

2. n. A person who is more apt to watch others participate than do it themselves.

**MOOP: Matter Out of Place:** 1. n. Basically trash people leave on the ground assuming someone else will pick it up or trash dropped. 2. v. To pick up the trash and throw it away properly to keep the desert space lean and practice the LNT principle.

**Mutant Vehicles:** n. Artistically altered motorized vehicles that are allowed to drive in the city and are required to give people rides. If they drive on the playa they must go through a licensing process at the DMV. Sometimes referred to as Art Cars.

**Newbie:** n. Any person who is attending Burning Man for the first time. Can often be recognized by the call they utter when coming out of the Porta-Potties on Tuesday: "That wasn't so bad" (burningman.com, Glossary).

**Piss Clear:** n. The 2nd newspaper to appear in BRC. The name is derived from the survival axiom "Drink so much water that you piss clear" (burningman.com, Glossary).

**Playa:** 1. n. The alkali-salt dirt bed the event takes place on. 2. n. The open space in the center of the event and in the keyhole that contains large-scale installation art including *The Man* and *The Temple*.

**Playa-adjacent:** adj. The new term for default world.

**Playa Dust:** n. The dust from the ground floating in the air or settled onto something.

**Playafication** (adj.: playafied): v. The process by which all participants' shoes/feet, hair, tents, carpets, furniture, vehicles, etc. become the same serene shade of playa-tan due to ubiquitous dust build-up (burningman.com, Glossary). 2. adj. When something is infused with playa dust to an extreme point. 3.v. The process by which something takes on characteristics of burner culture in the default world.

**Playa Name:** n. Originally spawned by the need for unique names on the staff's 2-way radios, playa names have become almost ubiquitous, and are sometimes used to provide an individual with an "alternate" personality or persona. Playa names are traditionally given to a person, rather than taken on (burningman.com, Glossary)

**Playa Nose:** 1. n. The rock-hard playafied buggers that occur in one's nose throughout a week of living in BRC. 2. n. The allergic condition that sometimes occurs in participants who get a very runny nose because of their reaction to the playa dust.

**Reality Bends:** n. Cramps felt in the mind and spirit after returning to the "real" world after spending a week in Black Rock City. Best remedied by Decompression (burningman.com, Glossary).

**Regional Network:** The year-round embodiment of the Burning Man experience, supporting it as a global cultural movement. In cities around the world, the Burning Man Project has established Regional Contacts whose role is to help local Burners connect with each other, while bringing Burning Man principles and culture into their local communities (burningman.com, black rock city year round).

**Survivally-challenged:** Politically correct term for any participant whose judgment is impaired by drugs or alcohol (burningman.com, Glossary).

**Swail, Swidden:** v. Old- English terms for slash and burn agricultural practices.

**Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ):** n. A space demarcated for the practice of autonomy. The term is coined by Hakim Bey. The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself before to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, *before* the State can crush it. (Bey 99).

**The Ten Principles:** n. The ethos of the event. They are: radical inclusion, gifting, decommodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, leaving no trace, participation, and immediacy.

**Theme Camps:** A campsite which artistically presents an idea or concept and is designed to be interactive with participants (burningman.com, Glossary).

**Tourist:** A looky-loo who comes only for a day or maybe two.

**Trash Fence:** n. The orange plastic barrier that delineates the boundary of Black Rock City/Burning Man. It is set up in the shape of a pentagram. Often people talk about walking out to the trash fence which generally means the part of the fence near the deep playa.

**Turnkey camps:** n. Camps that offer to set up camp and do all the work of running camp during the event in exchange for money. This is how it works: someone buys a ticket and a spot in a turnkey camp so they only need to show up and party. Currently, these are quite controversial within the politics of BRC.

**Sparkle Pony:** n. Generally described as someone who is unprepared for the desert climate putting excess strain on their campmates and who dress sexy or cute with fur and sparkles to playfully avoid work and spread “love” to all. Sparkle Ponies are usually very sweet and believe that they are their gift to the playa.

**Village:** Affinity group of theme camps ([burningman.com](http://burningman.com), Glossary).

**What Where When Guide:** The booklet you receive when you enter the event. It lists the majority of the events taking place and has a map indicating all of the registered art installations.

