Culture, place and identity in a mobile community

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CULTURE, PLACE, AND IDENTITY IN A MOBILE COMMUNITY

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
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in
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Dan and Penny Khede, from whom I learned the importance of community and the saving grace of art.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ideas, knowledge, and even creativity are influenced by the forces that surround us and represent a constantly reconfiguring social product that builds upon itself. Similarly, I could not have written this dissertation without the generous support and guidance of many others who patiently lent their expertise, input, precious time, and advice. I do not possess the words to fully express my gratitude.

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what that word meant.
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 "Interviewees and Occupations" page 60
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .................................................................................................................. iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................................................................... v
LIST OF TABLES ............................................................................................................. vi
ABSTRACT ...................................................................................................................... viii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................... 1
  Background of Burning Man ................................................................. 3
  “Community” ..................................................................................... 9
  Culture ......................................................................................... 24
CHAPTER 2: METHODS OF RESEARCH .................................................................. 50
CHAPTER 3: THE SEARCH FOR MOBILE COMMUNITY COMMITMENTS .............. 89
  Characterizing a Mobile Community ........................................... 91
  Seeking Mobile Community ........................................................... 126
CHAPTER 4: COUNTERCULTURE AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN THE EXTENDED BURNING MAN COMMUNITY ................................................................. 133
  Countercultural “Toolkit of Burners” ............................................. 134
  Burner Community Identity ............................................................ 154
  The Dialectic of Counterculture and the Mythical Mainstream .......... 173
CHAPTER 5: MOBILE COMMUNITY STYLES OF LIFE ....................................... 181
  The Lifestyle of Mobile, Flexible Occupations ............................... 182
CHAPTER 6: THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF PLACE FOR BURNERS IN PORTLAND, OREGON ................................................................................. 210
  The Portland “Pocket of the Extended Burning Man Community” .... 211
  Significance of Urban Culture and Space for Portland Burners ....... 217
  Burner Community Integration with Urban Culture and Space in Portland 231
  Significance of Place for Burner Community Cultural Integration .... 241
CHAPTER 7: CREATING COMMUNITY IN MOBILE MODERNITY ....................... 245
  Place and Community ................................................................ 252
REFERENCES .............................................................................................................. 259
Institutional Review Board Approval ......................................................... 275
ABSTRACT

CULTURE, PLACE, AND IDENTITY IN A MOBILE COMMUNITY

by

Genevieve Cox

University of New Hampshire, May, 2012

Contemporary communities are no longer necessarily bound by the confines of a specific locality due to spatial mobility. My dissertation examines if and how mobile individuals may create community, the culture of one group, and the significance of place amidst mobility for creating community in modernity. I analyzed three years of ethnographic field notes and 44 interviews with individuals who attend the yearly arts event Burning Man in the Nevada desert. After the event, these burners return to their home environments, most of which are on the American west coast, but also spend a significant portion of their time traveling the world. I argue that regardless of the degree of spatial mobility, individuals in the extended global Burning Man community share common values, take part in relationships of mutual support, and have greater group commitments as a community. I focus on the urban context of Portland, Oregon and the role that place plays for mobile communities. I found that mobile actors create community by: (1) Turning the once place-based conception of the term into a group of collectively held action-oriented principles that include shared values and ideologies, identities, commitments, and lifestyles [and] (2) Transforming a variety of spaces into symbolic places of the community that help develop the solidarities of different extensions of the mobile group and provide sites of cultural integration. These places
provide physical localities with which to produce and practice their counterculture, contribute to cultural integration and diffusion of various urban cultures, assist in the construction of a collective community identity, and reinforce a sense of mobile community belonging.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Theorists and researchers have asserted that modern life exists in an age of "new mobilities" distinguished by modern innovations such as the jet, the internet, or even fast-food (Sheller and Urry 2006). Dislocating space/time issues in modernity such as travel may cause individuals to feel disembedded from traditional forms of relationships and thus seek out new roles or identities (Giddens 1991). Amidst the dislocating pressures of our new global modernity, with a high degree of physical and spatial mobility, the culture surrounding social contexts may continually shift as individuals travel the world complicating how we engage in social interactions. Daily life for individuals is reconstituted between the "dialectical interplay of the local and global" and "tradition" loses its hold on individuals, partially due to a plethora of lifestyle choices in a more fluid world (Giddens 1991:5). Under these modern circumstances, the reflexivity of the self may result in doubt about one's self-identity due to contemporary risks like global climate change. Personal identities may become fragmented as individuals experience space and time differently (Castells 1997). However, individuals are not simply passive in the face of these kinds of modern risks, dislocations, or spatial mobility.

According to Giddens (1990), even within the disembedding nature of modernity, individuals may re-embed themselves into relations of trust through commitments to facework with one another. Commitments to facework involve physical face-to-face interactions with people. Individuals are often disembedded from more "traditional"
social contexts, but there are also more opportunities for social interactions given the ease of modern mobility. "Modernity fragments, [but] it also unites" (Giddens 1991:189). We can therefore reclaim relations of trust with other individuals through commitments to facework even in the face of a globalized disembedding and mobile world. Forging and finding new and resourceful ways to create community may represent one answer to reclaiming relations of trust with other individuals in the face of a modern mobile world.

Writing about the debate over the term community in sociology over 40 years ago, Scherer (1972:2-3) notes the importance of repeatedly revisiting the concept of community in social research given the continued importance of social life, even amidst the “fluid” nature of social structures in modernity.

Communities have always existed—and will continue to do so—because man is basically a social creature, unable to live independently. Modern communities, however, are not as visible and as clearly defined as in the past. Such factors as geographical isolation, ethnic differences, common dedication to a total life-scheme, tradition, continuous association, and distinctive life-styles are no longer the sole dominating characteristics of modern association. In our dynamic age, social structures are fluid and vague. As quickly as the social forms are identified and understood, they change. The process of locating the forms of modern community involves a critical investigation of many different kinds of sociability, often far afield from traditional areas of research.

Scherer (1972) argues that communities will continue to exist regardless of the transitions of modern processes because man is essentially social. Scherer calls for sociologists to extend their research to modern communities that may exist “far afield from traditional areas of research.” For her, contemporary communities may exist in a variety of forms.

Regardless of the degree of physical mobility in modernity, place still matters to sociological research (Gieryn 2000) and also the study of community. Theorists have written about the modern “placelessness of place” (Relph 1976) or the “transcendence of
place” (Coleman 1993), while others have argued that the emphasis on studying place-image becomes of perhaps greater importance due to globalization (Sassen 2006). As geographical mobility becomes easier, social media and the Internet increasingly facilitate the formation of groups that could possibly identify as citizens of the world or cosmopolitans (Figueiredo and Cayla 2010). But these kinds of collectivities, internet groups in particular, have not been found to be a good replacement for the gemeinschaft-like relationships of traditional communities (Driskell and Lyon 2002) because they lack an emphasis on face-to-face physical interaction that facilitate deep emotional connections with others. In other words, the importance of place, or even multiple places, remains salient to creating community in mobile modernity because of the face-to-face relations of trust individuals commit to during face-work in various place-grounded social contexts. But can an extended group of mobile individuals constitute a community with group commitments and gemeinschaft-like relationships? If so, how do mobile individuals create community? Moreover, what might the culture of one such group look like? The goal of my dissertation is to understand whether and how mobile individuals create community in modernity and the processes of culture within an empirically discernible mobile community. To that end, I focus on studying an extended mobile community of participants who attend the yearly arts event Burning Man.

**Background of Burning Man:**

The week prior to Labor Day each year, upwards of 50,000 participants known as “burners” from all over the world engage in a week-long event in the Nevada desert filled with revelry, art, and artistic performances. Camps featuring theatrical contests, scheduled performances, lectures, yoga, free alcohol, and gigantic art sculptures dot the
streets of a city that is purposefully created mainly by volunteers to hold 50,000 event participants and then dismantled afterwards. Huge "art cars" resembling floating pirate ships, dragons, flying carpets, and unicorns drive by with hundreds of revelers aboard. Massive pillars of flame shoot from constructed art installations and event participants dressed up in costumes stop to engage with other participants as they walk or bike around. The temperature during the day hovers around 107 degrees, with 60 mile an hour windy dust storms periodically interrupting participants' explorations. When night falls and the temperature drops into the 40's, the sky is illuminated with fire, light shows, art cars, and the luminosity of creatively lit art installations. On Saturday night after a fireworks display and performances with hundreds of fire dancers, a 50 foot geometric effigy of a man is burned in the center of it all.

The name "Burning Man," hails directly from the act of burning an effigy of a man (104 feet high in 2010) on the second to last night of the event. The weeklong event takes place at the end of August/beginning of September in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada, approximately two hours by car from Reno, and burners come from all over the world to attend. Burning Man provides a venue for artistic creation and expression; art installations from around the world are built on site and showcased. Approximately 45%

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1 Photo credit, Aaron Rogosin
of burners in 2010 camped with “themecamps” at the event\(^2\). Themecamps are groups of burners who create large camps centered on a particular theme or activity that provide services for other burners. These services can range from providing a performance stage or space for large electronic music dance parties to offering lectures or yoga classes. For example, one well-known themecamp called *HeeBeeGeeBee Healers* provides “a grounded oasis that creates a nurturing environment and provides healing services for the HeeBeeGeeBee community and all of Black Rock City\(^3\).” Most of the sites of social interaction at Burning Man take place within these themecamps, on art cars, or near art installations out on the “playa.” The picture below shows an art car called *Abraxas* and some burners dancing to the music emanating from the vehicle.

![Image of an art car called Abraxas and some burners dancing to the music emanating from the vehicle.](http://dustinohara.com/proiects/blackrockcitycensus2010/map/)

The event began in 1986 on Baker Beach in San Francisco, California with approximately 20 participants when Larry Harvey and Jerry James built and burned a figure resembling a man. The event moved to the Black Rock Desert of Nevada in 1990 after becoming too large and unwieldy for an urban setting and the confines of what Golden Gate Park Police would allow (Chen 2009). An influential counterculture already existed on the American west coast prior to the creation of event. San Francisco has been documented as one of the centers of the countercultures of the 1960’s and researchers


\(^3\) [http://www.heebecgeebeechalers.org/](http://www.heebecgeebeechalers.org/)

\(^4\) Photo credit, Aaron Rogosin
credit San Francisco’s 1967 “Summer of Love” as helping to spread the hippie counterculture of the 1960’s and 1970’s into the rest of the United States (Lee and Shlain 1985). In this cultural environment of San Francisco, alternative spiritual practices and critical contemplation about mainstream American culture and values had already been underway for decades before Burning Man began. The west coast of the United States had thriving “cultures of consciousness,” such as Beat cafes and “Acid Tests,” where “consciousness-altering techniques like meditation, biofeedback, yoga, ritual, isolation tanks, Tantric sex, breathwork, martial arts, group dynamics, and drugs” abounded (Davis 2005:22-23). Davis (2005), a cultural critic and author who studies social movements in San Francisco and Burning Man, argues that Burning Man merely “extends this tradition of hedonic ecstasy.”

Burning Man has been surprisingly successful at institutionalizing and reproducing counterculture in ways that other recent events based on similar countercultural revivalist ideals, like Woodstock II, have failed. The event itself has been held annually for 24 years, with dramatically increasing participation. By the fourth year of Burning Man’s existence (1990), the event had gone from 20 to 800 participants. After moving from the urban space of San Francisco to the extremely isolated Black Rock Desert in 1991 there were only 250 participants willing to go the distance, but by 1995 the number of participants had reached 4,000. By April 2001, the ticket buyers’ mailing addresses showed that attendees represented 49 of 50 states in the United States and at least 26 different countries (Chen 2003). The attendance at the event in 2010 grew to approximately 50,504 people. In 2011, the event sold out by the end of July at 50,000 due to the organization’s agreement with the Bureau of Land Management. In only 25 years,
the event went from 20 participants to over 50,000, a 252,000% increase. This large percentage increase is especially astonishing given that the event is difficult to physically access because it is held in an isolated, remote, and harsh desert environment.

The strategies that BMOrg (or the organization behind the Burning Man event, also known as Black Rock City, LLC) has used to deal with the drastic increase in participation have been credited to their countercultural roots by Katherine Chen (2009), a sociologist who studies the organization behind the event. As the event attracted more and more participants, BMOrg had to respond with more organization, infrastructure, planning, and bureaucratic processes. However, the event has been so successful in part because BMOrg has found a balance between bureaucracy and bohemian modes of sociability in the organizing of the event (Chen 2009). Chen (2009) argues that the organization’s unique ability to combine bureaucracy with bohemian collectivist attitudes is why the organization has been so successful in proliferating itself and building a larger and larger participation base and event. The organization behind the event is built around collective decision-making processes that incorporate the pre-existing bohemian west coast culture and finds a balance between under and over organizing. Thus, the countercultural context of the planning behind the event has contributed to its continued proliferation and success.

In addition to a growing participant population base that requires more and more infrastructure and organization, Burning Man has grown in pop cultural influence and local participation (i.e. in participants’ home localities rather than only at the event itself). The event has garnered more and more media notice, with prominent public figures such as Al Gore calling attention to it. Moreover, with organizational contacts on five
Continents, contacts and networks around the world continue to expand. *Regional Contacts* and the *Burning Man Regional Network* are extensions of event participants that provide a "year-round embodiment of the Burning Man experience, supporting it as a global cultural movement. In cities around the world, the Burning Man Project has established Regional Contacts whose role is to help local Burners connect with each other, while bringing Burning Man principles and culture into their local communities." Additionally, nonprofit organizations such as Black Rock Arts and Black Rock Solar work year round in conjunction with BMOrg to further countercultural ideals and art around the world. The total expenditures of the event in 2010 were upwards of $17.5 million dollars. What was once a small party on a beach has become a year round multimillion dollar event with participants from all over the world.

In different locations around the world, burners use commitments to face-to-face social interactions within community as a way to mitigate what some participants see as the dislocating features of modern life. On the Burning Man official website under the title—*What is Burning Man?*, BMOrg claims that "the impact of the Burning Man experience has been so profound that a culture has formed around it. This culture pushes the limits of Burning Man and has led to people banding together nation-wide, and putting on their own events, in an attempt to rekindle that magic feeling that only being part of this community can provide." My dissertation explores the validity of these claims by investigating if mobile individuals can constitute a community with more traditional relationships of affect sociologists attribute to place-grounded communities.

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6 [http://afterburn.burningman.com/10/financial_chart.html](http://afterburn.burningman.com/10/financial_chart.html)
how mobile individuals may create an extended community grounded in many places at once, and the community culture associated with these burners.

**Review of Relevant Literature:**

In the review of the literature presented here, I divide the review into two main sections. These two sections correspond with my research questions; Section 1—“Community,” and Section 2—“Culture.” The first section of the literature review focuses on the sociological definition and conceptualization of the term community. First, I define the term community for this study. I then trace sociological inquiry surrounding the term and give a background on the concept. This section also explores the influences of modern life, mobility in particular, on community. The second section, “Culture,” includes four main parts that help to later situate my findings. In the second section I first review the *Seamless Web* model of culture, which holds that culture may be viewed as a coherent and all-encompassing force that shapes actions and thoughts, followed by a description of the *Toolkit-Repertoire* model. The *Toolkit-Repertoire* model of culture focuses on ways individuals use culture as a disorganized collection of strategies to solve everyday problems (Vaisey 2010). Secondly, I discuss the concept of ideology in regards to culture. Next, I build from literature surrounding “counterculture” and “subculture” to provide a justification for referring to the community under study as counterculture. Finally, I discuss culture in terms of cultural practices, especially in regards to taste boundaries in style.

1. “Community:”

Robert Nisbet (1966:47) called community “the most fundamental and far-reaching of sociology’s unit ideas.” Entire monographs such as Jacqueline Scherer’s
have been devoted to the sociological incongruities and multiplicity of meanings of the term which have only grown in more recent sociological research. One early review of the concept found 94 different and often conflicting definitions by 1955 alone (see Hillary 1955). In *The Myth of Community Studies*, edited by Colin Bell and Howard Newby (1974), Margaret Stacey argues that researchers should avoid using the term altogether because the term has been so ill-defined. Thus, when discussing community, most studies invariably begin with the disclaimer that defining the word for research purposes is at the very least problematic because of the plethora of meanings, definitions, and interpretations that have been attributed to the term over time (Gardner 2004; Vaisey 2007; Wilkinson 1991).

Despite these definitional difficulties, three major dimensions of the term have been noted by more traditional community researchers as consistently remaining in the literature. These three commonly accepted sociological dimensions of defining community include a territorial, place-based locality, common ties among individuals or a "local society," and social interaction between individuals (Barbera 2006; Lyon 1987; Parisi, Gill, and Taquino 2000:7). However, an assumption underlies these three traditional community dimensions that a community may be defined as a community only to the degree that it exists in a single place-based locality. This assumption discounts the significance of shifting multiple places inherent in globalization and the processes of mobile actors in modernity. In order to incorporate the social phenomenon of "new mobilities" (Sheller and Urry 2006) in modernity where individuals are constantly in flux, I use a definition of community for this study that is not necessarily grounded in a single place.
Definition of Community for the Present Study: For my study, I build a definition of community from Brint’s (2001:8) definition “aggregates of people who share common activities and/or beliefs and who are bound together principally by relations of affect, loyalty, common values, and/or personal concern (i.e., interest in the personalities and life events of one another).” Brint constructs this definition of community based on a systematic and rigorous review of theoretical and empirical literature on community. I add “commitments that include face-to-face interaction” to Brint’s (2001:8) list of criteria for a community. Therefore, my definition of community includes:

1. Aggregates of people who share common activities and/or beliefs [and]
2. Who are bound together principally by relations of affect, loyalty, common values, and/or personal concern [and]
3. Who engage in commitments that include face-to-face interaction with other group members

Building from Brint’s definition for this study does not necessarily preclude or render the three traditional dimensions of community in sociology moot; it places a higher importance on relations of affect and group commitments as being the principle cohesive elements to a community group over a single locality. The relationship dimension to community is especially important for the burners in my study and other sociologists have also argued that relations of affect are an important element to defining community. Amitai Etzioni (2003) argues that community is defined by a web of affect-laden relationships that crisscross and reinforce one another as opposed to chain-like individual relationships. Community also requires a measure of commitment to shared norms, meanings, and values and a shared history and identity; in other words, a group culture (see Etzioni 2003:226).
Brint (2001:20) concludes the article Gemeinschaft Revisited: A Critique and Reconstruction of the Community Concept with the assertion that “more loosely connected and activity-based groups...[offer] the best hopes...for bringing some of the virtues of community to the modern world, while at the same time avoiding its characteristic vices and its purely mythical connotations.” I concede that activity-based groups or what have been termed “lifestyle enclaves” (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton 1985:335) are a poor replacement for community given that lifestyle enclaves are based mainly on leisure activities that do not necessarily produce commitments to the larger group through relationships of trust and mutual reciprocity. I also acknowledge that the importance of face-to-face social interaction does not dissipate simply because of modern mobility, and that community is never “place-less” or simply ephemeral, such as studies of virtual communities have demonstrated (e.g., Driskell and Lyon 2002). On the other hand, a definition of community grounded in only a single locality is not sufficient for research in an era of mobility and cultural flow. I therefore use a definition that builds from the three traditional dimensions of community, while emphasizing the importance of relationships and face-to-face interaction over a single locality. In the next parts of this section, I trace the classical uses of the sociological concept of community, explore other work that has grappled with the term, and discuss the tensions between modern mobility, place, and community.

**Classical Usage of the Changing Nature of Community in Modernity:**

Early sociologists such as Tonnies ([1887] 1963) and Durkheim ([1897] 1951; [1912] 1995) have been important influences in how sociologists conceptualize community. Tonnies ([1887] 1963) introduced a dichotomy of community (gemeinschaft)
versus society (gesellschaft) to explore the tension between community life and modernization, including the destabilization of social relationships accompanying development. Traditional community, or gemeinschaft, was based around emotional depth, mutual reciprocity, and social cohesion. Gemeinschaft was regulated by “folkways, mores, and religion” (Lin and Mele 2005:17) with family as “the general basis of life” (Lin and Mele 2005:20). Relationships within gemeinschaft were emotional and full of “sentiment, in his mind and heart, and in his conscience” for individuals (Lin and Mele 2005:18). Tonnies saw the opposition to gemeinschaft as the quickly modernizing society and economy; what he termed gesellschaft. In “gesellschaft-like civilization...peace and commerce are maintained through conventions and underlying mutual fear. The state protects this civilization through legislation and politics...[and] the state has moved away from and become estranged from these forms of community life” (Lin and Mele:2005:18). Thus, for Tonnies, modernization created estranged relationships and eroded the emotional bonds of more traditional community.

For Durkheim, modernization does not necessarily contribute to estranged relationships, although Durkheim did consider the progressive transition from traditional societies and communities (mechanical solidarity) to more modern societies (organic solidarity). Durkheim argues that “it is an historical law that mechanical solidarity...progressively loses ground and that organic solidarity becomes, little by little, preponderant” (Durkheim 1973:63). He systematically traces the changes from politico-familial organizations of clan consanguinity to more modern societies. Traditional villages in mechanical solidarity were “much more hermetically closed system[s] to the outside” and more self-sufficient than more modern societies (71). The “slow evolution”
from consanguinity in mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity for Durkheim entails a shift from more “profoundly affective” relationships “of the heart of men” (73) to relationships that are less recognizable given that they are no longer simply attributable to familial lines. Yet rather than being pulled apart through these changing relationships in modern societies, individuals are actually more tightly knit together through dependence upon each other. The societal transition into organic solidarity entails a meshing together of divergent customs and a “permeability.”

It is a general law that partial aggregates which participate in a larger aggregate see their individuality becoming less and less distinct. With the disappearance of the familial organization, local religions disappear without returning. Yet they persist in local customs. Little by little, they join together and unite at the same time that dialects and jargons begin to resolve themselves into one and the same national language, at the same time that regional administration loses its autonomy... The partitions which separate the various cells of social life, being less thick, are more often broken through. Their permeability becomes greater as they are traversed more. Accordingly, they lose their cohesion, and become progressively effaced, and, in the same measure, confound themselves. But local diversities can maintain themselves only in so far as diversity of environments continues exist. Territorial divisions are thus less and less grounded in the nature of things, and consequently, lose their significance” (74).

Durkheim here describes how modern life within organic solidarity blends together customs and “diversities” until the territorial boundaries of place “lose their significance.” For Durkheim, this blending leads to increasing levels of social interdependence and an increasingly specialized division of labor. The social cohesion in organic solidarity was thus the outcome of differentiation and an increasing dependency on interdependent parts functioning together in the modern division of labor. According to Durkheim, modern “social harmony comes essentially from the division of labor” (86).
Community, and the social cohesion of groups, was a moral force for Durkheim and “wherever there are societies, there is altruism, because there is solidarity” (83). Rather than relying on an individually-motivated social contract “privately entered” into by individuals as a means of societal cohesion in modernity, there exists a moral force binding individuals to something greater than themselves in a state of “mutual dependence” and “equilibrium” (89-98). The increasingly interdependent rise of the modern division of labor thus helps to create a moral context where individuals rely on each other in relations of mutual reciprocity and “sentiment[s] of common solidarity” (111).

Everything which is a source of solidarity is moral, everything which forces man to take account of other men is moral, everything which forces him to regulate his conduct through something other than the striving of his ego is moral, and morality is as solid as these ties are numerous and strong (136).

The moral force linking individuals to other individuals in modernity brings with it a regulation of behavior because individuals align with the conduct of the greater group. “The individual is not distinct from the group…[and] hardly at all distinguishable from the collective conscience” (80). The group or society thus has an external existence to individuals and a “collective conscience” linking together individuals in an outer morally binding force.

Members of groups develop emotional links to others in this moral collective context when the individual is emotionally tied into the moral force shaping boundaries of the group or what Durkheim refers to as the “wholly spiritual pressure operating upon us” (170). This process may similarly play out in other group based collectivity-affirming interactions like attendance at Burning Man. Reaffirming the emotional bonds of
community through repetitive social interaction becomes progressively more important, especially when individuals find “ourselves alone again” and “fall back to our ordinary level” (172) after being involved in group activities. Put another way, after reaffirming relations of solidarity and affect at gatherings like Burning Man, individuals want to continue to participate in activities that may reaffirm the bonds of the group. According to Durkheim, individuals want to align themselves with a greater community and in order to do this, repetitive face-to-face social interaction is a perquisite.

There can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas which make its unity and its personality. Now this moral remaking cannot be achieved except by the means of reunions, assemblies and meetings where the individuals, being closely united to one another, reaffirm in common their common sentiments (201).

Durkheim thus paid close attention to how social experiences helped to knit together individuals in modernity. In fact, one reason that icons or symbols like the Man from Burning Man hold power for individuals is because we attribute a “transference of sentiments” (182) to them that reminds us of the collective binding force of community through group rituals. When individuals participate in rituals or face-to-face social interactions, they align themselves to the greater collective force that upholds the community. In other words, community gatherings are particularly important to maintaining relations of affect and moral bonds in modernity where place becomes less and less important.

**Community and Social Ties, Networks, and Capital:**

In *Suicide* and *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim paid close attention to social integration as a dependent variable. According to Durkheim, social integration can be measured using the indictors of individuals’ social ties with others, their frequency
of integration with others, and their participation in community or other social groups. In more contemporary sociology, the social network concept emerged partly due to joining a Durkheimian emphasis on social ties with an “architectural sense of structure” (Brint 2001:4; see also Mitchell 1969; White, Boorman, and Breiger 1976). The idea of social ties or networks has remained influential in contemporary studies of community (Barbera 2006), especially because social capital is important to building and maintaining communities (Putnam 2000). Scholars have noted that social capital, or the amount of people a person knows (Coleman 1990), is important because these social relations provide emotional support and also social contacts that can be used for instrumental purposes (Fischer 1982; Lin 2001).

Active social ties between individuals—such as voluntary associations, schools, and even labor markets—have been used as a variable that shows an effect on trust in others (Almond and Verba 1963; Putnam 1993). Conversely, a lack of social ties to institutions within community is associated with delinquency (Hirschi 1969). Both strong and weak social ties have an effect on modern social life. Granovetter (1973) posits that acquaintances and weak ties are actually more important than strong emotional attachments in certain contexts because weak ties lead to more integration in communities and greater opportunities for mobility. Gesellschaft-like relationships that have been interpreted as indicative of alienation by earlier sociologists (e.g. Wirth 1938) are actually beneficial for communities (Granovetter 1973).

According to Bourdieu (1986:47) there are three fundamental types of capital; (1) economic capital, which may be directly converted into money; (2) cultural capital, that exists in the three states of (a) the embodied state or “the form of long-lasting dispositions
of the mind and body,” (b) the *objectified* state or “in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematic, etc.,” and (c) the *institutionalized* state, or “a form of objectification which must be set apart because... in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee;” and (3) **social capital**, which is

the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. These relationships may exist only in the practical state, in material and/or symbolic exchanges which help to maintain them (51).

