FIRE IN THEIR EYES: INQUIRIES INTO FIRE IN A BURNING MAN COMMUNITY

By

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1
To my fire kin
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank my committee, for their advice, patience, and encouragement. And I thank all those who shared their stories by the fireside.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Encounters</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring Fire In Burner Life</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Research Community</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Subject Of Inquiry</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Project</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 THEORIZING FIRE IN THE BURN COMMUNITY</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire as An Object Of Inquiry</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burns as Fire Collectives</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Spirit Of Cacophony</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire Moments And Ordinary Effects</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire And The Mind</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire as Light</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 ANTHROPUNKS AT AFTERBURN</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive Art as Inquiry</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis Of Expressions On Canvas</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo Content Analysis</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burning Without Fire: Thinking About Meaning And Affect</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 GIS AND BURN CULTURE: MAPPING A TEMPORARY CITY AND ITS EXPERIENTIAL SCAPES</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mapping The AfterBurn Pyroscape</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 FIRE MOMENTS</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burner Stories Of Fire Moments</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Fire – Effigy And Temple Burns</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effigy</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temple</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2-1</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-2</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-1</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-2</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-3</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-4</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-6</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-7</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-8</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-9</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-10</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-11</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-12</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-13</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-14</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-15</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-16</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-17</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-18</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-19</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-20</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-21</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3-22 Sound meter designed to look like a traffic light. .................................................. 67
3-23 Facing northwest: field and the Burning Oasis theme camp being dismantled... 68
3-24 Facing southwest: abandoned tub of water and the Effigy Burn field the morning following the burn. ................................................................. 68
3-25 Facing southwest: the sun low in the sky. ............................................................. 69
3-26 Facing southeast: free camping north of Circus Bohemia. ................................. 69
3-27 Playing in the sun.. ............................................................................................... 70
3-28 Partner hula hooping ......................................................................................... 70
3-29 A horse encounter in the South field................................................................. 71
3-30 Playing with props, West of HippiTrix on the Effigy Burn field. ......................... 71
4-1 AfterBurn 2011, Lakeland, FL............................................................................. 82
4-2 Map template for Burn events at Maddox Ranch, Lakeland, FL..................... 83
4-3 Pyroscapes of AfterBurn 2011: mapping the social life of fire at a Florida regional Burning Man event............................................................... 84
4-4 Fire fish art installation......................................................................................... 85
4-5 AfterBurn 2011 Effigy: King Clown, the 13th Wonder of the World. ............... 85
4-6 Fire arts performance ........................................................................................... 86
5-1 The Burn Fields.. ................................................................................................. 91
5-2 AfterBurn 2011 Effigy burning............................................................................. 92
5-3 Concentrated fire arts.. ....................................................................................... 100
5-4 Fire Conclave, 2011 North Carolina regional Burning Man event................... 100
5-5 Fire breathing.. ..................................................................................................... 101
5-6 Fire dancer with fire fans in motion...................................................................... 101
5-7 Conquering fear. A fire dancer who sustained significant burns demonstrates his lack of fear at a fire jam in Gainesville, FL. ................................. 104
5-8 Sites of burn events of various sizes ................................................................ 108
5-9  Participants gathering to release an airborne paper lantern fueled by fire...... 109
5-10 Talking to participants about fire................................................................. 114
5-11 Burners circling and dancing around the remains of an effigy burn.............. 114
Why do people collect around fire and what is the nature of their affinity for it? This study explores these questions by engaging the Florida Burning Man community, a group in which fire figures prominently. A survey of historical, psychological, and material perspectives is provided as a foundation for exploring its potential meanings. The question was explored through participant-observation, interview, personal documentation through interactive art, and mapping. Unstructured interviews were employed to learn about the values and attitudes attached to informants’ affinity for fire.

These inquiries indicated that fire is symbolically loaded in Burning Man culture. The symbol of a burning figure is at the heart of the culture’s origins stories. It brings physical bodies together via the influence of tradition and the cognitive state it engenders. The study also indicated that people value the quality of fire as a force to affect change and create a break in the homogeneity in the space of their lives. Fire and burning became a visual symbol and a tangible act reminiscent of alterity and a spirit of dissonance.

Fire is understood to possess qualities that participants admire and seek to replicate within themselves. These insights suggest that it is possible to look through a
phenomenon such as fire to illuminate human social dynamics. These conclusions are relevant for those theorizing motivations for the human search for alternatives to everyday life as in tourism and leisure, and attempts at alternative world-making such as Burn communities.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

First Encounters

This project began beside bonfires. I became interested in the human behaviors I was witnessing there, ones the fire itself seemed to be engendering. The crowds that fire creates and the meditative or trance state produced in those observing it particularly fascinated me. Since April of 2011, each time I was beside a fire at a regional Burning Man event in the Southeastern U.S., I turned conversations toward the human affinity for fire. I wanted to know how fire brings people together and what these people think about their fire affinity.

For six months, I simply listened. I wrote and mused. It was not until November 2011, when I decided to take on the project of mapping a Florida Regional Burning Man event, AfterBurn, that the work became sited. I designed projects inspired by my interest in the human draw toward fire and looked for answers in a community in which fire figured prominently.

In addition to mapping the city that the Burn creates, I sought to map pyroscapes: landscapes of human-fire interaction. This allowed me to focus on my first interest, the way people collect around fire. The other project was inspired by a collaborative ethnographic project using photo voice (Reed 2009) which I was exposed to several years earlier. It prompted my attempt to use interactive art and photography to allow people to capture thoughts and feelings about their experiences with burning. In this way, I was also able to approach the human-fire relationships I was witnessing through the network of cognitive associations bound up with fire in a community that calls itself
Burners.

Exploring Fire In Burner Life

This is an account of fire in the Burning Man community. I employ interactive art and mapping as methods of inquiry to ask how fire figures symbolically, overtly, and discretely in Burners’ lives. It is not a documentary of the Burning Man community, for that I refer the reader to literature and film (Bonin 2009, Doherty 2004, Gilmore 2005, Nohe 2002). Nevertheless, a brief introduction is in order.

The Research Community

This study was sited at a Florida regional Burn in November of 2011. The term “Burn” may refer to the main annual event in Nevada or any regional Burning Man event. These are organized replications of the experimental community, temporary city, and what might be called a countercultural movement, which manifests as Black Rock City for one week every year in the Nevada desert and is home to the Burning Man event.

Burning Man began in 1990 as an adventure in the desert by a small group of people looking for new life experiences, among who were a few who had been recreationally burning a large wooden effigy on a beach in San Francisco, for the sheer pleasure of the experience. The community and the experiences they and the desert fostered have attracted increasing numbers to the event each year. At present, when the city forms, it has roughly 50,000 citizens.

These citizens are expected to provide for themselves in the desert for 8 days. Yet more than merely survive the dust storms, each year they build large-scale art installations, throw extravagant parties, and many dress in elaborate costume and seek
experiences not typically offered or condoned by public opinion in the United States of America. They call themselves Burners.

Regional Burns began to appear in the late 1990s. Burners in Diaspora sought to stay connected to other participants in the community after experiencing an event that had profoundly transformed them. A regional network formed to bring the creative expression and freedoms participants experienced to Burning Man inspired events. There are now intentional, experimental Burner communities in 23 countries on five continents. It is a global cultural movement.

To address Burners as a culture requires recognition of two facts: their active ethnogenesis and existence as a counter-public. They have deliberately and directly engineered alternative worlds to act in sometimes separate identities and attempt to embody, preserve, and impose a unique set of values and social norms. And, having received recognition and critique from mainstream media, as a counter-public they exist “by virtue of members feeling addressed by a set of circulating media that posit this public as an alternative” (Warner in Povinelli 2006:142).

**The Subject Of Inquiry**

The social life of fire in this community has important things to say about Burner ethnogenesis, values, and the nature of the human-fire relationship itself. Burners are truly a fire collective. It is not that they collect because of fire or for it, but it brings them together just the same. “The burning of the statue is just the MacGuffin, the thing around which the real story gets set in motion, not the theme,” writes Brian Doherty (2004:2). People are changed by the freedoms and unique experiences of coming together to build these temporary cities. I wanted to know what the role of fire and burning is in these transformations, if any.
There is significant debate about the meaning of the ritual of burning the Man (Gilmore 2010). One of its meanings is in the reenactment of the act which started it all. The inspiration for its annual repetition is a celebration of the very endurance of the event, a commemorative sort of birthday candle in titanic scale. It is afforded so much significance by the organizers that the ritual has become strictly regulated and guarded. There is significant dissent concerning this. Dissonance peaked in 2007 when a man was convicted of arson for burning the Man down four days earlier than planned as a challenge to how regulated the event had become (Garofoli and Fulbright 2007).

At regional Burning Man events, the Effigy and Temple burns are critical rituals, necessary to the making of a Burn. The conflagrations of these structures (which are often not men, but may take any possible form from dragons to oranges) serve as a central axis around which the community comes together.

The Project

This thesis describes several projects involving the regional Burning Man community on the east coast of the United States, with the bulk of observations taking place within the Florida Burn community. Methodologically, this work explores interactive art and mapping as forms of inquiry to examine Burner self-description and chronicling to analyze the spatial relationships of the social life of fire. Two projects were undertaken at the annual autumnal Florida event, AfterBurn. The other points of entry are conversations and observations from seven regional Burns and other satellite Burner events.

The second chapter serves as an introduction to the Burning Man community and fire as an object of inquiry for exploring signification and significance for identity in human social realms. Historical, psychological, and material perspectives come
together to explore its potential meanings for the community. The third chapter details the interactive art project “AnthroPunks At AfterBurn” as a vantage point and assesses Burner utterances about Burning. The fourth chapter describes the process of mapping the Burn landscape and the geography of human-fire interactions as pyroscapes at the event AfterBurn 2011. The fifth chapter begins a journey across the Burn landscape. Fire became my eyes and ears. I follow it through the life of the Burn, pausing to explore moments of human-fire relations of various scales. These are sited on the map, and accompanied by illustrative pictures and the voices of participants. The final chapter reviews the exploration of fire from these vantage points, as it shaped the Burn landscape, it served as a collective force connecting people in the community, and as a symbolic phenomenon it illuminates Burner principles.
CHAPTER 2
THEORIZING FIRE IN THE BURN COMMUNITY

Fire as An Object Of Inquiry

If fire does anything, it brings people together, to fight it, feed it, witness it, and use it for warmth and light. As I entered the Burn community I noticed a preoccupation with fire that I have witnessed lifelong beside bonfires. My interest was piqued by the power of fire to draw people in. Here, I emphasize this power of fire as a magnetic force. It engenders what Kathleen Stewart (2007) calls “ordinary affects,” moments of suspension in the rhythm and flow of life, atmospheres of shared connections between people.

For perhaps a million years, humans have set fires. The pursuit of one concept tends to subsume all other ones under it, yet may serve as a construct for decentering human primacy, not a key to all phenomena. Stephen Pyne, in his six book series Cycle of Fire, narrates the story of how fire and humanity have interacted to shape the Earth. The universe itself began in balls of burning gas. Recognizing fire as a main character in the planet’s history, a new point of departure becomes possible: burning. Things began in fire.

The control of fire is inextricable from the history of civilization and the prevalence of humans. They are the primary source of ignition in the world and the most significant modifier of the fire environment and its fuels (Pyne 1982:4). Thus natural fire became replaced by that which is anthropogenic. Tamed fire is a symbol of civilization. “Fire became a tool, a tamed beast, a sacred symbol, an obedient servant. It knew its place in the social order and kept to it” (Pyne 1997:4).

Fire and humankind coevolved. And in their symbiotic relationship, the life of fire
and civilization began to resemble one another. The distribution and characteristics of fire became dependent on humans. Within this symbiosis, fire has consistently played a regenerative role for plant and by extension human environments. With a global perspective and an eye to history, Pyne (1995:6) suggests there is a lot less fire on the planet today than when Columbus sailed, due to unwarranted suppression which damages the Earth as much as overuse.

A fear of fire bred this suppression. Pyne (1995:6), speaking from an ecological standpoint, asserts, “There is too much of the wrong kind of fire at the wrong places and times, and not enough of the right kind of fire at the right places and times.” This may be true for more than forest management. Proximity to fire and liberty to engage in fire play educates children about appropriate fire management and safety. Suppression bars them from such experiential learning. I return to the implications of this later in my discussion of the psychology of fire.

The pursuit of the signification of fire allows the pursuit of social, objective, and material linkages, and a reexamination of the connections between humans and nonhumans. Fire is not an object per se but a process – combustion. Yet it is constantly objectified, and ideas about the agency and manipulation of objects are true of fire when it is treated as an object. Fire is not a human invention, but an appropriated tool. It often acts without human intent. It can thus be treated as an object having agency.

Objects and actors possess agency not on their own, but only through associations. It is with this approach to fire and humans, as key, influential components of networks, constantly transforming and being transformed by actors and the links between them, that I proceed.
Pursuing the social through fire also lends itself to a multi-sited model. As fire travels across a site or many sites, it leaves signatures, both material and symbolic. Burning changes the magnetic properties of soil by altering the magnetism of its iron particles” (Levick 2011), thus an area in which the soil has a different magnetic orientation can indicate the presence of past human-fire interactions. In this way, the pursuit of fire can cross both spatial and temporal boundaries.

Fire allowed people to turn night into day. It changed their temporal landscape, making night a time humans could inhabit. This study takes fire as an actor affecting social and material realms. It creates collectivity where it exists by drawing people in for warmth, light, and entertainment. This is true of the fire in a trash can in an alley, or for Burners circumambulating an Effigy burn. People actively watch fire. It moves unpredictably. If it strays from its prescribed bounds it is something to be feared. This unpredictability challenges us to tame it. This is manifest in many ways. In play with a lighter or matches, people affirm their mastery and control. It inspires the desire to be an exhibitionist. One might leap over the fire safely, or with props and dancing, display a conquest of it in increasingly elaborate ways.

**Burns as Fire Collectives**

I pursue fire through fire collectives – simply, groups that collect around fire. Temporary cities became my primary venue for this pursuit of the social life of fire. Apart from some major pilgrimage sites, Burning Man is the most iconic example of a temporary city in the last 20 years.

Following Igor Kopytoff (1986:199), I believe people order and constrain the world of things in a way that reflects the social order. Fire runs as a thread through Burner communities – in camp stoves and bonfires, effigies, lamps, or fire dancing
props. It is performance. It is ritualized in the everyday cigarette, pipe, and hookah smoking. It is formally ritualized in the Effigy and Temple burn nights. It is gifted under cooked food, as the warmth of a fire, and as a visual art. In art installations and dancing, it is radically self-expressed. I seek the biography of Burner fire – the fire that lives in Burn world, an ephemeropolis.

In this community, fire exists as a significant constituent of experience. It is manipulated in culturally specific ways and acts to shape material, the landscape, and the people in turn. The Burning Man community ritualizes fire and lives in association with it. Cognitively they are bound to it by name and by the imagery shared and reproduced about their lifestyle internally and externally in the media.

I attempted to open a dialogue about this relationship by creating a theme camp at a Florida regional Burn which included an interactive art installation. Described in a later chapter, this project calls attention to certain themes Burners emphasize and reiterate about fire and what it means to participate in a Burn event.

Hazel Rossotti (1993:5) claims “The main gift of fire to the arts is that of symbolism, which covers much of the human experience, evoking desire, passion, sexuality, romance, vitality, curiosity, knowledge, anger, punishment, evil, destruction, purity, domesticity, and comfort.” Its role in the Burner community has embodied these and more.

In a relatively short time, the origins of Burning Man became mythic. Origins stories provide a sense of legitimacy and authenticity. Stories about the early years are told and retold. The loss of outlandish freedoms of the past, such as the drive-by shooting range, is lamented. The idea of a world where outrageous things were
possible, outside the domain of the law, engenders retelling in a nostalgic fashion. Although the event is only 26 years old, and the wider regional community is 15 years old, conflicting origin stories already surround it. Origins stories help establish a sense of establishment in place and time. They offer context by explaining how things came to be. They make meaning.

One point on which these histories agree is that the burning of a wooden figure on Baker Beach, San Francisco in 1986 was paramount. This act did not have to become a ritual that would later be enacted every year by an increasingly larger collective of people in a remote desert locale. But it did.