**White-out:** A dust storm which produces near-zero visibility ([burningman.com](http://burningman.com), Glossary).

## Bibliography

- Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous*. New York: Vintage , 1997.
- Anonymous. "The Breath of the Goddess." Story Collection. Ramey, Heather, 2014.
- Artaud, Antonin. *The Peyote Dance*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976.
- . *The Theatre and Its Double*. New York: Grove, 1958.
- Auslander, Phillip. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*. Boston: Beacon, 1964.
- Badiner, Allan. "Dharma on the Playa: Buddhism at Burning Man." num. 3 Vol. 23 Spring 2014. *tricycle*. <<http://www.tricycle.com/feature/dharma-playa>>.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Semiotic Challenge*. Berkeley: U Berkeley , 1994.
- Baudrillard, Jean. "America." Baudrillard, Jean. *America*. London: Verso, 2010.
- . *Simulacra and Simulation* . Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 1994.
- Bey, Hakim. *T.A.Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2003.
- Billy, Reverend. "Reverend Billy: The Church of Stop Shopping." 2014. *revbilly.com*. <<http://www.revbilly.com/about-us>>.
- Black Rock Arts Foundation. *Black Rock Arts Foundation*. n.d. <<http://blackrockarts.org/about>>.
- Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. London: Pluto, 2000.
- Boing, Boing. "youtube.com." 26 May 2009. *Dance Dance Immolation*. <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PV\\_\\_5uEwio](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PV__5uEwio)>.
- Bowditch, Rachel. *On the Edge of Utopia: Performance and Ritual at Burning Man*. London: Seagull, 2010.
- Boylorn, Robin M., and Orbe, Mark P. eds. *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left-Coast P, 2014.
- Brecht, Bertolt. Willett, John. ed. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1992.

- Brennan, Teresa. *The Transmission of Affect*. Ithaca: Cornell U P, 2004.
- Bureau of Land Management. *blm.gov*. 9 11 2012. 11 11 2012. 2014.  
<[http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/blm\\_special\\_areas/NLCS.html](http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/blm_special_areas/NLCS.html)>.
- BURN2. *BURN2*. October 2011. <<http://burn2.org>>.
- burnersxxx. blogpost. "Washington Post: "The Mainstream Republican Values of Burning Man"." 6 May 2012. *Burners.Me Burning Man commentary*. April 2014. <<http://burners.me/2012/05/06/washington-post-the-mainstream-republican-values-of-burning-man/>>.
- Burning Man. *Ten Principles of Burning Man*. 2014.  
<[http://burningman.com/whatisburningman/about\\_burningman/principles.html#.U1cy-vldV8E](http://burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/principles.html#.U1cy-vldV8E)>.
- . *Black Rock City Year Round*. n.d. <<http://regionals.burningman.com/main/about-the-regional-network/>>.
- . "the burning blog." 3 March 2014. *burningmanproject.org*.  
<<http://blog.burningman.com/2014/03/news/burning-man-transitions-to-non-profit-organization/>>.
- . *Dept. of Public Works*. 2014.  
<<http://www.burningman.com/participate/dpw.html>>.
- . *Glossary*. 2014.  
<[http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about\\_burningman/glossary.html](http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/glossary.html)>.
- Tales from the Playa. *Tales from the Playa*. 2013.  
<<http://blog.burningman.com/author/talesfromtheplaya/>>.
- . *participation Black Rock Rangers*. n.d.  
<[http://www.burningman.com/participate/brc\\_rangers.html](http://www.burningman.com/participate/brc_rangers.html)>.
- . *burningman.com*. 2013. 23 12 2012.  
<<https://regionals.burningman.com/main/about-the-regional-network/history-of-regionals/>>.
- Burning Man Project. *Burning Man Project*. 08 2011. 23 11 2012. 2014.  
<<http://www.burningmanproject.org/about>>.