For Bourdieu, social capital becomes viable only when it is associated with group membership and the recognition that membership affords. Thus, the meaning behind social ties comes from the greater collective meaning associated with those ties and economic or social exchanges may take place in the realm of the “symbolic.” For members of the extended Burning Man community, cultural or social capital hold value mainly to the extent that they have symbolic meaning within the extended community.

Actors involved in artistic and cultural production take part in the “symbolic economy of cities” (Zukin 2006:3) where social capital is a particularly important part of obtaining economic capital. The cultural industries, of which many members of the extended Burning Man community work in, depend heavily on the interactions taking place in nightlife, parties, and such things as gallery openings (Currid 2007). These spaces of social interaction provide means by which artists and burners can develop their social ties and eventually gain an economic foothold in the symbolic economy of cities.
Becker (1982) viewed the social arrangements of the people in art worlds, such as artists, photographers, and gallery owners, as a large interconnected network that produces work as a collectivity rather than individually. According to Becker (1982), even occupations that are not usually recognized as integral to artistic production like museum guards or janitors have a role in the production of “art” because they are involved in the string of occupational relationships which lead to an end product of art. According to Becker (1982:x), an art world represents “the network of people whose cooperative activity [is] organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things.” Similarly, burners also take advantage of their large network of acquaintances and rely on their social ties to help produce community artistic projects for the event of Burning Man and also outside of the event.

Thornton (2008) sees the study of art worlds through a combination of cultural studies and networks. Thornton (2008:xi-xiv) argues that contemporary art worlds comprise a “loose network of overlapping subcultures held together by a belief in art.” She found that art is not just an occupation but a way of life for those immersed in “art worlds.” Additionally, “subcultural capital” (Thornton 1996) is especially important for artists given that they often receive creative ideas through cultural flow in various social interactions of a subcultural nature. The present study is not necessarily concerned with a network analysis (i.e. “nodes,” etc.) of the group under study, yet recent reviews of empirical work have emphasized “the rich rewards yielded” when culture and network scholarship are combined (Pachucki and Breiger 2010:215). The present study sheds light on the links between culture and an extended community with a multitude of social ties. I
study the collectivity within which those social interactions take place, especially in regards to artistic expression, a realm important to burners.

**Community Commitments and Belonging:**

The degree of commitment to a community largely defines the nature of that group (Etzioni 1961; Kanter 1972). Commitment is the positive involvement and the active ingredient in any community; the opposite of alienation (Etzioni 1961). Commitment requires individuals to expend and invest physical and emotional energy in social structures outside of themselves. Thus when studying a communal group like the extended Burning Man community, studying commitments to that group are necessary. In modern communities, members might be committed for only limited periods of time and belong to different kinds of communities at different points in their life, but this does not mean that the commitment is of little consequence (Etzioni 2003; Scherer 1972). The significant expenditure of emotional and physical investment by members sustains the community.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s (1972) *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* looks at communities from the nineteenth century, draws links to the communes of the 1960’s, and explores moral and social issues, including commitment, of the commune movement. Her discussion is especially pertinent given that the counterculture of the 1960’s is highly influential for burners. According to Kanter, there are three main foundations of commitment to a community. Firstly, a person must see the advantage of belonging (i.e. cognitive orientations). This can be evidenced by long-sustained, continuous commitment. The second foundation of commitment is based upon cohesion. The formation of positive emotional ties gives a
sense of satisfaction or enjoyment from belonging to the group. A third type of the foundations of commitment is based upon the member’s own assertion that demands of the group are legitimate and the member obeys to belong.

Commitments to a community help reinforce a sense of belonging to something outside of oneself and notions of “community” entail a sense of belonging for those members (Delanty 2003; Edwards 2011; Kanter 1972). This sense of belonging provides a shared understanding and connectivity to the group (Edwards 2011). Studying how individuals conceptualize or speak about the term “community” in their personal and social lives has been undertaken mainly in the sphere of community psychology and also within territorial settings (e.g. Brodsky and Marx 2001; Puddifoot 1996, 2003). Community psychologists use the constructs “sense of community” (see McMillan and Chavis 1986) and “community identity” (see Colombo and Senatore 2005) to measure attachment to community and better understand constructions of it. The community psychologists McMillan and Chavis (1986:9) have defined a “sense of community” as

A feeling that the members of a community have in relation to their belonging to a community, a feeling that members worry about each other and that the group is concerned about them, and a shared faith that the needs of the members will be satisfied through their commitment of being together.

Their theory includes four dimensions: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Additionally, a sense of community belonging is not necessarily linked to a geographical location (Moore 1974, 1982). Thus, group members may still feel committed, connected to, and integrated within a larger extended community, like the extended Burning Man community, even if
they do not physically exist within the same territory during the same extended time period.

**Commitments to Face-to-face Interaction in Modernity:** In *The Consequences of Modernity*, Giddens (1990:88) differentiates between "faceless commitments" that have to do with trust in large scale, largely non-personal abstract systems in modernity, and "facework commitments" or social interactions that physically take place between people. According to Giddens, both faceless and facework commitments are intertwined in "disembedding" processes in modern times.

My overall thesis will be that all disembedding mechanisms interact with re-embedding contexts of action, which may act either to support or undermine them; and that faceless commitments are similarly linked in an ambiguous way with those demanding facework (80).

He applies Goffman’s concepts of "facework" and "civil inattention" to help the reader understand how we handle day to day interaction with other individuals who are largely strangers. Goffman defines facework as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman 1955: 213). Facework is an active process and partially depends on the social culture to which the individual belongs (Goffman 1955). Commitments to facework involve physical social interactions where particular situational definitions are honored by those parties engaged in the social interaction; these commitments may change depending on the context of the interaction and the image of the self presented by the parties involved in the social interaction.

Giddens’ (1990; 1991) use of the concept "facework commitments" thus largely draws from Goffman’s work, but also simultaneously calls to mind the reflexive process of an individual negotiating social interaction in the face of modern large-scale
 impersonal social systems. In the follow chapters, I use the terms “commitments to facework” and “commitments to face-to-face interaction” interchangeably. However, I refer less to the term “facework” in the micro-sociology Goffman sense, and more in the sense of physical interaction within the confines of modern processes and therefore prefer the term “commitments to face-to-face interaction.”

**Community and Collective Identity:**

An individual’s sense of their community helps them to identify the group as a cohesive collectivity, separate from other groups. The concept of community is often used by members of that group to “construct versions of the collectivities in which we live” (Potter and Wetherell 1987:137). A sense of community identity includes both personal perceptions of one’s community and a shared sense of the community, together with the perceptions an individual thinks other community members also hold (Puddifoot 2003). Multiple constructions of group identity that imply inclusion and belongingness to that group can operate simultaneously (Cuba and Hummon 1993), such as gender identity, cultural identity, racial identity, and national identity. In this sense, community identity constitutes another layer of one’s social identity (Colombo and Senatore 2005).

Symbolic boundaries help reproduce the identity of the group. Symbolic boundaries operate as a “system of rules that guide interaction by affecting who comes together to engage in what social act” (Lamont and Fournier 1992:12). Community has been conceptualized in this framework as a series of group symbolic boundaries where group members define themselves in relation to others (Cohen 1985). Cohen (1985:12) asserts “the word [community] is a relational idea: the opposition of one community to others...[and] the word is only occasioned by the desire or need to express such a
distinction.” In other words, members of a community also define their group by what it is not.

Community identity may also be thought of as a socially and discursively constructed (i.e. constructed through social discourse) notion that lends meaning to experience (Colombo and Senatore 2005). According to Colombo and Senatore (2005), community research should take into account intersubjective meanings of community because knowledge is constructed and sustained through social processes. Colombo and Senatore’s (2005:52) conception of community identity refers to “a large-scale collective which is continually produced and reproduced in discourse by positioning processes and social categories construction.” Shared meanings between individual actors contribute to reinforcing the communal identity and group cohesion (Katovich and Couch 1992). The event space of Burning Man provides a physical space to live out “community” as a verb and reinforce the overarching community cultural identification, but also creates an extended network in burners’ home localities that may also be referred to as a community. I build on Colombo and Senatore’s (2005) conception of community identity to study ways in which burners use a community identity as a means of collective identification with an extended group of mobile individuals. This identity also simultaneously draws boundaries between the burner community and others outside of the group.

Ritual occasions, such as the yearly pilgrimage to the desert of Nevada for Burning Man, help to bolster group identity and affirm symbolic renewal for a group and its collective identity (Turner 1969). “Liminality” refers to moments in and out of time where normality is suspended (see Turner 1969). Liminal events help reinforce a group
collective identity as demonstrated in studies of community (see e.g. Mumford 1970; Collins 1988).

In an ethnography of Burning Man, Gilmore (2006:152) studied the ritualistic frameworks of the journey from participants’ homes to that of the remote location in the desert, using the concept of liminality. She attended the festival over the course of 10 years while taking field notes, conducted dozens of semi-structured interviews, and developed an online survey. She found that participants of Burning Man situate the event in ideological opposition to that of the “default world” and that during the event, participants experience a negotiation between communal experiences along with the other participants and encounters with the self. This process engendered both personal and group identity transformations. In other words, she found that individual participants at Burning Man developed a collective sense of self, and the communal “we-feeling” (Vaisey 2007) was symbolically positioned against what they perceived as the “default” American society. Gilmore’s (2006) findings thus reinforce the literature regarding community being actively engaged in boundary work and also the formulation of an overarching symbolic identity as a community for burners. Her work helps us understand construction of the group community identity for burners, but does not necessarily help us answer the question of how the extended community of mobile individuals may continue to create community outside of the event.

Contemporary Views of Community and Society:

Late modern societies have been called post-industrial, post-Fordist, programmed, post-modern (Bell 1974; Lash and Urry 1987; Hirst and Zeitlin 1991) or “liquid modernity” (Bauman 2000). Bauman (2000, 2004) asserts that we have moved into a
fluid state of modernity where social forms no longer hold shape. Researchers characterize these modern societies by a shift from centralized production processes to an emphasis on knowledge as a commodity (Horrigan 2001) and the fragmentation of personal identity because individuals experience space and time in many different ways (Castells 1997) in this mobile age.

During the 1970's, leading social theorists argued that we were moving from an industrial to a post-industrial society and shifting from the sphere of the economy into the sphere of culture (see Bell 1979). They argued that these social changes happened in part because of a culture of narcissism that undermined traditional forms of community and authority; facilitated by the new communitarianism and the 1960’s counterculture (see Bauman 1987; Bell 1979; Carroll 1977; Lasch 1980; Sennett 1977). The counterculture of the 1960’s were a key illustration of these cultural changes and thus remained an important topic of study beyond the 1960’s and 1970’s, where the debate has shifted from industrial/post-industrial to modern/post-modern (Hetherington 1998).

Theorists such as Giddens and Beck have largely focused on the salience of cultural, economic, and political changes associated with globalization in a modernity that is more provisional, risk ridden, and reflexive (see Beck 1992; Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994; Giddens 1990, 1991). This view has contributed to postmodern community often being viewed in terms of its “reflexive composition” (Delanty 2003; Lash and Urry 1994). Reflexive communities may also be stretched over time and space (Edwards 2011) rather than necessarily place-bound. The products and tools of such communities tend to be less material and more abstract and cultural (Lash and Urry 1994), which also highlights the importance of the aesthetic dimension (Edwards 2011) to these
communities. Identity has thus become important in the work of postmodernists, especially in regards to the intersection of identity and lifestyle choices in modernity.

Lifestyle choices are increasingly important to the constitution of self-identity in modernity but they are also influenced by capitalistic production, a characteristic of modernity (Giddens 1990). Giddens (1991) contends that in societies where modernity is well developed such as urban locations, self-identity becomes an unavoidable issue. Lifestyles of the urban middle class have contributed to these cultural changes (see Zukin 1982; Featherstone 1991; Lash and Urry 1994; O'Connor and Wynne 1996), in part because individuals have been stripped of their more traditional identities, creating a need for new forms of self definition (Cohen 1985). In *Consequences of Modernity*, Giddens (1990) asserts that we now feel the full problematic effects of modern individualization. However, in *Modernity and Self-Identity*, he leaves room for individual agency, even if he sees modernity as “apocalyptic” due to the risks inherent in modernity (Giddens 1991:4). According to Giddens (1991), globalization leads to a continually evolving dialectical process of disembeddeding from place, but we may re-embed ourselves through a commitment to facework in local contexts. Face-to-face interactions at a local level continues to hold relevance even amidst modern “dislocations” or “disembedding mechanisms” (Giddens 1990, 1991).

Recent sociological terms have come into use for groups of individuals or the culture of groups of individuals that address the intersection between lifestyle and collective identification in modernity including neo-tribes (Maffesoli 1988a, 1996; Bauman 1990, 1991), life-politics (Giddens 1990, 1991), sub-politics (Beck 1992, 1996), or expressive identities (Hetherington 1998). Expressive identities take into account
alternative lifestyles (see McKay 1996), activists in social movements and their corresponding identity politics, youth cultures which may overlap with New Age movements (see, e.g. Heelas 1996), and other issues such as complementary healing practices or green consumption (see, e.g. Hetherington 1998).

The terms used by researchers and theorists to distinguish contemporary communities range from a variety of viewpoints, cosmopolitanism being one example. Historically, cosmopolitan communities have been widely dispersed in space and are not necessarily formally organized (Figueiredo and Cayla 2010) and cosmopolitanism was thought of more in terms of a normative ideal or allegiance to humanity as a whole (Nussbaum 1996). “Cosmopolitan communities” include individuals who adhere to the notion that all human beings throughout the world can belong to a single community as citizens of the world (Appiah 2006). There has been a growing body of research focusing on cosmopolitanism that suggests it is not simply a normative ideal but that it exists in everyday reality (e.g. Beck 2000). Cosmopolitanism in contemporary times has been described by theorists and researchers as an openness to foreign cultures and others (Beck 2006; Beck and Sznaider 2006; Delanty 2009; Skrbis, Kendall, and Woodward 2004; Szerszynski and Urry 2006).

The concept of “tribes” or “neo-tribes” has also been used to characterize the individual’s (and also the collective) response to isolating and alienating conditions potentially caused by globalizing forces and post-industrial transformations (Figueiredo and Cayla 2010; Maffesoli 1996). Tribes are characterized by ephemeral collective identifications (Maffesoli 1996), while members of neo-tribes “belong to many tribes and not one tribe… [and] they facilitate meaningful social relationships” (Cova, Kozinets,
and Shankar 2007:5). Maffesoli’s (1996) discussion of tribes, what he also refers to as “emotional communities,” suggest they are marked by aesthetic sensibility rather than simply symbolic codes (Delanty 2003). In the following chapters, I also explore the role of aesthetic sensibility and collective identification for burners, since these aspects of contemporary lifestyles have been found to be important to groups like “neo-tribes” (Maffesoli 1996).

**Community, Place, and Spatial Mobility:**

More traditional sociological conceptions of “community” assume locality as a perquisite for a group of people to form a cohesive community (Lyon 1987; Maclver and Page 1949; Schnore 1973; Selznick 1992). Keller (2003) studied one of the first planned community developments in the United States over the course of 30 years through participant observation, collective records, attitude surveys, and almost 1,000 interviews with homeowners and argues that community cannot be deterritorialized; it is always based in a certain locality that helps provide a shared sense of social belonging. Keller (2003:8) differentiates between the term communitarianism and community. For Keller, while community is “concrete and rooted in place,” communitarianism is too “abstract” to be fully realized given its emphasis on philosophical principles such as social justice and civic responsibility. According to Keller, communitarians like Pocock (1975), Macintyre (1980), Walzer (1983), and Amitai Etzioni “do not deal with actual communities” and cannot answer the question of “How can one move from moral exhortation to being just, cooperative, responsive, and responsible to the living test and concrete texture of community?”
Keller (2003) thus rejects generalized "philosophical" discussions of community in favor of a longitudinal, territorialized, empirical study of a single community rooted in place. Keller offers little wiggle room for any other kind of community to "qualify" as being a community. Keller (2003:6-8) notes that in order for groups based on a shared identification to qualify as a community, "social categorization must be translated into a consciousness of kind, a sense of belonging, and a shared destiny, past or future," which are placeless group attributes, but Keller also simultaneously argues that "with few exceptions, community always denotes a there." Although Keller's research offers rigorous analysis over the course of 30 years, it does not necessarily help us answer the question of how mobile actors may create community. Within the context of mobile modernity, answering the question of how community is created and maintained in the face of spatial dislocations becomes increasingly relevant. Additionally, the community studies tradition within sociology including studies of small town villages or suburban life (see e.g. Lynd and Lynd 1922, 1937; Gans 1962, 1967; Hollingshead 1949) has done little to uncover the content of identities that draw people together and often undermine the image of warm community social relations partially due to their focus on power relations within the group (Brint 2001).

Since many traditional sociological conceptions of community like Keller's are tied to a single place (Hillery 1982; Lyon 1987; MacIver and Page 1949; Schnore 1973; Selznick 1992), a disparity exists in studying people that might inhabit many spaces and physically interact on a place-changing basis, but self-identify as a community. The ease of mobility and migration in modernity has somewhat modified how we exist in space (Hammerton 2004; Hochstadt 1999), and place-based community studies like those of the
Chicago School, the traditional sociological studies of place (e.g. Lynd and Lynd 1922), or Keller’s (2003) tend to discount the importance of community in modernity that may be grounded in multiple places at once or those communities that are tied to mobile actors.

In the last few decades, the relative ease of travel, mass media, and instant communication has changed the nature of how “community,” and more generally, society, may be interpreted. Sheller and Urry (2006) argue that more traditional spatial analysis fails to take into account how people move from place to place and event to event. For them, mobility is always located and materialized (Sheller 2004), but the complex character of the fluidity of movement in modernity needs to be taken into account for a “sociology beyond societies” (Urry 2000). They do, however, emphasize that “all places are tied into at least thin networks of connections that stretch beyond each such places” (Sheller and Urry 2006:209) and activities often occur while on the move. Thus, place does not necessarily become unimportant to sociological study, but sociology should be prepared to keep up with new forms of mobility (Urry and Sheller 2006).

As global mobility increases, an ever-increasing number of people have access to cultural norms and practices (Robertson 1995). New forms of media, including the Internet, allow people to connect with other cultures in distant places. Additionally, technological advances in telecommunications, transportation, and the exchange of information have allowed people to more easily keep up with each other (Figueiredo and Cayla 2010; Roudometof 2005). Bellah et. al. (1985) argue that local communities can be sustained by encouraging mutual trust found in institutions such as civic associations which are important in a modern world that contains various scales of community. New
models of community, according to Bellah et. al. (1985), could help us manage the tensions between more traditional place-rootedness and spatial mobility.

Some sociologists have found that communities may not be tied to a single geographic space, are viewed by the participants as communities, and do provide gemeinschaft-like relations. Gardner (2004:156) empirically studied what he terms the “portable communities” of bluegrass festivals in Colorado which theoretically “reside between ‘communities of memory,’ that help people remember both positive and negative events from their past and ‘lifestyle enclaves’,” discussed in Bellah et. al. 1985’s *Habits of the Heart*. Lifestyle enclaves are “formed by people who share some feature of private life...[and] use [it] to express their identity through shared patterns of appearance, consumption, and leisure activities” (Bellah et. al. 1985:335). Bellah et. al. (1985) contrasts this term with community which for Bellah et. al. is characterized by features of social interdependence, a shared history, and shared participation in politics.

Gardner (2004) explores the concept of community outside of how Bellah et. al. define it, and found that participants in “portable communities” articulated a kind of mobile community of gemeinschaft-like relations that helped satisfy their desires for community and mobility that was absent from their geographically embedded neighborhoods. Based on six years of ethnographic research, including participant observation of over 20 bluegrass music festivals and both formal and informal interviews and conversations, Gardner (2004:173-74) found that participants “flee their community-starved, sprawling, suburban neighborhoods to find enriching, meaningful interaction in perceivably safe and open settings [that simultaneously create] alternatives to mainstream social and cultural outlets.” The participants in Gardner’s study also viewed the settings
as "neither oppressive nor overly individualistic" and turn to these portable communities to provide places where participants can freely experience more traditional institutions of family, religion, and home, without their associated traditional "burdens."

In addition to studies of "portable community" like Gardner's, sociologists have studied "elective communities" that are also based on group membership choice. Studies of elective community often include members of subcultures, support groups, or such groups as readers of romance literature (see, e.g., Hebdige 1979; Radway 1984; Wuthrow 1994). These studies have shown that group members do receive support from others, but these studies have also tended to be little help in yielding useful scientific generalizations, instead mainly serving as "travel guides into esoteric worlds" (Brint 2001:7).

Researchers have also attempted to address whether community can exist in social networks from virtual online communities (e.g. Song 2009) and concluded that if community is understood as including close, holistic, and emotional ties of gemeinschaft than virtual communities are not really "true" communities. According to Driskell and Lyon (2002), the Internet provides a good venue to establish and maintain a network of social ties, but is a poor replacement for gemeinschaft-like relationships. In addition to some arguing that Internet communities are not "true" communities, theorists have argued that formal organizations are too limited for community because they have "no tie that binds" (Rousseau 1991:52), again here referring to close emotional ties. Thus, some studies of "elective communities," "virtual communities" (Rheingold 1993), and "organizational communities," show that face-to-face interactions and relationships of affect, common values, or personal concern are necessary conditions for a community, although a single place is not.
A gap in the literature exists for studying how mobile individuals create community. Gardner’s (2004) “portable communities” exist as isolated snapshots of community in action. Even if the individuals in his study create gemeinschaft-like relationships with others, they still return their geographically embedded homes after the bluegrass festivals with little continued face-to-face social interaction with other group members. Additionally, those who attend bluegrass festivals represent a small portion of Americans and Gardner’s study (and studies like his) represent mainly descriptive journeys into the “esoteric worlds” (Brint 2001:7) of communities based largely on lifestyle groupings. Burners represent a growing cultural phenomenon, as instanced by the increasing participation at the event, the saturation of the event in mainstream media, and organizational contacts and events taking place throughout the year globally on five continents. Moreover, burners travel much of the year and “arms” of the extended community exist in many places throughout the world where repeated face-to-face interactions and commitments to supporting the group as a community ensue. My findings will show that burners spend a large portion of the year maintaining gemeinschaft-like relationships with others in the extended community. Studying the extended community of mobile burners helps provide a better picture of how individuals negotiate face-to-face commitments under the pressures of a modern, mobile world.

2. Culture:

In addition to studying how mobile actors create community in modernity, I also focus on the culture of the community under study. I refer to “culture” as “patterns of meaning that are neither biologically universal nor personally idiosyncratic” (Vaisey 2010:20). Specifically focusing on the culture of the community helps to get at ways that
burners create gemeinschaft-like relations with other extended community members and also helps better understand the practices and means by which burners attach themselves to a greater symbolic identity as a group. Studying the culture of the community also provides a more holistic picture of mobile social processes of the group.

Sociologists categorize the large body of literature surrounding culture in different ways depending on the study at hand. When giving a background on the uses of the concept of culture in a book chapter about culture in poverty research, Lamont and Small (2008) group the literature of culture into separate groups including frames, repertoires, narratives, symbolic boundaries, institutions, and cultural capital. However, in this review, I place the literature surrounding culture into two overarching bodies of work that provide background more specifically for my study. I build from the work of Stephen Vaisey (2009, 2010), who has argued, oftentimes providing a counterpoint to the cultural sociologist Ann Swidler (see, e.g. 2008), to integrate elements of two schools of thought on culture to provide a more holistic understanding of how culture works.

My findings will show that the extended community of burners places the culture of their group in ideological opposition to what they think of as mainstream American culture. According to Hetherington (1998:15), “identity is articulated through the relationship between belonging, recognition or identification and difference.”

Articulating the culture of their community in opposition to a “mainstream” culture helps burners inscribe group boundaries, determine who does or does not belong to the group, and buffers the community identity of the group. The use of culture in this way becomes important to how burners create community and answering the question of how mobile actors create community. Additionally, one of the main motivations burners consciously
cite for creating mobile community is because they do not identify with mainstream American culture. Thus, the active use of culture is important both to how burners conceptualize their community, but also their motivations for creating mobile community. I therefore explore the literature on culture surrounding values and motivations, but also the active use of culture.

My dissertation builds upon two bodies of theory of culture— the *Seamless Web* model of culture, and the *Toolkit-Repertoire* model—to better understand the processes of culture in the group and its role in the community creation for the participants in my study. Both bodies of theory are important to understanding how culture shapes social action in the present study; using either body of theory as standalone explanations of how culture affects action would leave out important explanations and understandings of how culture works (Abramson 2010; Vaisey 2010). Although I am more interested in exploring the culture of the community rather than fully understanding how culture shapes social action, my findings will show that the culture of the group is integral to creating mobile community. The two categories of culture I describe below are not exhaustive of every sociological understanding or study of culture, necessarily mutually exclusive, or universally agreed upon by sociologists as the two major schools of thought on culture, but they do provide a comprehensible and practical way of understanding how sociologists have conceptualized culture and the applicability for better understanding my findings.

**Two Models of Culture:**

*Seamless Web Model of Culture:* The seamless web model holds that culture is a powerfully shared, integrating force that works to shape the action of individuals (Vaisey
Values or ideals are integral aspects of this perspective as individuals internalize them and attempt to lead lives consistent with these values (e.g. Weber [1930] 2002). This perspective has been influenced by anthropological and early sociological studies. The structural functionalist Talcott Parsons (1951) has also been influential to this body of work. For Parsons, values were a central part of channeling human actions. In this view, the social structures created by people work to regulate individual behavior.

Additionally, norms and values are understood as universal concepts.

The basic assumptions underlying this model of culture began to fall apart in the 1960’s. Criticisms of its fundamental suppositions were launched on both empirical (e.g. Hannerz 2004) and psychological grounds (e.g. Wrong 1961). Anthropologists and sociologists questioned the notion that culture was all encompassing because members of a given group may have shifting and multiple identities at the same time (see, e.g. Strauss and Quinn 1997). However, elements of this model continue to underlie more contemporary research. For example, contemporary scholars have been influenced by the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973:5) who wrote, “believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs.” Additionally, attempts to understand ways that values and internalized motivations may shape behavior has also been persistent. Some sociologists continue to study the power of “moral directives,” oftentimes with strong empirical support within their findings showing that internalized states do play a part in shaping individual behavior (see, e.g. Longest and Vaisey 2008; Smith and Denton 2005; Vaisey 2009).
Toolkit-Repertoire Model of Culture: According to Parsons (1951) and the seamless web model, culture affects human action through values that channel action to some ends rather than others. However, more contemporary sociologists have argued that the process whereby culture affects action is a more complex process. Swidler (1986:277) asserts that “culture is not a unified system that pushes actions in a consistent direction,” nor does it necessarily prescribe action through defining what we want or by using values as the central causal factor. Rather, culture shapes action “by furnishing a repertoire of capacities for action that can be mobilized to achieve new objectives” (Swidler 2001:81-82).