I am often told that humans are attracted to fire by virtue of a primal instinct. It is said as if somehow this draw lies at the heart of being human, as if our cells, our very genes, carry a memory of a smoky cave and faces illuminated in the flickering dark. As Burners try to define themselves, and various publics attempt to understand the social matrix out of which Burner identities and divisions emerge, another primeval fire burns. This vision of a burning figure remains, seared at the roots.

Since the late 1990s, as the regional events grew, this symbol of a figure on fire endured. Although they do not burn a “man,” each regional observes its own Effigy burn. Larry Harvey (1997), one of the founders of Burning Man, has spoken of humans’ attraction to fire as symbolizing the shared experience of our primal needs, and suggests a “lesson we have learned while acting in the abstract and liberating space of the desert is that in order to found a cultural sphere human beings require a center of gravity, a powerful axis in time and space. At our event this transcendent center is most conspicuously supplied by Burning Man himself.”
This idea of a transcendent center is deeply resonant with the idea of an *axis mundi*, a universal pillar or world center that connects the Earth and the worlds above and below. The *axis mundi* constitutes a sacred nexus in mundane space, a place where passage is possible from one realm to another, and communication with that realm is expressed by one or another symbolic image (Eliade 1961:37). This idea of a world center about which to collect, and language describing ritual and alternative place-making will continue to be fruitful for understanding the moments that engender fire collectives.

Burning Man scholar Lee Gilmore (2005:71) describes the Effigy burns as iconic, and centrally situated in time and space to indicate their primary significance. The element of fire operates concurrently as a second symbol and an agent of transformation. She describes a “collective effervescence” that erupts at the burning of the Man which “evokes a narrative of sacrifice that has the potential to generate experiences of strong emotional resonance and personal catharsis.”

The hearth, as a center of the domestic sphere, and fire events at the heart of the collected community, served as an axis for orienting existence in the past. Today, fire continues to perform as an axis, as a pillar of the community, a medium for transcendence, and a site for reflection.

**The Spirit Of Cacophony**

The symbol at the source of Burner culture may be the blaze of a Burning Man effigy silhouetted against a dark sky, but the spirit has another name: cacophony. This spirit of not quite resistance, but dissonance, can be seen and heard in Burner utterance.

In the very same year that two men first burned an icon on a San Francisco
Beach that would later become famous, a society was born in that same city, “a randomly gathered network of free spirits united in the pursuit of experiences beyond the pale of mainstream society” (Doherty 2004:36). And the first true iteration of what would become Burning Man, the first pilgrimage to the Black Rock Desert, was an event organized by this group – The Cacophony Society. The event in itself was discovered by a Cacophony member in 1988, and, sparking their interest, was attended by many in 1989. By 1990 the crowd had become so sizeable, the authorities were too concerned, and did not allow the effigy to be burned (Doherty 2004:46). It was that attempt at repression, and the spirit of a group dedicated to pushing boundaries and emphasizing direct experience, that would galvanize Burning Man into an eventually global phenomenon. Labor Day weekend, 1990, the Burning Man became part of a Cacophony Society Zone Trip – an extended event that takes the group outside their local area of time and place (Doherty 2004:49).

A Burn is a temporary city. For more than a few it is reminiscent of Hakim Bey’s Temporary Autonomous Zones – a limited liberation area isolated from forces of control and oppression (Doherty 2004:58). Burn world is seen as another place. It is palpably liminal. Such language was present from the beginning. The Cacophony Society’s “Zone Trips” were derived from Andrei Tarkovsky’s film Stalker, which features “a bizarre Zone that looks like the real world but in which bizarre, inexplicable things occur (Doherty 2004:49).

I have never personally heard the term “zone” used by a Burner, but the idea that burns are an altogether different place is pervasive. To indicate the social and cultural distinctions between these liberated areas and the everyday life, participants use the
term “default world” to connote the rest of the world that exists outside the burn. It is an often repeated sentiment and tradition for the greeting party volunteers who direct those first arriving at a burn to say, “Welcome Home.” There is something very reminiscent of pilgrimage, particularly in the yearly return to the Black Rock Desert. When Burners are on their way to a Burn, they say they are going home.

Doherty (2004:216), interviewing participant Aaron Muszalski, describes a “consensual reality and the ways our own behavior and attitudes transform physical space into whatever we believe it to be.” The conversation reflects the recipe for recreating these experiences. In an unfamiliar environment, it is easy to push the boundaries of reality and resonate with the magic or otherworldliness of a place. Perhaps what harsh or remote environments bring to experimental communities is a radical change in the landscape of possibilities. But as the regional events, often much closer to civilization show, perhaps communal effort and the unfamiliar is the key to unlocking liberated landscapes.

The ways people behave, and the flow of cultural norms themselves, move in the micro-level of everyday reality. This is Bourdieu’s *habitus* (1977). In what they witness from their fellow humans (and non-humans alike), they intuit the way of things and how they are to be done. And so culture flows, shaping and training the actors within it. Burn worlds exist because they are mentally and physically crafted, but this could not happen were it not for the malleability of social space.

As intentional communities, these social landscapes are crafted via certain parameters. As the regional network began to form, Larry Harvey authored Burning Man’s Ten Principles as suggested standards toward which the expanding community
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 (BurningMan.com).

**Fire Moments And Ordinary Effects**

People can create alternative spaces by intentionally altering the social fabric of their communities. Taking the biography of an object as a point of departure: in collective moments, how is fire invested with meaning through the social interactions it is caught up in (Gosden and Marshall 1999:170), and how is the social caught up in moments created by fire?

Fire is a process, a happening. It is at once a magnetic force and a material producing ordinary affects. What are ordinary affects? For Kathleen Stewart (2007:1-2) they are surging capacities to affect and be affected. They are things that happen in social worlds that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations and catch people up in the feeling of being part of something. They are the pulse of the Burn community, forming bonds and feeding its growth. It is through the ordinary effect of fire moments that the community is often drawn into shared experiences. The force of these encounters and the intensities they generate strengthens identification with the community and carries it forward. They evoke the idea of an unstated collective identity in events of shared sense experience and sociality.

Stewart (2007:116) describes the presence of ordinary affect in the yearning optimism of those caught in a hard place, clinging to unattainable hopes, as in immigrants coming to a new country. “It’s an experiment that starts with sheer intensity and then tries to find routes into a “we” that is not yet there but maybe could be.” It is
through such intensities that an event like Burning Man is sparked. In fits and bursts it grows, becoming not simply an event, but a global network of people.

“A world of shared banalities can be a basis for sociality, or an exhausting undertow, or just something to do. It can pop up as a picture of staged perfection, as a momentary recognition, or as a sense of shock or relief at being ‘in’ something with others” (Stewart 2007:27). In a place with nothing, the little things become big. When a group of people build a city where there was nothing, a shared drink of water, kind words, and a bit of creativity become everything.

With back to the flames, one can step back from the ebb and flow of life and take pause. Looking out across the landscape, webs of meaning woven out of moments of gifting, necessity, and affect are almost visible. Examining fire moments illuminates a life of collaboration, collectiveness, and interconnectedness.

Fire moments are any moment inhabited by a type of fire and experienced by another agent. When a person comes into contact with fire as an object and it affects their atmosphere and how they are experiencing the world, a fire moment is constituted. They are the unit of analysis in this inquiry.

The effigy burn is the most iconic fire moment of a Burn. “Why do we burn the Man?” asks Burner and documentarian Brian Doherty (2004:286). “If we didn’t, we couldn’t build him to burn him again next year. And then we wouldn’t have the excuse for us all to be here – us, feeling like something bigger and more than just a bunch of strangers and friends…” This is more than the catharsis, escape, and meaning of ritual. The ensemble is principal here, it speaks to shared affect.

In burning, something is always given out, such as energy in the form of heat,
light, and often sounds (Rossotti 1993:263). In Burning something is always gifted – an experience, a meal, a lesson, a tool, a memory.

Some people may believe that self-interest is the dominant motivation of the modern individual. Yet the selfless exchange and the social tie born of that exchange are far from lost. The gifting meme is powerful in Burn communities, so much so that it is the second of the Ten Principles. Because it most often occurs unexpectedly and between strangers, gifting frequently produces ordinary affect. Whether constructing pyrotechnic art, an Effigy or Temple, performing a fire art, cooking to gift hot food, firing ceramic pendants to gift at the event, or maintaining a bonfire for people to keep warm – fire is often present in the gift. Fire is provided with the knowledge that it will engender affective moments. Thus fire moments are often gifts. Godbout and Caillé (2002) describe how the gift continues to constitute the foundation of our social fabric, even if it is between strangers. Gifting is one way Burners generate the feeling of collectivity. There is something undeniably enriching about coming together to give gifts of time or food, trinkets, art, or performance to strangers, acquaintances, and occasionally some friends.

Stewart (2007:128) writes, “Ordinary affect is a surging, a rubbing, a connection of some kind that has an impact. It's transpersonal or prepersonal – not about one person's feeling becoming another's but about bodies literally affecting one another and generating intensities: human bodies, discursive bodies, bodies of thought, bodies of water.” These impactful connections are sought and expected at a Burn. In a crowd, individuals become one body. Just as fire is a multiple, but one body, “…we speak of flames and tongues of flame. In the Vedas, fire is called ‘The one Agni, manifoldly
“ablaze’” (Canetti 1973:76).

Stewart (2007:23) suggests that “Matter can shimmer with undetermined potential and the weight of received meaning.” Like the people who keep it, fire is so susceptible to forces, impacts, and encounters. Fire is an event. It exists within its own environment. The manipulation of its environment changes it and can cause it to perish. Fire unites people in fire moments. It shimmers with meaning in these moments.

**Fire And The Mind**

In part, the shaping and magnetic force of fire is ascribed and imagined. People approach fire through the categories with which they divide the world. They move through meaningful associations to arrive at the fireside.

As with death and the human corpse, as fire diminishes in everyday life, fascination with it increases. In the United States, the body of a deceased loved one is no longer prepared and viewed in the home. Although once an immediate and visual part of everyday life, the deceased body has become the domain of various industries. For the most part, it is kept out of sight and out of mind. Perhaps this estrangement is responsible for modern interest in zombies, vampires, and the corpse, and their increasing presence in gaming and film.

Pyne (1995:311) says that there is much less fire in the world today than there was in the past. And yet, humans encounter fire every day. Every time they initiate ignition, each time they ride in a car. Perhaps fire has not diminished, it has simply become hidden. More likely, the issue is definitional. As flame and torch and embers, fire is not witnessed with the same frequency as in the past. How can the draw of fire be at once its familiarity (evoking nostalgia) and its increasing estrangement from everyday life? There is a distinction here between unfamiliar and uncommon. Like a precious
metal, fire becomes valued for rarity as much as beauty. Part of its ability to be a spectacle is derived from the place fire now occupies, often residing in ritual or deliberately alternative spaces in human life.

The development of artificial light in the nineteenth century marks a significant turning point in human-fire history. A flame was no longer needed for light in the evening. Wolfgang Schivelbush (1995) goes so far as to suggest that the technology of artificial illumination helped forge modern consciousness. The shrinking presence of familiar fire in human life is not solely passive, a byproduct of the increasing presence of other sources of light, heat, and power. It is the victim of active prohibition.

The reservation of public lands as parks and forests in the 1800s forced the issue of fire into public discourse as it excluded many sources of fire (Pyne 1995:185). And the provisions of New York City’s early fire code, born out of the legislature’s revision of its municipal regulations in 1813 speak to the birth of modern fire prohibition (Pyne 1997:57). Bans and restrictions on dangerous materials continue to increase.

Exploring the psychological relationship humans possess with fire is critical to understanding fire behavior and fire congregation and communality. I propose that symbolically and materially fire moments produce a coalescing affect. Both the concept of fire and fire itself influence the Burner psyche and shape the activities of the community.

“To the imagination, fire is not a separable datum of experience: it is already linked by analogy and identity with a dozen other aspects of experience” (Frye in Bachelard 1968:vi). Every human thought or action is caught up in a web of meaningful associations. While the actual matrix of metaphors and associations for any given
phenomenon may be as unique as individual persons, shared concepts are tangible and powerfully influential.

George Lakoff (1990), a cognitive linguist, has pursued the centrality of metaphor to human thinking. My understanding of the human response to fire lies at the nexus of Lakoff’s thought and the reflections in Gaston Bachelard’s (1968) *Psychoanalysis of Fire*. Lakoff espouses an experiential realism in which thought grows out of the embodiment of experience. Everything contributes to the experiences of individuals or collectives of organisms, “not merely perception, motor movement, etc, but especially the internally genetically acquired makeup of the organism and the nature of its interactions in both its physical and its social environments” (Lakoff 1987:xv). For Lakoff, our thoughts and behaviors cannot be understood outside of our corporeal experience with the world. People’s conceptual categories, their reason, are embodied and imaginative.

Through metaphors, humans understand and experience one type of things in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:5). Our thoughts, experiences, and behaviors, then, are shaped by metaphorical webs composed of associations which surround the concepts with which we are interacting. This metaphorical shaping however is only partial, as one concept is not the other. In this way, the metaphor may limit cognition of something, restricting the terms in which a person can conceptualize the subject.

It should be possible to apply these concepts of embodied reason and metaphorical shaping to the ideas people are communicating about fire and Burning. I do this in Chapter III and IV, when I analyze the expressions from the AnthroPunks at AfterBurn project and the ideas participants shared about fire moments.
Lakoff discusses fire in his study of the concept of anger. Although they are abstract, emotional concepts have a basis in bodily experience, wherein physiological effects stand for the emotion (Lakoff 1987:377). As a result, metonymies for anger reflect the association of anger with heat. Inspired by the physiological effects of heat and redness, the metaphor becomes “anger is fire” (Lakoff 1987:383).

As a result of this metaphor, in the mind anger will always be linked to fire, and fire will always be linked to anger. I believe that in the resulting web of associations, fire is inextricably linked to other metaphors for anger as well. For example, Lakoff (1987: 393,411) also recognizes “the dangerous animal” as a metaphor for anger, and that many metaphors for anger overlap with those for lust (lust is also fire). Thus fire is cognitively linked to anger and lust, as well as danger and animality. Fire becomes angry, sexual, passionate, alive, wild, dangerous, and ephemeral. These are just a few of the concepts we use to understand fire and think about it.

I agree with Lakoff’s (1987:408) proposal that these metaphors are not mere poetic expressions, but implicit in the semantics of the language.” Without these metaphors, our understanding of the concepts they describe would be quite restricted.

Bachelard (1968:112) finds that meditation on fire is characterized by painfully complex ambiguities that inspire pleasure, puzzlement, and creative thought. These are often the result of reverie and phenomenologically-derived conclusions. This is akin to the experiential realism of Lakoff. The aim of psychoanalysis is not to reject reverie, but to diminish these ambiguities and liberate it as a creative mental process.

In order to explain some of these fire reveries, Bachelard (1968:12) theorizes several complexes, some of which resonate strongly with Burner thoughts on fire. The
first is the Prometheus Complex, “all those tendencies which impel us to know as much as our fathers, more than our fathers, as much as our teachers, more than our teachers.”

For Bachelard (1968:11), in the context of fire, the Prometheus Complex arises because we are taught as children to respect fire and are prohibited from touching it, making knowledge of it obtainable only through clever disobedience. From the first, fire is the object of a prohibition. It follows that fire play is the consequence of this prohibition. I think this runs deeper than childhood socialization against, and private experimentation with, fire. Widespread prohibitions against burning, increasing population density in urban settings, and reliance on electricity for heating have all played a role in distancing humans from fire in their everyday lives. I believe this alienation from fire contributes to modern fascination with fire manipulation, pyrotechnics, and fire art. I believe it also plays a significant role in manifesting Bachelard’s Empedocles Complex.

Fessler (2006) disagrees. He believes that the restrictions imposed on children’s fire learning in many modern societies by prohibition limits their acquisition of information about it and experience with it. When this education is incompletely satisfied, fire retains a greater allure throughout life than is natural. He suggests (2006:441, 442) this is why “many modern societies enshrine fire as an emotional symbol and a source of amusement (rather than a tool)” and “the ‘toy’ meanings ascribed to fire” are perpetuated.