- . *Burning Man Project*. n.d. 19 12 2012.  
<<http://www.burningmanproject.org/about/mission>>.
- . burningmanproject.org. *Programs*. 2014.  
<<http://www.burningmanproject.org/programs#philosophical>>.
- Chen, Katherine K. *Enabling Creative Chaos: The Organization Behind the Burning Man Event*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009.
- Chihuly, Kim. *burn2.org*. 2014. <<http://burn2.org/>>.
- Congress. "Wilderness Act of 1964." *Public Law 88-577 (16 U.S. C. 1131-1136)*. Washington D.C.: Congress, 3 09 1964.
- Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness." Cronon, William ed. *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. New York: Norton, 1995. 76-77.
- Davis, Erik. *Nomad Codes: Adventures in Modern Esoterica*. Portland: Yeti, 2010.
- . *The Visionary State: A Journey Through California's Spiritual Landscape*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books , 2006.
- Davis, Wade. *Light at the Edge of the World: A Journey Through the Realm of Vanishing Cultures*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2007.
- Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black & Red, 1983.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. Massumi, Brian. Trans. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1987.
- Dictionary. *dictionary.com*. n.d. <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Hypertext>>.
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Fuller, Robert C. *Stairways to Heaven: Drugs in American Religious History*. Boulder: Westview, 2000.
- Gazetas, Calliope, 1969, Jason, and Throne Rebecca eds. "2013 What Where When Cargo Cult." Black Rock, LLC, 2013.
- Gilmore, Lee. *Theater in a Crowded Fire: Ritual and Spirituality at Burning Man*. Berkeley: UP, 2010.

- Gregg, Melissa and Seigworth, Gregory J. eds. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010.
- Gros, Jesse. *Your Wild & Precious Life: Adventures in Conscious Creation*. Los Angeles: Jesse Gros, 2013.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*. New York: Columbia, 2008.
- Hancock, Graham. "The War on Consciousness - Graham Hancock (removed TED Talk)." 14 March 2013. *youtube.com*. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-b6-0yW7Iaw&feature=youtu.be>>.
- Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Sujection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford, 1997.
- Harvey, Larry. "Burning Man." 1997. *burningman.com*. 19 12 2012. <[http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/1997/97\\_speech\\_2.html](http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/1997/97_speech_2.html)>.
- Heller, Megan and McRae, Kateri. "afterburn report 2012." 2012. *burningman.com*. <[http://burningman.com/media/doc/pdf/afterburn/ab2012/bm12\\_weighted\\_census\\_data-v6.pdf](http://burningman.com/media/doc/pdf/afterburn/ab2012/bm12_weighted_census_data-v6.pdf)>.
- Johannesen, Robert W. "The Meaning of Manifest Destiny." Haynes, Sam W. and Morris, Christopher. *Manifest Destiny and Empire American Antebellum Expansionism*. Arlington: Texas A&M P, 1997. 7-20.
- Kelting, Lily. "*Lily the Lagoon*". Story Collection. Heather Ramey. 12 April 2014.
- Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. New York: New American Library, 1957.
- Khimm, Suzy. "The Washington Post." 5 May 2012. *washingtonpost.com*. <[http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/post/the-main-street-republican-values-of--burning-man/2012/05/03/gIQA5wfOzT\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/post/the-main-street-republican-values-of--burning-man/2012/05/03/gIQA5wfOzT_blog.html)>.
- Kubiak, Anthony. *Stages of Terror: Terrorism, Ideology, and Coercion as Theatre History*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991.
- Lapine, Neonbunny. *Billion Bunny March to Protest Humanity*. 30 August 2012. <<https://www.facebook.com/events/424163734293356/>>.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

- Lipset, Seymour Martin. *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*. New York: Norton, 1996.
- Magister, Caveat. "the burning blog." 18 April 2014. *burningman.com*.  
<<http://blog.burningman.com/2014/04/afield-in-the-world/its-a-new-era-the-future-of-burning-man-belongs-to/>>.
- Magna, Apollo. "Lucy on the Playa with Lamplighters ." 2 November 2012. *youtube.com*. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=311Wo5-1o4M>>.
- Mander, Jerry. *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*. New York: Harper Collins, 1978.
- May, Theresa J. "Beyond Bambi: Towards a Dangerous Ecocriticism in Theatre Studies." *Theatre Topics* 17:2 (2007): 95-110.
- McKenna, Terrence. *The Archaic Revival: Speculations on Psychedelic Mushrooms, the Amazon, Virtual Reality, UFOs, Evolution, Shamanism, the Rebirth of the Goddess, and the End of History*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991.
- McLuhan, Marshall and Fiore, Quentin. *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*. Durham: Duke UP, 1967.
- and Lapham, Lewis H. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. London: Routledge. 1964.
- Mitchell, Jon. "the burning blog." 5 April 2014. *burningman.com*. 2014.  
<<http://blog.burningman.com/2014/04/eventshappenings/glc-14-burning-mans-servant-leaders/>>.
- Nash, Roderick Frazier. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2001.
- Noxious, Bob. "burningman.com." 2008. *Burning Man 2008 Theme Art Installations*.  
<[http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/2008/08\\_art\\_theme.html#trash](http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/2008/08_art_theme.html#trash)>.2013.
- Otto, Walter F. *Dionysus Myth and Cult*. Dallas: Springer, 1993.
- Parks, Suzan-Lori. "Elements of Style." Parks, Suzan-Lori. *The American Play and Other Works*. New York: TCG, 1995. 6-18.
- Pendell, Dale. *Inspired Madness: The Gifts of Burning Man*. Berkeley: Frog, Ltd., 2006.

- Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked the Politics of Performance*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Pinchbeck, Daniel. *Breaking Open the Head: A Psychedelic Journey Into the Heart of Contemporary Shamanism*. New York: Broadway Books, 2002.
- Pyne, Stephen. *Vestal Fire: An Environmental History, Told Through Fire, of Europe and Europe's Encounter with the World*. Seattle: U Washington, 1997.
- Ramey, Heather. "Framing Metropolis: Performing Theatre of Affect at the Burning Man Project, 2010." *TheatreForum*. issue 38, 2011.
- Rappaport, Roy A. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1999.
- Roach, Joesph. *it*. Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 2007.
- Roberts, Adrian ed. *Burning Man Live: 13 Years of Piss Clear Black Rock City's Alternative Newspaper*. San Francisco: RE/Search, 2009.
- Rosedale, Philip. "Philip Rosedale talks about his new VR Venture High Fidelity." 10 July 2013. *youtube.com*. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gL9atpjLPT4>>.
- Sacks, Oliver. *Hallucinations*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012.
- Salter, Christopher. *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance*. Cambridge: MIT, 2010.
- Saltz, David Z. "The Art of Interaction: Interactivity, Performativity, and Computers ." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 55, No. 2, *Perspectives on the Arts and Technology* (1997): 117-127.
- Samuel, Lawrence R. *The American Dream: A Cultural History*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2012.
- Schneider, Rebecca. *Performing Remains Art and War in Times of the Theatrical Reenactment*. London: Routledge, 2011.
- Sedley, David. *Plato's Cratylus*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003.
- Sexton, Jared. *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism*. Minneappolis: U Minnesota P, 2008.
- Shakespeare, William. *Coriolanus. The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. New York: Gramercy, 1990.

- Snyder, Gary. *The Practice of the Wild*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1990.
- SPARK: A Burning Man Story*. Dir. Steve Brown. 2013.  
<<http://www.sparkpictures.com/>>.
- Stenson, Molly. "What is Burning Man?" 2013. *burningman.com*.  
<[http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about\\_burningman/experience.html](http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/experience.html)>.
- Styn, John Halcyon. *lust monkey*. 2011.  
<http://www.lustmonkey.com/halcyon/99frame.htm>. October 2011.  
<<http://www.lustmonkey.com/halcyon/99frame.htm>>.
- . interview. Heather Ramey. January, 2014.
- . *the burning blog*. 2011. <http://blog.burningman.com/author/jstyn/>. October 2011.  
<<http://blog.burningman.com/author/jstyn/>>.
- Sue, Derald Wing. "psychologytoday.com." 17 March 2010. *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*. <<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201011/microaggressions-more-just-race>>.
- Taibbi, Matt. "White Madness." *Rolling Stone* 22 September 2005: 49-52.
- Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003.
- Turner, Fred. "Burning Man at Google: a cultural infrastructure for new media production." *New Media & Society* (2009): 73-94. Sage Publications.
- Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: PAJ, 1982.
- Walkness. aka Hare, Jonathan Walker. "The Horse". Story Collection. Heather Ramey. 2014.
- Webster, Merriam and. *Merriam-Webster*. n.d. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hypertext>>.
- Wetherell, Margaret. *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*. Los Angeles: Sage, 2012.
- Widget, Emcee. *Interview with Second Life founder Philip Rosedale at BURN2 June 24 2013*. 24 June 2013. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rv91AwOkJQ>>.

Wilderson III, Frank B. *Red, White & Black*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010.

Willett, John ed. trans. *Brecht On Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1992.

Young, Reverend Dr. Malcom Clemens. "HuffPost Religion." 18 October 2013. *huffingtonpost.com*. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/reverend-dr-malcolm-clemens-young/religion-at-burning-man\\_b\\_4118619.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/reverend-dr-malcolm-clemens-young/religion-at-burning-man_b_4118619.html)>.