In the Toolkit-Repertoire paradigm, culture is not comprised of “values that [directly] suffuse other aspects of belief, intention, or collective life [but are rather] complex rule-like structures that can be put to strategic use” (DiMaggio 1997:265). In this view, rather than providing values as motivating factors (Parsons 1951), or orienting motivations (Geertz 1973), culture helps provide “strategies of action” (Swidler 1986:277). In other words, culture provides a set of collective skills that people can use in their everyday lives rather than simply pushing people towards culturally prescribed ends. Therefore, the essential difference between the Seamless Web model and the Toolkit-Repertoire model lies in a diverging focus on ends versus means. The Seamless Web model sees culture “as the source of the ends of action,” while the Toolkit-Repertoire paradigm holds that culture helps provide the “means for action” (Vaisey 2010:8).

Integrating Theories: Scholars have critiqued the Toolkit-Repertoire model on grounds that it does not pay enough attention to structural factors that may influence outcomes or that the perspective treats culture as a mere site for rationalizations. Michele
Lamont (1992, chapter 7) has argued that the toolkit perspective does not fully explain why some choices are made while others are not made, particularly because of structural conditions such as economic factors. Patterson (2002:203) strongly articulates that the toolkit perspective is “a mere supplement of rational choice theory.” Vaisey (2010) has argued that the Toolkit-Repertoire model cannot accurately fill the analytic gap left when leaving behind the Seamless Web model namely because Swidler’s (1986:274) claim that “what people want...is of little help in explaining their action” is full of illusions to aspirations and wishes but cannot explain the origin of these wishes. Moreover, in regards to my following findings, repertoire theory does little to explain the motivations behind why people continually trek year after year to an isolated and uncomfortable desert environment to attend an expensive event like Burning Man even if attending group gatherings has become part of their everyday strategies of action.

The Seamless Web model is well suited for better understanding the motivations of individuals and different groups, but cannot accurately account for inconsistency as individuals may continually shift cultural frames when discussing their lives. Alternatively, the Toolkit-Repertoire model cannot accurately account for why some individuals pursue some lines of action and others different lines of action (Vaisey 2010), but helps us understand the fluidity and contradictions of culture. In order to account for neither model of culture being necessary and sufficient, my dissertation considers both motivations for creating community in modernity and ways individuals use their culture as a toolkit to create community. In other words, I draw heavily from both bodies of theory and literature surrounding culture in the following pages. I also consider the role of personal and collective ideologies in these processes, most especially because
interviewees in this study continually referred to ideologies and values in their discussions.

**Ideology:**

My findings show that burners attempt to aesthetically and discursively distance themselves from what they perceive as mainstream ideologies in their cultural practices and their articulation of values that they believe are in opposition to mainstream American values and ideologies. We often actively use our culture in this way by distancing ourselves from it (Sikkink 1998; Swilder 2001). I refer to the group as a counterculture given this oppositional emphasis and explore sociological understandings of ideology and counterculture below.

**Ideology and the roots of “Counterculture:”** In *The German Ideology*, Marx theorizes that the ideas that circulate in society prop up the economic structure of capitalism and work to suppress the awareness of the vast inequality within capitalism. Marx focused on the ways the prevailing ideology of the bourgeoisie prevented people from seeing the actual problematic conditions of their everyday lives. This prevailing ideology helps to obscure the exploitation of the workers, but it also buffers the economic system because ideology pervades into the political forces that support capitalism.

Marx’s analysis of capitalism focused on the transition from small scale capitalism to an increasingly complex global manufacturing system. However, Marx did not live long enough to witness the era of mass production and mass consumption in the early twentieth century. Building on Marx’s work, Gramsci was able to theorize about developments in capitalism after World War I. In contrast to Marx, Gramsci’s concept of hegemony included the significant role of mass media, mass consumption, and mass
culture. He worked under the assumption that the capitalist economy was embedded within broader socio-cultural regimes (Antonia and Bonanno 2000).

Gramsci (1957) incorporated culture into Marx’s theory of ideology particularly because of the increasingly significant role of mass media, consumption, and culture to the era in which he was writing; although both theorists generally agreed that the dominant culture is brought into being by intellectuals or members of the upper class who codify and formalize existing ideas into the hegemonic ideology. However, for Gramsci, the hegemonic ideology was communicated to society at large partially because of mass communication and mass culture, thereby reinforcing the prevailing ideology and transmitting it in efficient ways Marx could not necessarily have foreseen. Hegemony and ideology constitute the “two dominant forms in which power enters...culture” and hegemony is the “order of signs and practices, relations and distinctions, images, and epistemologies” that are historically inscribed notions which have come to be taken for granted in our everyday lives (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:22-23).

Gramsci emphasized that that the older Marxian term, “ideology,” also actually contained cultural norms and values (rather than only ideas) that were communicated through social life. For him, the upper-class had a subculture that differentiated it from the lower classes. At the same time as the existence of this subculture, according to Gramsci (1957), the upper classes also brought into being a different kind of culture for the masses that obscures the causes of inequality by mystifying people into believing the “hegemonic” (or what burners may think of as “mainstream”) ideology. For this ideology to be successful the masses must internalize ideas like a commonality of interest between the rich and poor or blaming problems on forces being beyond the control of any one
person. For Gramsci (1957), this culture disseminated by the upper classes was not necessarily a culture developed by the masses, but a culture contrived for the masses that ultimately worked in favor of the dominating classes. A real “counterculture,” according to Gramsci, could exist only through a more authentic culture generated by the masses themselves that stands in opposition to the hegemonic culture (Worsley 1997). In other words, Gramsci theorized that counterculture is produced when groups of individuals create their own culture that stands in opposition to dominant ideologies. This understanding of counterculture as positioned in opposition to mainstream culture has continued into current sociological research of subcultures and countercultures.

**Counterculture versus Subculture:**

After Gramsci first used the term counterculture to better understand how individuals position themselves against hegemonic ideologies in an era of mass communication, sociologists picked up the term in the 1960’s. Milton Yinger proposed in 1960 to call groups of subcultures that conflicted with dominant norms or values “contracultures.” For Yinger (1960), contracultures were organized in opposition to cultural beliefs or expressions. Through additional empirical work, researchers transitioned to the term “countercultures” (e.g. Roszak 1969). Building on the earlier work of Yinger, the historian Roszak (1969) claimed a youth counterculture had emerged in the 1960’s that rejected more traditional characteristics of Western individualized culture and replaced the Western technological/scientific outlook with a “humanistic/mysticist alternative.”

Adler and Adler (2000) note that countercultures may “arise out of underlying or developing societal stress: rapid political or economic change; demographic
transformations in the population (age, gender, location); a swift influx of new ideas; drastic escalation or diminishment of hopes or aspirations; weakening of ties to primary support circles (families, neighborhoods, work groups); and the erosion of meaning in the deepest symbols and rituals of society.” Examples of countercultures include the hippies, the bohemian Beats, Earth First! (Lange 1990; Short 1991), and extremist racist groups such as the Klu Klux Klan or skinheads (Baron 1997; Hamm 1995; Young and Craig 1997).

In a presidential address to the American Sociological Association, Yinger (1977:833) notes that “countervalues” are an integral part of countercultures. He defines countervalues as “a set of norms and values of a group that sharply contradict the dominant norms and values of the society of which that group is a part.” Countercultures attempt to reorganize normative bases of the social order with their emphasis on countervalues and have appeared at many times throughout history. I argue that burners also comprise a counterculture because of their articulated ideological stances.

Researchers have referred to back to the land movements and other “hippie” cultures as “counterculture” in part because of their ideological stance that challenge mass culture’s core beliefs (e.g. Berger 1981; Roszak 1969; Turner 2005). Hippie communities of the 1960’s and 1970’s combined the mystical and utopian features of countercultures in their search for a higher transcendence (Adler and Adler 2000). Hippies of the 1960’s have been especially viewed as challenging the rise of bureaucratization of corporate life in America (see Fischer 2006).

Countercultural hippies used their oppositional ideological stance against mainstream America in an attempt to shift mainstream cultural beliefs. Yinger (1982:285)
regards countercultures as the "engines of social change" due to their ideological 
opposition to the dominant culture. According to Yinger, through communication or 
shared experiences, countercultural groups may coalesce into ideologically integrated 
(yet separate from the dominant ideology) groups and change culture through a "dialectic 
of counterculture." In discussing the generational revolt of the hippies, Roszak (1969:42) 
argues that a

"counter culture" [is]...a culture so radically disaffiliated from the 
mainstream assumptions of [a] society that it scarcely looks to many as a 
culture at all, but takes the alarming appearance of a barbaric 
intrusion...counter culture is concerned with...altering the total cultural 
context within which our daily politics takes place.

For Roszak (1969:42), countercultures have little structure or formal membership. He 
stresses that they are "a variegated procession constantly influx, acquiring and losing 
members along the way." Countercultures are more difficult to differentiate from the 
general population than subcultures, particularly because members of countercultures are 
customly in flux whereas subcultures are usually more easily identifiable.

The term "subculture" is substantively close to the term "counterculture" and was 
originally applied by sociologists studying deviant subcultures such as Becker (1963) or 
sociologists who primarily studied youth subcultures like the Punks or the Teddy Boys 
(e.g. Hebdige 1979). Subcultures are often comprised of youth, rather than a more 
heterogeneous mix of ages (for example, see Becker 1963, Hall and Jefferson 1993 
[1975], Hebdige 1979, Thornton 1996). The sociological study of subcultures, 
particularly the subcultural studies of the Birmingham School, help situate my findings 
regarding the extended community of burners because there are similarities between
subcultural oppositional ideologies and the countervalues of the extended Burning Man community.

The subcultural studies of British cultural studies, particularly those from the University of Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the 1970’s, focused on issues of class; specifically the working class, conceptually close to Marx’s *lumpenproletariat*. For researchers of the CCCS, subcultures were often problematized due to a perceived lack of class consciousness, self-absorption, or a self-interested nature distanced from organized forms of labor (see Gelder 2007:83). The CCCS phenomena of subcultures were studied in four major ways. First, they were observed through the lens of the English working class, understood as gemeinschaft, or a community bound by place and social ties (see e.g. Thompson [1963] 1986; Williams [1958] 1984). Subcultures were also examined through an “us” versus “them” binary. Third, CCCS studied the culture of the subcultures with an emphasis on meanings, rituals, and traditions. Fourth, contemporary life was defined through a lens of mass consumerism, communication, and cultural forms that were seen as a threat to communities.

Clark, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts (1997:100), members of the CCCS, theorized that “subcultures must exhibit a distinctive enough shape and structure to make them identifiably different from their ‘parent’ culture. They must be focused around certain activities, values, certain uses of material artifacts, territorial spaces etc. which significantly differentiate them from the wider culture.” Burners do fit into this definition, but as my findings will show, the group was highly influenced by values of the American hippie countercultural movements of the 1960’s and 1970’s. I refer to the extended
mobile community of burners as a counterculture given their emphasis on “countervalues” (Yinger 1982), the wide range of ages found in the community, and their interest in working to change American mass culture in what they perceive as a positive direction rather than simply resisting mainstream ideologies, values and identifications that distinguish them as a counterculture, not a subculture.

**Cultural Practices:**

Countercultural participants who attend Burning Man may combine spirituality, ritual, and artistic creation at the event, which helps to shape the identity of the group (Gilmore 2006). Beyond the space of Burning Man, members of the extended Burning Man community may discern who is or is not a community member based on certain classifiable practices inherent in the culture of the community, the collective identity of the group, and the associated symbolic boundaries such as taste boundaries in style.

Cultural predilections, such as propensities for the aesthetic or “taste,” do not stem simply from individual choice; they exist in a socially structured framework influenced by institutions, family, and ones’ peers. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Bourdieu (1984) develops a political economy of cultural goods by demonstrating that cultural preferences are the product of upbringing and education. In other words, class and culture are connected. Bourdieu (1984:173) defines taste as “the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices.” In other words, individuals appropriate cultural objects as a means of symbolically categorizing themselves from others. Taste, as a set of preferences, may “express the same expressive intention in the specific logic of each of the symbolic subspaces, furniture, clothing, language or body hexis.”
In general, symbols of style can indicate socioeconomic status and an individual’s access to an elite social echelon. Individuals may interpret symbols of style as indicative of social placement. Bourdieu (1984:7) asserts that “artistic and cultural consumption are predisposed to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences” and these differences are used to assert one’s social identity (Bourdieu 1984:7). If one’s individual social identity is partially defined through differences of aesthetic choice which reflect specific social elements like class upbringing, we can infer that individual outward presentation of self via choice in style may also have symbolic meaning for the group.

My findings show that members of the Burning community explain that they “recognize” other group members via their sense of style or taste. The recognition reflects the internalized practices of habitus which Bourdieu (1984:170) defines as

the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgments and the system of classification (principium divisionis) of these practices. It is in the relationship between the two capacities which define the habitus, the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world, i.e. the space of life-styles, is constituted.

According to Bourdieu, class preferences include taste and the aesthetic in addition to monetarily-related and culturally-related practices. The expressive style and other aesthetic practices of the burners help bolster their burner community identity by providing a visual taste boundary or differentiation. According to Bourdieu (1984:6) “taste classifies and it classifies the classifier.” In the following pages I explore style and other cultural practices like artistic creation in the extended community to help interpret how individuals inscribe symbolic boundaries of the group and create community.

Social practices at Burning Man, like art production in community spaces, help engender a sense of ritual and symbolism in the lives of those who attend the event.
Community art provides a venue for ritualistic social interaction by bringing individuals together under a common goal by designing a symbol of the community by the community (Collins 1988; Lowe 2000) and art is representative of the community within which it is created (Dewey 1934). The visible practices of culture in the extended Burning Man community, such as artistic creation and style, aid in understanding the collective life of the group and how individuals use their culture to reinforce group boundaries. These visible elements of the collective culture ultimately aid in studying how mobile individuals create community.

Outline of Chapters:

The following chapters present an in-depth picture of how mobile actors create community in modernity and use of culture in the group. Chapter 2 details the methodology behind my 4 years of ethnographic research. Chapter 3 explores the extent to which burners constitute a mobile community built on shared activities, beliefs, values, communal commitments, and relationships of affect or mutual concern that contribute to a group communal ethos. I found that the extended group of burners may be referred to as a community. Chapter 4 provides an in-depth examination of the counterculture of the extended community and the ideologies and countervails of the group. This chapter also examines the collective cultural and social processes of the group that lead to a collectively shared identity as members of the extended Burning Man community. Chapter 5 explores the lifestyle practices of mobile community members, including their flexible mobile occupations and the extent to which taste boundaries in style inscribe symbolic boundaries of the group. Chapter 6 documents the cultural significance of place for the formation of one “pocket” of the extended community of burners. This chapter
also highlights the cultural integration of burners in the urban environment of Portland, Oregon. Chapter 7 concludes my dissertation.
CHAPTER 2

METHODS OF RESEARCH

This chapter describes the design and execution of my qualitative study of mobile community and the cultural processes of the group. I first give an account of the research approach including how I gained entry into the extended Burning Man community. I then describe how I selected participants and the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants which is followed by a description of the data collection procedures and site descriptions. The final section of this chapter explains how I analyzed the data and the coding scheme and thematic categories I used for analyses.

Research Approach and Questions:

In modern times, actors and groups of actors move across space and between places and shift the traditional meanings of place and place-based community. What were once spaces of place have become spaces of cultural and physical flows for mobile actors (Hall 2009). Partially because of modern mobility, reevaluating what constitutes “the field” in qualitative research has become a challenge for qualitative researchers (Amit 2000). Latour (2005) identifies sociological understanding as essentially static and advocates for theoretical interests that keep pace with mobile actors in this modern age of mobility. A qualitative research approach grounded in the local but that integrates mobile actors represents one answer to modifying the research approach within qualitative methodology given modern circumstances, constraints, and cultural shifts. My dissertation research is grounded in such an approach that takes the meanings of multiple
places for group life and the fluidity of culture under consideration in an age of “new mobilities” (Sheller and Urry 2006). My work focuses on studying mobile individuals attempting to create community despite their mobility. My dissertation addresses three main questions: “Can an extended group of mobile individuals constitute a community with group commitments and gemeinschaft-like relationships?” “If so, how do mobile individuals create community?” and “What might the culture of one such group look like?”

**Ethnographic Case Study Approach:**

The research design of my dissertation included a combination of strategies of inquiry. I combined an ethnography, or a study of a cultural group in a natural setting (Creswell 1998; 2003) characterized by a flexible process that evolves in response to the lived realities within the field setting (LeCompte and Schensul 1999), with a case study where the researcher studies an event or process using a variety of data collection procedures such as interviews (Creswell 2003; Stake 1995). My ethnographic case study of the extended Burning Man community included participant observation at multiple sites, two group conversations, and formal and informal interviews at gathering locations. Because members of the group under study are highly mobile themselves, conducting ethnographic research at the multiple sites where actors in the group socially interact is a practical way to do targeted research. Participant observation at multiple locations enabled me to extract meaningful interpretations of the social world of extended members the Burning Man community. Through a process of deep attentiveness and immersion within the group, I captured and documented the behaviors, perceptions, and social processes of participants in the extended community.
My process of documenting the life of the extended Burning Man community has largely been inductive. In inductive reasoning, the researcher uses specific observations to generate broader generalizations (Singleton and Straits 1999). I began the inductive process by observing and documenting group life which then allowed me the ability to infer patterns through analyzing these repeated observations. Ultimately, the inductive process allowed me the ability to develop new theoretical propositions based on these patterns. The resultant “knowledge claim” (Creswell 2003:6) of the research process stemmed from a constructionist standpoint.

Knowledge claims may represent research paradigms (Lincoln and Cuba 2000; Mertens 1998) that are based on certain philosophical assumptions, epistemologies, and ontologies (Crotty 1998). Crotty (1998) identifies three basic assumptions of the constructionist standpoint. First, because meanings are constructed by human beings and the socio-historical context surrounding them, interview questions should be largely open-ended, allowing adequate participant expression. Secondly, it is important to personally visit the social gatherings of participants to gain a better understanding of their social and historical perspective. Third, meaning is always social and arises from interaction within a group. Thus, the constructionist knowledge claim is largely inductive.

I documented the social life of the extended Burning Man community as a local participant, taking into account the socio-historical context of the places they inhabit and the cultural meanings and interpretations of the group.

**Entry into the Group:**

Surveys and interviews distanced from the nuances of life may result in caricatures of social groups (see Wacquant 2004). In order to avoid such
misrepresentations, I tried to develop and maintain social relationships as an insider within the group under study. Developing and maintaining personal rapport with pivotal people in the field is an important aspect of gaining entry into the field and documenting inside processes of group life (Becker 1998; Lofland and Lofland 1995; Weiss 1994; Whyte 1943). I developed close social relationships and became an insider of the group by traveling with group members to Burning Man, going to social gatherings of the group, and participating in building large scale art installations with the group.

I first became acquainted with the extended Burning Man community when I was conducting a study of recreation use in National Forests in Oregon and Washington. I had moved to the west coast from West Virginia for this job and was interested in looking for people to create performance art with as a social outlet. I was introduced to a group of performers through an older mutual dance contact, many of whom attended the arts event Burning Man that I had not heard of at that point. I acted and danced in a theater production that was a fundraiser for this group of people who were camping together at Burning Man. The performers were raising money to construct a stage at Burning Man in order to offer a few scheduled productions during the course of the event.

After concluding a few performances of a performance piece members of the group had collectively written and choreographed in Portland, I was invited to attend Burning Man with them. There, I met many other individuals who considered themselves artists in what they repeatedly referred to as “their community.” Over the course of the next two years I met around 400-500 people living in and between Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland, OR, Seattle WA, Vancouver, B.C., India, Bali, and Costa Rica who all considered themselves part of the same extended Burning Man community. The
individuals I met purported to know of thousands of additional individuals who also referred to themselves as members of the extended Burning Man community. Many of the individuals I met considered themselves artists, and continually referred to the larger globally extended group of people as a single community, albeit with smaller groups of people who know each other more intimately within the larger community. This group emphasis on referring to themselves as a community piqued my interest in exploring in depth how these actors create community amidst all the geographical physical mobility of the group members. Prior to meeting members of the extended community in Portland, I had already received a master’s degree in applied social research and as a partial consequence, tended to view our interactions through a sociological lens. I became interested in exploring in a more methodical way how these individuals create community.

After two years of living in Portland, OR, I left the west coast in July 2007 to attend graduate school at the University of New Hampshire, but kept in contact with many in the extended community. The same fall I started graduate school, I also helped build an art installation at Burning Man with 8 other artists. The piece we built together was entitled The Tasseograph. The project manager of The Tasseograph was named Tex. BMOrg, or the organization behind the Burning Man event, liked our piece and Tex applied for an additional art grant the following year. BMOrg choose Tex and James, the artist who had the initial vision for The Tasseograph, to design and build the Temple at Burning Man 2008, a large honor for any artist who attends the event. After receiving news that Tex and James had been chosen to create the Temple, Tex quickly pulled together a large group of volunteers within the extended Burning Man community. They
started fundraising and building the art installation in the winter of 2008 in a warehouse in San Francisco.

During the fall of 2007, I received UNH IRB approval to conduct exploratory research with this extended community (including interviews centered on the aesthetic and their occupations) because of my initial interest in exploring how a large extended group of people create community. I completed 7 interviews during two visits in 2007-2008. In March 2008, Tex called to ask if I wanted to participate in building the Temple at Burning Man 2008. I immediately agreed and received IRB approval for a second stage of exploratory research that would include ethnographic fieldnotes. I planned on taking fieldnotes during the time I would be helping to build the art installation in the desert. Tex agreed that I could simultaneously do research while working on the installation; all artists and workers knew of my researcher status. Tex and the other volunteers had already completed the fundraising and the initial construction for the Temple in a warehouse in San Francisco over the winter, spring, and early summer, prior to packing up Ryder moving trucks with equipment and supplies and hauling it all out to the desert in July 2008. I flew to Nevada, rented a car, and joined the rest of the artists and volunteers in the first week of August to build the three-story, $100,000 art installation that we would burn to the ground on the last night of the festival. I was in the desert for almost a month participating and observing and flew back to New Hampshire directly from Nevada for another year of graduate school.

My interests in studying the extended community continued to expand over the next two years as a graduate student. I also continued to keep up with members of the group and go back to the west coast for social visits. In the middle of my fourth year as a
graduate student, I wrote my dissertation proposal based on my years of exploratory research and received a third IRB approval to extend this research to include sites in Portland, Oregon.

Inside View: Being an insider in the extended community of burners had both advantages and disadvantages during my research, analysis, and writing. I was able to develop an excellent rapport with participants, but I also simultaneously struggled with my analytic distance as I was highly immersed in the life of the group. Researchers often have to deal with the tension of being a member of the inside group while simultaneously studying participants. Thorton (1996:105) studied the social worlds of subcultural ravers in England and describes the conflict between being both a participant and an observer in qualitative research.

One complication of my fieldwork resulted from the fact that the two methods that make up ethnography—participation and observation—are not necessarily complementary. In fact, they often conflict. As a participating insider, one adopts the group’s view of its social world by privileging what it says. As an observing outsider, one gives credence to what one sees.

Thornton (1996:92) balanced this tension by adopting a strategy of methodological reflexivity enabling her what she calls a “double interrogation” of various subcultural meanings. Like Thornton, I also found the dual role of participant/observer to be in conflict. On the one hand, over the years I developed deep relationships with some of the community members which allowed me inside access to group gatherings and perspectives that other sociologists may not have access to. But alternatively, I had to gain critical distance with which to analyze countercultural meanings. I believe I also managed to find a balance between these two roles, gaining analytic distance as my research and writing progressed.
Although I stayed friends with many in the group and continued to conduct exploratory research in person on visits, the months that I was physically absent helped me gain intellectual perspective on the social and cultural processes of the extended community. My work developing a coding scheme and thematic categories helped me to emotionally detach from the data. I achieved analytic distance as I methodically critically assessed the data and as the writing of my findings progressed.

**Data Collection—Interviews/Group Conversations:**

In 2010, I conducted formal personal interviews in Portland, Oregon with a total of 44 individuals (see Table 1 below for pseudonyms and occupations) who have attended Burning Man and hundreds of informal interviews with other event participants over the course of my earlier three years of exploratory research. The face-to-face semi-structured, open-ended interviews ranged from one to two hours and were tape recorded. I transcribed every interview verbatim, which helped further familiarize myself with the data. Prior to beginning interviews, I first obtained verbal and written consent from interviewees. I gave each interviewee a copy of the pre-approved UNH IRB approval form and explained my study. The interviews took place at the homes of interviewees. Due to sensitive topics such as illegal drug use and dissemination, interviews needed to be conducted in locations where participants felt comfortable such as their home environments. Seven interviews were collected in 2008, 5 interviews in 2009, and I conducted 32 interviews in 2010 for a total of 44 interviews.

The focus of the interviews was the development of their self-identified “community” outside of the event. I began my exploratory research framing the community in terms of their communal artistic production, but Burning Man was
continually brought up, unprompted, by the participants during our later interviews. As the interviews progressed, I began to recognize the centrality of the event to the participants’ lives beyond the physical space of the event into “the default world” (Gilmore 2006). I thus became more and more interested in the ways Burning Man, and also the cultural context already present in participants’ multiple localities, was helping to create sporadic yet tight-knit groups of people throughout the world who continue to return to the event year after year. I observed that the culture of the west coast and the place of Portland in particular played a part in the formation of the extended group and helped shape their everyday actions. The place of Portland emerged as an important thematic element within the interview process. This prompted me to focus on the importance of the urban cultural milieu to the everyday lives of community members.

The interview questions included individual background information such as “Tell me what you do for a living,” and “Has this been influenced by the people you spend the most time with?” I also asked questions centered on their group such as “Do you feel as though you have a community?” “How do you know it’s a community?” “What do you have in common with other community members?” “Is there anything that makes this group distinct?” Other related questions included “Do you see your group similarly to other groups such as the hippies?” I also added questions directly about Burning Man after participants continually brought up the event during initial stages of interviews. Examples of these questions included “Why do you go to Burning Man?” and “What happens when Burning Man is over for good?”