Fessler’s (2006) initial findings backup his claims that children who interact with fire consistently at an early age and whose fire education needs are satisfied do not
exhibit a notable affinity for fire later in life, although they need further corroboration. The idea is that where fire is a tool, it is not a source of entertainment. Although fire use in the Burn community is predominately recreational, I was absolutely never told that it was used for fun. To some extent it is described as entertaining when beauty is mentioned, but this facet of it goes largely unspoken. There is the possibility that I indirectly caused a bias in respondents’ answers if my demeanor somehow produced the assumption I was not looking for answers about fire as entertainment.

Fessler (2006:441) makes the unfortunate mistake of suggesting that because for ancestral humans and their immediate predecessor species fire would have been a nearly omnipresent tool, it constituted a mundane facet of life. He contrasts this to modern societies where it is used as decoration, entertainment, a romanticized marker of special circumstances, and assumes that it was not enshrined as an emotional symbol (Fessler 2006:441). Not only is this generalizing and lacks time depth, but many examples of fire veneration and the ascription of meaning to it beyond the mundane are known (see Frazer 1930 for a global survey, Boyd and Kotwal 1983 for fire in Zoroastrianism, and Fogelson 1984 for historical Cherokee tradition).

Fessler (2006:432) relates that “contrary to portraits common in the conventional social science literature, a reliance on acquired information in no way indicates the absence of domain-specific evolved psychological traits…evolutionists have embraced a perspective wherein psychological adaptations can operate via a predisposition to attend to discrete cues and particular sources of information in order to learn about specific facets of the environment.” Thus, humans may not be born with the knowledge of how to manipulate fire, but they may be born with information-acquisition
mechanisms specific to the problem of controlling fire.

Fessler (2006) theorizes these mechanisms based on a better-studied phenomenon, the information acquisition system dedicated to learning about predators, expecting parallels to exist in the domain of controlling fire. Learning can be expected to occur without extrinsic motivation, information is acquired rapidly, socially-transmitted information constitutes a valuable resource, and the information acquisition system can be expected to employ prior structures developed that guide learning on the subject (Fessler 2006:434). Children’s manipulation of small fires may be analogous to chase play, providing a means of acquiring relevant experience about a potentially harmful phenomenon in a safe setting (Fessler 2006:335).

While Fessler’s (2006) analysis of children’s fire play is insightful, I do not believe that amusement is the significant drive behind modern Western fascination with fire. Based on my observations and the ideas expressed by those Burners I was in conversation with, fire seems to engender a near-trance state. The draw toward fire and this mental absorption accompanying it are the inspiration for this research. Near a fire, Burners were often hypnotized, thoughtful, and full of pause, a trait that I believe produces fire collectives.

Interested in disassociation and absorption as cognitive capacities and as induced by a cultural context, Christopher Lynn (2011) looked at their potential to enhance well-being through stress reduction in a mixed-method study using fire. After testing susceptibility to fireside hypnotic influence by comparing EEG, skin conductance, temperature, and blood pressure measures in people exposed to simulated fire with sound muted, with sound, and to a blank computer screen as control in a randomized
crossover design, he suggests that the preliminary results indicate that the cognitive influence of fire goes beyond the stimulus of a flickering light, and is in fact a multisensory and social experience. Thus, the near-trance state I consistently witness individuals experiencing in fire moments is thus tangible, if not quantifiable. It will be interesting to see the future findings of these preliminary inquiries.

United in the Empedocles Complex are “the love and respect for fire, the instinct for living and the instinct for dying,” born out of a special kind of reverie (Bachelard 1968:16). It is this Complex which resonates with fire as a collective agent – magnetic, it draws people in. Evoking a contemplative mindset, it represents “sudden change,” and links “the small to the great, the hearth to the volcano, and the funeral pyre...”(Bachelard 1968:16). It is linked to fire’s transformative power and to the end of the transformation itself.

The burning of the Man and regional Effigy burns are the iconic rituals of Burner life. They form the heart around which the community strengthens its collective experience. Yet the Effigy burn is no longer the only axis around which the community gathers.

The Temples are a class of reoccurring art installations and burn events that began at Burning Man in 2001, and whose ritual is replicated at regional events. As with the Effigy, it is the spectacle nature of the Temple which imbues it with force.

The Temple tradition was inspired by Burner artist David Best’s unplanned transformation of his art installation in 2000 into a memorial for a friend who had died in the weeks just before the event (Gilmore 2010). In the following years, Best and others took up the concept and expanded it. The construction of the Temple and its burn night
are now key rituals on the playa and at most regional events. They are a place for the inscription of memorials, tangible upon the structure’s walls and intangibly imbuing these spaces with thought and feeling. Author Lee Gilmore (2010) communicates that through the inscription of memories on the Temple’s walls “participants were able to share, ritualize, and transform private grief into public expression in ways that are generally unavailable to many contemporary Americans.”

On the last festival night, the burning of the Temple is a much quieter ritual than its counterpart, the Effigy or burning of the Man the night before. Saturated with as many meanings as it has witnesses, its atmosphere is no less charged for its lack of revelry. The Temple is Black Rock City’s most formalized and somber Burn ritual a “decentralized, collective, and participatory nexus of creation and destruction, intimacy and spectacle, love and death” (Gilmore 2010). Gazing into the flames, it is a time of introspection, reflecting on connections, and contemplating transformations.

Sometimes people walk into fires. Bachelard (1968:20) suggests that the call of the funeral pyre remains a fundamental poetic theme that no longer corresponds to modern life. Yet it happened on the playa in 2000 (Doherty 2004:218). And it happened at Transformus, a southeast regional Burn, in 2008. The first man died, the second did not. Nevertheless, the Transformus effigy burn ritual and fire conclave performance preceding it will never be the same. The fear and shock in the face of such moments leaves an indelible mark on the community. When finished dancing, fire conclave participants form a ring and face outward, instructed to watch for any who would run toward the flames as the effigy burns.

There can be intoxication with the idea of destruction. Perhaps a death by fire
being the least lonely, as a whole universe is seemingly reduced to nothingness along with the thinker (Bachelard 1968:19). Yet there are less morbid reasons to wish to be at the center of the flames, as I surmised this past spring as I stood on the perimeter of an effigy burn. The man immediately to my left, not taking his eyes from the blaze said, “I wish I could be in the middle of that.” Sometimes a person cannot help but touch the things that impress them.

The Novalis Complex communicates the metaphorical fire of passion and love, profanity and purity. “It is characterized by a consciousness of inner heat, which has precedence over a purely visual knowledge of light. A satisfaction of the thermal sense, heat is a possession, it penetrates, goes to the interior unseen where the eye cannot go, the hand cannot enter” (Bachelard 1968:27).

In the Novalis Complex there is an impulse towards fire that is brought about through friction. There is an association between this fitful movement and development. It symbolizes the primal conquest of fire. The tradition of the Lamplighters, the group of volunteers responsible for raising the lamps that demarcate the roads of the city for navigation, is understood in such terms. “Civilization is symbolized by the controlled flame of the lamps, in contrast to the untamed fires that otherwise raged over the playa by the mid-nineties, when most of the art of the city burned and anything else people had an urge to see aflame burned as well” (Doherty 2004:58).

Fire does not need to touch something to change it. In the first instance, it illuminates and warms (penetrates to the interior of things). In the second, if Lakoff (1987) is to be accepted, then to experience a fire event is to understand and experience change. The event is transformative for the witness.
Fire changes everything. “When we want everything to be changed we call on fire,” notes Bachelard (1968:57). When a crowd seeks political change, they burn a flag. When an individual seeks personal change, they may burn their possessions. To change a landscape, a farmer burns the woods to make way for fields.

To Burn is to change. Burn environments are spaces for trying out new identities. Rossotti (1993:254) discusses firewalking as a practice used to inspire confidence and overcome one’s illness or phobias. In their transformative capacity, Burns allow a person freedom and push them to act outside the boundaries of default world norms. The Burning Man community inspires many to push boundaries. One participant describes her training in welding as the catalyst for overcoming her fear of large things she cannot control. She realized she could control fire and create art, and in turn feels that women who weld exude immense sexual energy (Doherty 2004:211). Powerful, metaphorical fire transfers its passion.

The power of fire is harnessed as a means of destruction. Destruction in the name of cleansing, release, and entertainment are common motivations for Burner fire. In a kind of “ideological arson,” art installations have been immolated because they were believed to be antithetical to what Burning Man stood for (Doherty 2004:206).

It is more common, however, for the creators of an art installation to burn their own piece. The motivations for this are various. In 1999, the L.A. Cacophony Society constructed a scale-model replica of Disney’s “It’s A Small World” ride and demolished and incinerated it at the end of the week as a rejection of both overbroad ethnic stereotypes and the “one-world, we are all together mentality that united both Walt Disney and many of the gooey political progressives in the Burning Man audience who
might think they hated everything Burning Man stood for” (Doherty 2004:208).

The tradition of art incineration runs deep. In the 1980s, a woman named Mary Graubarger held spontaneous art parties on Baker Beach in San Francisco, creating sculptures out of the detritus of the sea and later torching them (Doherty 2004:27). Her words resonate with the spirit of the Burn experience and the tradition of burning one’s art. “The need for people to have something permanent of their creation leaves all this junk sitting around. It’s more beautiful to have people experience it and then it’s gone” (Doherty 2004:27). Larry Harvey, often called the founder of Burning Man, was occasionally in attendance.

The embrace of ephemerality inherent in art destruction is captured by the idea of the “counter-monument.” Found in the philosophical statement of the crew responsible for the 2010 Burning Man Temple,

The counter-monument’s aim is not to console but to provoke; not to embody permanence but change; not to be everlasting but to disappear; not to be ignored but to demand interaction; not to accept the burden of memory but to throw it back and demand response. The counter-monument accomplishes what all monuments should; it reflects back to the people and thus codifies their own memorial projections and preoccupations (The Flux Foundation 2010).

In burning their memorials, monuments, and art, Burners take active responsibility for their emotions and values, rather than relying on their symbolization, preservation, and renewal in permanent structures.

**Fire as Light**

Schivelbusch (1995:4) describes the source of the magic that fire possessed for past cultures as its unity in providing heat, light, and cooking (later metallurgy and pottery). Life came together in fire.

Fire is the origin of artificial light. Schivelbusch (1995:8) provides an assessment
of how the development and refinement of artificial light changed human technology and sociality. It emancipated the working day from its dependence on natural daylight and made it possible to work before dawn and long after dusk.

People experience fire in culturally specific ways. Some work has been done on the way culture influences how people conceive of light and color and the primacy and linkages of different senses. It “creates atmosphere, highlights and sculpts areas, and opens up spaces, influencing not just how you look at them but also how you feel about them. Light profoundly influences both ambience and mood” (Bille and Sorenson 2007:272). Light is inhabited and manipulated in human social realms “as a way of creating interpersonal relationships and connecting people and things” (Bille and Sorenson 2007:266). People use light to send messages and communicate ideas about what is expected behavior in different spaces (i.e. a bank is not lit the way a hospital or a domestic space is). These codified expectations comprise light regimes. In architecture light is regarded as a building material.

My research indicates that fire is used socially. At different scales, fire as spectacle can also forge connections between people and things through shared experience and fire-associated material culture.

In the creation of lightscapes, the luminosity and materiality of the light source extend agency to their surroundings, altering human experiences of space and defining sensations of intimacy and exclusion (Bille and Sorenson 2007:275). In contrast to electric light, candlelight is perceived to be more authentic, intimate, and animate. Candlelight can invoke the idea of life itself into a space, “but also helps in creating calmness, relaxation, warmth, peace, harmony and balance” (Bille and Sorenson
An important effect of subdued lighting is its ability to create confined and intimate spaces within a larger space. Thus, exclusivity can be created among individuals participating in a larger social gathering via a limited amount of light. When firelight is used, “flames flicker…and cast light and shadow onto the faces of the persons in the group, whereby these luminosities define who is in the group and who is not” (Bille and Sorenson 2007:277).

Figure 2-1. Fire eating circle. Photo courtesy of Tommy Danger.

Figure 2-2. Small circle of fire eaters. Photo courtesy of Tommy Danger.
This phenomenon can be seen in Figures 2-1 and 2-2, photographs of an informal, spontaneous fire eating circle at a Florida regional Burning Man event in April 2011. This fire moment reflects the dynamics of inclusion in illumination, such as which individuals are visible and are remembered to have been present.

The manipulation of fire and light confers power. As electricity was popularized, lighting became industrialized. This centralized the power of fire as light and displaced it from the control of the average individual. By choosing to use candles and kerosene lamps, a person could distance themselves from the centralized supply of lighting and maintain a sense of autonomy. By keeping individual lights, people participated in acts of resistance.

Light and darkness can be manipulated as weapons. Artificial light remains a tool of regulation and control by authoritative bodies by enabling surveillance. Thus the act of extinguishing a fire can confer a feeling of omnipotence. At the smallest scale, removing a light can be a pleasurably subversive act. One can literally erect a wall of darkness by depriving an area of light (Schivelbush 1995:98,106). On a grander scale, destroying the capacity to maintain artificial light can be violent. If light is the handmaiden of ordered society, “darkness is the counter order of the rebellion” (Schivelbush 1995:109).

The process of manipulating and orchestrating the world by means of light is an active component of social life in every culture. Light has agency in lightscapes which reveal people, objects, and spatial relationships whose connections can be used to discern value and power structures, identities and sociality (Bille and Sorenson 2007:281).
These insights about light can help us understand the place of fire and artificial light on a Burn landscape. Although fire has been largely subverted by other technologies in its role as artificial light, it is still symbolically maintained as a marker of civic structure, as in the tradition of the LampLighters lanterns.

The increasing use of light in all forms for art and utility should not be absent from any description of a Burn landscape. The magnitude of its use is reminiscent of nineteenth century fantasies involving light, when engineers dreamed of turning night into day (Schivelbush 1995:3). The use of programmable electroluminescent wire, LED, and glow burgeons alongside large scale art installations incorporating fire as a principal medium. Fire and other light sources are both used for recreation. Because of this I do not think that the widespread use of these other light sources can be attributed purely to motivations of convenience or safety. Instead, I agree with those (e.g., Gilmore 2005:73) who describe a subscription to a technological aesthetic, although I do not believe that this signals a turn away from a “primal lure of fire.”

Burning Man author Erik Davis (2005:28) describes a “cult of flicker,” the “drive – spiritual as well as technological – to manifest the spectral machinery of mind in the world before our eyes.” Fire is “the most powerfully archaic flicker tech of all,” it carries an immense symbolic load, but its true greatness is that such symbolism is nothing in the face of the blaze itself (Davis 2005:29). His description is apt enough to quote at length:

We are all metaphysical children before arc lights, bonfires, or propane explosions, fascinated by fire’s all-consuming alchemy of beauty and threat. This fire-lust flickers at the core of consciousness itself...We often hear that modern consumer culture has replaced the hearth with television, but we seldom draw the full implications out of this received notion, which is that fire was the old ones’ TV. Some of that hypnotic power continues to
animate the fire-twirling that remains, despite its formal limitations, Burning Man's signature performance art. For spectators, these highly ritualized performances function as a syncretistic cult of flicker and flesh; for twirlers, they offer a literally elemental encounter – a dance of power and risk, a mutual seduction, an erotic opportunity to lick and swallow an incorporeal event that feeds on matter itself (2005:29).

Over the years, in the face of safety concerns, Burner fire has become increasingly regulated. There is a controlled perimeter at Effigy and Temple burns. Conclave participants have a safety meeting prior to their performance and there is a contingent of volunteers whose sole responsibility is to act as observers and ensure fire safety. Big fire at Burns has become increasingly spectacular, where spectacle is understood in the DeBordian sense as “the totalizing pseudo-world of technical mediations that grease the capitalist system – profoundly alienates us from actual life through its continuously circulating images” (Davis 2005:30). For Davis, this gentrification of fire is in part why the festival has intensified the technology of flicker and become an exhibition of artificial light. Yet, the spectacle critique cannot truly touch the experience that is fire on burn night. “Perhaps,” he muses, “the central conflagration itself is so deep and so old, so visceral and profoundly excessive, that for a spell it consumes all frames” (2005:30).