Depending on observational data I had already gathered about the interviewee, I asked many additional interview questions that arose during our conversations following
a “contextualized conversation” model (Stage and Mattson 2003:97). Stage and Mattson (2003) argue that conversational techniques such as emergent discussions aid in the interview process for ethnographies because they include research participants in a reciprocal process that helps realize the full potential of ethnography. My interviews also followed this conversational pattern and flowed depending on topics rather than a prescribed ordering of questions. Topics in addition to the questions above included a) participants’ conceptions of their community and their place within it, including their perceptions of the centrality of art and creativity b) participants’ feelings of belonging or not belonging to the extended group, c) participants’ views of witnessing actions indicating community reciprocity or support, d) shared senses of aesthetic, e) discussing if/how the art festival scene and community gatherings add or detract from how they view their individual identity and that of their community, f) economic drivers of the community, including affiliations with the drug trade, g) ways participants attach symbolic meaning to aspects of their community and any rituals they encounter that give shape to their community, h) the nature of place and if they do in fact view themselves as existing in a mobile community bound by social ties.

**Interviewees:**

The interviewee with the most number of “burns” under his belt has attended Burning Man 16 times, whereas some “burners” I interviewed had only been once. Pseudonyms have been used in place of participants’ names. The table below gives the interviewees’ main source of income (other than marijuana production which I do not include in the table for interviewee confidentiality reasons). Most interviewees receive money from a combination of the occupations listed below. Every interviewee was self-
employed or engaged in short term flexible work where they were in charge of their own schedules. My sample was 64% male and 36% female.

**Table 1: Interviewees and Occupations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tex, Jenn, Louie, Timothy</td>
<td>Self-employed nonprofit arts management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holden, Franklin, Sam, Asteria, Val, Henri, Irving, Lincoln, Norman, Xavier, Kyoukai</td>
<td>Self-employed performers, visual or sculptural artists, film makers, photographers, writers, and dancers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark, Laura, Sophia, Marjorie, Trina, Seneca, Gabby, Maddie, Monty</td>
<td>Self-employed clothing design, boutique operator, or crafter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logan</td>
<td>Self-employed architect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tad</td>
<td>Self-employed computer programming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curtis, Salvador, Langston</td>
<td>Self-employed carpenter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felipe</td>
<td>Self-employed DJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabelle, Jonathon, Ralph</td>
<td>Self-employed massage therapist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard, Eric, Justin</td>
<td>Self-employed web-design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia, Natalie</td>
<td>Health-related occupations (registered nurse, physician)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stein</td>
<td>Art direction for magazines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke, Jordan, Jessica, Ash, Nora</td>
<td>Other (service industry, wind farm technician, relationship counseling)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tex, Sophia, Trina, Seneca, Monty, Logan, Tad, Salvador, Isabelle, Richard, Justin, Jessica</td>
<td>Secondary income from performing or visual arts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to 44 individual interviews, I also conducted two group conversations during participant observations; one group had six participants and the second had four participants. I taped and eventually transcribed these two group conversations. The first group conversation was two hours long and was conducted in Portland, OR. The second group conversation occurred during the build phase of Burning Man 2010. We had been working during the day to build our themecamp and 4 burners were sitting in camping chairs relaxing after the day’s work. The topics of both group conversations adhered to those of the individual interviews.
Selection of Burners in Portland, OR: Burners argue that subsets of the extended community have developed and continue to develop in countries and cities throughout the world. I chose to interview participants specifically in Portland, Oregon and eventually focus on the place of Portland for three main reasons. First, from exploratory research I documented a large contingent of burners in Portland. I asked the Burning Man organization for a formal list of the numbers of online ticket buyers from the major cities on the west coast. Given the constraints of their online system for documenting ticket buyers, they are unable to measure how many tickets were bought per person from each given zip code, the numbers of ticket buyers for the fire conclave (free tickets given to fire performers), or the free tickets given to artists and staff tickets that are not held in a database searchable by city. Because the Burning Man organization documents ticket buyers by zip code, there are also difficulties in drawing boundaries between who may or may not “count” as a citizen of a given city. The numbers of Burning Man participants from any given city are therefore unreliable for a number of reasons. However, from my exploratory research and hundreds of informal interviews with burners at the event of Burning Man, I came to the conclusion that the largest contingents of “pockets” of the extended Burning Man community exist in San Francisco, Portland, OR, and Los Angeles. Other places with large numbers of Burning Man participants also include Vancouver, BC, Reno, Nevada, and New York City.

My second reason for choosing the focus on burners in Portland, OR has to do with the unique culture and size of the city itself. San Francisco, which arguably has the largest contingent of burners within the confines of the city, is also larger and more diffuse than the city of Portland. The larger Bay Area in 2010 consisted of roughly 7.2
million people, while the Portland metropolitan area has roughly 2.2 million people. The smaller size of the Portland area allowed me to uncover a more cohesive sense of place identity in the city and the integration of burners within it.

The third reason I choose to focus on burners in Portland, OR has to with access to the group itself. I had already developed relationships with many in the group over years of exploratory research. As I already explained, developing a good rapport with participants allowed me access to their social worlds in ways that ultimately benefitted my research.

**Interviewee Selection:** My selection of interviewees was purposive. My initial definition of the universe was limited to those participants who attend Burning Man and spend some portion out of the year in Portland, Oregon. Through my initial exploratory research I was able to document the extended community as a kind of mobile cohesive group with strong social ties. I chose the community in Portland because I had already received entrée to the group, but also because my prior exploratory research documented strong social ties amidst a large degree of physical mobility.

Using my previous exploratory observations and referrals from other members, I targeted central members of the extended Burning Man community in Portland for interviews. I used my fieldnotes (the process of participant observation is described in greater detail below) to identify members I observed as central to the group and cross referenced this assessment with referrals from other community members. I asked interviewees to name other community members they felt were central to the group. I also asked interviewees to give me names of community members they thought might

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8 http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/bayarea.htm
9 www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0020.xls
offer articulate views reflective of the entire extended community but that might also typify views in Portland.

My purposive sampling allowed me to document views from group members culturally and socially proximal to other group members, even though they might be geographically distal. Since many extended community members spend a good deal of the year traveling, this approach allowed me to target interviewees who were socially integral to the extended group. Although it may be argued that peripheral members of the group offer a unique perspective on the group, I specifically targeted central members of the community in Portland (even if they were geographically mobile). My focus became that of burners in Portland. Observation and interviews of central members was the best way to gain data on the local fundamental processes of the extended community.

My goal was to better understand one small arm of the extended community through direct observation, participation, and interviews. The views expressed by my interviewees may be in direct opposition to those from other parts of the country or the world who attend Burning Man but do not belong to the extended community based in Portland, Oregon. The views expressed by my interviewees are thus representative of the extended community extending from Portland, but may not necessarily be generalizable to the entire universe of those who attend Burning Man.

Contacting Participants: After obtaining names of interviewees through referrals from other interviewees or through my own participant observations, I contacted participants either through email or Facebook. Each participant of the 44 interviewees I asked agreed to be interviewed on my first attempt at contact. I credit this high “response rate” to the more personal relationships I developed over my three years of research with
participants, but also to the tight-knit nature of the group under study. Most participants knew me by reputation, if not personally, and thus may have felt obliged to participate. One problem with every prospective participant agreeing to be interviewed may be that interviewees felt pressured to participate due to the tight-knit nature of the group. However, I made it verbally clear that they did not have to participate at the beginning of our interviews, and explained this a second time while going over the IRB consent form.

**Saturation:**

I ended the collection of interviews when I reached a point of thematic saturation during the process of data collection. Participants began to express the same repeated views which wove together to form larger thematic patterns. The sampling selection for qualitative research may stop once a researcher no longer obtains new data that may significantly alter the analysis (Glaser and Straus 1967; Glaser 1978). As I conducted interviews, I took extensive notes and began to develop a list of thematic categories. As my interviews progressed, these patterns became more intelligible and repetitive. I ended the collection of interviews once a point of thematic saturation was reached in the data, with no new emergent patterns.

**Data Collection—Participant Observation:**

My dissertation includes fieldnotes from Burning Man 2008, Burning Man 2010, and various sites in and around Portland in the fall of 2010. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), validity in qualitative studies may be thought of in terms of getting at emergent understanding of actors rather than the more classic view that differentiates content, face, convergent, discriminant, and predictive validity in studies. Validity in qualitative research results from arriving at a manner of understanding (Miles and
that results from being embedded in the research site and careful analysis. Due to the physical mobility of group members, I took the opportunity to do participant observation in a variety of mobile qualitative "fields" (Amit 2000). Embedding myself into the various fields such as Burning Man or places in Portland where burners socially interact, thus helps bring validity to this study in addition to giving a more holistic view of group social life. "Following" burners to their spaces of interaction and work allowed me to more fully document the mobility of the community and the culture of the group.

Using multiple methods of data collection helps to mitigate the biases of any one research method in its own (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, and Sechrest 1966). Using both interviews and participant observation allowed for triangulation of the data. Flick (1998:230) argues that "triangulation is less a strategy for validating results and procedures than an alternative to validation . . . which increases scope, depth and consistency." Thus, multiple methods help to give my study validity and provided a way for me to cross reference the claims of interviewees with other forms of data. My observations and fieldnotes also helped me contextualize the interview data within the confines of the environments surrounding the interviewees and provided social reference points with which to interact with group members for further developing interview questions. These observations also helped me gain the trust of other extended community members. In summation, the contextualization of the interviews provided by participant observations ultimately aided me in achieving greater understanding of the lived realities of the extended community.
An important aspect of my participant observation was visually documenting field sites, non-interviewee participants at these sites, and the art, style, and aesthetic taste of burners through photographs. I took photographs of burners and various art installations. For the privacy and safety of interviewees, I did not take their individual photographs. I also use photos, with permission, from various public websites. Visual documentation provides rich material to supplement the ethnographic and interview data. According to Prosser (2007:14), "contemporary visual studies examine the meanings and significance of the production, consumption and circulation of material culture." My photographs also especially aid in studying the material and aesthetic culture of the extended Burning Man community. Some of the photographs were taken while I conducted participant observation, while other photographs are included as separate data to be analyzed as data. Below, I describe the research sites and my process of data collection more in depth.

**Burning Man:**

As I explained earlier, my interest in researching this community stemmed from firsthand experiences where I observed a geographically spread out and mobile group of people calling themselves a community. I became interested in meanings these mobile self-employed individuals attached to their community. As my exploratory research progressed, I continued to document the centrality of Burning Man to their lives and their collective experience as an extended community outside of the event. Burning Man therefore became one of my main sites of participant observation. In order to document and analyze the cultural meanings of the community, it was necessary to also document and analyze Burning Man.
Physical Description of the Site: Burning Man is held annually in the Black Rock Desert in northwest Nevada. The Black Rock Desert is a dry lake bed framed by two mountain ranges with an area of approximately 1,000 square miles at an elevation of 3,907 feet (U.S. Geologic Society 1980). The town of Gerlach resides near the entrance to what burners call the “playa,” or the dry alkaline landmass of the ancient lakebed where Burning Man is held. It takes roughly two and half hours to reach the Black Rock Desert from Reno, Nevada. Gerlach is little more than a gas station with a small convenience store and a few houses. Burners must bring all the supplies and water they will need for their time in the desert with them to the event.

The vast desert lends itself to inclement weather such as frequent dust storms with little visibility and choking winds and extremely high and low temperatures, providing a physically taxing, yet beautifully majestic environment. Piercing blue desert skies give way to endless starry nights on the open expanse of the playa surrounded by views of stunning mountains. The extreme dryness of the Black Rock Desert can cause severe dehydration and possibly death. The climate also necessitates the constant application of moisturizing lotion, sunscreen, and footbaths. The dusty road that funnels festival goers into the heart of Black Rock City, the name for the temporary city that is built for the event, is lined each year with signs spaced at intervals. The first sign each year reads,

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10 Photo credit, Aaron Rogosin
“Welcome...to the Vacant Heart...of the Wild West.” For repeat festival goers, the phrase provides a recognizable greeting and familiarity based on past experience that they are entering an isolated environment created apart from their regular existence. Seeing the sign reminds participants to shed the vestiges of what burners call “the default world;” that for one week they will not be tethered to an outwardly imposed 9am-5pm work schedule (even though there are scheduled events participants may attend if they choose) or the logos of Corporate America, as true to its countercultural roots, Burning Man assertively prevents any advertising, selling, or commodification inside the event.

A temporary city that burners refer to as "Black Rock City" is created, used, and then torn down each year, with different principles and expectations than in everyday life. Each year, Black Rock City is laid out by workers from the Department of Public Works (DPW) in the horseshoe pattern shown below.

Many volunteers and some paid workers arrive months before the event to survey the land and put stakes and road signs into place. Constructing the layout for a temporary city


68
of 50,000 is no small task and begins almost two months before the official start of the event. In 2004, the central camping area alone was approximately 29,237,000 square feet. Each year the streets are ordered from the esplanade to streets that begin with A, B, C and so forth. Depending on the estimated number of participants, some years there are more streets and the streets refer to the theme for the year of the event. For example, all the streets in 2010 were named for global cities. The “A” street was called “Athens,” while the last street was “Kyoto.” Participants can orient themselves during the event, especially at night or during whiteouts via the radial shape. For example, indicating your camp is at 6:45 and Esplanade, would signify where the camp was on the grid to other participants so they could find it later.

The area above the Temple, referred to by some participants as “deep playa,” is enclosed by an orange fence called “the trash fence,” to keep trash from blowing into the surrounding wilderness but also serves as a physical boundary preventing participants from wandering too far. Using the same layout year after year helps keep location orientations consistent for burners who return again and again because camps are placed in different locations each year. Center Camp, however, is consistently in the same place each year. Large sound camps are also usually placed on the furthest corners of the esplanade around 10 and 2 o’clock to keep the loudest music away from areas such as the family friendly camp. Placement on the esplanade is desirable for large camps, but not all camps that request the esplanade are placed there. The Man, a large geometrically shaped effigy of a man, stands at the center of the temporary city or “ephemeropolis” (Black 1998). The effigy stands as a visible symbol from all areas on the esplanade.

12 http://afterburn.burningman.com/04/dpw/planning.html. This is the last year I could get data on the full square footage of the camping areas. although the DPW aims to have 650 square feet per person per year as a general rule
13 Fieldnotes 8-26-10
horseshoe layout of the city, with the effigy of the man as a central point, provides a venue to gaze upon outrageously costumed participants as they bike, walk, or ride by in art cars.

Population Characteristics of Burners: Participants at Burning Man refer to themselves as “burners.” Burners hail from at least 49 of the 50 states in the United States and at least 26 different countries (Chen 2003). Beginning in 2001, a theme camp at Burning Man known as “Census Camp” started doing an informal census of the population of Black Rock City each year. The camp does not randomly sample participants, but leaves census forms at a few designated locations for burners to fill out during the week of Burning Man. I first present data from the 2007 Burning Man census followed by the 2010 census to provide some context about the characteristics of the population of participants who attend Burning Man. I was unable to obtain the exact number of respondents for the two years of survey data results I present here, but I calculated an approximate number of respondents for the Burning Man 2007 census given the number of respondents for one particular question on years of education. Approximately 1906 participants (or approximately 4% of the over 47,000 attendees that year) at Burning Man answered the 2007 census.

Of the respondents in 2007, 54% were male, 44% were female, 2% were other or intersex. Seventy-two percent of respondents considered themselves to be white. Fully 76% of respondents sometimes or always considered themselves to be artists. A little over half (57%) of respondents considered themselves as “employed,” while 26% of respondents replied that they were self-employed and 17% of respondents said that they were unemployed. In 2010, 18% of respondents were married, while 73% were not
married; the rest of the respondents were “other.” For income levels in 2010, 10.3% of participants earned less than $10,000/year, 24.4% of respondents earned $10,000-30,000/year, 21.2% of participants earned $30,000-50,000/year, 14.2% earned $50,000-70,000/year, 9.8% earned $70,000-$100,000/year, 10.3% earned $100,000-150,000/year, and 10% earned over $150,000/year. Approximately 17% of participants were younger than age 25, approximately 39% of respondents were ages 25-35, 12% were 35-40 years old, 16% were in their 40’s, and approximately 14% were age 50 or older. Burners are also highly educated. Thirty-five percent of respondents have a bachelor’s degree and 20% of respondents have at least a graduate degree.

**Data Collection at Burning Man:** I attended and documented two years of Burning Man with IRB approval (2008 and 2010) for a total of 27 days of ethnographic participant observation fieldnotes. In total, I have attended Burning Man four times (2006-2008, and 2010). My first two years, 2006-2007, were the years that piqued my interest in exploring the community further. In 2006 and 2010, I was involved with planning and organizing large theme camps on the main “street” of the event, the esplanade. The other two years (2007 and 2008), I participated in the building of large scale art installations, the *Tasseograph* (2007) and *Basura Sagrada* (English translation—Sacred Trash) (2008). In 2008, I arrived at Burning Man over two weeks prior to the official opening of the event on a special early arrival pass attained from my social contact Tex. I had come to voluntarily help build the Temple that was entitled *Basura Sagrada* that year, with 80 other volunteers and also to document the construction using fieldnotes. The Temple is often touted as one of the main focal points of the event.
During the process of participating in building the Temple in 2008, I encountered many obstacles to my fieldwork. The temperature of the desert hovered around 106-110 degrees during the day (which sapped my energy), we had limited electricity (depending on when the generator was running), extended camping and working for up to 20 hours a day with very little sleep took it's physical toll on everybody including myself, and frequent dust storms that year stalled my ability to use a laptop computer. I carried a small note pad and pen in the pocket of a specially designed belt to take field memos and jottings during my carpentry work and during group meetings or meals. I would then wake up before most of the group to copy my field jottings into a computer if we had electricity that day.

There were times during the construction of Basura Sagrada when only a small number of participants could be working due to the specialized nature of the tasks, such as one instance when 4 crew members were operating a large crane. In these instances, I would watch and take fieldnotes directly on my laptop as the social exchanges and work on the art installation unfolded. I positioned myself either on the back of a large enclosed truck to have some semblance of shade in the 106 degree weather or under one of the many shade structures. During work times where I could not participate, I was able to document conversations and social action as they took place. I would type as events unfolded. I was often in full view of all the volunteer workers present as an ethnographer taking fieldnotes on their interactions. During working hours where I was participating, I would take field jottings in the notebook I kept in the pocket of my utility belt as social situations arose. I was unable to document every single social occurrence, but tried to document as many interactions as possible and then reflect upon these interactions as I
expanded upon the field jottings following Emerson, Frez, and Shaw’s (2005) criteria for writing ethnographic fieldnotes. I have a total of 15 days of fieldnotes for Burning Man 2008.

During my second year (2010) of taking fieldnotes at Burning Man, I adhered to a similar participant observation process as 2008 during the build phase of the event. I arrived that year on the Wednesday preceding the opening on an “early arrival” pass given to me by the head organizer of the themecamp I was camping with that year. Burning Man annually officially opens on Monday morning at 12am, so that particular year I was present 5 days prior to the “official” opening of the event. I carried a notepad for field jottings in my utility belt as I worked to construct two large geometric aluminum domes and camp structures such as the kitchen, Costco bars, or the camp shower. I also documented every day during the actual event of Burning Man in 2010 whereas in 2008 I documented 15 days of art installation construction prior to the opening of the event. I rarely had access to electricity in 2010, so all my fieldnotes that year were handwritten jottings. I later copied and expanded these jottings into more full fieldnotes on my computer following the event after I had returned to Portland. In 2010, I documented 12 days at Burning Man.

**Places in Portland, Oregon:**

In addition to documenting two years at Burning Man, I also spent 4 months during the fall 2010 attending and documenting community gatherings such as parties or camping excursions in and around Portland. My research focus was to better understand the creation of community in this extended group and the group’s culture, so it was important to document and analyze various cultural and social interactions. All of the
participants in my study call Portland home for at least a portion of the year. For example, Marjorie, one of the interviewees, spends approximately 4 months of each year traveling in India, 4 months traveling to multiple arts festivals on the west coast, and approximately 4 months in Portland at the house she owns in the city.

While interacting with the group, I carried a small notebook and took field jottings at the various locations we where we gathered. Later, I would type up longer fieldnotes attempting to recall all aspects of the events. I would hear about the events I attended and documented through other interviewees, invites from social contacts, and through learning about the events at other events I attended. My already deep immersion in the group aided in getting invitations to events. I attended events that I discerned as representative of the extended community.

The community gatherings I attended in and around Portland, OR included Last Thursday—a monthly art-walk in the Alberta Arts Neighborhood of Portland; two parties at the house of community member Holden—one of which was a fundraiser for our Burning Man themecamp and the second of which was entitled “Holden is a Corporate Whore No-More Party” to celebrate his occupational transition from a GIS analyst to an independent film maker; a snow day on the burner community-owned “Mobile Groove Bomb” mobile party bus; the loading of structures and goods into a large rental truck for our Burning Man 2010 themecamp; a night at a rented cabin with 15 burners in Summer Lake, Oregon where burners often stop and stay the night on their way to the event or on their way home from the event to use the hot springs; one “handfasting ceremony” or wedding for one of the extended community members currently living in Hawaii; two birthday parties/pot lucks; one gathering of a singer/songwriter night held monthly at the
In summation, over the course of four years (2007-2010 with IRB approval) my field notes document informal conversations, my attendance at multiple community group activities such as potlucks or parties, and twice attending Burning Man in Nevada for research purposes. I conducted a total of 44 semi-structured interviews and 2 group conversations (one with 6 participants and one with 4).

**Data Analysis:**

During the interviews, I took extensive notes while the participants discussed their stories, lives, community, and experiences. These notes included information about experiences that seemed particularly important to my stated research goals and questions or any other distinctive information the interviewee described. Following the interview, I typed up these notes. The notes helped guide the development of my thematic categories. After each interview, I would revise this emerging list of overarching themes and categories of interpretation according to my interview notes. The analysis of my data thus began as I was simultaneously collecting the data. All interview transcripts, group conversation transcripts, field notes, and photographs were integrated into one data file in NVivo. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis program that provides digital data management tools which allow for isolation of different components (i.e. text, photographs, etc.) of one’s research within a single database (see Bazeley 2007). Additionally, NVivo allows multiple themes and patterns to be linked to participants’ interview transcripts. I developed and continually re-evaluated a thematic coding scheme
as I integrated each new interview and day of field notes into NVivo before I “officially” began the coding process.

The second stage of the analysis of data took place during the transcription of interviews and the revisions of my field notes. Directly after being in the field, I would take my field memos and notes and expand them into longer field notes. I entered these more finished versions of field notes into NVivo. Additionally, because I personally transcribed all of my interview data as I already indicated, I became further acquainted with the data and continued to revise the “rough draft” of overarching thematic categories during transcription.

**Coding:**

The third stage of analysis took place as I re-evaluated and coded every interview, group conversation, and day of field notes over the course of two months using NVivo. Because a priori analytic categorical systems are often “neglectful of local contexts and impose theoretically—rather than locally—derived structures of meaning and relevance” (Rapley and Pretty 1999:698), I chose to modify the coding scheme as my research progressed. This emergent analysis is consistent with analytic induction (Becker 1963; Katz 2001).

A code may be thought of as an abstract representation of a phenomenon (Bazeley 2007; Strauss and Corbin 1998) or a device that helps to identify textual themes (Ryan and Bernard 2000). Codes help answer such questions as: What is this data point representative of? What is it about? (Miles and Huberman 1994). I “tagged” or indexed various passages of interview or field text (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Miles and Huberman 1994; Ryan and Bernard 2000) so that I could later reference and retrieve
these passages during the writing of findings chapters. Coding passages of data also helped me later “recontextualize” (Tesch 1990) the material during writing.

I began the coding process using two interviews that I identified through my earlier interview notes as “typical” (Bazeley 2007:61) of burners in Portland and particularly interesting or rich. I categorized these two interviews as typical of burners in Portland given that their views were thematically representative of the larger extended community. I assessed this by looking over all my interview notes and choosing those interviews that most highly typified my emerging coding scheme. I began the in-depth coding process with these two particularly rich interviews because the first few coded interviews may have influence on the evolution of the developing categories (Bazeley 2007). I coded a third interview that I determined as standing in contrast to the first two coded interviews in order to develop a holistic scheme of thematic categories at the outset of in-depth coding. I then coded all remaining interviews.

The fourth and final stage of my coding process took place during the writing of my findings chapters. Rather than simply relay categories I had already defined, I continued to develop subcategories within the data as the writing process unfolded. After all interviews and field notes were coded, I printed out overarching thematic categories and further evaluated and focus coded (Straus and Corbin 1998) these categories manually using highlighters. This process allowed me to determine the appropriate patterned quotes to showcase in my findings.

The “final” coding scheme I developed entails 16 overarching thematic categories and 60 subcategories/codes, or what NVivo labels as “nodes.” I used operational definitions for the overarching themes and subcategories. Some of my categories and
subcategories have considerable thematic overlap. The fluid nature of culture and the diverse perspectives of interviewees contributed to this overlap. Specifically, there was a good amount of overlap with coding for art and aesthetic as some degree of subjectivity is unavoidable when critiquing or studying senses of the aesthetic or style. I attempted to mitigate this ambiguity by using a consistent and specific coding frame and scheme while coding.

Themes, Subcategories, and Operational Definitions:

Larger Community—this category includes all references to the discussion of the meaning of community in modernity or references to interdependence. Interdependence here refers to any act, behavior, or speech indicative of physical or emotional reliance on the extended community for physical or emotional preservation.

Subcategories:

Authentic Self—interviewee references to what they explain to be their “true” self through existing within community

Alienation and Isolation—interviewee references to feeling alienated or isolated in the modern world

Openness—interviewee references to what they perceive to be the validity of sharing emotional feelings or artistic expressions within community

What Creates Community—interviewee or fieldnote references to physical and emotional means of creating a cohesive community
Long for Village or Tribe—interviewee references to desiring a cohesive community based on interdependent or emotionally supportive relationships in modernity

Modernity—interviewee references to modern constraints such as structured employment or mass communication

Communal Effort—interviewee or fieldnote references of working in tandem with other individuals both physically and emotionally to uphold relationships or support other community members

Define Community—verbal definitions and conceptualizations of interviewees of the word “community”

Negative Views of Community—problems that interviewees articulate as associated with their extended group

Social Sustainability—interviewee references to the viability and extended preservation of their group over time

Support or Interdependence—interviewee or fieldnote references to physical or emotional means of supporting other group members

Social Sanctions or Accountability—ways that group members deal with infractions of the group’s social codes and rules

Portland Community—this thematic category includes day to day life within the burner community in Portland, including references to participant family life and group culture

Subcategories:
Cheap Housing Creates Community—interviewee references to affordable housing in Portland as a reason to live in the area

Family Life—interviewee or fieldnote references to community members’ family contexts

Links with Burning Man—interviewee or fieldnote references to the cultural, symbolic, or physical intersection and integration between Portland and Burning Man

Transmission of Culture—interviewee or fieldnote references to the transmission of culture between group members or those outside the group

Roots of Community and Childhood—interviewee or fieldnote references to the formation of the extended group, including interviewee references to childhood scenarios that led to their desire to find community

More than Just Partying—interviewee or fieldnote references to group gatherings as emotionally or symbolically meaningful and supportive for the group rather than emotionally devoid of meaning on an individual level

Burning Man Reflections—this category contains instances of interviewees describing their experiences surrounding Burning Man

Subcategories:

Emotions and Experiences at Burning Man—interviewee references to experiences they found particularly emotionally or spiritual at the event
Anomie—interviewee descriptions of feeling normless or restless while attending the event

After Burning Man—interviewee or fieldnote references to group gatherings that happen after Burning Man but are still related to the event. This subcategory also includes interviewee explanations of what they explain will happen to their extended community after the event ceases to exist

Burning Man Culture Ripples Outwards—interviewee or fieldnote references to the integration or expansion of the culture of Burning Man into other areas outside the event

Why Go to Burning Man—participant explanations of why they attend Burning Man

Ten Principals Local—interviewee or fieldnote references to the Ten Principles of Burning Man in participants’ local environments beyond the event

Function and Purpose/Goals of Group—this category includes any references to reasons group members gave for their current way of life on a daily or meanings they attached to existing within a larger group. Subcategories include reasons for attending Burning Man.