Guy DeBord (2006:7) writes that social life that was directly lived has been replaced with its representation – the spectacle. Social life is overtaken by the commodity. Its history can be understood as "the decline of being into having, and having into merely appearing" (DeBord 2006:10). The modern individual is a mere spectator to life. Debord is a Situationist, where situations are actively created moments characterized by "a sense of self-consciousness of existence within a particular environment or ambience"(Ford 2005:50). His proposal is to wake up the spectator
whose agency is overwhelmed by spectacular images. The only way to achieve this awakening is revolutionary design. Only the active creation of situations that reorder life, in which the present dominates the past, can right the wrong of being excluded from any real life (DeBord 2006:67).

Burners value participation and immediacy. They seek to overcome barriers between themselves and participation in society and the world around them. As they discourage being merely a spectator, they are responding directly to DeBord’s societal critique.

Fire does not become the spectacle. It demands response. It cannot stand in for experience because the fire gazer is never truly disengaged, but rather always vigilant, prepared in case the fire strays. Powerful, immediate, and able to rapidly overcome barriers – fire mirrors the core principles of the community.

A network is formed in the links between fire and the visual and tactile atmospheres it creates for fire collectives such as Burning Man communities. Sometimes fire is used to communicate messages or elicit specific responses in the Burn community. As it brings people together it renews social cohesion. It creates an event, the only moment where the community is all together in the same place, engaged in the same endeavor.

I believe as fire manifests materially on the landscape it signifies the principle of radical self-expression. Although fire cannot exist in the community unregulated, in contrast to the default world it has not been criminalized and does not bear a stigma of illicitness or subversivism.

I do not believe that an appreciation of a technological aesthetic, an attraction to
electric light, will diminish the allure of fire. The scale at which fire use endures is too pervasive to believe that its image is destined to gradually diminish as it has in modern American life. If Burners choose to accept the level of prohibition, regulation, control, and institutionalization of their fire that would cause it to nearly disappear from their landscape, the core principles of the community itself will have to become compromised.

In Eliade's (1961:63) well-crafted language,

Where the sacred manifests itself in space, the real unveils itself, the world comes into existence. But the irruption of the sacred does not only project a fixed point into the formless fluidity of profane space, a center into chaos; it also effects a break in place, that is, it opens communication between the cosmic planes (between earth and heaven) and makes possible ontological passage from one mode of being to another.

In many ways Burns constitute an attempt at world-making. Their creation affects a break in space, making possible experimentation and realization of ideals and artistic visions. The experience opens communication, perpetuating the possibility of continuous recreation and world definition.

Fire is a fixed point, a center in chaos, an immobile, mutable break in place. To kindle fire is to give a place over to it. A space gained by fire is lost to humans. Yet Burners still coexist with fire in a way most modern Americans do not. Dancing, eating, and breathing with it, at times they come as close to communing with it as humans may. Fire transmutates, it converts a substance from one mode into another. It transforms ordinary spaces into sites of the extraordinary. It transfigures those who wield it, putting them in touch with a space they might not otherwise reach.

The social order is reflected in the way humans order their physical world. Humans are drawn to fire, whether by evolutionary adaptation or an attraction resulting from
prohibition. This look at the social life of fire found it at the center of the community and origin of Burner history. It can be used to manipulate social space and it creates shared experiences. It also acts as an *axis mundi*, a break in space, analogous to the malleability of social space engendered by the idea of the Temporary Autonomous Zone and the influence of the Cacophony Society. Its high visibility in the Burn community echoes the fact that fire often resides in special, ritual, or deliberately alternative spaces.

Burners are cognitively bound to fire. In the next chapter I assess whether psychological complexes and metaphorical concepts about fire appear in Burner self-documentary. Through interactive art and photography I inquire about the meaning of burning.
CHAPTER 3
ANTHROPUNKS AT AFTERBURN

Why do people collect around fire? Why are they drawn to it? I chose to explore these questions by engaging the Florida Burning Man community, a group in which fire figures prominently.

In order to explore my question, I decided to inquire about it from several perspectives: participant-observation, interview, personal documentation through interactive art, and mapping. I relied on unstructured interviews to learn about the values and attitudes attached to informants' affinity for fire. Choice of informants was either situational or the result of snowball sampling. Each time I was proximate to a fire, I had conversations with those nearby. Other informants were chosen by their consistent participation with fire events at the Burn and by referral. My interpretations about responses to these interviews are guided by participant observation, the results of the personal documentation, and theoretical discourse on fire and the Burning Man community.

I elicited statements on values and attitudes by collecting personal documentation via an interactive art project. Participants expressed themselves through paint on canvas and photography. The relationships and details revealed through the medium of photography proved particularly fruitful for gaining valuable insight into how people view and represent their own culture.

I used the techniques of cutting and sorting and key words in context to identify themes in the statements of my informants, and the artistic and photographic expressions of participants by searching for repetitions, intragroup typologies, and theory-related material (Ryan and Bernard 2003). These methods were useful in the
search for themes which linked expressions across text and images, from my
informants’ utterances to Burner self-chronicling. Yet ultimately I elected to not include
these tabulations, and let participant’s expressions speak for them.

**Interactive Art as Inquiry**

Some (e.g., Doherty 2004:274) would say that the Burning Man community is
about the art. It fosters art by providing grants and by being an environment supportive
of potentially unconventional and creative artistic expressions. The most iconic Burner
art forms are probably the large-scale structures found at the main event in the Nevada
desert. Yet there are other forms, the effigies, temples, and smaller art installations, art
cars, performance arts, costuming, jewelry and other mementos gifted between
participants, and even the artists’ designs chosen to be printed on tickets.

In a venue replete with artistic expression, the ideas the Florida Burners felt the
need to communicate given a public space taught me about their values. These
utterances, the content of the photos they took, and the moments they captured
corresponded with the ideas expressed during fire moments. They taught me what it
means to burn without flames.

The project AnthroPunks at AfterBurn manifested as a theme camp erected at a
Florida Burn. A theme camp is a participatory camp that aims to create an ambience, a
visual presence, and /or in some way provide a communal space or provide an activity.
Theme camps are more visible on the landscape than independent camping, and
central to Burn life.

Anthropunks took the form of an interactive art installation, with the intention of
providing a multimedia venue for participants to communicate about their Burn
experience. The theme camp was used as a platform for eliciting personal
documentation in the interest of answering questions about the meaning of burning and the significance of fire in the community. Responses were delimited only by the motivation of individuals. The project encouraged participants to reflect and express sentiments about their Burn experience while they were still in a Burn environment through mediums that were interactive and not tedious.

I registered AnthroPunks as a theme camp with BurntOranges Inc., the nonprofit which organizes the Florida regional Burning Man events, with the following description:

Our RSS = Radical Social Science. Feed us a quote, a painting, an observation, a story, a theory, an artifact even! We provide a canvas for you to radically express yourself and offer a venue for sharing and thinking about the Burn, our wonderful home. What's the latest on the ticker? Pyro life. Fire: we collect around it, but what do you think about it? Puzzle over our questions, add your own. Come share good talk, pleasant vibes, tasty treats, and leave your mark on our canvas! Brought to you by Rick Scott's latest Enemy #1! (Burnt Oranges Inc. 2011)

Next, a blank, 4 x 54 ft. canvas was erected and art supplies such as paints, brushes, markers, and pastels were provided (Figure 3-1). Painted signs that read “Paint me!” and “What’s in your head?” encouraged participants to avail themselves of the materials. Last, to invite interaction, I created the prompt “Why do we burn?” within fiery colors and a collage of words for fire in other languages (Figure 3-2). In the interest of increasing engagement, I alluded to literal fire with the prompt, but used the more ambiguous term “burn,” rather than “fire.”

Another medium provided by the project was photography. The Anthropunks cameras introduced opportunities for another class of reflection and expressions. A box of disposable cameras was placed on the table near the art supplies. They came with simple instructions, “CAMERAS: Forgot yours? Go capture the Burn and return. Pics posted at AnthroPunks at AfterBurn (Facebook)."
I envisioned AnthroPunks as a continuous symbiotic exchange. I did not want to simply use it as a recording device. I sought to provide a satisfying setting for creative expression. Participants did convey enjoyment in painting and offering their thoughts on and off the canvas. A significant contingent moved their painting off the canvas and used it as body paint (Figure 3-3). I purchased non-toxic paints in anticipation of this.
Monday, November 14, marked the end of the AfterBurn 2011. That morning, I photographed the canvas before it was dismantled. Photos of the canvas and the developed pictures from the disposable cameras were posted in online albums on the AnthroPunks at AfterBurn Facebook group. Participants were then notified and invited to label and comment on the content. What follows is an analysis of the creative expressions that were entered at Anthropunks.

**Analysis Of Expressions On Canvas**

“Why do we burn?” This is the idea that opened AnthroPunks at AfterBurn. Many more questions could be used to interrogate its open-ended multi-media responses. Given the theory of the influence of conceptual associations for the terms by which people understand phenomena (Lakoff 1987), I propose that to speak or think about a Burn or Burner event evokes thoughts of fire. Thus the events and individuals that form the Burn community are cognitively associated with fire from the perspectives of both Burners and non-Burners alike.

This is significant for the people who participate in the community and shapes the perspectives of those observing and trying to understand them. The responses from the AnthroPunks canvas were sorted first by similarity and then with reference to Burning Man’s Ten Principles. The responses in concept maps indicate that Burner self-documentation about motivations resonate with themes in conversations about fire affinity.

Some expressed that they burn in order to actualize sanity, happiness, and transformation (Figure 3-4). Burning is a force with the power to affect things, and the Burn becomes an alternative space “to be free.” They allude to aspirations toward optimal experience and life enjoyment.
Burning is expressed as a catalyst toward action and a force of inspiration in images which suggest movement and in the demands of imperative statements (Figure 3-5). Elias Canetti (1984) elaborated at length about fire as a crowd symbol. Although many of his ideas resonate with crowds of an unruly and destructive nature, they convey that personified fire is understood to have life and behave. Fire is more than violent. Its mutable nature inspires an image that is characteristically ecstatic. Flames dance and play. They act and are jubilant. As a symbol of life it is dynamic and has the capacity to encompass happiness, well-being, and celebration. Flames are said to laugh and leap. If Burn experiences are fire personified, then they are a multidimensional fire that is lived and performed. Their participants are kinetic and cavorting.

Figure 3-4. Expressions about optimal experience. “To be free, flow, to remember we’re alive, happiness, escape, sanity, fire is a beautiful thing that makes us feel brand new.” Photos courtesy of the author.
There are overwhelming expressions of warmth. Some said they burn “for love.” Burns, like fire, bring them together (Figure 3-6). They place a positive emphasis on community and also resonate with the principles of radical inclusion and communal effort. These principles communicate that anyone is welcome to join the community, and that it values creative cooperation and collaboration. The responses recognize the event as a collective, participatory endeavor.
Personal messages of affection, praise of things they found pleasant, and gratitude for gifts provided by other Burners also spread warmth across the canvas (Figures 3-7 and 3-8). The method of interactive art revealed a tendency to gift positive messages to others when possible. Participants repurposed the Anthropunks project and used it as an altruistic platform to express love. They reiterate ideas of personal and general significance which convey messages about positivity and transformation which echo the motivations for creating the Burn itself. Through the canvas, participants gifted encouragement and affection to strangers and friends.
Other positive messages convey burning as an empowering force to help them realize their potential creativity, ecstatic wonder, their identity, and their intentions (Figure 3-9). They offer encouragement to embrace the unique idiosyncrasies which make up the individual. Each statement about human uniqueness and ability is reminiscent of Radical Self-expression, which “arises from the unique gifts of the individual” (Burningman.com). Ghandi’s “Be the change you wish to see in the world” (Figure 3-9) echoes the principle of Gifting, but also resonates with a striving to remake
the world, addressing its perceived negative ills.

Ideas about the distinction between transcendence and escapism are guided by dominant power regimes, gatekeepers determining what an acceptable spiritual or leisure experience should be. Normative claims and governance about modes of sociality even on an intimate level catch the body and its relations up, bounding and constraining them (Povinelli 2006). Yet, as one participant conveys with a quote from Mary Oliver, “You do not have to be good, you do not have to walk a thousand miles on your knees through the desert, repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves” (Figure 3-9).

Several factors set the Burning Man community apart from other intentional communities professing utopian ideals. One of these is intentional impermanence, which does not need to be interpreted as perceived unsustainability. Burns are used as periods of rejuvenation, but the ideals they reinforce cross barriers and return with their participants to the default world. Projects such as Burners Without Borders exemplify the idea of spreading Burner ethics among a broader audience.

They echo language in the Ten Principles which addresses empowerment and transformation. Radical self-reliance encourages reliance on inner resources, radical self-expression is seen as the unique gift of the individual, the principle of participation explains that individual or societal change can only occur through deeply personal participation, and immediacy conveys that through immediate experience, one reaches a recognition of the inner self, the reality of others, and participation in society and the natural world.

For some the canvas became a venue for the contemplative and sublime in ideas
of personal destiny, the eternal Tao, spirit, and the meditation on existence and the supernatural (Figure 3-10). They parallel expressions I heard in fireside conversations describing complex ambiguity, and a mix of euphoria and terror in the face of fire.

Figure 3-9. Expressions of empowerment. “To remember and celebrate – that life is wonderful; that we are powerful, & …that the natural state of the human spirit is ecstatic wonder! That we should settle for nothing less! Love life, Be the change you wish to see in the world!!! Author: Ghandi Written: Anada, Don’t ask for an easy life, ask to be a strong person, Because it’s important to remember that none of us really know what we’re doing anyway, but we can be beautiful beyond our wildest dreams, overcome caterpillariness, Let it be, ‘You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves’ -Mary Oliver, Breathe within tree image.” Photos courtesy of the author.

Images of nature (Figure 3-11) evoke the idea of fire causing one to feel “one with nature,” as well as being elemental and an interconnected totality of existence. The
Earth, sea creatures, the sun, stars, and flora invoke the world Burners seek to connect with and participate in, as well as a respect for the environment communicated by the principle of Leave No Trace.

Colorful images and abstract art (Figure 3-12) evoke the visual encounters and sensational experiences later described by participants on the subject of burning.

Figure 3-10. Spiritual expressions. “My destiny, I ‘know’ Buddha no mind, Can’t believe how strange it is to be anything at all, Spirit with lotus image, Isis is ever here learn the hidden signs with winged figure, I don’t want to be an ant.” Photos courtesy of the author.

Figure 3-11. Images evoking nature. “Stars, sun, mouse, flower, phallic willow tree, Earth with collage of marine animals, horse, and an eye, squid.” Photos courtesy of the author.
One of the particularly fascinating things about the AnthroPunks project was the way people participated in a dialogue with one another. This is particularly poignant in the illustrated statements, “Reject Caterpillarness” and its rebuttal “No” (Figure 3-13).

In moments such as this, when not just an “I” but a “we” is felt, it invokes recognition and demands engagement. Just as the cry of one watching an Effigy burn may be caught up or answered by others in the crowd, the declaration of one may be caught up and echoed or countered. The crowd is at once a multitude of separate “I”s and a united “we.” And thus, the voices of the canvas speak at times disconnected, in juxtaposed concert, or in dialogue. Themes stand out amid the resulting cacophony.
The concept evoked in Figure 3-13 is reminiscent of a movement which appeared in the Florida Burner community shortly after AfterBurn 2011: The Moderate Vibe Movement. Essentially a meme formalized by a Facebook group page, it arose in response to another: the Positive Vibe Movement. The Positive Vibe Movement is simply an alternative online community geared at the arts and conscious living.

These and other moderate vibes are less a rejection of positive aspirations than an articulation of a dissonance that I believe is central to the Burner ethos. It is vestigial of the spirit of the Cacophony Society (see Chapter 2). The community formed as a venue for the unconventional, exemplified by their propensity for adventuring in inhospitable environments, often with lavish creature comforts. As a statement often expressed to new Burners goes, “there is no right way to Burn.” The moderate, dissonant, and decidedly negative are radically included too. Utterances within the Anthropunks canvas indicate that dissonance and the space for being dissonant are just as important as positive vibes.