Subcategories:

Burning Man as Work—fieldnote or interviewee references to hard physical interdependent labor within community at the event as a primary reason for attending the event
Play or Enjoyment of Art—interviewee or fieldnote references to the fun or enjoyment of creating art as a primary reason for attending the event

Burning Man as Serving Others—interviewee or fieldnote references to working for the good of others within community as a primary reason for attending the event

Economic System—this category includes data references to the extended community’s economic means of preservation and interaction

Subcategories:

Own System Creates Community—fieldnote or interviewee references to ways informal or formal economic interactions lead to group cohesion or interdependence

Jobs—the occupations of interviewees

Changing Work Roles—interviewee or fieldnote references to shifting work roles in the second modernity. For example, this category includes references to informal flexible autonomous occupations being a priority for interviewees.

Networking—interviewee or fieldnote references to informal communal interactions that also serve as social network building interactions

Marijuana Economy—interviewee or fieldnote references to occupations or interactions associated with informal and formal economic interactions centered on marijuana
Festival Economy—interviewee or fieldnote references to economic interactions associated with the traveling festival scene

Mobility and Place—this category includes references to travel or geographical mobility, including travel to festivals

Subcategories:

Global Travel—interviewee or fieldnote references to the international travel of participants

Values of Group—this category includes references to group or individual values together with their personal/group spiritual beliefs and practices, social “rules” surrounding their values, perceived commonalities, or discussions surrounding romantic relationships

Subcategories:

Navel Gazing—interviewee references to self and group inwardly focused social interactions as opposed to including outsiders

Beliefs and Spirituality—interviewee or fieldnote references to their belief system surrounding religion or spiritual practices

Sex or Relationships—interviewee or fieldnote references to sexual or romantic relationships and their views associated with these relationships

Countercultural Terminology—terms that group insiders recognize and use as being unique to their group
Group Commonalities—interviewee references to personal views, values, beliefs, or social rules that they explain as having in common with other group members.

Rules—interviewee references to formal or informal social rules of the group that group members attempt to adhere to

Symbols—includes aesthetic or spiritual symbols interviewees referred to on a personal and community-wise level

Subcategories:

Global Symbols—esthetic or spiritual symbols that originate outside of American culture

Rituals—Interviewee references to the importance of rituals in their life or ritualistic behavior in fieldnotes

Subcategories:

Burning Man Attendance Ritual—interviewee references to the importance of attending Burning Man specifically as a ritual that gives meaning to their lives (not including the creation of art)

Ritual Acts outside of Burning Man—interviewee or fieldnote references to ritualistic behavior

Hierarchy of Group—includes interview or fieldnote references to the social hierarchy of the extended community

Subcategories:
Who knows Who—interviewee references to the importance knowing what they perceive to be the core members of the extended group

Othering Boundary—comments or actions which indicate an Us versus Them (i.e. what the participants view as ‘mainstream’ culture) individual or community attitude that self separate the burner community from other groups

Subcategories:

Against Mainstream—a symbolic and cultural boundary that interviewees associate with their group

Reality in Reverse—appropriating and using more traditional American cultural symbols in ways that contradict the traditional usage of those symbols

Transformations—Personal, spiritual, value, or occupational shifts interviewees referred to after becoming involved in the extended Burning Man community

Subcategories:

Perception Shift as Identity—interviewee references to personal identity changes facilitated through attending Burning Man or becoming socially involved with the extended community

Zombie Apocalypse—(term taken directly from two interviewees) interviewee references to what they perceived to be the demise of American culture facilitated by environmental degradation and consumption
Art and Aesthetic—interview or fieldnote references to the use of art, style, or aesthetic recognition of group members contributing to the creation and cohesion of the extended community. This also include acts of aesthetic expression at Burning Man.

Subcategories:

Art as Burning Man Ritual—interviewee references to specifically using the yearly creation of art at Burning Man as part of a personal ritual

Art as Vehicle—interviewee references to the creation of art within a group as a means of group cohesion and solidarity rather than as artistic expression

Global Purchasing—interviewee references to the importance of buying art outside of the United States

Inside Self—interviewee references to creating art as a means of portraying their “true” nature or as an impulse they cannot control

Aesthetic Emphasis—interviewee or fieldnote references to a pattern of similar aesthetic between extended group members

Appearance Matters—interviewee or fieldnote references to style or personal taste

Tribal Recognition—interviewee or fieldnote references to symbols within style that group members use to recognize other groups members as members of their group

86
Discussion of Social Movements—interview references or group comparisons to other countercultures or their countercultural parents

Subcategories:

Counterculture as Generational—interviewee references to the cyclical nature or importance of counterculture over time

Drugs and Alcohol—interview references or fieldnote instances of drug usage or reasons interviewees gave for drug use in the extended community

Group Social Order at Burning Man—this category includes instances of upholding the social order of the group and means by which group members navigated conflict at Burning Man.

Subcategories:

Group Social Control—interviewee or fieldnote references to the ways by which the order of the group is upheld including personal or group regulation of behavior

Bureaucracy—specific interviewee or fieldnote references to the bureaucracy within the organization behind the Burning Man event

Radical Self-Reliance—refers to indications or instances of relying on one’s self for physical survival in the desert

Self Regulation of Work Habits—reliance on self-autonomy in order to determine when a participant will or will not work, either doing chores to benefit the greater group like cooking, or working on the art installation
Navigating Conflict—interviewee or fieldnote references to ways group members deal with verbal conflict
CHAPTER 3

THE SEARCH FOR MOBILE COMMUNITY COMMITMENTS

The changes associated with globalization may bring a personal sense of uncertainty from new risks and contribute to individuals feeling disembedded from more traditional contexts (Beck 1998; Giddens 1990, 1991) such as feeling alienated from the deeper relationships associated with traditional place-based communities. However, in this age of “new mobilities” (Sheller and Urry 2006), individuals may re-embed themselves into relations of trust with others through commitments to facework, or face-to-face social interactions that take place in a variety of contexts (Giddens 1990:88). New types of community, if they exist, may help facilitate the development of more holistic relationships and attachments in modernity through commitments to the community that embed individuals into a larger cohesive group and instill a sense of belonging.

Burners and the organization behind Burning Man claim that the event has created a worldwide “community” and has become “a global cultural movement.”14 In a group conversation at Burning Man with six burners who call Portland, Oregon home for most of the year, a participant described what she sees as prolific about Burning Man.

How beautiful is that? Creating this event that started with someone expressing themselves in one way and then it became a yearly thing and then people were like, “You know what? I like how we’re influencing other people.” And now it’s 50,000 people annually who come out and they all get a little piece of that original intention and bring it home. And I see the ripples that get created with all these gatherings. They’re happening all over the country and all over the world, too… Knowing that all the skill-sets that we have, we can create community and that these

14 http://regionals.burningman.com/regionals_intro.html
nodes are interconnected. There’s definitely things moving forward to create more gatherings. Less gatherings that are just hedonistic, although they are still a celebration of art, music, and culture, but are also conferences. Tribal convergences.\textsuperscript{15}

For this burner named Asteria, cultural principles of Burning Man “ripple” outward and now other gatherings that emphasize similar ideologies are happening in many other places around the world besides Black Rock City that work to create community. Asteria asserts that these gatherings help create a community in part because the gatherings have moved away from the realm of “hedonistic” into “convergences.” She thus implies that these “gatherings” hold deeper meaning for burners than simply spaces within which to party. Asteria continued to explain that her reason for coming to Burning Man was not necessarily just for the art or the party. Rather, it was because she “love[s] living with her friends for a week. It’s beautiful to see how we all work together. I feel like that is something I want to create at home more.” Burners like Asteria thus claim that gatherings like Burning Man create “ripples” that lead to the creation of a “community” with many “interconnected” nodes outside of the event. However, can an extended group of mobile individuals like burners even constitute a community with group commitments and gemeinschaft-like relationships?

As I discussed in the introduction, the definition of community I use for this study emphasizes relationships of affect, group values, and commitments to the group as crucial criteria for the development of a community, while a single place-based locality is not necessarily a perquisite. In this chapter I explore the extent to which the extended Burning Man community fills the criteria of a community as 1) Aggregates of people who share common activities and/or beliefs, 2) Who are bound together principally by

\textsuperscript{15} Field notes 8-26-10
relations of affect, loyalty, common values, and/or personal concern, and 3) Who engage in commitments that include face-to-face interaction with other group members.

Commitments specific to the extended burner community include commitments to 1) Support, 2) Supporting Expression, including expressing critical reflections about the group, and 3) a Communal Ethos. I define a communal ethos as "belonging to a community and physically participating in a shared sense of interdependence with shared moral bonds." As I will show, I found that regardless of the degree of spatial mobility or the extended nature of the group, individuals in the extended Burning Man community share common values, take part in relationships of mutual support, and have greater group commitments as a community. As such, however diffuse the group may be, they constitute a community.

**Characterizing a Mobile Community:**

Members of the extended Burning Man community relate to each other on deeper levels than we might associate with a traveling festival scene or the youth subcultures studied by sociologists like Hebdige (1977) or Thornton (1996). Gemeinschaft-like social relations and group commitments are developed and honed through interactions at gatherings and events like Burning Man. Burners certainly spend a portion of their time being "hedonistic" or engaging in behaviors we might associate with a lifestyle enclave or a subculture, but members of the extended community also collectively contribute to the medical bills of community members hurt while traveling in places like Costa Rica or Thailand, organize meal wheels and fundraisers for members with cancer, go to the funerals of members' "blood families," and socially ostracize members from group events in multiple cities who have committed infractions of the group’s moral code like...
violence against women.\textsuperscript{16} The extended community of burners may be defined as a community particularly because of these kinds of levels of physical support, deeper levels of relationships, and their frequent face-to-face global interactions.

\textbf{1. A Community is: Aggregates of people who share common activities and/or beliefs:}

Jonathon, a marijuana farmer who lives half of his year in California and half the year in Portland, Oregon, explained that for him, community was a "common unity" of beliefs.

The community isn't anything that has to be bound. Your common unity with your friend that lives in China is still there. Your beliefs, what you believe to be true. If those things are still the same with the friend who lives across the world, you're still in community. And when things change in your mind or their mind, than there's an opportunity to separate from their community... I don't think a community is something you're bound to. I think it's just as changeable as your mind is changeable in what you think and what you believe to be real. People think it's not a community because you don't have to stay, cool, because you don't have to stay. That's one of the beautiful things about the way we think is that you have freedom, and I'll go so far as to say, are encouraged, to follow your beliefs. And your beliefs change, or at least they should. They should change with the circumstances or where you're at in the world.

Jonathon highly regards the "freedom" to "follow your beliefs" in different places throughout the world rather than being "bound" to a group situated in a single place or "bound" to ideals that do not shift according to the "circumstances." For him, community has to do with being in "common unity" of convictions.

Jonathon also feels that "beliefs" may shift over time. He explains that the group is still in "common unity" wherever they are and that it is not necessarily a bad thing that their beliefs may change depending on their "circumstances." Gatherings of the community, including attending Burning Man, help to reaffirm the collective beliefs of

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{16} All examples taken directly from participant interviews.}
the group. Group gatherings and symbols like the Man from Burning Man help members of the group collectively reaffirm group sentiments that help unify the larger group (Durkheim 1912:474-5). Like Jonathon, regardless of how many places individual actors in the group occupy, or how mobile members are throughout the year, most members of the group still refer to themselves as a “community,” particularly because they repeatedly reaffirm their community “groupness” and collective beliefs through face-to-face interaction in a variety of places in the world.

Burners explain that they belong to what they refer to as “a global family” or a “worldwide community” of other burners. Richard, a self-employed graphic designer originally from Philadelphia and who moved to Portland, Oregon from New York City, explained:

I think anywhere around the world might be inclined to find them because these people, they travel a lot. If you run into a burner in Africa, you wouldn’t be too surprised because these people that live such amazing lives, they’re willing to travel to find the most transcendent experiences and when they do, they inspire people, and little satellite communities pods pop up and realize these ideals and start living with them and so it has become a worldwide community, just like the hippies were in the 60’s.

Richard explains that burners are “willing to travel” because they want to find “transcendent experiences” and the extensive travel helps to form “communities” across the world similar to the countercultural hippies of the 1960’s. Like Richard, almost all participants explained that they belonged to a bigger extended community built on shared experience like traveling or attending festivals together and an openness to experiencing other cultures.

Logan has worked in Canada, Europe, and all over the United States including Hawaii. He runs his own architecture business and was the architect for the art
installation *Basura Sagrada* in 2008 at Burning Man. He owns a plot of land in trust with 8 others outside of Portland, Oregon where he holds community campouts throughout the year. Logan thought that members of his community traveled because they wanted to experience other cultures, particularly because he felt that they were “accepting.”

In this community, there’s a lot of joy of travel and a lot of joy, just because. And that’s part of the nature of this community, it’s all accepting. All that acceptance cries out for accepting other cultures and also going out and seeing them. And going out and seeing them you also bring it back.

For him, traveling is also about accepting other cultures, mixing with them, and bringing elements of them back to his home life and group. He considers the “joy of travel” as simply the “nature” of his community because they are “accepting.” Sociologists have often referred to world traveling individuals such that Logan explains as “cosmopolitan.” Hannerz (1990:239) defines cosmopolitanism as “an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other... an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences.” Burners like Logan fulfill the criteria of cosmopolitanism although they are more likely to refer themselves as members of an extended community rather than as cosmopolitan given their relational priority and commitments to other members of the extended community and their emphasis on experience as shared rather than individualized.

One crucial element of shared experience for the extended community of burners is the travel to festivals on the west coast of the United States. All the burners I interviewed spent some amount of time during the year in their home locations in the United States engaged in face-to-face interactions with their communities there, but they also spent a significant amount of time traveling to arts festivals and other locations.
around the world. They often travel to visit with their extended community of burners or for business as many of their self-employed flexible occupations require travel.

Seventeen participants referred to the positive experiences they had while traveling in countries such as Indonesia, India, Thailand, Mexico, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Brazil, China, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Italy, or Germany. Community members often travel together and stay at houses of friends in other countries or in the United States. Many community members travel quite a bit during the rainy winter season in Portland and San Francisco as a reprieve from the wet and foggy west coast weather.

During the summer festival season, community members travel to many different locations such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Colorado, New Mexico, Oregon, or Canada to do live paintings, dance to various DJs and musical groups, or create group art installations at festivals. Burners often travel and camp together while at these festivals such as the Oregon Country Fair, Burning Man, Symbiosis, High Sierra, or other countercultural festivals. Trina, a mother of two adolescent boys and a small scale clothing designer, described what she loved about the summer arts festival scene on the west coast that includes her annual pilgrimage to Burning Man. She explained that she had gone to five separate arts festivals over the summer in 2010 that included “a spiritual Anarchist Beltane, then we did Oregon Country Fair, then we did Emrgnsee, and then Beloved, and Burning Man.” I asked her why she went to all these gatherings.

Trina: For me it’s layered. Most festivals I go to, it’s really about making connections. I really love networking. I pride myself on being a hub as far as connecting other communities together or knowing what people do and what their specialties are and helping bridge those gaps of other communities I know who want or need that type of service. For myself, there’s also a spiritual component of finding people who really resonate with where I’m at in my life who are creative and inspiring and living their life out loud in such a way that inspires me to be a better me. And that’s
another great way to fan that network and deepen the ones that are already existing. I’ve been in the Burning Man community here in Portland for the last 5 or 6 years. It’s been really lovely. It’s really amazing to go away somewhere and yet still see lots of people away from your home town and still help with a festival in some way or another. That’s also how I’ve been able to fund my way is that I didn’t pay for any festival this summer season.

Interviewer: So without my prompting, you called your friends here in Portland the Burning Man community. What prompted you to call it that?

Trina: I guess I call it the Burning Man community because that’s really where I jumped in. And that’s not what it’s necessarily called here, but we don’t call it anything else, either. We identify as burners and at the same time we’re way beyond that because this is our everyday life. It’s not as if we go and we’re burners while we’re there and then we’re different when we come back; this is who we are in our everyday life—we’re burners. This is what we do. We’re creative, we do projects.

Trina refers to her group of friends as “burners” because “we’re creative, we do projects.”

For Trina, the burner identity designation and her extended community goes beyond simply physically attending the yearly festival. Community members are “way beyond that because this is our everyday life.” Trina has spent much of the last five summers going to different festivals, connecting with others in her extended Burning Man community, volunteering for different community projects, and developing her network of community members up and down the west coast. Her sense of belonging to the extended Burning Man community goes beyond simply attending Burning Man.

In one sense, Trina describes a mobile lifestyle comprised of different communities that simply move from festival to festival to engage in small scale gatherings. But there is something deeper for Trina. She feels as though there is a “spiritual component” to “finding people who really resonate with where I’m at in my life who are creative and inspiring and living their life out loud in such a way that inspires me to be a better me.” Belonging to the extended community is particularly profound for
burners like Trina and especially those who think of themselves in terms of prioritizing values like environmentalism. Like Trina, many burners feel that they have found a community “that inspires.”

I asked Tad, a DJ and computer programmer with tri-citizenship status in Switzerland, Canada, and the United States, if he thought that his extended community of burners was based in a single place or around a single event like Burning Man.

I think it’s not so much about a place because I’m seeing the same sort of stuff emerge out of New York. There’s definitely a scene and a movement and people embracing the same sort of ideology around... definitely Burning Man is a big element of it. There’s no denying that whatsoever. Whether people are fully embracing whatever tenants are being prescribed by its founder, there is certainly a common thread and I see it emerging all over... This whole burner scene; that’s real. There’s something extended about it. That doesn’t mean everyone in it is the same quality, but people are gravitating towards this notion of personal freedom and the giving-ness. Part of the scene is you can feel glamorous and people dote on you and you look great and whatever, but there’s also... I see this sort of gift economy idea stretching out beyond the playa and people doing things for other people just because. That was my general way of thinking anyway before I went to Burning Man, but then it really struck me.

Tad does highlight that community members engage with others in the group because it helps them to feel glamorous and because they were a lot of different kinds of styles, but like Trina, the association with group goes deeper than just outward appearances. Tad feels that his extended community is more a group of people based on ideology or ideals like “personal freedom” or “giving” to others, rather than a single place. He feels as though people such as himself generally held similar beliefs before going to Burning Man, but that the event helps to crystallize these beliefs (i.e. “struck me”). In other words, he felt like he found a collectivity of people who believed in the same ideas as himself such as “doing things for other people just because.”
I also asked participants how they know when they meet someone if they are a member of their community, given that the group is transient and that many distinguishing factors of the community come from shared experiences or collective beliefs. Many of the interviewees explained that the recognition of other “community” members went beyond just recognizing people’s faces as group members or the distinct expressive style of clothing they wear. Most responses centered on simply intuitively “knowing” that people they met were members of their group. One participant said

I think that you just have a similar energy. Like you recognize each other. You can recognize each other without really knowing each other. I’ve met people all over the world that I know that, ‘Oh, you’re one of us.’ It’s a feeling maybe that you get. I think it’s just mainly that; your intuition about them as a person and their character.

Many interviewees explained that they recognize the “energy” of someone that belongs in their group; that this recognition of similar “energy” was the discerning factor for group membership. The recognition of other group members as group members stems from personally identifying with behaviors like Logan’s description of an “openness” to other cultures. Burners “recognize” the “energy” of other members because their beliefs are similar to their own and resonate with their own pre-existing worldview. In other words, burners see themselves in the others in the group.

The common activities of the extended burner community include such practices as attending festivals like Burning Man, working interdependently/volunteering for group projects like art installations, wearing expressive styles, and generally attendance at multiple face-to-face community gatherings. Beliefs shared among group members include such principles as “givingness” or the willingness to donate time or skills to group projects, a sense of “openness,” and an emphasis on what Tad called “personal
their world around them and they want to make it as amazing as possible and you're living a qualitatively different lifestyle.

According to Richard, the festivals are “fun.” But traveling to festivals is also “living a qualitatively different lifestyle” than simply going to parties in the same place where you live. The difference between connecting at parties and connecting at festivals has to do with people being “invested in the experience” because the isolation of the event means participants are “creating their world around them.” The face-to-face interactions at festivals take on a more familial feel as participants live, work, and interact together 24 hours a day for these events instead of isolated short social encounters in urban settings like other groups might experience. The relationships transition into something one “feels” because there is an emotional “investment” in the experience.

Natalie, a naturopathic doctor, also discussed that the prolonged isolation of the events helped to create a different atmosphere than everyday life.

It [Burning Man] really blew my mind when I went [the first time]. The stuff that I expected went beyond my expectations and then there was stuff that I didn’t even know to expect and it blew my mind, too. And I ended up making friendships and making my own family community after that first year and just built after that. And I realized that the community of events happen in that place, but you bring it back with you. And you bring the goodness of how you felt there and how good everyone is to each other there and how loving and helpful and honest and trustworthy people are there. And you bring that back and know that you’re around a bunch of people who felt that and it’s like a sort of utopia that can’t always exist in the real world, but it can exist for however long people are there. And it can extend into the real world to some degree. And the more you go, and the more other people that go, and the more people you know who go. Then your world has those elements in it. And that’s what makes you keep wanting to go.

Natalie called the isolated space of the event a “utopia.” But importantly for her, those relationships she builds “extend into the real world” and the more events she attends, “the more people you know who go,” so she keeps wanting to come back. Her community is
not just in the place of Burning Man or other festivals; it has become a year-round phenomena she calls a “family community” built from the relationships she develops at the events.

I asked Georgia, a grandmother in her late fifties who is a part time nurse midwife with a flexible schedule, if she thinks that Burning Man is a central point for her community.

Georgia: I think yes and no. I think there’s plenty of people in our community that don’t like Burning Man for a lot of reasons. And I think that it’s just an organized place for more than just our community, but other people that are curious about that sort of way of living to have an opportunity to create that for at least one week in the year. And people go there and get what they want out of it. It’s not always a good thing for everybody. I don’t think it’s the end all event. I think it’s fantastic. I love it. But I also see that there’s a lot of negatives about it, too. I think that why we’re drawn to it is because we live that way anyway. I live that way all year long. I don’t think that just for one week out of the year, I’m going to gift people things, be generous and express myself and have a good time. I think that’s just who we are. Take care of the earth, be stewards of what’s around us. And be aware of other people.

Interviewer: So what you’re saying is it’s not like this isolated incident for you; you do that all the time?

Georgia: I do that all the time. I think it’s just a place where the people that you don’t get to see all the time, from other countries and other parts of the country…Our community is extended—it’s vast. L.A., San Francisco, New York, Seattle. Our community isn’t just Portland, so Burning Man gives that opportunity for all of us to come together in one big place. And have the room and the opportunity to be together for one week. Like Country Fair is the same way. I think that’s the draw of all the festivals, really. It’s a place where people in the community can go and commune together and be together and play together and love together and laugh. And it’s just a way to be together. Like having a family reunion. Burning Man feels like a family reunion.

When first answering my question, Georgia admitted that Burning Man is not an event that everyone in “her community” feels positively about. But the event helps get a something deeper and admits that not everyone needs to attend the event to be part of the
community. She feels like she, and the others in her group, are the type of people who
"live that way all year long." She responded using the third person "we" and described
values such as environmentalism or "tak[ing] care of the earth," being "aware of other
people," being "generous," and being able to "express" herself on a daily basis as reasons
for interacting with the group at Burning Man, but also at other festival locations.

For her, individuals are drawn to these group gatherings because they adhere to
similar values individuals practice on a daily basis but also because they keep relational
bonds fresh since her community is "vast." In other words, she goes to these festivals to
spend face-to-face time with other burners who practice similar countercultural values
like "gifting" in her extended community. She feels drawn to these festivals because she
is someone who is "generous," and "express[ive]" during the entire year, not just when
she is at Burning Man. But most importantly, she goes to Burning Man because it is like
a "family reunion" for her. In short, she goes because she enjoys the relational bonds in a
community of other like-minded individuals.

Spaces may become places when invested with meaning and value through social
interaction (Gieryn 2000). In this manner, Black Rock City, simply a desert "space" for
much of the year, becomes a "place" during the event where face-to-face social
interactions ensue in an isolated and harsh environment. The event space of Burning Man
and other multiple gathering spaces like it may become places of the mobile community
where relationships of affect in the gemeinschaft-like sense are developed through social
interaction. One participant named Louie, who makes his living from developing arts and
community festivals and gatherings, noted that he attempted to recreate more traditional
forms of "connection" with a "village feel" through creating festivals because he is very
"skeptical that community can exist outside of place." However, Louie does not refer to the traditional meaning of place. For Louie, mobile spaces like festivals can become places when invested with meaning.

Louie: Here's what I'll say. I'm skeptical that community can exist outside of place. I'm very skeptical. However, I think that it's possible for communities to exist outside of space, and I think that part of what events can do when they are done well is that they can temporarily transform space into place. And I think that you do need to have a sense of place...you need to feel connected to place to feel connected to people. I haven't had an experience of not doing that, but I do think that we have ways that we can feel connected to a place that we don't live in.

Interviewer: Why would you want to go back to a village model where community is rooted in place? We spent years of modernization getting away from that.

Louie: Yeah, and mostly I don't think it's worked out so well for us. The biggest reason is that pretty much everyone I know, no matter how much they talk about community, feels sad, scared, isolated and alone and when you get really down to it and you ask people to be really honest, I don't think I know anyone who doesn't feel that way. But I don't think people felt that way in the village. So that's part of it. Another part of it is I think that the disconnect...as one of the wider places this place that we live is the planet and she's not doing very well at all. Part of that is our disconnection to place, because we don't feel connected to any place, it feels okay for us as a culture to basically be at war with the place that we live. We've almost killed the place that we live.

Louie feels that the heart of our "disconnection" with place is because we are "at war" as a culture" with the greater planet that we live on (i.e. pollution, deforestation, habitat destruction). Louie does not think that community can exist outside of place, but he does note that community can exist outside of space. In other words, Louie feels that it is possible to create community with mobile members as long as the spaces they inhabit become "places" through their embodied social interactions together. For him, events that are "done well" and that adhere to values like environmentalism help to mitigate modern
feelings of being "sad, scared, isolated, and alone" that he feels were less of a problem when people lived communally as a village.