The AnthroPunks project became a venue for Burner self-commentary. The site and its photographic extensions bore witness to and were shaped by the impacts of Burn events and experiences. These expressions are in-the-moment reflections, less subject to the selectivity and embellishments of historical narrative. As they try to make sense of their experience, however, participants do situate it in the terms of both Burner discourse and other worldviews. The strength of these ideas is evidenced by the repetition of certain motifs, as in the evocation through the canvas of certain poets’ and philosophers’ thought.

The canvas became a tangle of potential connections. Literally moving things –
things that are in motion and are defined by their capacity to affect and be affected – they have to be mapped through their different, coexisting forms of composition, habituation, and event. A wall of expressions, each an utterance to provoke affect or release an emotion. Some of them are symbols or quotes. Whether personal or not, I think most were intended as gifts. They were crafted in a public sphere, with the knowledge that they would reflect out and be received. I think most were left because they are “good to think with.” They possessed affective power for their authors. Each contribution represents a burn moment. Yet none of the moments are bounded. They bleed into each other, the first responses affecting those that came after. And each is in motion, received and traveling off canvas in the minds of participants. Mental fire, they affected their present and are affecting the future.

**Photo Content Analysis**

One hundred and ten pictures were taken with the AnthroPunks cameras. After those discarded due to lack of clarity, 94 were developed. Two images were not posted because they violated Facebook.com’s restrictions on nudity. Thus, 92 were shared online at [http://www.facebook.com/groups/293073334053448/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/293073334053448/).

There were significant constraints to photography as a personal documentation medium due to fiscal limitations and the impracticality of leaving expensive equipment unsupervised near large quantities of paint. The flash and focus capabilities of the disposable cameras circumscribed subject matter and conditions captured.

The remaining photos evoke particular genres as they attempt to capture the everyday of the Burn. Through candid photos, objects, and landscapes, participants depicted not the extraordinary and iconic of Burner life so beloved by film documentarians, but the banalities and sudden realities of it.
Perhaps a limited budget was fortuitous. Without better equipment, participants could not translate the “cult of flicker.” Rather, they were forced to tell stories about a less reported character – the daytime Burn. It is less glamorous in the garish Sun, the ephemerality of its features standing stark and unhidden by shadow and softened by romantic firelight.

The photographs, devoid of lighting and special effects, tell a story of ordinary affects (Stewart 2007), those moments of shared banalities when human lives surge up against one another to share in something. This constant bumping up against one another and generating force, feeling, or passion is part of Burn appeal. These images also narrate the story of matter which “can shimmer with undetermined potential and the weight of received meaning” (Stewart 2007:23). Participants recorded the unlikely objects and conventional backdrops against which the Burn is performed.

The object-centered category conveys two sweeping messages. A significant number capture moments of packed or unpacked gear and cars, as in figures 3-14,15,16,17,18,19. Still lives, these snapshots of grossly disorganized juggling props or neatly stacked camp chairs speak to the labor involved in erecting and dismantling even in temporary cities. It as if their creators wished to convey the tedium behind the normally extraordinary conflagrations, costumery, and other unique Burn moments often captured on film.

One of the truths that came out of this experiment is that art is one of the most suitable modes for capturing the everyday, the ordinary shared experiences. Human life is bound up in an endless network of objects and an array of ways to engage them. These are revealed in the photographs capturing the many ways humans might become
fascinated with objects such as their potential action (a flying balloon), their color (a bright pinwheel), or their purpose (traffic light sound meter). As in Figures 3-20, 3-21, and 3-22, the images become proof of exploration and analysis.

Figure 3-14. Scattered skill toys at HippiTrix theme camp. Photo courtesy of anonymous participant.

Figure 3-15. An early stage of the canvas development. Photo courtesy of anonymous participant.
Figure 3-16. The completed canvas. Photo courtesy of anonymous participant.

Figure 3-17. The canvas being dismantled. Photo courtesy of anonymous participant.

Figure 3-18. A car in the process of being packed. Photo courtesy of anonymous participant.
Figure 3-19. The AnthroPunks supplies table. Photo courtesy of anonymous participant.

Figure 3-20. Balloon in flight. Photo courtesy of anonymous participant.

Figure 3-21. Close-up of rainbow pinwheel. Photo courtesy of anonymous participant.

Figure 3-22. Sound meter designed to look like a traffic light. Photo courtesy of anonymous participant.
There was a penchant for photographing disengaged scenery. The uninhabited, or sparsely inhabited landscape shots, stem from a desire to convey several related ideas. One is a need to cope with the disorientation of the ebb and flow of activity level. A field that pulsed with life the night before appears barren through the camera lens, and the only evidence of a once enormous Ferris wheel in flames is now only a small tendril of smoke curling up from a pile of ashes. Another is the desire for perspective. The photographers seem to be trying to capture a sense of the setting, sometimes mundane and sometimes beautiful, which gets lost in images of faces, costume, and action in their desire to chronicle and preserve the experience.

Figure 3-23. Facing northwest: field and the Burning Oasis theme camp being dismantled. Photo courtesy of anonymous participant.

Figure 3-24. Facing southwest: abandoned tub of water and the Effigy Burn field the morning following the burn. Photo courtesy of anonymous participant.
Sometimes photographs freeze frames not of events, but landscapes. They can be placeholders for scenes that were enacted on them. The feel of the grey soil and oak leaves underfoot, the dust that leaves skin dry and the itch of crabgrass on a ranch, the contrast of shade and sun, the Spanish moss and the ants, are all also part of the assemblage, part of the moments. Given an audio recorder, participants might have given me the wind in the trees and the eerie and persistent calls of peacocks, laughter interspersed with inside jokes, and the beat of djembes and electronic dance music.

At other times images freeze part of a moment. Like newspaper clippings cut out and set away, they are snapped to create a mnemonic for later, a touchstone for
accessing a past stream of events. These mnemonic devices are not always images of action; sometimes they represent the people who were present. Sometimes they are individual portraits. The answer to the question “What happened?” becomes “She did.”

It seems there was a persistent desire to chronicle the everyday – shared smiles, a sunset, a workshop on flow arts, or the distraction of a colorful object. These actions, faces, and places congeal. They are not moments themselves. They represent moments and desires for moments past. They are fragments of the tangled phenomena which affected those who encountered them. They are reverberations that, if it were possible to trace them back, would lead to the affects that inspired them.

Figure 3-27. Playing in the sun. Photo courtesy of anonymous participant.

Figure 3-28. Partner hula hooping. Photo courtesy of anonymous participant.
The photos capture a facet of Burner culture that is often lost in translation. One can burn without fire. Burning can also mean to consume or use up. Or, as the candid photos illustrate, to burn can mean to be full of life and action. To be a Burner is to be a keeper of fire, and to consume and radiate the light and heat of life together as a crowd of flames.

AnthroPunks revealed that psychological complexes and metaphorical concepts about fire appear in some Burner self-documentary and rationalization about burning. Certain recurring themes are apparent in Burner art and archiving of their experience.
through mediums such as photography. At times, these themes resonate with formal
Burn community ideals as reflected in the Ten Principles, and at others a cross
pollination with other philosophies.

**Burning Without Fire: Thinking About Meaning And Affect**

There is a place for the discussion of signification and meaning in the rituals and
big fire moments of a Burn, to make sense of things, and render intelligible things that
cannot be comprehended directly. Yet, a focus on the meaning of the ritual and
spectacular alone risks losing a holistic perspective.

Much of what occurred on the Burn landscape which connected its citizens,
catching them up and making them feel they were a part of something, was found in the
everyday. It is in experiences, the common and the strange. Experiences of emotion,
the body, other people, and time inextricably link them to each other.

The spontaneous aspects of existence may be the most telling. For Stewart
(2007), the ordinary is an integral site of cultural politics. Ordinary affect connects
people and creates common experiences that shape public feeling, but not in the sense
of society-affirming ritual. Instead, it is felt in the reverberations of the unrehearsed.

In the canvas, a sea of color, where everyone was painting declarations and
ideals, and wisdoms crossed in bold brush strokes, a tiny message, inked in blue read,
“Because it’s important to remember that none of us really know what we’re doing
anyway, but we can be beautiful beyond our wildest dreams.” One by one, strangers
happened upon the note. It was carried away in curiosity or a smile.

In such moments one catches a glimpse of a network of affective connections
constituting Burn life. It is densely spun of linkages and almost-moments. The different
scales of fire moments reflect these as well. Big, ritualized Effigy fire is a theatre for
ascribed meanings. Catching sight as one is lying down to sleep of the lone fire dancer at dawn may radiate affect.

A useful analogy from material culture studies might be Christopher Fennel's (2007:7) explanation of emblematic and instrumental core symbols, which may be tangible or intangible expressions of fundamental elements of a cultural group's cosmology and sense of identity. Core symbols span a continuum of expression. Ritualized community fire moments would be analogous to emblematic symbols, which "serve to summarize the identity of a culture group as a cohesive unit" (Fennel 2007:8).

The ordinary effects of fire and burn moments are analogous to instrumental symbols, which are frequently abbreviated forms of a core symbol of a cultural belief system used for private expressions which are more dynamic and thus malleable to new social settings. Fennel (2007:27) finds that the individual use of such abbreviated forms "can lead to stylistic innovation and the creation of new symbolic repertoires to express membership in social networks formed in new settings." Fire becomes a reminder of the alternative social parameters of Burn landscapes and a means to connect with them in everyday life.

For Stewart (2007:3), ordinary affects gather texture and density "as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldings of all kinds," they are "an animate circuit that conducts force and maps connections, routes, and disjunctures." They lack the more accessible meanings of semantic messages and symbolic signification.

The most palpable disjuncture for the Burner community is that between the Burn and what is perceived as the default world. Disjuncture comes from the gap between
these attempted ideal worlds and the social reality their participants must relate to. Their values and the conceptual maps they apply to understand what is going on around them begin to differ from the dominant culture they inhabit. This dissonance is a result of difference in people’s worldviews as much as physical limitations and the realities of limited resources available to perpetuate the Burn lifestyle.

I would not be surprised to discover that the founders of Burning Man were exposed to Guy DeBord’s (2006) idea that social life has been replaced with its representation. The strong theme of empowerment in the canvas reiterates a desire for agency and direct experience.

The canvas taught me that they Burn to be creative, to be new, to live to their fullest so they can return rejuvenated to a world of politics they are disconnected from and commercialization, commodification, and exchanges of wealth they cannot begin to conceive. They Burn with the intention of participating in life, rather than consuming others’ performances and experiences.

In early April of 2012, blogger Caveat Magister attempted to answer the question “What does it mean to be a Burner?” He argues that most people spend their lives as agents of social control, but that at some point, Burners become agents of possibility, creating, participating in, and sharing possibilities that society does not normally allow. “To ‘Burn’ is to become an agent of open possibility, creating a space where something amazing can happen and anyone can join.” Motivations, perceptions, and outcomes are irrelevant, “because you’ve given up acting as an agent of social control and have instead invited everyone to play: you created the game but it’s not your game. It’s a gift” (Magister 2012).
Participants often act without a well-articulated sense of purpose. Larry Harvey, as one of the founders, is invested in the community and wants to see it continue. He articulated the 10 Principles as a resource for those moments when people were trying to put their finger on the meaning of things. That is why they are not prescriptive. Instead, they are reflexive. Immediacy and participation respond very strongly to DeBord’s critiques.

The affects achieved in the layering of individual utterances expressed through AnthroPunks at AfterBurn illustrated a desire for creative and self-conscious experiences and burning as a medium for finding the confidence to pursue them. It also illuminated the tendency of Florida Burners to use a public venue for self-expression as a platform for sending empowering messages to foster an environment of radical inclusion and participation.

What it means to burn, and to burn without fire, can be witnessed in the everyday. Fire acts as a symbol of the alternative social parameters of Burn landscapes. In the next chapter, another perspective to make sense of fire’s influence on the Burn landscape’s texture and shape is offered by mapping.
People use maps to represent and make sense of phenomena. Culture itself can be understood as a particular toolkit for charting and navigating physical and social worlds. Maps are merely representations, yet they possess the ability to concretize realities in the eyes of the observer.

They are a visual way to present spatial data, but they can be used as a venue to showcase other data, such as social experiences, as well. Mapping human-fire interactions lent me an additional perspective, served as a mnemonic to site observations after the fact, and provided a venue to situate expressions about fire moments.

Mircea Eliade (1959:20) describes the nonhomogeneity of space for religious man, where the world is divided into sacred and profane. Something about Burn landscapes is reminiscent of this geography.

For Eliade (1959:21), a *hierophany*, or physical manifestation of the sacred, constitutes the world by revealing a fixed point or central axis for all future orientation. Intentional, large-scale fire moments such as Effigy and Temple burns that are designed to bring the community together serve as an axis for the orientation of the Burn community for the duration of its temporary existence. In turn, Burns act to concretize or reinstill Burner ideals, constituting a mnemonic toward which participants orient themselves even as they return to the default world and its prohibitions and restrictions.

Thus, fire reconstitutes the Burner world, a world born of a burning event. The mission statement of the organization which facilitates Burning Man claims “…Burning Man must endure as a self-supporting enterprise that is capable of sustaining the lives
of those who dedicate themselves to its work. From this devotion spring those duties that we owe to one another. We will always burn the Man” (Burningman.com). These large scale acts of burning become one of the few things requisite to creating a Burn. Burning becomes a necessity, carried out at centralized locations at ritualized times.

In mapping a Burn landscape and the human-fire interactions it witnessed, I sought to achieve several goals. I experimented with the idea of recording and analyzing experiential landscapes, in this case one characterized by fire’s influence on human sociality. I sought to generate several maps of the event, AfterBurn 2011, and the property on which it was held. In addition to investigating my research questions, I wished to provide better maps for BurntOranges Inc, the organization responsible for the Florida regional Burning Man events, for future use and planning.

Social interactions can be caught up in a moment created by an element. Fire has a social life in its own right. Just as Burners manipulate fire, fire in turn is a mover of people and events. It is a focusing element in focused gatherings. Fire can serve as a point of reference to recognize and interpret action. The section below reflects these ideas about where fire is situated, its influence, and meaning. It is first a discussion of the mapping process, followed by an exploration of a pyroscape – a landscape of human-fire moments.

Any new lens or method for examining social phenomena is valuable in its ability to assist one in decentering their assumptions and proceed from a different point to access meaning and arrive at conclusions. Brennan-Horley et al. (2010) discuss how Geographic Information Systems (GIS) can be used to enhance ethnographic methodologies within a cultural research project. Mapping can broaden the scope of
data available, produce innovative ways of communicating research, and push the traditional boundaries for conceptualizing the interpretation of the social. As a researcher I struggle with the linearity of assessing and representing social and material relationships solely through written language. GIS and maps provide the ability to convey complexity and layered phenomena. Methodologically, mapping ideas and experiences may facilitate the recognition of new and meaningful connections and the ability to convey these to one’s audience.

This project arose out of my desire to experiment with mapping dynamic phenomena, specifically human experiences with the material world, in order to better understand them. The aim of this project was to discover whether a temporary city arising from a Burn event could be mapped in a way that would produce a useful product for the community, and simultaneously, whether the interaction with fire over the course of the event could be mapped as a *pyro scape*, in order to record, assess, and represent it.

As this project progressed, I became increasingly aware of the subjectivity of GIS analysis. Previously, I succumbed to positivistic assumptions and did not question these information systems as social constructions. Aitken and Michel (1995:17) outline some important concerns about power structures and conventions of communication between academics, practitioners, and clients, and how these affect ‘those whose everyday lives are impacted by GIS research and implementation.” Assuming that GIS production is somehow more inherently rational than other forms of knowledge production misses the significant sociocultural and political contexts in which it takes place.

As I continue to write about this project, I hope to be able to produce both material
useful for the Florida Burner community, and for others interested in mapping ephemeral social phenomena, in a way that highlights pitfalls and potential collaborative opportunities.

**Mapping The AfterBurn Pyroscape**

Contiguous with the interactive art project AnthroPunks At AfterBurn, I undertook the project of mapping the Burn itself. Over the course of two days I took GPS points at sites of activity and landmarks across the Burn, and spent the weekend observing and noting loci of human-fire engagement. Following the event I consulted with other participants about where they remembered people engaging and manipulating fire. After gathering necessary data layers such as an aerial photo of the property, and compiling my own from the points I collected, I generated several maps of the Burn.