Participants referred to the sense of community that develops through attending festivals that have been transformed into places of the mobile community. Logan explained that he goes to Burning Man because he gets to meet other people and develop relationships with them through working on projects together such as building the Temple.

Some of the most gifted, beautiful, tolerant, smartass, clever motherfuckers have been at Burning Man. Which is one reason why I continue to go is the people. It's the art and the beauty and the cleanliness of the playa are all allures, but it's nothing like the people that are there, which is why I keep coming back. So to answer your question, it's the sense of community is what I love doing. The building of the temple was what got me to go down there [again after taking a few years off from going to Burning Man]. And to design the temple and the joy of looking forward to building something so absurd and huge out in the middle of nowhere with a whole bunch of other freaks.

Logan enjoys the "sense of community" he gets from attending Burning Man. He enjoys building art like the temple particularly because of the sense of working interdependence it creates during the build process. He enjoys developing relationships with others that stem from living and working together "out in the middle of nowhere" with others in his extended community.

Community Values: Like Georgia, burners explained that their value system was one of the defining characteristics of them as a community. They often linked their personal conceptualization of the community with what they determined to be this group value system. Salvador is a carpenter and a performer who has been going to Burning Man since the late 1990's. He explains what he calls the "Bohemian value system" of his extended community.
I believe there is a strong Bohemian value system in our community... And having art and creativity and music being a strong part of our community, being where we put our energy and our money. And being able to have people over for dinner, like that sense of community is really important to me.

Salvador explains that his "sense of community" includes being able to "have people over for dinner," but also a value system that includes "art and creativity and music."

Members of the extended community like Salvador linked their "sense of community" with what they considered to be their group value system.

Justin, a graphic designer and visual artist in his late twenties who has been going to Burning Man for 8 years, explained to me what he called the "building blocks" of his community.

It's [art] a source of gravity for our community... People will create art projects and work on them together... And that kind of gives people something to talk about and a shared experience... So people are having these unique shared experiences that tend to create unique community... Another building block would maybe be music and ecology or social values. I feel like people in this community that I participate in and identify with, in one way or another are environmentally aware.

Members of the extended community often collectively collaborate on art installations for Burning Man or other projects in different locations around the world which helps provide a sense of working interdependence and group cohesion. Justin calls the group collaboration on art projects a source of "gravity" for the group; something which brings the group closer together. Additionally, for Justin, and for almost every participant, the value system of their community included environmentalism or what he calls "social values," a sense of community, and a commitment to artistic self expression which I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter.
Other participants echoed the group emphasis on artistic creation such as Asteria, an exotic dancer who combines fire dancing and pole dancing in her routines. During a group conversation at Burning Man 2010 after a long day of building camp infrastructure, Asteria explains what she feels are the “principles” of her group.

What are our principles as a community? What are the things I recognize in other people that I’m like, “Yes, you are part of my tribe…” And I think that’s the biggest thing that we all have in common is I feel like we understand that what you do is not your career. You can be a banker but you can also be this amazing artist and that’s what you do. My community and my art and living life to the fullest which means being together in community.

Asteria and other members of the extended community often referred to the greater extended community as a “tribe.” This reference calls to mind a connection closer to an extended kin network with shared cultural elements, rather than referring to the word “community” in the sense of a more modern housing development or lifestyle enclave. Additionally, Asteria feels that the value system of her community includes “living life to the fullest … [and] being together in community.” For Asteria, and other members of the extended Burning Man community “being together in community” is a value in and of itself. Members of the community linked this sense of community as a value to deeper connections like being part of the same “tribe” and what Georgia described as attending a large “family reunion.”

Sharing a sense of community as a value in and of itself, working interdependently with others on artistic projects, celebrating with each other, or meeting up in various locations for festivals helps members to feel like they belong to something outside of themselves. Jonathon noted that

What we try to do in our community is that pursuit of happiness, to have a good life, to enjoy ourselves, to spend time with each other, to experience
projects, and enjoy friendships and love and have that as a high call together.

Thus, for participants in this study, their extended “community” simultaneously refers to their group of mobile friends and acquaintances, but it also refers to their beliefs, values, supporting group artistic creation and friendships and commitments to face-to-face interactions with others in the extended community. Members of the extended community commit to each other as a community built on relationships of affect and a shared group value system.

III. A Community is: Individuals who engage in commitments that include face-to-face interaction with other group members:

The commitments to supporting other members of the extended community beyond the place of Burning Man center on working fluidly together on expressive projects like the art installation “the temple” that Logan referred to, interdependent pooling of resources, and mutual reciprocal support. Community members support one another financially, emotionally, and socially connect interdependently in the various places where burners travel. Many of these kinds of support involve face-to-face interaction, especially commitments to supporting artistic expression. Other commitments, like raising money on the internet for hurt group members, may take place virtually. I found that the main commitments to the group for members of the extended Burning Man community take place, for the most part, in face-to-face social situations. However, these sites of face-to-face social interaction may change. The main commitments to the extended community can be grouped into the categories of 1) Commitments to Support, 2) Commitments to Supporting Expression, and 3)
Commitments to a Communal Ethos—defined as “belonging to a community and physically participating in a shared sense of interdependence with shared moral bonds.”

Commitments to Support: Members of the larger community find ways to support those in the bigger group around the world. When two burner community members got in a motorbike accident on a trip in Costa Rica in 2008, members of the community from a variety of places quickly raised $5,000 through donations on the internet for their healthcare. Members of the community also raised money for a member who was seriously hurt while on a trip to Thailand. One participant recounted that he had received flowers anonymously in the mail in Portland, Oregon from someone in the community when he was having financial difficulties. Community members collectively donated $2,000 for the surgery of a burner’s dog in Portland in 2010 because he could not afford it on his own. Participants explained that “we look out for each other” and that this “knowing you have a family” gives “a sense of security.”

In Portland, where I interviewed the majority of participants in this study, burners chipped in to help Trina from losing her house for a few months when finances were tight. Trina, a clothing designer and mother of two in her late-forties, describes how the community “tangibly” supported her during difficult situations.

It’s fun and it’s very fulfilling in that way [creatively and celebratory-wise], but this community has completely come out for me. Last year when I was losing my house and I was really struggling to make mortgage payments every month, I had 4 or 5 people in our community who stepped forward and offered me money to help me from one month to the next until I just couldn’t do it anymore. One of those I still owe and the other, who I was just contacting to say I could pay him back he said, “No, it’s a gift. I’m not going to ask for anything. I wanted to do that for you.” And these are people who don’t always have a lot of money. These are people who had it in the moment and decided that based on knowing me and my situation, that they wanted to help. And really honestly, of all the communities I asked, I had more help from what is seen as the poorest
group of people of the communities I belong to. And that is very tangible support. I have deep gratitude for that support. In that way, yes we are all self-reliant and kind of fend for ourselves, but when somebody needs something and you put it out there, 3 or 4 people are going to respond, as least. There are times that of course, that doesn’t happen, not everyone can help all the time, that’s not realistic. But more than likely you’re going to have somebody who pipes in and says, “I’m here to support emotionally, monetarily, physically” with whatever skills they have. If they can throw down, they’ll throw down. I’ve had help in construction, I’ve had help in, one of our community members is a naturopathic doctor, and one of my kids cut himself and we weren’t sure if he needed stitches or not, so I can just call her and say, “Hey, can you look at it?” So, to me, that’s community. That’s people who are willing to show up for you when you need it, but also because it’s based on reciprocity. We give and it flows really well that way.

Other members in the community gave her money for her mortgage payments and free health care to one of her sons. Trina feels like members of the community support her “emotionally, monetarily, physically with whatever skills they have.” The commitments to the group go beyond the deep relationships of affect developed between members or even the shared value system. Group members also commitment to providing physical support to others in the extended community. Other examples of “tangible” help interviewees alluded to include two fundraisers for two group members with Stage Three cervical cancer and Stage Four breast cancer or interventions for community members with behavioral problems like violence against women or drug abuse that other group members deemed threatening.

Commitments to Supporting Expression: When discussing their community, one participant explained that “we’ve found commonality around the acceptance of individual expression—that’s our community.” Burners explained that expression is about linking their inner most selves with outward presentations because expressive acts create “beauty” in the world. Community members explicate that “we’re trying to create or
experience beauty in this world” because “beauty in and of itself has value.” Or that being expressive is about “reflecting what’s inside you,” or wanting “my outer world to reflect my inner world which is pretty amazing and beautiful and dynamic.” Many group members use the word “authentic” to describe the “thing” inside themselves that needs to be released through expression. According to one participant, this “authentic self is not so much what you do, but who you are. And that becomes art.” Self-expression, for the participants in this study, encompasses expressing whatever it is inside them that needs to get out including making art, wearing expressive clothing styles, or performing.

Acts of self-expression like wearing creative styles or artistic projects in the Burning Man community do more than simply help people on an individual basis to “express themselves” through their clothing or art; the expressive act is ultimately a group resource that helps to make the group a cohesive community. Beyond individual expressions or artistic creations, acts of self expression become ways of creating cohesion for the group; a group identification that the group can rally around. Burners support each other in what two participants called “the power of expression.”

Expressing oneself through style or performance in a group allows individuals to feel a sense of belonging and security in what some participants called, “being a freak.” Two participants separately alluded to the following same instance. March Fourth Marching Band, a band which contains many Burning Man community members in Portland, OR went on a performance tour of Germany in the fall of 2010. Richard responded to my question of what he has in common with others in his community by discussing a parade the band participated in while on tour.

I guess we could make a nod to the radical expression. People really interested in being individuals, in a collective. That’s the beautiful thing
about seeing March Fourth when they came back from Germany and they were showing their video over at Holden’s. And they were just a bunch of 35 freaks walking down the street in a very rigid social society where if one freak was walking down the street, they would shun him and say, “What are you doing? Why don’t you try to fit in?” But 35 of them is very compelling. Seeing 35 freaks of nature walk down the street and these people were very interested in their community that was rolling down the street together and making music together and wearing outlandish clothes together. And there was fascination [from the Germans]. They gathered in groups and they just stared at the spectacle and you can tell that they [crowds of Germans] were going, “How could they be so bold, to be such freaks?” It was only that they were together that they could pull it off.

This participant explains that by expressing themselves within a collective of other expressive individuals, the group can do something they could not do on their own. Especially given the conservativeness of what he calls a “rigid social society” in the German town the band was performing in together. Richard explains that there is safety in numbers for the “freaks,” but more importantly, the self-expressing “fascinate[s]” others viewing the spectacle. He implied that by producing a spectacle in a collective, his community was setting an example that “expressing” oneself is acceptable and possibly even enjoyable. Other participants also emphasized that they felt their individual self-expression made impacts on people outside their group, but that it was only through being in community with others that it was possible.

Isabelle explained that her community was interested in its impact on others through using art as a medium. I asked her where she thought that individual and communal desire to express themselves through art or style came from.

I think it comes from this community identifying with the power of expression. And obviously, if there’s nobody to express to, expression doesn’t have a power. And so there’s this constant thing of people feeling connected to something greater and more powerful than them through the connection of expression. And everybody is really, for the most part, encouraging of everybody else to express in whatever and however they want to. Whether it be music or art or fashion or dance or poetry or being
a freak rolling around and just... You know what I mean? For the most part, I think the reason we’re drawn to it over and over again is because we have at one point felt a relief from certain kinds of confinement through expression. That is really really powerful.

For Isabelle, one needs to have someone outside of oneself to express to for the expressive act to mean anything of import. The group helps to provide this role. She sees group members as being drawn to each other as a collective in the first place because they identify with and relate to one another’s desire to feel “relief from certain kinds of confinement through expression.” For her, individuals within the community are “connected” to one another via the “power of expression.” The type of social support she emphasizes is “encouraging” for other group members to continue to engage in expressive acts.

Another participant named Ralph echoed the group’s cultural emphasis on self-expression. I asked him what makes the group a “community” and he explained that promoting self expression amongst each other is a part of supporting one another in the group. For him, the social support of self-expression at parties and events like Burning Man helps make the group a community.

What continues to draw us together, is the burn... But there are all these trials and tribulations that we go through as a result of this initiatory experience in northern Nevada. We bring it home because it’s so much fucking fun. And we continue to promote that self expression in ourselves and other people that have been there to support us in that power of self-expression. So what makes it a community is that there is a certain amount of support that goes on for people to be creative in their process.

For Ralph, the Burn provides a focal point for the group where they have “ initiatory experience[s].” Then in their home lives, self-expression helps the group come together and is part of what makes them a “community.” There is a collective group prioritization of self-expression, rather than simply individualized artistic motivations, that helps make
the group a community. Later, this participant said, “I’m not sure if it’s self-expression for me. For me, it’s like a sharing and a participatory thing.” In other words, for him, self-expression is really a means to the end of creating a cohesive community.

Burning Man helps affirm for group members that what both Isabelle and this participant called “the power of self-expression” holds them together as a group. I asked Tex, who was the project manager for building the Temple Basura Sagrada at Burning Man in 2008, about what he thought Burning Man does for his group of friends. I first prefaced that 50,000 burners probably have 50,000 different reasons for going to Burning Man. He replied:

It’s [Burning Man] a sort of safe space. It’s like in the game of tag, its home base. It’s where you know, if you’ve been there, that you’ve somehow expressed yourself. Maybe you were a shut in and you don’t go back and it doesn’t really count so it wasn’t for you. But most of the people we know go multiple times and they express themselves. And you get to see people being themselves. And then you bring that home with you and you know who they really are and they don’t stop being that person. So that’s who you know. And when you know people and this may be why we have some semi-cohesive group of thousands, is that you actually see what someone is like without the trappings of normal society. And that’s who they are, and that’s who they strive to be. So then we get an expectation that that person is going to be that person year round and then we allow ourselves to be those people because we know people that expect us to be that way. So that becomes that social norm. Our ways of expressing ourselves out there become the way we express ourselves in the real world when we’re around each other, so it feels really good and we stick around each other.

Tex explains that Burning Man provides a social touchstone or a commonality of experience, stripped of “the trappings of normal society” for participants because they have been in an isolated place where they have all expressed themselves amongst each other; a “home base” that socially normalizes and supports self-expression for members of the group. He illustrates that the event helps produce his “semi-cohesive group of
thousands” outside of the event because Burning Man reinforces the expectation that participants will continue being burners and expressing themselves at home, beyond the playa. He continues that this social expectation of self-expression becomes preferable to the implied “trappings of normal society;” that being a person who can authentically self-express within a group of other similarly expressive people beyond Burning Man, “feels really good,” so “we [the group of self-expressing people] stick around each other.”

Richard’s, Tex’s, and Isabelle’s comments help elucidate ways the group uses a shared value of self-expression as an interdependent resource for “community” cohesion through individual action. Their comments also reflect how this resource is often used to “promote” or socialize other members to act in ways consistent with the rest of the group. Richard explains that without the security of the greater group of “freaks” surrounding individuals, members of the group would not likely be able to comfortably express themselves in “rigid” environments. Isabelle identifies that the “power of self-expression” is only salient when there are others witnessing that expression. Tex illustrates how the shared social expectation of self-expression normalizes and supports expression as the main conducive element for community cohesion outside of Burning Man. Members of the group thus commit to supporting expression within a community of similarly expressive individuals.

Critical Reflections of “the Community:” Most participants agreed that their extended group of individuals was a community because they could, as one participant said, “rely on each other.” However, interviewees also expressed critical views of the ways support may be more hollow than tangible. For members of the extended community, the ability to openly criticize themselves and their group were also important
attributes of being within a supportive community. This "openness" to critical reflection was an essential part of existing within an expressive community.

Stein discussed how belonging to the community may lead to "burn out." Our conversation had centered on whether or not her community could be socially sustainable given that group members may give too much support to others and not focus enough on themselves or party too much without taking care of their physical health.

People are so enamored with the idea of community, the normal interpersonal reinforcement [so they say things like], "I love you; that was amazing; you’re talented; thank you." Those things are bantered about really freely in this particular community. I have rolled my eyes so many times...So then when somebody that I’ve known for years that I just helped them not lose their house or showed up when their roof was leaking and helped them moved all their furniture so all their shit didn’t get ruined. Or watched their kid, or picked them up at the airport...All the things that you do for somebody you love. When they say, "Hey, thanks, I love you." It doesn’t feel like acknowledgement and at least for me, you cannot continue to give to a community while simultaneously staying out until 4 in the morning and toxifying your body. And trying to kind of live a double life without both physical and emotional reinforcement. And I think that until this group of people gets better genuinely discerning and appreciating and talking straight to each other, that people will continue to get burned out. Because the idea is that we’re supporting each other and becoming our most honest and creative selves.

Stein makes an interesting point that acknowledgement of support within a community may have less meaning with too much repetition. For community members like Stein, one way that other group members may avoid living a "double life" or "burn out" is by being authentically honest with others, but also supporting each other in the pursuit of being their "most honest and creative selves." Burners like Stein were able to be particularly articulate and self reflexive about what constituted "true" support. Stein is critical of the amount of freely "bantered" emotional reinforcement yet she also informed me in the interview that she gave money to Trina to help her make mortgage payments on
her house. In other words, Stein believes and acts as though support for other community members has to be more than just lip service for the support to constitute a truly supportive community.

Many interviewees do not look positively on the way the term “community” is used or appropriated by their group. Kyoukai is a tall lean woman in her late thirties. She has designed clothes in Bali, and spent extensive time traveling in Japan and South America as a professional dancer. She recounts

Our Burning Man Community loves to talk about ‘our community, our community, our community, that I’m a part of.’ And sometimes I just ask, ‘Well what defines our community? Taking drugs and partying? And dressing cool?’ That’s just not a community.

Kyoukai began her discussion with “our community” even though she ended with the notion that the group was not one, highlighting that even when participants do not agree that the group is a “community,” they still call it one. Tex summed up the ambiguity of the term community as “community is just the accepted nomenclature for our abnormally large circle of friends,” that should be used “with a smirk and quotes.” Additionally, some participants flat out reject being termed a “burner” even if they referred to themselves as a member of the “Burning Man Community.” In other words, even for participants who disavowed the term community or the identification as a “burner,” their collective beliefs serve to unify them as a group regardless of how they are categorized by themselves or others.

After saying she did not believe the group was truly a “community,” I asked Jenn why she thought others in the group held so staunchly to using the word for their group. She attributes it to a lack of a referent point for what community means in a modern culture.
I think that a lot of people are throwing the word community around without knowing what it means, without knowing where it's going, and without really being honest. I think it's because we don't actually know what community is. We aren't a community by strict definitions.

For Jenn, the group is not "a community by strict definitions" or a more traditionally defined place-based cluster. According to her, people "throw" around the word "without knowing what it means" and "without knowing where it's going." In other words, people just use the word to describe their group because it is the closest approximation to what they think their group is, particularly because many people do not really know "what it means." Another participant felt similarly. He explained it as, "I think a lot of it goes back to, a lot of people have never been part of a community. So it's hard for them to know that going to a party with a bunch of your friends and seeing a lot of people that are dressed crazy and fun like you are, that's not necessary a community." For both participants, they see members of their group as having few modern reference points for "what community is" since there are so many different connotations of the word and because many people have never been a part of a traditional rooted-in-place community or belonged to other kinds of associations like religious groups.

About half of the interviewees acknowledged that according to the traditional singular place-based conception of community, their extended group of burners were not "actually" a community. Yet every single interviewee in this study referred to this group as "their community," and then in the same breath might admit their group might not be one. For them, the group "feels" like a community regardless of whether the group exists in many places at once, is predicated on values that transcend place, or how the term is defined from an outside perspective. Participants also explained that the name is not fully sufficient for modern social situations and most participants declared themselves to be
members of multiple communities, rather than only one; especially because they travel so often or belong to many different groups of friends.

**Commitments to a Communal Ethos:** Some of the first words often heard after getting in the gate of Burning Man are, “Welcome Home.” Participants greet each other as though they have returned to a familiar space reminiscent of where they say they feel like they can express and really “be themselves” around supportive others. The gates provide an actual physical boundary for the face-to-face social interactions that will take place inside the event. The first sign at the 2010 event read, “Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody. Only because and only when they are created by everybody”—Jane Jacobs. The Jane Jacobs’ quote invokes a call for event participants to be willing contributors to everyone’s experience at Burning Man; that in order for the city to function and provide something for them, the participants need to have a hand its creation, as interactivity and working together communally is key to the event’s success.

The place of Black Rock City, where Burning Man is annually held, exists in an extremely isolated environment. Black Rock City is physically, aesthetically, socially, and ideologically isolated from mainstream America. In addition to temperatures sometimes exceeding 110 degrees during the day that may cause heat stroke, dust storms in the Black Rock Desert continually threaten to tear down living structures or cause people to get lost in the desert for hours in white outs. The landmass of the playa is also extremely alkaline and can physically harm participants’ feet by creating “playafoot” or open and bleeding sores if one goes barefoot or does not neutralize their feet with an acidic substance such as lemon juice every few days. Because of these harsh conditions, participants often check in on each other at the event by asking questions like, “Are you
drinking enough water?” or “Do you have sunscreen on?” Due to weather, temperature, isolation, and chemistry, the desert environment requires group members to work together for the physical preservation of each individual. Individuals thus have powerful motivations to develop a sense of communal interdependence in order to keep themselves and others healthy. I refer to this working sense of interdependence that includes moral bonds with other group members as their communal ethos. This ethos extends into the greater extended community beyond the isolated place of Black Rock City.

Over the course of almost three weeks in 2008, I voluntarily worked daily from around 7am until midnight on the installation *Basura Sagrada*. Others worked from around 3pm until 3 or 4am because it was more bearable for them to work in the heat after sunset. The construction of the art installation was mainly accomplished with veteran burners who had been coming to Burning Man for years and who were already deeply integrated into the community of burners outside of Burning Man. Almost every person working on the installation were volunteers. The workers had cooperation skills honed by years of constructing art projects with others at Burning Man or planning and organizing other art festivals on the American west coast. Their interdependent skills of working collectively together became more ingrained over the course of building the art installation together. While some workers who had specialized in carpentry or welding skills were building, others, who had cooking skills or management skills, would be simultaneously making the food or dealing with the organizational nightmare of getting $100,000 worth of building materials into the middle of the desert. The pictures below show workers working together during the construction of *Basura Sagrada*.

1 Field notes 2008
Workers choose when and how they wanted to work which contributed to
efficiency in building. More was getting done by those who could best do it, but moral
bonds were also formed between workers in the process. One particular illustration of
interdependent labor from my field notes that simultaneously helped develop moral
bonds between workers includes the responsibilities of “fluffers.”

Nora walks out into the middle of the construction site to ask if anyone
needs water. She is holding a jug of water and a plate of premade
sandwich halves. In temperatures exceeding 110 degrees in the direct
sunlight, people can easily get heatstroke and checking in how people are
doing is important if they’re working too hard. Sally walks by with a spray

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18 Photos taken by Genevieve Cox
20 Visitors at the finished Temple (2008).
bottle and says, "Fluffing!!!" as she sprays the workers around her. My Italian workmate Naomi and I are currently screwing in doorknobs onto the 30 foot high spiral staircase. Nora directly looks at us and asks, "Hungry?" We walk down the stairs and take two halves of sandwiches each and thank her. She goes to the next crew of workers to bring them sandwiches. While Naomi and I are eating our sandwiches Sally walks back up with some cups of iced tea for us and also mists us with water again. She then leaves to go mist another crew of workers. After eating, Naomi and I go back to our job.

While specialized workers are doing heavy physical labor in the sun in 110 degree heat on the art installation, kitchen "fluffers" came around with plates of food, beer, and spray water bottles that helped to immediately cool workers down because of rapid evaporation in the desert. The workers would be grateful to the "fluffers" for relief of physical needs like thirst and hunger which formed a bond between them, but that also contributed to work efficiency. During the building process, crew members became very close. We developed a large feeling of solidarity because we were working hard together towards the same goal.

Other activities in my field notes that helped solidify a feeling of togetherness and community for participants during the building of the art installation, Bastira Sagrada, included a group trip to nearby hot springs in an old bus that had been converted to biodiesel, work circles where the designers of the installation communicated what they viewed as the spiritual importance of building the Temple, shared group dinners that included a mock Thanksgiving—complete with deep fried turkeys, and impromptu parties with copious amounts of shared alcohol and dancing. It was important to celebrate together and let off steam from working long hours in a harsh climate. Impromptu celebrations have the dual purpose of relaxing workers while also creating a cohesive group with strong bonds that contribute to work efficiency. These moral bonds formed
under harsh conditions at Burning Man have consequences later for the solidarity of the group outside of the event and add to a culture that prioritizes an ethos of the group based on interdependence.

Franklin is a photographer who helps to manage a building where artists work in Portland, Oregon in exchange for not paying rent on his photography studio. Below, he describes how his extended group of Burning Man participants does more as a community than they could do alone because their value system prioritizes relationship building over accumulation of money. I asked him what his community meant to him.

It’s emergence. It’s a bunch of people who recognize the fact that together we’re a lot more than we are as individuals. And there’s a recognition that transcends the monetary. And we all work hard for what we can do as a group, as a group of friends, than we can as individuals. And since there are no contracts, it’s a volunteer thing. And when people are working hard around you, you want to work as hard as the people around you because you don’t want to feel like you’re not putting out as much as the other people are. You’re not going to stop until everything gets done. Because you’re building experiences, you’re building relationships, you’re not building your bank account.

Franklin was describing why he felt the need to work diligently and such long hours to voluntarily build *Basura Sagrada* at Burning Man in 2008. During our interview he explained that he thought others in America were too focused on the accumulation of money rather than building relationships with others. He explained that he creates art and contributes to group art projects because he is concerned with building relational bonds with others, not accumulating money. According to Franklin, individuals want to deliver for the greater good of the group.

The preparations for and the events following Burning Man in participants’ home locations also often fulfill the purpose of creating a sense of working interdependence. Many participants attend Burning Man with a chosen theme camp that work together for
most of the year outside of the event fundraising and planning. Fundraising parties for the theme camp often fulfill the role of creating a sense of working interdependence, as do work parties for theme camp projects or art installation. For example, loading a truck with Burning Man equipment for a camp of 40 people is a day long process requiring volunteer labor from as many of the camp members who can be present to help load/unload the truck. Participants learn how to effectively work in a group and take on necessary organizational roles. After the event of Burning Man, theme camps also have to clean up the mess. Decompression parties are planned and thrown. Camps have many get-togethers following the burn to discuss their experiences there. The Burning Man season yearly lasts from around April through October or longer; participants may spend over half their year devoted to the event and forming relationships with others who go to the event. On any given year in cities like San Francisco or Portland, OR there are many theme camps all going through a similar process of planning for the event, throwing fundraisers, and “decompressing” after the event. There are multiple tightly functioning interdependent groups within the larger burner community. Stein, a graphic designer and mother of a young son, describes how this process unfolds outside of Burning Man.