The data for the mapping project was recorded with a Garmin GPSMAP 76Cx, and other necessary layer data was acquired from the Florida Department of Transportation. Map renderings were produced using ArcGIS 10 software. The map data display the site and communicates the landscape of human-fire engagements. These include distribution of fire moments, as well as types of engagements and their distribution relative to one another. Different modes of engagement are highlighted in a later chapter and paired with images of each type of fire engagement and informant reflections about the significance of those moments.

The first is a map of AfterBurn as it appeared in 2011 (Figure 4-1). It displays the location of theme camps and their relative size, sites whose location typically repeats because they are integral to the temporary city’s functioning such as the Ranger Station and Center Camp, pathways, parking, bathrooms, and areas of free, unaffiliated camping. Although the Burn, bounded by the Maddox Ranch property, takes a similar
form each time it is erected, it is not the same from event to event. Major theme camps often repeat, yet their content and numbers are constantly shifting. Thus, this map is useful in its capacity to display the spatial information of an ephemeral phenomenon, and it is an accurate portrayal of the geography of a typical Florida regional Burn. It could not, however, be used to navigate the landscape of a future Burn.

For this reason, I generated a template map (Figure 4-2) displaying boundaries, the infrastructure which is consistently sited such as Center Camp, and areas which Burnt Oranges Inc. uses to define camping and place theme camps. This map can be altered before each event to display theme camp locations and to be printed in the Survival Guide, a pamphlet distributed at the gate listing theme camp content and practical information. The juxtaposition of the two renderings of the same location provides an accurate sense of variability and subjectivity in mapping production and display.

A byproduct of the generation of maps is a database comprised of several classes of data. These classes manifest as layers on the map, and can be turned on and off to display different phenomena on a landscape, effectively rendering maps customized to display the information one wants to receive and present.

One of the map layers generated, visible in Figure 4-3, illustrates how I pursued my inquiry about human-fire interactions across the Burn landscape. The layer’s elements were created based on events I witnessed, as well as the observations of other participants.

Theoretically such layers can be manipulated by others to emphasize the data they wish to view. Using GIS technologies to display or overlay multiple layers
concurrently presents the ability to reveal spatial relationships between classes of information. Mundane and extraordinary life elements can thus be represented together across the landscape. This was my aim in rendering burn events, the burn fields, and areas of concentrated fire arts performance (Figure 4-3).

Each of these three types of sites represents fire moments. Again, fire moments are any moment inhabited by a type of fire and experienced by another agent. These are moments created by fire. They may be experienced alone, or engender fire collectives. I use the term fire collective to denote a group which congregates around, at the cause of, or to create fire. Fire moments draw the community into shared experiences. The force of these encounters and the intensities they generate strengthen identity with the community and carry it forward.

Lived geographies occur at different scales. In Figure 4-3, burn events are any site in which fire occurred and was overtly visible. Examples include fire art installations such as a large metal fish sculpture which spewed fire or a basketball hoop whose fire cannon was activated when a participant scored. They also include large-scale conflagrations such as the Effigy and Temple burns, braziers kept out at theme camps for communal warmth and night light, fire arts performance on all scales, and isolated moments such as spontaneous fire flogging at The Stocks or fire massage on the Bridge.

In the map in Figure 4-3, moments where fire was present yet only discretely visible are excluded, even when they engendered a crowd.
Figure 4-1. AfterBurn 2011, Lakeland, FL. Image courtesy of the author.
Figure 4-2. Map template for Burn events at Maddox Ranch, Lakeland, FL. Image courtesy of the author.
Figure 4-3. Pyroscapes of AfterBurn 2011: mapping the social life of fire at a Florida regional Burning Man event. Image courtesy of the author.
Examples include the fire of camp stoves at camps which gifted large quantities of hot food to passersby, and the moments of smoking hookah and other apparatus made possible by the ignition of lighters and blow torches.

The burn fields simultaneously reflect the physical parameters defined by open spaces reserved for the Effigy and Temple burns (which must remain clear of camping...
and other art), and the sites of collective effervescence as a result of ritualized burning on a large scale. Burn fields each see the organized performance of fire arts during the Fire Conclave, a ritual wherein fire artists are invited to perform while circling the Effigy and Temple before they are burned on their respective nights. Areas of concentrated fire arts performance indicate both designated and open areas where fire arts were performed for hours each night.

Mapping a pyro scape does not capture the temporality of fire moments. When these moments become this spatially concentrated, it is difficult to convey that once set in motion, action is nearly continuous. To render this, the size of the flame icons indicate the relative extent to which areas of fire arts performance were repeatedly used each night of the Burn.

Figure 4-6. Fire arts performance. Photo courtesy of Alexa Anderson.

What was made clear by the process of gathering data and creating a map of this pyro scape is that fire is an active participant in the Burner world. It is true that fire would not exist in these temporary cities without human impetus, yet there can be no doubt that through its own agency it strongly shapes the landscape. The process of mapping the pyro scape further illuminated its spatial and cognitive influence as well as indicated themes which reflect the shared values which engender cultural cohesion.
Not all fire moments are equal. By virtue of scale and circumstance, these moments evoke different meanings. In Figure 4-3, each fire symbol indicates physical size, the level of participatory engagement involved, and the number of individuals collaborating in the event.

Sometimes fire moments are larger than any one person can experience. Their significance is in the number of individuals touched by, experiencing, and affecting these same moments simultaneously. There is something in these collective fire moments which transcends the individual, even while producing very personal affects. And there is a powerful effect in the lighting of a pipe or the flames of one fire dancer which in turn evokes the greater transcendent, collective moments.

One of the defining characteristics of a Burn is that one has the freedom to participate in and create fire moments at a rate and scale which typically do not exist in the default world. Made clear in the map in Figure 4-3, the presence of overt and discrete fire on the landscape per meter is significantly higher than in a typical community in the southern United States.

Sites of large-scale, overt fire located at the center of the community are typically those most inhabited. They receive more attention and are visited and participated in by more people than sites of personal fire moments.

The map indicates that sanctioned areas for fire tending and performance tend to engender more fire use in general. Fire manipulation and play which is not intended to be exhibitionary nevertheless routinely takes place in a few select, densely populated areas of the community. This can be seen (Figure 4-3) where the areas of concentrated fire arts manipulation are bounded by sites of burn events.
Thus, fire moments become heavily concentrated in a few areas as a result of several factors. One is the compelling property of fire, encouraging individuals to gather. Another is *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977) and the tendency of people to follow set precedents, resulting in the continuous use of sites of spontaneous fire play. Yet another is convenience, where the nearest open area adjacent to a camp with a large concentration of fire dancers may become a frequently used site. This was the case for the area northeast of the Effigy Burn field, since the most proximate camp, HippiTrix, emphasizes object manipulation and fire arts.

“Place” can operate at different scales and manifest in different locations, becoming personal in nature. Landmarks or iconic and scenic places become sites to stage fire events. Small scale, spontaneous fire play occurred at locations otherwise unassociated with fire such as the Bridge and the Stocks. I believe these events occurred in these locations because it is felt that fire events need to be “sited.” Both sites witnessed small-scale, personal fire events such as fire dancing, flogging, and massage which were not scheduled, but rather inspired by the desire to engage in fire activities and to do it in a “place.” These places possess a kind of location inspiration. One was isolated and facilitated more intimate fire interactions. The other was a more public setting, where being witnessed may have been part of the attraction of participating. While necessary characteristics for placement of any fire may be bounded by safety or availability of fuel and weather conditions, these types of placement were guided by a desire for scenic value. The events and later the memories of the events were probably tied to the notability of these landmarks.

The human inhabitants of these landscapes live and sleep at distances determined
to be safe from its presence. Mapping fire indicates it as a significant environmental factor, and whereas it is not the only determinant, it plays a part in the shape of the temporary settlement. This physical shaping in the present is one way fire is a primary actor in the Burn network.

Another fact made evident by the mapping of *pyroscapes* is that overt fire does not exist at the majority of campsites. It is not even present at most theme camps. The hearth fire is not a prerequisite for the temporary Burner home. Many people camp and eat without the use of a camp stove or open fire.

The paucity of overt fire at most camps could be a reflection of the lack of necessity and inexperience with it in the default world. It is perceived as difficult to achieve or unnecessarily expensive to maintain. The hearth was once a basic necessity and the core of the human home. It is now a luxury good.

Fire is a destination and a setting. The ability of fire to repel, due to its capacity to do harm, guides settlement and human activity. Its magnetic capacity can be harnessed to gather people. If a camp wishes to be active and populated in the evening, the use of fire is a common way to achieve this goal.

People congregate around fires. This is true of ones which both are and are not intended for that purpose. Whether a pile of logs or an artistic sculpture set alight, fire participates by drawing people in. It is difficult to ignore a blaze. It is rare to see an unattended fire. In the early hours of the morning, when many are asleep, a lone figure or two can often still be seen keeping vigil, staring into the flames. And the spectacle of humans wielding fire is likewise a draw. Fire performances and spontaneous fire play each garner audiences. This remains true even as these sights repeat through the night.
Fire moves people. It is an active player on the Burn landscape. It is on the *burn fields* that it can be seen at its most iconic participating with Burners in shaping their intentional communities. When large-scale, overt fire manifests, it affords opportunities to reiterate shared principles and perpetuate a collectivity that appears substantially valued.

Substantial *burn events* produce physical signatures. The traces of past Effigy and Temple fires are stained as great rings in an otherwise sparsely inhabited field. Just as the soil bears testimony to their presence, these larger *burn events* leave indelible marks on their participants far into the future.
CHAPTER 5
FIRE MOMENTS

Burner Stories Of Fire Moments

Just as people gather around fire, I watched them gather around my research. The effect of fire can be deeply personal, and people want to share and work through the musings and insights my questions prompted. As they puzzled over its symbolism, themes resonated in their utterances. Different fire moments engender different affects.

Big Fire – Effigy And Temple Burns

Figure 5-1. The Burn Fields. Image courtesy of the author.
Effigy

It is unexpectedly cold, a few hours after sundown on a ranch in central Florida in mid-November. The dark of the field is punctuated by small fires, flashlights, LED toys, glow sticks, and the movement of a crowd of 600 or so Burners under a star dappled sky...rushing, waiting.

The fire dancers who will participate in Conclave (a tradition wherein dancers perform while circling the Effigy before it is lit) are stamping their feet and clenching and unclenching their hands. They need sensitivity in their line of work. There is a frost warning. It is a night for jackets, but more clothing poses problems. Some fire props, such as staffs and hoops, are meant to roll on and over the body. And in general, layers of clothing increase the risk of ignition.

The dancers are one in their restlessness. Experienced participants note the wind and other conditions which will affect the way their flames and the fuel behave, comparing it to past Burns. Those participating for the first time respond absentmindedly, trying to ignore the internal butterflies of the neophyte. The whole of the Burn will come out to watch the lighting of the Effigy. The performance of Conclave is one of the gifts fire dancers give the community. At the smaller regional Burns,
participation in Conclave is less a privilege than a right (so long as participants attend a safety meeting).

It is a world of sound and smell and touch, in the pre-Conclave darkness: voices everywhere, white gas, and cold. Cold metal gallons of Coleman camp fuel and the spill cans the dancers use to catch the extra fuel when pouring or to soak their Kevlar wicks are clustered in the shadows. And then the volunteers in charge of safety give the word. There is a stir and huddle around the fuel dump, not so much out of a desire to be seen first in Conclave, but because as soon as their props are lit, the dancers will finally be warm. Fueled, each person waits for the go ahead. Their props lit, they step out, dancing steadily in a great circle. Between them and the fuel-soaked wooden Effigy are volunteers ensuring that the fire is not lit preemptively. Out of the dark, cheers and voices call. As always, there are no faces. In darkness, blinded by fire, a dancer can barely discern a muted world beyond the glow of their flames.

A regional Conclave is an unrehearsed procession. Relying on the rhythm of the dancers to the drums, it flows, ideally without one dancer running into the space of another. All the while there are drums. A drum circle forms somewhere in the crowd before the Effigy burn. There are countless DJs set up with their equipment at a Burn, but it is a drum circle that forms the soundscape of the burn field.

When the last of the fire dancers has made their second round, several more short performances ensue. A long-time fire breather, spitting ten foot plumes, makes a round. A man known as Mayhem dazzles the crowd, rapidly manipulating a staff spraying fireworks that engulf him in a dense cloud of sparks in all directions.
And finally, all is quiet. All wait. They will watch the Effigy, a towering wooden structure in the form of some artist’s fancy (this one a great Ferris wheel) burn to the ground. They will cheer it until it weakens enough to fall. And as it burns down, there will be a signal given, and all will form a circle, running. A cacophony of howls and cheers and laughter, skipping and running and dancing at once, they will slow, and circumambulate together for a time, then drift away.

Reflection

Pondering the significance of these conflagrations for the crowd, I turned to Ryan, a Burner of five years, whose introduction to the culture was a Florida Burn. He expressed the belief that Effigy and Temple burns definitely have the power to serve as a powerful healing ritual for people, especially for those who personally create and destroy them. I ask him if they ever serve that function for him. He supposes they do, in the times when he needs it. He tells me,

It’s always more than just a big pretty fire to look at to me. I get the feeling many people only get about that far, but I feel the need to somehow honor and channel the energy of the life that went into the wood, the sweat that went into the building, the love that went into the art as I watch the embers racing toward the heavens...or an “ancestor”\(^1\) whirlwind of super tight flame lick out of a burning pyre on the playa...I feel that our intentions are being blasted, combusted into being.

As it often does, the fire moment became a venue for reflection. He is most struck by the force of fire to reflect change and affect it. As a process, it mirrors the intentions of its creator, and is the catalyst to propel them.

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\(^1\) “Ancestors: spiraling, tornado-like dust plumes that traverse the playa, either produced by wind or by heat from large fires, such as the Man burning.”
(http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/glossary.html)
Temple

The moment of a big fire event is not a closed point in time. It leaves a signature, changing a place forever. The scene of the fire produces traces of its effect on its witnesses. For them, its artifacts are touchstones, portals to the memory of the past fire moment.

I know a man with his own Temple ritual. Every event, without fail he rises the morning after the Temple burn and dons the same outfit. Quietly, deliberately, he finds his way to the often still smoking ashes, of the great conflagration the night before. Once there he kneels and takes a small, plastic cylinder from his pocket. With care he scoops, filling it with ashes. He rises, capping his labeled specimen. Its provenience recorded, it will take its place as the next in line in a shadow box on the wall of his home. If you asked him, he would not tell you there is anything sacred about the Temple ashes. If they mean more than a memento and a way to mark time, only he can say.

Totem

A totem is an object or species with which a group is believed to possess a relation of kinship. Durkheim (1977) suggested that a totem is sacred because it is the symbol of the group itself, and the reverence which people feel for it is really a respect they hold for central social values. It is always insisted that the figure of the Burning Man is a placeholder and that it stands for nothing. Yet the effigy burns bring the community together as they bear witness to shared values.

For many Burners, fire acts as a modern totem. The community identifies with this strong and transformative object. Big fire creates unity. The appearance of exorbitant fire is a *hierophany*, the point that connects the line between mundane and remarkable, between the Burn and default world. It is a key symbol of “home.” Despite
displacement in time and space, the regional events and Burning Man itself each
embody the same “home.” Despite the particulars of each region, as if Burns were all
portals to the same alternative space.

**Fire the time marker**

Movement on the Burn landscape occurs in fits and bursts. It rolls calmly on,
strolling through the day with a slow pulse. The night begins with a collective
immobilization, the edges of the transfixed are crowd stirring and restless. The fire of
the burning figure becomes an hourglass. At its collapse the sand has run out and the
world surges into motion. Participants break the circle and run around the fire, skipping
and dancing and howling, or strolling hand in hand. Then they break off in all directions,
careening into a night that becomes frenetic with their flight on various paths of priorities
and distractions.

And that is the pace of Burn life. The city is raised with busy hands that pull ropes
and zippers of tents and darting eyes site all things that need to be set in their place. It
is all fervid anticipation. Next are strolling days and the occasional skip and sprint
punctuated by the smiles and pauses of theme camp distractions.