Stein had a commanding presence of a self-assured woman with a fierce, yet kind, humor and is a Black Rock Ranger (a volunteer peace keeper at Burning Man). She explains how working together on expressive projects together outside of Burning Man help reinforce relationships of affect within the group.

The amazing thing about Burning Man and why I think it does create a community is because it’s a focal point for a lot of people. Not all 50,000 that go, but a pretty significant number. And the people around them spend months [preparing]. When we did the Groove Bomb project in 2008, we started having meetings about it in February. And we started having work weekends every weekend, 5-20 people would get together
and do physical labor together towards a shared end goal. From March until the event was over, so March until Labor Day because it was all about building and testing and then there was doing it at the event, enjoying it, and then tearing it down and getting it back. That was 7 months out of that year that we all had a common purpose. And that happens 30,000 different groups of people building. Whether it’s building their solar pizza ovens, or their flaming mobile steampunk snail.

According to Stein, Burning Man has become a “focal point” for people because they work on projects together throughout the year for the event. Stein explains that she feels like Burning Man creates community because group members labor together for a shared goal, whatever art installation or project might be. The process for her goes from March until Labor Day, giving everyone a common purpose the group could work together for. The hours of volunteering and working together towards an end goal over an extended period of time contributes to burners creating deep relationships with each other and a communal ethos in the group.

The skills of working interdependence learned at Burning Man become useful in the world beyond the event. One participant I interviewed who has attended Burning Man off and on since 1996 describes an experience he had at the event in 2010 where teamwork led to community building. He arrived to the event a week early because he was building an art installation with others and decided he wanted to camp in a space that BMOrg had designated as a “public plaza.” He was the first in the plaza to arrive and he realized that the public plaza was only going to exist if people worked together to make it happen.

Because I was there first and knew that it was on the map and kind of wanted it to happen, I sold the next couple of people that showed up on the idea. You know, “don’t park over here, that’s the plaza, come over to this side. See these little red flags in the ground?” And then as more people showed up we started talking about the plaza. I, and then eventually other people, would go talk to them and ask them really nicely to get out of the
plaza so other people wouldn’t get the idea that they could park in the plaza. Eventually when that stopped working we had sort of an emergency neighborhood meeting. And we managed to go with a plan to mark the plaza, and put a little park in the plaza. So we as a neighborhood got together and made this thing happen. So that’s like, that was me using skills of interacting with other people, with strangers, with people who just showed up who I don’t know, that I learned many times in Burning Man over the years, but also that I use all the time in Portland. Here in Portland where I live, it’s really important to me that I know my neighbors on some level. I might be pissed off at a couple of them, but we all know each other by sight at least and we’re on a first name basis and we all talk...And I practice those skills at Burning Man.

This participant explains that it’s only through a group effort of actively working together that the plaza, also meant for use by the greater population of Black Rock City, came into existence. This participant notes that he uses these communal negotiation skills back in his home town of Portland—a city well-known for its emphasis on urban planning, walkable and bike-able neighborhoods, and its urban growth boundary. Burning Man helps him to practice the skills of cooperation with strangers and working together as a neighborhood that transcend the space of Burning Man.

The commitments to the extended Burning Man community include supporting each other physically, emotionally, and creatively, as well as commitments to a communal ethos that includes a sense of working interdependence and shared moral bonds. These commitments transcend place and are part of how burners conceptualize what it means to be in community with others. Members of the extended Burning Man community also explain that they share core beliefs and values such as a sense of “openness” to expression, an emphasis on what Tad called “personal freedom,” environmental awareness, “givingness” or the willingness to donate time or skills to group projects, and attendance at multiple face-to-face community gatherings. These practices and common beliefs also go hand in hand with developing gemeinschaft-like
relationships, in addition to a “sense of community” as a value in and of itself. It is not necessarily the content of these values or group commitments that define members of the extended Burning Man as a community. Rather, the fact that they collectively share principles and attributes, and actively participate in and commit to these shared rituals, values, and experiences that I define them as a community. The group is a community regardless of individuals existing in multiple places simultaneously or regardless of their “place-less” group conceptualization. Members of the extended Burning Man community share common activities, beliefs, values, are principally bound by relationships of affect and engage in commitments that include face-to-face interaction.

**Seeking Mobile Community:**

For many of the burners in this study, belonging to a community helps to mitigate personal feelings of isolation in a world they view as disconnecting. Participants also explained that activities shared within the community helps them find meaning in their lives. Some burners cited a lack of sufficiently fulfilling available groups or civic associations to attach themselves to in modern times as having contributed to their desire to find and belong to a community in the first place. Stein describes how she’s been looking for community her whole life, but nothing else came close to what she found in her extended community of burners.

I’ve been desperately seeking community for my whole life and I’ve found this thing that is often called “the community”...I’ve had times where I really believed in it, where I’ve felt like it was a supportive and an engaged group of people...I don’t know my neighbors. I tried joining the PTA. I have been a member of multiple associations of adults over the course of my adult life. But I think that this group, both in Portland, and kind of nationally, shows up for each other and tracks each other...There are other times when I think we need to feel like [community] means something, so we’re crafting this fake meaning into a hedonistic group of self-absorbed children. Because sometimes we’re like that too.
According to Stein "the community" has its ups and downs. She reflexively acknowledges that sometimes the group is "a hedonistic group of self-absorbed children" that "crafts" a "fake meaning," but she also feels they can be really "supportive" and "engaged." Regardless of the difficulties of engaging with the group, she still concedes that it has at least given her more than groups like the PTA or other "associations" have; especially because she has been "desperately seeking community for [her] whole life." She also makes it evident that she sees the group as simultaneously existing in other parts of the country at once, even though a local lack of tolerable organizations to belong to initiated her desire to find community in the first place.

Many interviewees discussed reasons for finding a community to belong to because they had a long held desire for acceptance since childhood. They noted that this desire was partially motivated by feeling estranged from others during childhood or that they "yearned for a sense of family." Many participants also noted that they moved around a lot as children or came from homes with divorced parents. Seven participants noted that they felt like "the freak," "an outsider," or "an outcast" in adolescence or childhood and thus were looking for community outside of the places they grew up or outside of what they called their "blood family." Xavier, a piano teacher, musician, DJ, and bar tender describes how this longing for inclusion contributes to group gatherings that take the place of more traditional family gatherings for many of the group members.

In some ways we are damaged. Many of us. I decided to have a few folks over to the house on Christmas night last year for people who were not at home with their families. There were like 25 people that came over! I thought it would just be a few. Some of us did have heavy childhoods, but a lot of us have always been looking for family. I'm an only child, my mother was divorced 3 times by the time I was twenty.
This participant notes that some group members “have always been looking for family,” so he provided a gathering space for some of the group members on Christmas. Xavier continued to explain that he felt that one of the main reasons people attend Burning Man or create artistic projects in their home environments together was because people are looking for meaning, above what they can get as individuals.

We are a group that knows firsthand, probably thanks to Burning Man, how awesome it can be when you work together to create something. That we can frequently be larger than the sum of our parts... What keeps this community so tight, deep down, is a need for meaning in a world that many of us find either meaningless or obsessed with the wrong values. Materialism, especially. If we cannot find fulfillment in our careers, by god, we’re [the community] going to find it in the desert [at Burning Man] or at the party this weekend or we’re going to build this structure or make a fire cannon or start a band or whatever... Take Meredith as an example from the corporate world. Her life is completely different now than it was 7 or 8 years ago because of Burning Man. And she is somebody that says over and over again, “I want to grow old with this community.” She says it all the time. To her, this is where it’s at. And she hangs out with her corporate friends—they go to church groups to try to meet people and they’re just miserable. They want what she has. This is when you get the impression that Burning Man can save the world. Because there are vibrant, wild, un-satiated animals inside of us waiting to get out. And it’s dormant in most people. And they may die without ever knowing what’s going on.

Xavier uses the example of his friend Meredith who used to be in the “corporate world” and now wants to “grow old with this community” to explain that Burning Man can have real transformative and lasting effects on individuals. He used the phrase “Burning Man can save the world” with his tongue firmly in cheek, but he does credit the event and his community as helping to release the “vibrant, wild, un-satiated animals” inside people they may not know they had through self-expression. He also explains that he thinks that many in his group credit the current status quo as “being obsessed with the wrong values” like materialism.
Xavier’s comment that group members are searching for “meaning” amidst a modern world that is “obsessed with the wrong values” echoes Giddens (1991:9) assertion that “personal meaninglessness—the feeling that life has nothing worthwhile to offer—becomes a fundamental psychic problem in circumstances of late modernity.” According to Xavier, the group creates projects like “fire cannons” or forms bands together because they are looking for meaning through expression, but also because together, they are greater “than the sum of their parts.” Giddens (1991:80) describes modernity as being characterized by the ever increasing use of disembedding mechanisms to organize social life, but asserts that local contexts help to re-imbed individuals through relations of trust in “facework commitments.” Similarly, burners use elements of modernity like the ability to be mobile to reconstruct a more traditional sense of commitment to community at different locations in the world. For example, the dislocating nature of mobility becomes the “joy of travel,” positively reinforced by mobile globalized “arms of the community.”

Recent sociological studies of community that focus on different kinds of emergent or non-place based communities such as virtual communities (Driskell and Lyon 2002) highlight the importance of place as a prerequisite for the development of close emotional ties within communities. For Driskell and Lyon (2002) virtual communities are not “true” communities, at least according to the traditional sociological definition because they lack gemeinschaft-like relationships. When studying youth subculture, Thornton (1997) also argues that communities are usually bounded by a single place. The community to which participants refer in this study is largely based in Portland, but it is spread across the whole of the city and is also a highly mobile group.
with ties all over the west coast and the world. As such, some sociologists might argue that the group is too geographically widespread and transient to be defined as a community. Yet in the group, the social bonds and group interdependence supported by repetitive face-to-face interactions create an extended system of individuals with deep connections that identifies itself as a community with deep commitments. For this group, Burning Man and other gatherings throughout the year provide spaces to come together yearly to expressively interact in what two participants called a “family reunion” that literally acts as a grounding force for commitment in their lives.

For most participants, “community” helps to mitigate feelings of isolation and use mobility to their advantage. Burners participate in the ritual of traveling to the desert to experience what Roy (1959) calls the ritual of pleasure. Rituals of pleasure create a sense of group affiliation and identity within the group that helps further cement commitment to the group (Roy 1959). Celebrations at arts festivals, and gatherings that community members host, also provide this purpose. There is a high level of individual commitment to group celebration and expressive projects, evidenced by the incredible number of volunteer hours participants put in to help see these gatherings and events to fruition that leads to the cohesion of the community. The collective beliefs of the community prioritize such commitment to projects and to supporting others in the extended community. These are mutually reinforcing mechanisms for group solidarity. According to other community researchers, commitment is the active ingredient in any community (Etzioni 1961).

Kanter (1972) asserts that there are three main foundations of commitment to a community. Members of the community must first want to belong to a community,
evidenced by long-standing group affiliation. Secondly, there must be some degree of cohesion for the group. Third, community members must “obey” to belong to the group. These bases of commitment for communities also apply to members of the extended burner community. Burners referred to the advantages of belonging (e.g. “friendships and alliances”), community cohesion (e.g. Stein called her community a “supportive and engaged group”), or group legitimacy (e.g. “people leave the area, but they’re still in the community”). Even if members criticized the group as “hedonistic children,” they still referred to the group as “their community.” Thus, the burners in my study are generally committed to being in the extended Burning Man community, even if they verbally disavow it. There are of course some serious problems for members of this community, such as excessive drug or alcohol use, repeated illegal behaviors, and financial difficulties. But members of the group are grasping for some sense of belonging in a world that is “isolated” and “meaningless.” Even if their group offers only partial solace from anomie and is riddled with problems, they offer an interesting look into collective processes and forging community amidst modern pressures.

Participants at Burning Man practice the art of living in community in an isolated environment. Through the communal effort of simply trying to live, work, cook, and sleep in a harsh environment where participants must rely on others, the participants forge holistic bonds between each other and a sense of gemeinschaft-like village life, particularly in the pre-event phase while the infrastructure and art installations are being built. The moral ties developed through working interdependently carry over into other areas of their lives. The principles of Burning Man and the experiences participants have while attending the event provide an overarching identity as “burners” that participants
can attach themselves to once they leave the event. This symbolic identification transcends place, even if the social interactions that helped first emphasize this identification happened within the place of Black Rock City. This “burner” identification also carries over into participants who have not physically attended the event in Nevada, but still symbolically consider themselves as part of the Burning Man community, as I will explore in the next chapter. Additionally, skills practiced at Burning Man or other Regional Burns, like community building, or critical reflection are integrated into participants’ cultural “tool kits” (Swidler 1986) and taken and used in the different environments that participants may find themselves in after the event.

Participants’ attempts to characterize their community such as “a recognition of spirit and energy,” “creative misfits,” “commonality around the acceptance of individual expression,” or “community starts in your heart and emerges outward into your life,” imply active cultural and symbolic interpretations of what community means. Members view the word “community” as a verb with symbolic implications, rather than as just a noun. “Community,” for the burners in this study, is a way of behaving and part of their countercultural “tool kit” or cultural repertoire (Swidler 1986, 2001) rather than only their personal territory/locality or group of friends. For members of the extended Burning Man community, community has become a group identity and something one does rather than only somewhere.
CHAPTER 4

COUNTERCULTURE AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN THE EXTENDED BURNING MAN COMMUNITY

Burning Man provides a poignant example of the search for community in modernity. Participants trek many miles to the middle of the Nevada desert to build a temporary city and live, work, and play together under harsh environmental conditions. The desert environment provides physical isolation and social distance from the rest of America enabling a physical, cultural, and ideological atmosphere that feels much different than the everyday cultural context of most places in America. Within and beyond the physical confines Black Rock City, individuals take part in commitments to the greater group that help define them as a community. A sense of working interdependence or a communal ethos has become intertwined with the cultural meanings associated with their extended group and have thus also become intertwined with their cultural tool kits and repertoires.

In “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” Ann Swidler (1986:273-274) argues for a model of culture whereby culture may be thought of as a “tool kit” comprised of symbols, stories, habits, rituals, styles, and world-views that order social action by providing cultural components that help construct “strategies of action.” As I discussed at the end of the last chapter, the practices and ideals burners associate with the word community provide a designation for the group as a community but have also become part of their countercultural tool kits. In addition to this sense of community as a
verb with cultural implications that includes various commitments, I found that the cultural tool kits of burners include ideologies and "countervalue," or values that reject the normative order and processes of the broader cultural value system (Yinger 1982). These values contribute to their collective identifications as members of the Burning Man community. This chapter first explores the countercultural tool kits of burners and then investigates the collective identity of the extended community.

**Countercultural “Toolkit” of Burners:**

Swidler (1986:274) criticizes the Parsonian tradition of analyzing values as the main means by which culture affects action, particularly because values in the Parsonian sense are “abstract" and “general" and because culture in this view shapes behavior by determining what people want. According to Swidler, “what people want...is of little help in explaining their action.” Nonetheless, values are integrally important to how the extended Burning Man community conceptualizes themselves as a community and their motivations for creating community in the first place. Although I borrow the term cultural tool kit from Swidler, my findings also show that value orientations and motivations are similarly important for ordering the social action of burners in addition to prescribing strategies of action. The strategies of action supported by burners' cultural tool kits originate in part from these values and motivations.

Jenn helps run a nonprofit dedicated to spreading the arts in Portland. After she referred to Burning Man without my prompting during a discussion about her personal relationship with her partner, I asked her why she thought other interviewees (including her) kept bringing up the event again and again when discussing unrelated personal
situations. She responded with an answer that included what she thought to be her

group’s “ethos.”

Jenn: Well, because to me, that’s [Burning Man] a touchstone for this
whole notion of community that we have as a generation... I know that not
everybody in our generation is going to Burning Man or maybe even has
any concept of what that is, but [its] our niche culture... So, we’re living
on the west coast, a lot of us have come from other places to be here
because there’s something about the culture in this town, on this coast, in
this area, that we can relate to. Maybe more so than we could where we
grew up... So I have a different sense of community... To me, [others]
probably have a very different concept and a more traditional way of
thinking about a community. It’s maybe their church community they see
every week and they worship together and whatnot. For us, that’s not our
ethos. That’s not how we’re looking to shape the world.

Interviewer: You said, “Our ethos to shape the world.” Is your ethos in
line with that of the bigger group and if so, then what is that? Could you
describe that ethos?

Jenn: Burning Man is like bringing us all back to that more traditional
sense of community where you’re relying on other people for your
survival. You’re relying on yourself, but you’re also relying on your
campmates and the neighbors you have around you... Except that we do it
on a temporary basis, a short period of time, in a very extreme
environment, and then we disperse. And we carry that sense of community
with us, out into the world... Some people go back to their regular 9-5 jobs
and don’t think about it until it comes up again the next year. Some people
live and die and breathe Burning Man all year round. And I think that it
somewhat stems from the fact that in general, our greater American
culture has become isolated. We isolate ourselves with these fences and
our big houses, and our single passenger cars. All of those things where
we strive to be individual, we’ve lost sight of relying on your
neighbors... I’m saying we want to change the world and shape it into this
whole other kind of thing, and yet we’re totally coming back and relying
on a traditional model in order to do that. Except that we do it half naked
and in the middle of the desert... That’s a really important part of it,
though, and the creativity and the participation and the interactivity. Those
are the key elements of that ethos that I think doesn’t get exhibited in
regular society that is part of trying to reshape our world.

Jenn elegantly ties together several divergent aspects of what she sees as important to
their ethos and why Burning Man has been so successful at infiltrating into participants’
lives and creating community outside of the event. First, Jenn explains that many of those
who live on the west coast moved there from other places because they identified with
the culture of the place. The culture of the larger environment provided an initial draw.
Secondly, Jenn does not presume that everyone in America has the same conception of
what community means, but she does admit that those who attend Burning Man are
relying on a more "traditional model" of communal relations like helping each other out
in order to help "reshape our world." The "traditional model" for her entails the
communal aspect of working interdependently to survive in the desert during the event of
Burning Man. She explains that she and other burners practice these skills in an isolated
environment and feels that her "ethos" and the greater group she attaches those practices
to, stand in contrast to the greater "isolation" of "American culture."

Jenn does relate to the culture around her on the west coast, yet her sense of a
communal ethos is tied to the counterculture she associates with the burner community.
She also relates to the principles of "creativity," "participation," and "interactivity" more
so than what she sees as the potentially isolating nature of mainstream American culture
which has lost sight of "relying" on their neighbors. For her, Burning Man is important
because it helps ameliorate what she sees as the isolating nature of American culture
through communal participation and face-to-face interaction. Later in the interview I
asked Jenn how people enter this so-called "community" she described. Her answer was,
"how they enter, is by doing it," echoing the emphasis on face-to-face interaction and
interdependence so important to their ethos. She went on to describe that the people she
thinks of as members of her community are people that continually show up, help each
other, and volunteer for various community building and expressive projects. She implied
that as long as people showed up and were willing to pitch in, they were included in what she thinks of as her extended Burning Man “community.”

Importantly, Jenn details that “I’m saying we want to change the world and shape it into this whole other kind of thing, and yet we’re totally coming back and relying on a traditional model in order to do that.” Burners like Jenn explained that they had motivations to “change the world;” this was one of their chief reasons for creating community. For the participants in this study, their communal ethos helps shape group interaction and leads to them focus on developing relationships with each other that go beyond the hollowness of lifestyle enclaves built on a shared connection of leisure (see Bellah et. al 1986:71-75).

In studying how individuals discuss love in their lives, Swidler (2001:79) refutes Geertz’s (1973) analysis of the central aspect of culture as its “ethos,” or feelings that are “embodied and reinforced by symbols” that are all-encompassing. She shows that people often switch cultural frames midstream when discussing their lives and personal relationships. Thus, she rejects the “implication that culture affects action largely by shaping its ethos, coloring life by diffusing outward from a few intensely hued ritual moments” because this implication suggests “a culture both more unified and less complex in its operation than the culture we actually observe.” Although the data for this study do support the fluidity and complexity of culture, a communal ethos buffered by shared values such as Jenn describes, was significantly important to burners. For the participants in this study, their community ethos helps shape group interaction and leads to their focus on developing more holistic relationships with each other. The group’s ethos was also inextricably intertwined with their community cultural system and group
values that deviate from what they viewed as mainstream American values. Put another way, individual social action was tied to collective motivations which partially aligned with group ideologies and countervalues.

**Ideology and Countervalues:**

Counterculture of the 1960's emphasized community over consumerism (Berger 1981), especially countercultures on the American west coast. Inheriting this legacy of countercultural values, members of the Burning Man community attempt to distance themselves from what they perceive as the dominant American culture by standing in opposition to mainstream values. For burners, the ideologies and values counter to the American mainstream within their culture are not necessarily the sole “causal” elements of their choices. But ideologies and countervalues are important to them, help inform their motivations, and do work to shape social action both at Burning Man and beyond the space of the event. Jenn saw mainstream American culture as having become “isolated” behind “fences,” “big houses,” and “single passenger cars.” She explained that the ethos of burners is bent on “reshap[ing] our world” into a less isolated form. Similarly, the members of the greater group of burners to which Jenn attaches herself to, also ideologically separate themselves and their value systems from what they repeatedly referred to as “mainstream” culture.

Burners share a group value system which they believe is antithetical to most Americans, that include “countervalues” (Yinger 1982). One participant explained that he and his group have rejected the 1950’s model of family and life [and that the] defining aspect of the[ir] community [is] a different value system than the majority of people adhere to that brings people together and allows us to interact and
support each other... [with] a kind of freedom to express yourself in many
different ways.

In other words, for participants, artistic expression and “a sense of community” are linked
with values they find oppositional to the value system of most Americans. For the
extended Burning Man community in particular, countervalues help provide parameters
for the group and reinforce their group identity as a community.

In the last chapter, I highlighted a quote from Asteria at Burning Man about what
she considered to be the defining principles of her group. She relayed the following
excerpt to me during the same group conversation.

I think so much of our lives in the corporate or financial world or the
capitalist world is that we are individuals in that we have our individual
units, we have our individual cars, and we show that we’re individuals
based on what color of ipods or what color of Nikes are we wearing. And
that’s our limit as to how we can show our individuality, but really that
individuality, I don’t think that’s something that’s necessarily innate in us.
We do want to be in a tribe, we do want to be close to people. I know that
the most depressed I’ve been has been when I’m in my compartment
alone; my apartment, my little pod that I work in. My little cubicle and this
and that. But when I’m with my friends and I can share my life and I can
share my human experience with other people through art and dance and
music and just conversation like this. And my values are to take care of
this environment better. And really pay attention and being conscious on a
multitude of levels. I think those are the principles that we see in each
other. And that’s how we create community.

Underlying Asteria’s discussion of what she feels are the principles of her group is also a
designation of what her group is not. She implies that most Americans are “individuals”
only according to the color of their ipods or Nikes they wear or their individual cars in
what she calls the “capitalist world.” In other words, she feels that most Americans are
too focused on aspects of consumption and individual wealth accumulation to find
meaning in the world rather than through expression or communal values. For Asteria,
the principles of her community are the opposite principles to other American consumptive and individualistic values she considers isolating.

For the most part, community members tended to view the “mainstream” culture in a relatively negative light; lumping together what one participant called “the normal people” under one dominant American cultural rubric they viewed as depressingly homogenous and aesthetically bland. For example, Marjorie called mainstream culture “the cookie cutter American Dream.”

When I refer to [my] community, [it] is all the freaky people. If I can identify that they are behaving outside of the way of what the cookie cutter American Dream is, than these are people who are in the community... Even though within the community there are similarities [to mainstream values] it’s different from mainstream culture. It really is.

Marjorie insists that “all the freaky people” she associates with her community are “different from mainstream culture.” She explains that she can refer to the group as a community and identify people as members because they behave differently than those who adhere to “the cookie cutter American Dream.” One of the main defining characteristics of the extended community for her was that they were not part of what she considers mainstream culture.

Val, a fulltime singer and songwriter, explains what he has in common with his group and how he thinks these commonalities are culturally different than most Americans.

It’s about choices and I think a lot of us have chosen to try to have... You have to deal with the existing paradigm to have the job, to make the money, to have the stuff, to do the thing. But I don’t know any of us that are defined by that. We all do what we want to do. How can I exist within the machine, within the framework, without actually being in the machine? That’s why I can exist in the margins, where it’s cool. I’m not part of gab nation where I wear the Coby Bryant shirt, go eat at McDonald’s, buy the Budweiser, and just come home and click on the big
game or whatever. I want to do something that’s a little more interesting. I think we’re definitely in the minority compared to what most people do.

Val articulates that those people in his group make a choice to exist on the “margins” of “the framework” of the “machine” of mainstream society because they do not believe in homogenized values that rely on things such as fast food or mainstream media (i.e. “the big game”). He explains that members of his group are “not defined” by “mak[ing] the money [in order] to have the stuff.” He wants “to do something that’s a little more interesting.” In other words, he feels that practitioners of mainstream culture are focused on consumption and that members of his group make the choice to “not [be] defined by” having “stuff.”

Tex admitted to having “hippie” parents and also felt that his group differed from “mainstream” culture. He spends much of his time organizing art festivals or community gatherings. I asked Tex why it was that he felt the need to create so many community projects and gatherings.

I think that in general people come together to remind ourselves that we’re separate from mainstream society but also achieving certain goals... There’s a certain kind of flavor to the gatherings that our community does. Partly spiritual, partly hedonistic drug fests. Also, it’s very heavily centered around the creative which is what inspires me to be involved. Because it allows for some kind of individual expression on a larger scale than what we could get from mainstream society... That’s [Burning Man] the basic common denominator to get down to it... Maybe they’ve eschewed the mainstream American dream status quo, whatever you have it, that dictates certain financial goals, status symbols, houses, cars, bling, money, whatever.

Tex feels as though the gatherings he participates in with his community allow for “some kind of individual expression on a larger scale than what we could get from mainstream society.” In other words, Tex feels that the expressive gatherings of the community affirm the solidarity and identity of the community of burners because they are not based
on “mainstream American dream status quo” materialistic values such as “status symbols” or “bling.”

Asteria “recognized” others as being “part of [her] tribe” because of their commitment to art and to “being together in community,” while Marjorie insisted that she could identify members of her community because they behave outside “of what the cookie cutter American Dream is.” These burners claim to recognize other community members as group members partially based on a perceived adherence to similar ideologies, a communal ethos, and a commitment to artistic self expression. These cultural values, which group members see as antithetical to the American mainstream, echo that of the 1960’s counterculture.