And then there are nights, christened in fire. Burn nights call in the citizens of the
city together as one, and then release them, pulsing fireflies into the night. Activity is
unceasing. Paths are crossed by lone white rabbits on missions and swaying groups
passing to and fro on a boulevard of theme camps, sampling an audiovisual buffet of
music genres and colored laser or fire-art ambiance as it suits their taste. As the hours
pass, the pace slows. By dawn movement on the paths are exceptions in the stillness.
Slowly, the city’s life ebbs but never truly fades. As the sun climbs, the strolling picks up
to a rolling gait again.
It is cyclical. It rises and falls. Fire becomes a time marker, a way to order the world. And each Burn creates a similar or the same pattern...depending on duration. Burner life becomes cyclical…waiting for festival season. For many participants, Burns become breaks, punctuations in default world time.

**Fire as sublime force**

Sublimity is the quality that inspires awe or reverence. It impresses the mind through a sense of grandeur or power. In conversation, the theme of fire as a sublime force was a constant thread. It is woven through reflections on big fire moments, but also in intimate moments of memories staring into candle flames.

Fire’s most powerful draw is as a sublime force, yet sublimity wears many faces: awe and terror, wonder and delight. It is Bachelard’s (1968) Empedocles Complex, from the hearth, to the volcano, to the funeral pyre. Scale does not seem to affect the sublime. It is felt in the sheer immensity of a big fire event, lying somewhere in the orange glow bathing a crowd of faces, reflected in their eyes. And it is there in a smile and the palm of one’s hand at the pleasure of the striking of a match head.

Describing her relationship with fire, Katherine told me she was entranced by the beauty and majesticness of it. The thought gave her cause to reminisce, “When I was little I used to play with the flame on candles, now I spin fire props. It feels almost spiritual.” The sublimity of fire is there in her hand, a distinctly inhuman force, ethereal and otherworldly.

In contrast to such intimacy is an idea which was often expressed to me as if it was self-evident. This was suggested by another participant, Ethan. “This might be the best way I can explain it. Ready?” he asked. “Cause pretty fire go boom and stuff,” he declared in feigned child-speak. I laughed. “Not kidding,” he insisted, “That is exactly
why we are all so drawn to it. Cause it’s pretty and has the possibility to go boom.” The sublimity of fire is taken for granted, but it does not always garb itself in grace. Often it calls up a stereotype of a brutish, primitive time of man, and strikes us dumb.

Sometimes the sublime is found in the unknown. Behind the orchestration of big fire and the mastery of fire arts is the Prometheus Complex. This tendency that impels people to know as much and more than their forbears causes them to experiment and play with the unknown. Those that spoke to me of a primal lure of fire, imply that the manipulation of fire by fire dancers and artists, and its control by those managing the Effigy and Temple burns, is a reenactment first mastering of fire in the distant past. It is assumed to be a natural, panhuman instinct.

While this is a controversial idea (see Chapter 2), the force of fire and mastery over it, the play of power between it and the Burners who shared their thoughts appears again and again. I believe a facet of the Prometheus Complex is the value placed on the prestige that comes with mastering something previously unknown, and in this case, dangerous or sublime.

The emotions through which an individual comes to fire are mutable. Age may change the desire to borrow the prestige of fire. When he was younger, Aaron would drive an hour on most weekends to perform fire dancing at clubs in the nearest big city. Now 30 and a graduate student, he tells me, “There was a time when I imbued fire with significant meaning, but I’m a far less irrational person now than I was then. At this point I hardly ever spin fire, but when I do its more for the ecstatic wonder than any desire to impress others.” With age he lost the pride that comes from mastery and control, and instead gave way to being lost in the sublimity of an elemental encounter.
Fire Dancing, Arts, And Effects

Fire Dancers

Fire dancers come from all walks of life. Many, perhaps most are not 'adrenaline junkies.' Some are. They are object manipulators, on the order of jugglers, tossers, and hula hoopers. They are flow artists, perhaps looking to accent their flow or take it to the next level with the challenge of fire. Some are looking for attention. Some do it for money. Some do it in their backyard. For them, every object has manipulation potential, and if it can be manipulated, it can be set on fire.

There are numerous fire arts, and they are growing. Practitioners of fire arts employ props typically wicked with Kevlar and soaked in fuel (commonly white gas, kerosene, or lamp oil). Fire arts include fire poi, hoop, staff, juggling clubs, fans, as well as the use of small torches and one's body for eating and breathing, but this list encompasses only the most common forms.

Fire dancers often form networks to come together and collectively burn. They collect to learn from each other, practice, to ensure each other's safety, perform, and most often for the sheer enjoyment that is burning.

My inquiries indicate that fire dancers are more likely than Burners in general to possess developed thoughts about human-fire relationships. Dancers often espouse a very personal connection to fire. Nevertheless, their beliefs about the place of fire in their lives still fall across a broad spectrum. The bond manifests in a variety of ways, from identifying as an astrological “fire sign” to recognizing fire as a guiding element or personal totem.
Figure 5-3. Concentrated fire arts. Image courtesy of the author.

Figure 5-4. Fire Conclave, 2011 North Carolina regional Burning Man event. Photo courtesy of Tommy Danger.
Fire is often fetishized as an object regarded with awe that possesses life and embodies a force that is magic or almost magical. As Katherine, the woman whose fellowship with fire began long ago as a child playing with candle flames, says, “When I wield the flames I feel one with nature and a sense of empowerment.” The fire moments of this group reveal more than an object of reverence. Conceived as mental fire it becomes a force, a catalyst for action.

Following up via the Internet with Anthony, a performer I met at a Fire and Flow Arts Festival in Georgia, I asked about his affinity for fire. He wrote, “I feel that it is half of me. I have always felt that fire and water are my ruling elements. Fire is love, warmth, action, and dance. It is a source of the magick (sic) that interacts and rules all life.” For him, the connection is spiritual and deeply entwined with the idea of a guiding force. It is
also linked to identity, as he considers it integral to his being. He claims to be of fire and water, seeing these as personal elements or totems.

For Demas, fire is empowerment. He describes his relationship with fire as an inspiration of confidence and shaping of his identity by the control of something sublime. Each time I spoke with him, his ideas about fire were inseparable from his personal fire dancing practice. “What about other fire, outside of fire dancing?” I asked him. “You don’t have a section that is dedicated to fire dancers? That’s odd,” he countered. It is then that I realized, no matter how pervasive fire appears, people tend to recognize only certain fire moments as significant in their lives.

He tells me fire dancing is significant to his person. In the following scene, he illustrates that it allows for unconventional liberties, “It allows me to dance freely and everywhere I’d like and want to without being judged too harshly. For instance, if I started dancing in the middle of a restaurant people would complain a crazy person is interrupting their food, but if I dance with fire at a restaurant people enjoy the show.” So fire provides a sense of legitimacy. It lends its prestige to the person who wields it. In his words, the draw to fire becomes an adrenaline addiction, “but not adrenaline in the sense of dangerous excitement, so much as something beautiful and deadly at the same time that I’m in control of. The noise, the visuals, the overall feeling that I am doing something unique, that’s what’s exciting.” To climb Everest, be a lion tamer, or spin fire, a person seeks a sense of both self-worth and external approval. “The sensational rush you feel when you are controlling something that not only is beautiful but extremely powerful and dangerous is a huge motivator.” On another occasion he tells me, “for that small, 3 minutes of life the fire is on your prop, you feel like your
essence is displayed for anyone to see and appreciate, giving your soul worth.”

There is a sense of pride in playing with fire that is lasting. It “instills a strong confidence boost that changes the very confidence level of your everyday actions and causes you to feel good overall about what decisions you make and actions you take.” As a force it may act on matter without touching it. Perhaps this is why fire dancers are the ones to frequently speak of a fire alive within; it imbues its bearers with a sense of internal worth.

Fire dancing and other object manipulation such as juggling are often referred to as “flow arts.” This is flow as defined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1997), “the experience people have when they are completely immersed in an activity for its own sake, stretching body and mind to the limit in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.”

Michael began fire dancing five years ago. He describes fire as a lover, connected to where he goes when he enters flow space. When he finds his flow, he says, “all of the walls that I build around myself to filter and occlude the world so that I can either protect myself, or simply function in some mode other than sensory overload, fall to pieces. When those walls come down I can hear the fire talking to me...” Without filters, he describes directly experiencing the world unmitigated by thought. In that place he can feel more than just heat energy coming from the flames, with it he can create more than shapes and patterns of fire.

“The dance,” he says, “becomes a dialogue between me and the prop, the fire becomes something closer to a lover or a dance partner than an elemental force or a decoration. When the walls come down, my fire staff, the environment, the
wind...everything has a voice, everything has a force of will...and if I am really truly lucky (this has only happened a couple times) the roles are flipped and I become the prop and these forces become the wielder.”

He pauses, “I really wish I had better words, and I will find them in the future…I would just leave it at that, but when I really hit flow space...I'm not okay for days after. It takes time to reassert the filters and rebuild the walls. It's a little scary, because the experience fundamentally alters my consciousness in a way that nothing else ever has. I honestly have no idea how to explain the unique mix of euphoria and terror that comes from experiencing the world without all the little filters that we put up to subconsciously process things. I have no idea how to explain how it feels to become an instrument of the moment as opposed to [practicing] willful manipulation…”

For this individual, fire is a force all its own, a compelling, driving force that guides his dance. Its power is at once frightening and liberating as it elides self-imposed boundaries which inhibit confidences and the achievement of the optimal experience of flow in his everyday life. He is drawn to fire as a force which seems alive and able to transform him and what he is capable of.

Figure 5-7. Conquering fear. A fire dancer who sustained significant burns demonstrates his lack of fear at a fire jam in Gainesville, FL. Photo courtesy of Tyler Gilbert.
A Test Of Courage

It is a challenge to recover from getting hurt doing what you love. Fire dancers get burned, but if they are lucky, and if they are careful, then never seriously.

It was a windy spring evening. April gusts buffeted grass across the fields of central Florida, swaying the Spanish moss and sending one’s hair billowing in all directions. The fire dancers assembled for Conclave that night were nervous. Wind is the enemy of those who play at fire arts. It vies for control of one’s flames and tugs fire tools and toys away from the body.

The circular perimeter had been formed. The burn field was clear, save for the fire safety volunteers. They would keep the space between the performers and the fueled Effigy, ready to ignite with accelerants. The field reverberated with deep beats to the time of the drummer’s hands. Given the signal, I stepped out and away to dance. Everything became a haze, the flames of my fire staff deepened shadows. The crowd was obscured; fire-lit bodies wore faces lost in darkness. A vague awareness lived, a superficial part of me…there, just at the edge of my skin. Deep down, so far below thoughts and words it knew that I was bounded, with only so much space to dance…to roll and tumble, turn and step, and turn again. I was there in a saturated sepia, smoky watercolor world of blurred half-sight. The world was pulling and I a dervish spinning round.

I never saw what happened that night. Lost to me, only the panic and pain that fire can wreak took stage. Down the line from me, at his cue, another dancer stepped out. Striking his poi together, one lit to the other unlit, he sprayed excess fuel down his arm. White gas left flames from his shoulder to his wrist. Immobile and mutable, insides churning, he remained still. A volunteer extinguished the flames.
It was oozing, bubbly, crisp flesh, not burning flame searing the flesh black and finally cracking. It itched and itched, a stingy burning when it twisted tight. Underneath the flesh on fire with pus, and above, thick scabs that itched and itched and itched.

The burn victim, Andrew, passes on his story of returning to fire, after being burned:

I was terrified of the fire and injuring myself again, but I forced myself to spin at the first ever Temple Conclave, which was perfect...basically I needed to burn Sunday to make sure I wasn’t traumatized from the event. I was terrified because there was even more wind that night. I went out expecting to do only basic moves and to just feel the fire again, but after about 30 seconds I busted out all my normal moves. I respect the fire more now, but I’m not afraid of it.

Rather than waiting, he felt the need to confront the fire in a personal test of courage. He was able to maintain the close bond he had developed with it over the course of years of fire dancing.

Fire is engaged as a test of courage. For thousands of years, humans across the world have practiced fire walking in rites of self-empowerment, cleansing, and faith (Rossotti 1993:253). Andrew’s story illustrates that it can be about overcoming fear, but that it is not that way every time.

Late one evening in the spring of 2011, I found myself at a Florida Burn watching several men attempt to leap over a large bonfire. In these moments, fire is Lakoff’s (1990) dangerous animal. Fire can lend prestige through danger. The attraction to danger is an attraction to survival. With every success, the hero feels more comfortable. Demas indicates an interest in prestige, acknowledging the effect of fire on others’ perception of his persona. Some indicate that the attraction is not a conscious choice, the extreme of which is Michael’s response. If part of the Prometheus Complex is mastery, then each time fire is encountered, it is a rival that must be conquered.
Fire Arts Safety

Sometimes a dancer may feel they should not burn. Andrew, the burn victim, alluded to this feeling when he described how spinning fire made him feel refreshed. Even after five and a half years, he cannot go to an event where he can spin fire and not take the opportunity. He has tried, even telling people he will not burn that night. "I always end up burning anyway," he says, “despite my feelings that I shouldn't for some reason.”

Why would one not burn, when he/she is so passionate about it? Respect. When a person dances with fire, when it becomes another being, a lover, a companion, a twin, an extension of self, boundaries still apply. Despite their disregard for prohibition-infused language about fire play, those with an intimate relationship with fire perhaps possess the most reverence.

Intoxication, while not unheard of, often discourages burning for a night because it can inhibit one's abilities or make one uncertain of their ability to perform. In fact, the first safety guideline of the The North American Fire Arts Association is “Performers should not attempt performance under the influence of any judgment or reaction impairing substance” (NAFAA 2005). A whole host of other conditions: wind, area available for burning, whether someone is present to act as a “safety” affects an individual’s willingness to burn.

There is awe in the face of those that dance with fire, more than I hear from those who sit idly and watch it. They will return to it again and again, but they perceive a force in it, the dangerous animal. And as a force it causes them to look within themselves and assess their capabilities, and to afford it respect.

Respect, of course, only minimizes risk. Dawn, a woman whose story I share
below, offered hesitantly to tell me of the effects fire has had on her skin. I did not push, and so we did not explore this further. The potentially detrimental effects of fire arts on the body are little discussed. And yet risks are inherent in these physically demanding practices which expose dancers to toxic chemicals. The consequences can be grave in the practice of fire breathing. Chemical poisoning and pneumonia are abiding concerns, and a mishap can spell death.

**Ambient Fire**

![Figure 5-8. Sites of burn events of various sizes. Image courtesy of the author.](image-url)
Creating The Collective

Fire brings the body in closer proximity to other bodies. It is truly magnetic, a collector. What is it about fire that stops this bustling world in its tracks? Humans live in a kinetic world. In the face of fire they stand still. But witness its paradoxical nature again. Fire behaving as we expect it brings us pause, we stand in awe. Fire uncontrolled sends us careening, the strongest catalyst for panic, frenzy, fear and rush.

It is there, in his eyes. Feet firmly rooted, he is straight-legged, hands half-thrust in his pockets, the excess left to spill over and slacken, seeping up into the repose of his shoulders. His face is forward, head inclined slightly down. His jaw is still set, drawing tight the skin around his eyes. Fire does not relax. Instead, as it draws them in, its watchers forget themselves. In trance, entranced, breathing shallow breaths.

So often they are caught up this way, on their way from one place to the next. Mobile bodies become transfixed, caught up in the gravitational pull of an ember world.
as they pass too near the edge of the fire’s glow. The fire is a fixed point, immobile yet forever mutable. In orbit, unlike becomes like and the fire witness becomes rooted yet mutable, subject to inner change.

**Fire And Trance**

Of fire, Anthony the performer tells me, “It’s beautiful, the way it moves, the colors, the sounds it makes. It brings me peace just getting to watch it” and “it awakens a primitive part of the mind. It gives us warmth and then gives us comfort.” He speaks of a stillness he finds in fire and water. “With fire it comes when I am watching a fire as it burns, I become entangled in the dance of the flame, the world fades to black and sounds are gone. My body then becomes stagnant and my energy begins to calm and slow” and “with water it happens for moments when I am underwater. Time stops, the world is quiet a moment of perfect peace.”

We are in a coffee shop in downtown Gainesville. Our small table is crammed with tea cups, pots, and notebooks. My coffee mate, Dave, is studying Biology as I mull over the fire-themed vignettes I am compiling. Looking up suddenly, I ask him why he likes fire. He takes the length of a long breath to think, drawing in and letting it out slowly. “Because it’s a good way to let my mind wander. It’s like watching a rapid, it dances the same way, in repetitive motion. You can tell a lot about fire by how it dances (the type of fuel, the way the logs are laid). And it’s the same with a rapid (the direction of the current, whether and where there are rocks below).” “If you know the language,” I interposed. “Yeah,” he affirmed, “if you know how to read it.” I knew that he had spent several summers guiding rafts of tourists over rapids on Tennessee and Washington rivers. I knew guides spoke of “reading the water” to chart their course. For Dave, then, fire gazing was more than staring idly into the flames. It was a trance, and evocative of
a flow state he achieved in other moments of his life.

Aware that there were often bonfires at his family’s home, I asked if he thought the type of family he was raised in played a role in his relationship with fire. “Yes,” he reflected, “It was something they always did. For me, it brings up all these early memories and good feelings of community, family, and comfort. They [fires] always mean family and friends.” A fire evokes memories of past fires. It can literally signify home and fellowship.

In these states of absorption, the fireside becomes a place of contemplation. Though Ethan, the young Burner who once told me humans are drawn to fire because it “goes boom,” expresses awe at fire as a force, his true fascination seems to be with its enigmatic nature. He muses, “Fire represents the perfect depiction of power and subtlety. It's Yin and Yang. Fire gives life and takes it. It'll warm you, but it'll also burn you. It's shapeless. You never have true control over it. It's not something good or bad. It just is as it is.” I asked him about his appreciation of something so inconsistent. “I'm entranced by its ambiguity, I love its wisdom,” he insisted. How could fire, I wondered, be wise? He spoke of a mental, spiritual, or existential fire, “a vehicle to drive wisdom within oneself.”

Even mental fire is a force. He tells me it is “Like a passion that strikes you randomly and causes you to ‘spontaneously combust.’ And the next thing you know you have to act because there's something burning in your head, fueling you and screaming to get out and do something. To me, it's that fire that makes you take risks: go for the job interview you won't get, kiss that beautiful woman you've been talking to, moon a cop and laugh about it with your friends.”
The Life Of Fire

Translucent skin perspires. Beads of sweat drip tiny rivers from a bald scalp down temples and cheeks. An August night in South Florida is no respite. It remains the sticky, wet heat of the August day. We are at an Orphan Burn: the name for a regional Burner event developed to coincide with Burning Man itself, for those who cannot make the trek to the playa that year.

The owner of the bald scalp standing next to me is a man I do not know yet, and perhaps met before. I could not recall. We are taking pause, strangers sharing the same moment, riveted by the forge-like glow of a raku fire. A door to my laboratory opened. Turning to him, I began as I often do, “Why do you think people are so attracted to fire?” He hesitated no more than a second. “Well,” John told me, “I think it’s because it’s such a perfect metaphor for life.”

This seemed familiar, apt even. It is a piece of wisdom repeated as often as the one which assumes we are all drawn to fire by some primal urge. Why is fire a perfect metaphor for life? We sketched it out together. It moves, it needs oxygen to breathe, and we feed it, and it consumes. It needs attention. We serve it, and it serves us. We hold it captive, and it captivates us. Because it is short-lived and fragile, and it can die at almost-moment’s notice. It is warm and life-giving. It is operative and effects change. It is capricious, a trickster. Is anything more inconstant than fire? It lives, soothes…and can cause excruciating pain and visceral screaming.

In all fire moments, I heard Burners compare or relate fire to the idea of life. People say “Set your heart on fire.” One feels the heat on one’s face and remembers the warmth in one’s chest. That is the metaphor for life – a fuel in the furnace powering the machine. There is also one in a dancing flame undulating and flirting with its
brethren, glowing and rosy blushing embers, or winking and mischievous darting flames. Life-like, it may also smolder and choke, sputter sickly out, and fade away. Perhaps the draw is due to awe at the aptness of the metaphor. This thing seems alive. We find ourselves trapped, entranced by the mystique of this living thing that demands (loudly) our attention (like an animal), but cannot speak to us. There is something remarkably similar about the wonder and awe in witnessing another kind of vitality, as when a tiny reptile’s digits grasp the end of one of our own, and the trance of the fire.

Fire as Fetish

“I am also turned on by fire. I have a real fire fetish. So that means besides everything else, I'm very attracted to girls who spin fire, because it provides the opportunity for combining the things I love with potentially sex,” Andrew related in a follow-up conversation. Fire as fetish was bound to appear. Lakoff (1990) suggests that fire is bound to the concept of lust. As sexual metaphors are rich with fire and burning imagery, we can expect that fire will be cognitively bound to the concept of sex.

As Andrew uses it, it does not possess the traditional anthropological connotations of a charm or object believed to possess supernatural power (Gmelch 2006:311), but rather to the fetish in psychological parlance as an object that causes a habitual erotic response or fixation (American Psychiatric Association 1994:526). In both contexts, they are ascribed a special force, or life of their own. Fire could be said to be fetishized in the Burner community in several ways: it is a magnetic force that brings the community together, a transformative one which heals and inspires action, and a dangerous force symbolizing a personal challenge. I believe it is respected for its kinetic property, as it is a process, continually mutable, it embodies agency – participation and immediacy, which live at the core of Burner values.
Fire Stories

In the course of these discussions, I was often asked about my own feelings on the subject. After a million years, I would tell my companions, I think it might be written into us, to be drawn to fire. Most seemed ready to accept this. Yet even as Ethan mentioned, “Evolutionarily being drawn to light and being drawn to warmth and things that keep us alive,” he insisted, “that doesn't mean there can't be something special and more to it than that.” There is something special in human’s draw to fire. There is a beauty and richness in the stories and thoughts it inspired the Burn community to share.

Figure 5-10. Talking to participants about fire. Photo courtesy of Bruce Almberg.

Figure 5-11. Burners circling and dancing around the remains of an effigy burn. Photo courtesy of Tommy Danger.
There is one more story, one more voice to be heard. For some, such as a woman named Dawn, fire moments mark time. They become a thread that can tell the story of their lives. Seated, Dawn’s legs are drawn in, arms wrapped around her knees. A warm, orange glow bathes her face. I ask her why she is drawn to fire. She tells me, “Being drawn to fire is an understatement – been playing with it, mesmerized by it, and forming friendships over it since I was old enough to figure out how to light matches on my own.” I see her child-self, a little girl with clumsy fingers, smiling at the pleasant scrape of the match head against the side of the box. I see her wide eyes in awe. She says, “Everything about it pretty much holds a fascination, the way it looks, smells, feels, its shape, the way it dances, the colors it can form.” It is a sensual feast.

It is forever magnetic. Over and over she looks up from the fire and discovers she is not alone. “The way it brings people together,” she says, “people always naturally gather around fire.” I see her there, the flames dancing in her eyes. She speaks of fire the enigma, and as catharsis. “It's beautiful, warm, and mysterious. It can be calm and sensual or lively and passionate. It can embody emotion. It can bring release, spiritually or in the attributes of what it is burning. It is also a symbol for all of these things.”

I can glimpse the fire through the breaks in the knitted ring of shadowed people, pulsing and shuffling the powdered sand of the white beach. She is there in the crowd, turning round and round. “It is this thing we dance around in drum circles. And this has really strong associations for me. When I was at my first festival, an extremely awesome girl told me that the bonfire and the drum circle is a battery, and while pointing to her chest and belly, that when we dance around it, it recharges our battery.” She has many more stories about bonfires and drum circles.
Turning further inward, she continued to feel out the signatures fire left on her life. “Fire also has so many associations with the sun, life and spirit. These have been pretty big in my life in one way or another. The destruction and rebirth aspect of fire has also been pretty big for me.”

She can be found, again and again, dancing with fire at the drum circles under the full moon on the beaches of south Florida’s east coast. Or she is racing to it down the interstate under the countless stars whose fire watches the Everglades, sleeping bag thrown in the back for the next festival. She arrives amid a flutter of friend’s hugs and acquaintances’ embraces. She steps out first with a hula hoop of fire whirling round, and then again for a fire fan dance to spin, back arching out, mirroring the movements of a sister dancer.

It is in settings such as these, as the evening wears down and tired feet are rested just inside the circle of the ember’s glow that firebugs like her settle themselves and ponder the flames before their eyes. It is here, legs drawn up, chin resting on her knees that she might have told me, “Fire is personal for everybody I think, and universal, but maybe not in the same way.” She suggested that people within the Burn culture are well aware of their fascination with fire, especially people who play with props. While I admitted this rings true, not all Burners are fire dancers, and not all fire dancers are Burners. It would be interesting to see how a less pyrocentric group in the default world would speak of fire in their lives.

Dawn and some of the others I spoke with ponder all these things now, by the fireside and out at bars, when I am gone. In the weeks after a Burn, calls and emails come in. Curiosity breeds, and how the subject takes shape has few limits.
Follow-up conversations usually touch on the attributes of fire, spiritual practices and beliefs involving fire in various traditions, and things associated with fire. One of the last things Dawn told me was “…I had a really cool conversation with someone about TV, cellphones, and things with screens and how we gather around them being analogous for what fire and bonfires used to be for people.” Erik Davis’ words echo in my mind “fire is the old one’s TV” (2005:29). We are all metaphysical children with our flicker fascinations, however they take shape.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION: FIRE AFFECT

I have called fire a process, an event, a happening. As a force that must be interacted with, it interrupts the landscape of possible human action. It is most often recognized as a force that affects change.

Fire in Burner culture can be understood as a kind of secular *hierophany*, if we take Eliade’s (1977) sacred not as religious or associated with a deity but as the sublime, regarded with reverence, awe, or respect. It acts as a fixed point that affects a break in the homogeneity of space. The dialectic of a *hierophany* is such that as fire becomes esteemed, it is its affects that are valued while fire itself is not venerated. And if we follow Eliade (1977:21), it acts as an ideal model for those who experience it, and ontologically founds the world. Of this last quality, I will only reiterate that the burning of the Man is at the heart of Burning Man’s origins stories. Effigy burns at regional events are seen as requisite and a sign of their relation to the main event.

I believe that fire is a physical phenomenon that symbolically represents the social plane breaking of Burner culture. Burning is not as socially normative in American culture as it once was. If it were, burning would not be as noteworthy a custom as it is in the Burning Man community. Burner utterance about fire consistently ascribes agency to fire, alluding to it as a lifelike force.

Plane breaking as I refer to it here can also be understood in terms of the mathematical representation of space in Cartesian planes. The xy, yz, and xz planes, commonly called the wall, wheel, and floor planes respectively, are used to explain movement in the disciplines of object manipulation and flow arts. Traditionally, plane breaking in object manipulation was not considered aesthetically pleasing. Clean lines
were desirable. Most plane-breaking, such as transitioning from a move that is meant to be executed strictly in xz space immediately into yz space, was considered an error on the part of the novice. Now, however, plane breaking is valued for its ability to open up the range of motion of the body and in turn the movements that are understood as possible. What was once understood as dissonance is now valued.

Fire is understood to metaphorically and literally possess qualities that participants admire and seek to replicate within themselves. It does not matter that many are not well versed in the details of the community’s origins. The ideals of seeking new and immediate experience and participating in the world around you continue to be transmitted. For Dawn it can already be said to be part of her identity and life history, from matches as a child to the drum circles of her adult life. There are groups that celebrate discord, such as Discordians (Cusack 2010). Fire remains symbolic of that too, that dissonance. Fire and burning became a visual symbol and a tangible act reminiscent of alterity, difference, and the Cacophony spirit.

The quality of fire as a force to affect change and literally create a break in the homogeneity in the space of people’s lives is valued. This search for an alternative to everyday, mundane life has a parallel in tourism. Anthropologists theorizing motivations for tourism and leisure suggest such activities are a search for the authentic self and reformation of identity (Cohen 2010). These ideas are usually underlined by a view of tourism as escapism or avoidance of their perceived everyday reality.

People can create alternative spaces by intentionally altering the social fabric of their communities. The Burner communities are a testament to this. There is a limit, however, to the productivity of defining so-called countercultural behavior in terms of a
mystic transcendental world and role reversals. As Michael Taussig (2006:160) points out, sometimes the researcher gets caught up in the bacchanal of Carnivale. It is in those moments that all things become a very ordered web of signification. Grotesque excess is portrayed as therapeutic performance that is merely a resistance already inoculated against.

A different approach, one explored significantly by Lee Gilmore (2005) with regard to the Burning Man community, interprets ritual and spirituality in these environments in terms of Victor Turner’s *liminoid*. The Turnerian theory applied by Gilmore falls short of describing the significance of these events for people, highlighting a human attraction to ritual and meaning while neglecting everyday affects.

The reasons for Burning are as varied as the individuals who participate in it. Some define it as a vacation, which may fulfill the same role as a traditional spiritual or religious quest. It is in these modern moments of segregated leisure time – vacations – that humans also seek well-being. The human search for well-being, for happiness, is caught up in an incredible network of possibilities and stimuli.

Behaviors categorized as ritual or spiritual are often characterized by a striving. They are efforts which seek to attain an alternative status or mode of existence. This striving resonates with the messages of aspiration and positivity communicated by the Florida Burner community. It is not novel to think that there are things beyond basic needs that are requisite to human well-being. Some, perhaps most of these are less mystical than Turner’s *liminal/liminoid*, yet they are no less a driving force.

Returning to a question I posed previously: what does it mean to be understood through terms of fire and burning? Fire has a powerful role to play as a metaphor for
understanding Burn communities. Humans and fire are restricted from one another by difference, although they need many of the same things. It is the hunger of fire, this notion of it as a consuming force, and insatiable, that resonates with the Burner striving and aspirations. And just as Burners attempt to be producers, extolling participation and immediacy rather than passive consumption, neither is fire solely a consumer.

From a biographical approach, fire is invested with meaning through the social interactions it is caught up in (Gosden and Marshall 170). And in Burner culture, the social is often caught up in moments created by fire. Each constrains, fosters, and manipulates the other. Mapping a pyroscapate made clear that these actors collect and affect one another. Fire acts as a collective force engendering community. It is truly a material phenomenon shaping the social.

Like an irremovable scar, the image of a burning figure is at the heart of the Burner world. As long as a fire is set, people will come. What is built around that fire will change. Expressions will ebb and flow, flickering as flames. Here is another lesson, taken from fire: inconstant though it seems to be, the shape of a flame is a ratio of the amount of fuel to the amount of oxygen. There is an equation for a Burn world too: the amount of communal effort put in against the bounds of the space they create in radical self-expression.

When they come together, common values emerge, concretizing ethical orientations and feelings of connectivity. Burn communities are fire collectives. Fire serves as a vehicle by which the community is held together.

Fire is mnemonic for the community; it bridges the spatial, temporal, and social distance between Burns and the default world. The ordinary effects of the Burn resonate
into participants’ everyday lives. Literally and metaphorically, fire joins what was separate (Canetti 1973). Comfort is found in this solidarity or immanent, transcendent warmth of the collectivity (Shields in Maffesoli 1996:x), and the subsequent space made for alterity. Burning is orienting, renewing a commitment to principles held in common which participants experience impediments to in their everyday lives.

I found fire out there on the edge, in the middle of nowhere, and right at the center, at the very heart of things. In a brazier, it warmed the gatekeepers late into Friday night as they kept watch across the eastern field at the edge of the road. And for two nights it gathered every human body to it, their attention fixed on the same site.

At each level of inquiry, the very foundation of Burner ideals and values were reiterated. From each vantage point, fire lent itself to understanding how people connect, exchange, and reconstitute meaningful ideas about their existence.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kacie Claire Allen was born in Brooksville, Florida in 1987. She graduated from the New College of Florida with a B.A. in Anthropology/Religion. She went on to serve on the archaeological crew at Canyon de Chelly National Monument on the Navajo Reservation, and consult and supervise historic preservation projects in Sarasota, FL. Kacie entered the University of Florida in 2010 with the intent of pursuing further work in African Diaspora archaeology and public anthropology. She hopes to continue to work on projects that explore silenced histories in the future. For now, she continues to engage Burning Man communities, and those who dance with fire.