* Links with other countercultures: Interestingly, many members of the Burning Man community grew up under circumstances we might associate with the legacy of the countercultures from the 1960’s or traveled the world quite a bit as children. For example, 8 out of 44 interviewees lived in other countries as children because their parents were either religious missionaries or were on communes in other countries. Other interviewees mentioned that their parents prioritized hippie values and speculated that the extended Burning Man community was only able to form because many in the group had already been exposed to countercultural values.

Our group couldn’t exist without the 60’s having happened. Without growing up as the product of the acceptance of drug subcultures that our parents created. I grew up in a very outlaw family. Drugs were what paid for my higher education and for what I was able to achieve, or experience as a child. I traveled a lot, I went around, I learned about different cultures. I had a great fucking childhood. And part of that was not only the acceptance my parents learned through smoking lots of pot, around a lot of different tables, in many different cities around the world, and in their own searchings, but the economic means that it provides through growing weed and selling it.
This participant describes a familial acceptance of drug subculture as positively contributing to his childhood and attributes drugs as paying for his college education.

This countercultural context helped lay the groundwork for the continued development of the marijuana industry that many members of burner community engage in. Moreover, many burners had already developed countercultural principles long before they went to Burning Man or met other members of their group. Thus, some members of the group had been practicing their countercultural values since childhood.

Participants compared their group to other countercultural groups; the hippies in particular. I asked Xavier, a DJ, musician, and bartender, if he’d compare his group to the hippies. He had already brought up the topic of 1960’s counterculture in our conversation before I breached the subject.

I think we’re definitely on the same thread. It’s hard to explain without sounding ridiculous. The hippie ship sank and we are in one of the lifeboats still going in the same direction. That was the turning point for the whole world as far as I’m concerned. After basically the atom bomb was created, mankind was on a quick evolve or die schedule. A lot of the basic tenants of what the hippies, who didn’t even want to be called hippies, were suggesting. That even came out of the drug culture or the civil rights movements or whatever, are basically all things that we believe. We believe in the tribe, we believe in being in smaller, sustainable communities. We believe in nonviolence. We believe in sitting around the campfire and being with other human beings instead of being all separated watching TV all day.

Xavier feels as though “the hippie ship sank” but he does see himself and his group as being a part of the “same thread.” Members of his group hold similar values to the hippies such as “nonviolence,” “the tribe,” and “sustainable communities.” Xavier believes that after the “atom bomb was created mankind was on a quick evolve or die schedule.” In other words, he sees the values of the hippies as a step in a positive
direction and his group as carrying this torch. He sees his group as being “evolve[d]” particularly because they adhere to a value system that is the opposite of “watching TV all day.”

Richard also felt like the value system of burners was similar to the hippies even though he explained many burners are “anti-hippie.” I asked if he thought there were any similarities between his extended community and other social movements.

I do. A lot of people have an anti-hippie reaction to it. A lot of burners would not want to be confused with the hippies. I remember one of my first burns, I saw an art car with a bumper sticker that said, “We’re not fucking hippies.” And it’s kind of funny because you could say you are hippies, you’ve just figured out how to take it to the next level. There’s a lot of similarities between these counterculture movements. They’re both responses to the [mainstream] community, which would have you stay home and learn your ideals through the television and live everything vicariously and just support the economy. The hippies and the burners were willing to step away and redefine their lifestyle and travel and get exposure from all different kinds of ways of life. And the burners, of course, are very much into defining themselves by their own specific mores, values, conventions, to find out what their community is really about. But there’s crossover.

Richard explains that even if burners attempt to be “anti-hippie,” they still share a lot of the same similarities such as an emphasis on travel and a willingness to “step away” from the passivity of living life through a television screen or consumption (i.e. “just support the economy”).

Motivations of moving “mainstream” culture forward through countervalues: In addition to holding values like anti-consumerism dear, participants tended to agree that their community could either integrate with American culture to push it in what they considered a more positive direction, or use their artistic expressive acts as examples of the possibility to enjoy life beyond a “9-5” lifestyle. Members of the group continually referred to their countercultural value system as a way to modify or transform
mainstream culture in ways the group views as constructive; especially in regards to
issues of environmental awareness and sustainability. For those who have few communal
referred points in modernity (beyond attending church or other such gathering spaces) in
a culture that has long prioritized individualized values, burners claim that Burning Man
provides a language and the practice of communal interdependence. Holden explains

The Burning Man experience requires a lot of commitment. You have to
get yourself down there from wherever it is you’re coming from, there’s
also battling the elements and being in an unfamiliar place, that’s kind of
scary at times. But through that portal, through that transformation that
people invariably seem to experience, it’s a kind of galvanizing
experience. There’s enough of us that have been down there enough, that
for me I feel like there needs to be a progression. I feel like it’s important
that there’s a progression out into something else. I see some shades of
that occurring, for sure. But it’s kind of an irreplaceable experience in a lot
of ways. Perhaps part of the reason that we work so hard to recreate it off
the playa is because we miss it.

Holden feels that through the commitment of attending the event, community members
have gone through a “portal.” He feels that the critical mass of attendance and a cultural
tipping point has been reached. Holden wants to see members of his community
“progress into something else,” even if they continually try and recreate the
“irreplaceable experience” in other places besides Black Rock City. Similarly to Holden,
burners tended to refer to their culture as a way to help American culture progress; as a
kind of remedy for isolation. They tended to talk about their group culture as a way to
transform mainstream culture into a less isolated culture where materialism was less
important.

For participants like Henri, a metal sculptural artist and welder who has been
going to Burning Man for 8 years, artistic expression is one way that “freaks” or “anyone
that’s not a part of the mainstream, meathead, mall American culture” can “wake up”
people in America. I asked him why he felt it necessary to put himself in opposition to

“meathead, mall American culture.”

Henri: Because we’ve got to wake them up. We’ve got to expose people to the reality that there’s more to life than going to the mall and coming home and watching television and driving SUVs around town. You can live your life lots of different ways. You don’t have to have a job and work at Kentucky Fried Taco Hut. You can like do whatever the hell you want to. You just have to figure it out….I feel like in America, especially, we’re very isolated from the rest of the world. We have this vampire superiority thing. We have all these products. What are the words...(laughs and gestures as though he is really searching for the words). Oh yeah, we’re exploding the entire world for our fantastic quality of life and most people just go to Walmart and see the price tags and say, “Oh that’s so low, let’s just consume more!” And they don’t think about it. Not to say that I’ve never been to Walmart and don’t take advantage of the rollback prices (laughs).

Interviewer: So, it’s linked to being aware of ecological stewardship for you?

Henri: Yes, social stewardship, environmental stewardship, all that stuff. Just being aware of how we fit into the world and what our individual actions are doing in the bigger picture. That’s part of the reason that I make found-object sculpture; I’m a recycler. I create art from the secondhand store or the garbage dump or the side of the road or something from someone’s yard. I take all these miscellaneous pieces of refuse and I put them back into something that’s beautiful and that people hopefully want to buy or trade me something for or at least enjoy in their lives. That’s my little way of doing something that’s sustainable that I know how to do in this world of unsustainable things.

According to Henri, it is not necessary to work a repetitive meaningless job as exemplified by the fast food industry. He feels that the American emphasis on consumption or television watching is primarily problematic because Americans do not think critically about their lives or consumption habits. Henri explains that he makes art from found-objects because he wants people to “enjoy their lives” or because it’s his “way of doing something that’s sustainable…in this world of unsustainable things.”

Henri sees his group as helping to “wake up” Americans, through their group practices

146
like art creation. Later in the interview, Henri continued to emphasize that without what he calls “subcultures” like the burners that work to shift and transform mainstream culture, “America would be the lamest place, ever.”

Many in the group see their expressive community as a kind of antidote to the consumerism and materialism they see as rampant in mainstream culture. One participant explained in a group conversation

The parts of our culture that are okay with church on Sunday and NASCAR and Kentucky Fried Chicken; they’re just okay with that because there is a status quo... I think if Paine and Jefferson and all of these people who were heroes to America saw what had become of America today, they’d be rolling over in their graves. Whereas if they saw our community they’d say ‘oh thank god, at least there’s hope.’

For many in the group, the antidote they feel their group offers helps others to, in the words of Xavier, “live incredible lives that aren’t defined by the laziest of mankind and the corporations.” Mark said, “I need more than what this American reality offers us. Being merely a consumer is not enough. So I think, those of us who are in these countercultural movements are questing to find that.” According to group members, using creativity or expressing what is inside oneself through collaborative artistic projects allowed them what they considered to be true “freedom.” But more importantly, they felt this freedom contributed to society as a whole progressing and provided what they believed was a positive example to others outside their community.

Participants continually implied that “cultural movements,” like Burning Man, make America more interesting and push the boundaries of what mainstream America includes and accepts. At the end of our interview, I asked Xavier if he had anything else he wanted to say. He replied with an articulate response that included explaining how he thought his community was part of the “1%” of humans that move society “forward.”
I know that my life is very rich because of my friends. And if someone asked me to describe the community I’m not sure I’d be able to do it. But we are that same 1% that you could probably trace back to when we were living in caves. All forward motion in society probably starts with us. That’s about the most arrogant thing I can think of. But the masses out there that shop at Wal-mart... It’s not the fact that shopping at Wal-mart is the most horrible thing you can do. It’s that most people do not question or analyze anything. It is one foot in front of the other, do what you’re told. Go to school. Get a job. Get married. Grow old and die. Those people out number us 9 to 1, but they are not the people that move society forward. They never have been.

Xavier admittedly “arrogantly” believes that people like him and his community are responsible for “all forward motion in society.” During the interview Xavier referred again and again to how the power of expression or creativity was responsible for helping people realize there could be life beyond “shop[ping] at Wal-mart” or “do[ing] what you’re told.” He believes that expressive groups like his community are responsible for “mov[ing] society forward” through expression and critical reflection.

Another community member named Laura, a tall willowy blond woman, expressed similar sentiments as Xavier. She believed it was the job of “creative people” to “push themselves” “beyond what might be considered the mainstream.”

Laura: We have the ability to push people to the edges of themselves. And when people explore the edges of themselves, then they grow. And I think that’s where we can move as a culture. I think we can come up with green energy...

Interviewer: Why do you think you belong to different culture?

Laura: Because 90% of my friends are artists and creative people and think outside the box and push themselves and think beyond what might be considered the mainstream. But I think it’s really important that we don’t categorize ourselves as artists as others, or as outside of the mainstream because we are a functioning part of that same stream of information. Which is why I think the integration is really important because I think while we continue to categorize ourselves as something outside of the normal, than we miss the opportunities to integrate with people who are different than us and learn from people who are different than us.
Laura begins her discussion by explaining how she hopes her community can “move” American culture forward through “green energy” or by helping others grow through self-exploration. She acknowledges that she is different than mainstream culture, but similar at the same time. On the one hand, Laura’s discussion is confusing as she switches her cultural frame mid-discussion (Goffman 1974; Padgett and Ansell 1993; Swidler 2001). She distances herself from mainstream culture and then makes an about face to say she hopes “we don’t categorize ourselves as artists as others” because “we are a functioning part of that same stream.”

For Laura, her community may help “move” American culture forward through their “green” and self-exploring principles particularly because they are part of the same “stream” as other Americans. She believed her community could integrate with mainstream culture and help propel them in what she considers a more positive direction.

After I asked Trina what would happen when the event can no longer continue, she responded, “I would love to see more people kind of graduating. Burning Man is like a great lab.” Many other participants like Holden agreed that Burning Man has been an excellent “lab” or experiment in trying to facilitate social interactivity and that even if Burning Man the event were to cease, the spirit would live on because participants have enjoyed the experience of a communal ethos.

Not all burners described the goals of their community so confidently. Some have ceased to believe the extended community of burners can actually achieve lofty goals of moving American culture in a positive direction. Tex admits that he’s “seen much of our community spinning their wheels, both spiritually and financially and culturally.”

I’ve stopped believing that we’re in some sort of transitional transformation thing that we’re heading toward some sort of ultimate
Illusory goal of positive transformation of the world. I think that we party in a more fun, and hopefully more sustainable, although I’m not sure about that anymore, way... I guess I’ve stopped believing it because I’ve seen so much of our community spinning their wheels, both spiritually and financially and culturally... We had this idea that we’re heading into some sort of transformational change and that we’re somehow the agents of that change. I don’t necessarily buy that we are any more enlightened than any other community.  

Tex no longer buys into the idea that individuals in his community are the “agents” of change because they have been “spinning their wheels.” However, even if burners are failing at the “illusory goal” of shifting mainstream culture like Tex admits, the empirical reality remains that Burning Man is becoming increasingly important and relevant. The increasing participation of the event reflects this, as does the outward cultural expansion of visual symbols like the diffusion of Burning Man style. Even if the extended community of Burning Man does not accomplish the major goal of shifting mainstream culture, the event has become widely recognized.  

According to other group members like Henri, Xavier, or Val, problematic mainstream American values include consumerism, environmental degradation, individuation outside of a socially supportive community leading to isolation, homogeneity (e.g. what many burners called a “9-5 life” including copious amounts of television watching) that prevents expressing oneself artistically or taking a critical stance on mainstream American culture, and generally an America that is focused on individual accumulation of money that has lost sight of working collectively for the greater good. Burners generally insisted that they as individuals and their community as a whole stood in opposition to these “mainstream” values; they tended to take a critical stance on the greater culture in America. At the same time however, most interviewees were also able to...
to be self-reflexive when it came to their criticisms, demonstrating that the cultural “tool” of critical reflection was a resource community members used and applied, even to themselves.

*Practicing cultural “tool” of critical reflection:* A central point of the burner community is the freedom to critically express what they experience inside themselves through art or self-reflection or by critically assessing the bland life trajectory of Americans as what Marjorie called the “cookie cutter American Dream.” Burners tended to take a critical stance on mainstream American culture, but they were also generally able to be critical about themselves.

When I walked into Stein’s small 1940’s craftsman bungalow in Portland at 9pm, Stein was designing the layout for a magazine article on her laptop. She is keenly aware of the world around her and, like many others in her community of long-time burners, takes a critical stance on what she considers to be mainstream culture and the parts of it she disdains like the sphere of advertising. As an occupation, art direction takes a considerable inclination for aesthetic and artistic design properties, yet she doesn’t consider herself an artist. She does not consider herself an artist because she just “make[s] magazines” for part of the greater advertising world.

I don’t consider myself an artist; I consider myself a facilitator and an organizer of information. Aesthetic sense is one of the tools I use for that... I have this grand notion that artists express some sort of truth about the world and I just make magazines... The magazines I work for right now are vehicles for advertisers... To me, a magazine without a larger editorial voice and a goal to inform, to entertain, and to enhance the life of the reader—it’s just an advertising circular. People aren’t going to buy an advertising circular for five dollars, so we mask it in a magazine.

Stein feels that the magazines she designs for mainstream American consumption are little more than vehicles for selling and buying commodities. Moreover, she notes that the
magazines “mask” their advertising intentions under the guise of a magazine. Being aware of the “truth” of what advertisers are selling and keeping other larger social justice issues in context is central to her and to her community’s sense of itself. The above passage indicates that she recognizes that advertising is a necessary evil in her job, but she does not simply accept it without question.

Stein is critical of mainstream advertising, but she is also critical of the environmental hypocrisy she and other burners feel is inherent at Burning Man. Stein continued, “It’s funny to me how much of the art at Burning Man is ‘StarFucks’ and ‘Mallmart’ and really deriding American consumer culture, while using materials they’ve bought at Costco and Home Depot to build it.” For Stein, these two art installations at Burning Man are hypocritical. ‘StarFucks’ is a café at Burning Man that makes a critical commentary on the company Starbucks and ‘Mallmart’ is a theme camp that doubled as a kind of art installation at Burning Man critiquing Wal-mart. But for Stein, much of the materials used to build camps, cafés, and installations at the event are bought at establishments they are meant to criticize. Other burners, like Mark, felt similarly. Mark called Burning Man a “wasteful festival.”

I don’t know if I’d even say that Burning Man is a disdain for stuff. Because Burning Man has more stuff involved in it than anything I’ve ever seen. It’s a very wasteful festival. The whole thing is about burning everything and bringing it, spending millions of dollars to set up these huge camps that you just burn. It’s a weird blend of American consumerism. It’s almost like taking American consumerism to the extreme.

Like Stein and Mark, burners were generally able to also selectively criticize themselves while differentiating and derogating mainstream society from their community. For participants, expression is not solely limited to creating art. It also involves being critical
of oneself and expressing incongruities about themselves like Stein’s discussion of her occupation or Mark assessing how Burning Man actually takes American consumerism “to the extreme.”

For the participants, expression and critical reflection holds more weight because it is done within a supportive community of other self-expressing individuals. The group support and encouragement for self-expression or critical reflection works to socialize members into group norms and values that valorize expressive acts and styles. The incorporation of an identity or an expressive identity for this group, is important to the group socialization of new members (Fine 2010). For individuals, there is a communal cultural expectation of expression which works to shape action and also contributes to a collective identity of the group.

Swidler argues (2001:86-87) that “values are not the reason why a person develops one strategy of action rather than another.” However, my data show that participants in my study not only articulate their adherence to countercultural values, they act upon them in everyday interactions. Even though participants like Laura might continually contradict themselves, burners were still able to critically reflect on themselves and act using their values at least as partial guides. Burners like Henri attempt to employ themselves in occupations like found-art sculpture that also align with their value systems. Swidler (2001) analyzes interview transcripts without field observation data of practitioners of what we might think of a mainstream culture. At least in the case of burners, participants do attempt to adhere to a cohesive ethos and group values reinforced by the social expectation of their group. Even if this ethos does not totally influence or dictate every aspect of their lives or necessarily prescribe their actions, the
ethos has become part of their cultural toolkit and Burning Man has assisted in the
practice and articulation of these values and ethos.

**Burner Community Identity:**

**Transformations of identity:**

While attending Burning Man, participants are deeply immersed in the culture of
the alternative reality that is the physical, aesthetic, and ideological space of the event.
The journey undertaken to the desert to participate at Burning Man has been referred to
by anthropologist Gilmore (2006:45) as a “transformation of perspective and identity.”
Personal “transformations” at Burning Man contribute to participants heavily attaching
themselves to the overarching identity of belonging to an extended community that they
view as working to move beyond modern problems like materialism. These
“transformations” may moderate lives in the real world beyond the space of the event
itself.

I asked Marjorie, a tall slim white woman who designs and manufactures clothing
in India with local families, if she would consider Burning Man as a “common thread” of
the extended festival and travel communities she feels she is a part of since she has been
herself to Burning Man 8 times. She denies that she thinks of herself as a “burner,”
preferring to explain that Burning Man is mainly just helping to “crack” open the “egg.”

In the first few years of my exposure, being called a burner, or having
things Burning Man was normal. And now I am very much not at all using
Burning Man as a way to define it. Burning Man is cracking the egg open
in a wonderful way to get in touch with what is already there. So for me,
I’m not a burner, but I likely go every year. Cause many of these people in
these other communities have never been to Burning Man, but they’re
tapped into what it’s all about. And their common thread is about letting
go of all expectations one has on one’s self based on what they interpret is
expected by society’s standards and living in a really pure way based on
their own pure creative energy from within. No matter where I am in the
different communities, wherever they are, I’m always inspired by whatever people are creating that is clearly not in reaction or a reflection of what they’re seeing in mainstream media. And keep in mind I spent 10 years working for mainstream media, so I’m very in tune with what I like, in what is being funneled into the brainwash machine.

According to Marjorie, going to Burning Man is not necessarily about the festival itself but about “cracking the egg open” or “letting go” of “expectations...of society’s standards” based on “pure creative energy.” She sees the role of global travel and events like Burning Man as ways to be “inspired” by other individuals’ “pure creative energy” that is outside of the “mainstream.” She feels that there are individuals all over the world that are “tapped into” what Burning Man is “all about.” Marjorie explains that Burning Man can help to “crack” open the egg for individuals or provide the impetus for life changes that help people extricate themselves from what she terms “the brainwash machine.” She implies that this impetus or “cracking the egg” helps individuals to find meaning beyond the mainstream “brainwash machine” she derides.

Marjorie felt as though it was through her “exposure” to Burning Man that she learned that she no longer wanted to be a part of 9-5 corporate lifestyle. I feel like through the exposure of Burning Man, has really taught me, or introduced me to how much I was clocking in and out of life. Prior to my exposure at Burning Man I was a weekend warrior. I would work my ass off all week so I’d have my whole weekend to become who I wanted to really want to be and then at the end of the weekend, jump back into the professional role that my corporate company expected of me. And I thought, this is just not a natural way of living and I want to take all my joys and passions and I don’t want clock in and out. I want my whole life to be together and balanced all together as one. I don’t want to ever compromise who I am so that I can get a paycheck. So if my great loves in life and my talents are coming from sewing and organization and marketing and photography and I also enjoy India, I can just spend year round doing what I love and what I’m good at and make money, too. And it was very inspiring through Burning Man. I feel like a lot of burners with their exposure to Burning Man, it seeps into their professional life and people slip away from corporate life and into their passions. Which is
super beautiful. I really wish it upon everybody. We’re not going to be rich from it, but what is rich anyway? What’s the value of wealth? For me, it’s happiness.

For participants like Marjorie, Burning Man helps “remind” people or show others that there is an alternative to a “9-5” lifestyle without enjoyment; that people may find meaning in the world through finding their “passions.” She also feels like she no longer has to “compromise” who she is to receive monetary remuneration because she has found “happiness” or what she considers to be the “true” value of wealth. She does concede that she still needs to “make money,” but according to her, wealth is “happiness,” not necessarily having a lot of money.

Georgia, a grandmother in her fifties, did not start going to Burning Man until she had been married for almost 20 years. I asked her if going to Burning Man had affected her personal life and her family.

Yeah, it was huge. Basically my husband at the time was really intimidated by it and he loved that part of me, that self-expressive, crazy, freedom... And I'd always been like that. But with meeting these people, it became much more of a passion for me and I was like drawn, probably more so away from him. And the relationship. Because I was really feeling like I'd found my family and I'd never been happier. It was like sort of coming home. The more I became involved in this community and the more that I started participating in events, there was this peace that came over me, that was like, “Oh my god, I found my people.”

Georgia has now been separated from her husband for over 6 years. She credits the relationships she developed with her new-found burner “family” as partially drawing her away from the relationship with her husband because of her personal transformation.

Personal transformations through the Burning Man experience may often be facilitated by becoming deeply integrated in the relationships of the community. Once an individual enters the group, the group’s expectations help to socialize that member
further into the counterculture of the community. Felipe, a DJ who lives in Portland and who has been going to Burning Man for at least the last 6 years, explains how individuals get “re-tuned” in the place of Black Rock City. Once they return to their home environments, Felipe feels like they need a supportive community to continue to “hold space” for their personal transformations that happen at the event.

Felipe: I was going to talk to you about Burning Man being this place that has this unique vibrational field that you go to and then be re-tuned and then you come back into your local space that has a certain frequency. And if you don’t have enough strength and groundedness in your field, you can actually drift back to the sleep of your region. So like the things that you thought were so profound at Burning Man become murky and lost over time because you’re just standing by yourself in this world that says and does other things in contrast to what you just experienced. But now you have a body of people that are changing and spend time together. They support your ability to hold that frequency, ground into it, and make it real... That may be the work of this modern day community from the Burning Man perspective at least is that it’s more of a container for transformation, like stabilizing transformation than it is anything else.

Interviewer: So you say “our energy” or “our container for transformation” and what I’m wondering, and what I think some people might say to me is that’s just a new way to say an old thing. That’s just a new way to describe keeping boundaries around us and around other people that we don’t want in. And I’m wondering how it is that that’s different.

Felipe: Well because I don’t think there’s a boundary there. First of all, let’s change these terminologies. We walk in a world with perceptions. We go to a place that has very stretched and contorted perceptions. It stretches the landscape of perception and possibility, that you come back with a different context of how things can occur. Especially because you go to a place [Black Rock City] that functions in many ways like a city. And then you come back to a place that functions like a city. You have to contrast those realities. So I think individuals that had to first go through this. They had to stabilize it. They had to make it real, if they really wanted it. They found something in the change in their perception that they wanted to make real in their life. So they had to start making changes in themselves. So they would naturally start to look for those people that emulated that type of energy. And as more and more people that emulated this energy, I guess I shouldn’t say energy anymore. That emulated these types of perceptions and ways of being. Then a body of people culminated
around it. That body of people isn’t exactly seeking exclusivity and in fact, many ways...the exclusivity comes in because it’s a limited body, in a much larger context than a city. So the strength in the relationships is deep because of how difficult it is to find a body of people that hold this kind of space. So sometimes it may look exclusive, but it’s actually incredibly welcoming. But you have to have some courage to make an effort and go through what may be perceived of as a wall of exclusivity, but it’s not there. It’s not a wall of exclusivity, it’s a wall of relationships. And everybody is invited to start cultivating their relationships with the community.

According to Felipe one gets “re-tuned” in the “unique vibrational field” of Black Rock City. The burner then carries this change back to her local environment and if she is not surrounded by other burners or like-minded individuals who have experienced a similar “re-tun[ing],” she will “drift back into the sleep of her region” (i.e. shake off the transformational experiences of Burning Man and continue an unaltered existence as a member of the mainstream culture). What is so profound about the extended Burning Man community for Felipe, is that community members will continue to “hold space” (a phrase used 27 times by interviewees) for other community members and support them in their “retunement” process. In other words, Felipe finds it a positive thing that the extended community expects new members to act in way congruent with the group’s counterculture.

When I told Felipe that this process seemed as though he were simply sugar coating an exclusionary process, he referred to the individual choosing to go to Burning Man in the first place and “change their perception” as a means of defending the deep relationships of the group. For Felipe, someone attending Burning Man has made a conscious decision to shift themselves and their perceptions about mainstream society and the larger world. He feels that the community develops from this point of divergence with mainstream values and the transformations people have by attending the event. He
also claims that anyone may enter the community if they are willing to go through similarly transformative processes (i.e. become more like that others in the group). Moreover, he feels that the community may “look exclusionary” but is actually welcoming. The outside view of boundaries for Felipe is rather a “wall of relationships” and only appears exclusionary because it’s “difficult to find a body of people that hold this kind of space.” In other words, individuals who have been supporting each other through transformative processes develop deep relational bonds that may put others off from attempting to get to know them, especially because they appear so different on the outside via their senses of style and the aesthetic. Yet in practice, it is only once the individual acts, values the same things, and looks more like the extended community that they are accepted as a member of the group.

For Georgia, Marjorie, and other burners, attending Burning Man or group gatherings of the extended community, often leads to personal transformations such as ending relationships or quitting jobs. Eric explained that Burning Man led people to “embrace what they really want to do and what they might be afraid of.” Jonathon, a marijuana farmer, explains this process.

There’s a lot of people who get to the point in their life where they’ve had a job. Then somehow they’ve been hearing about Burning Man, their friends go to Burning Man, it’s all groovy, they haven’t gone for years and years and finally they go. And it blows their minds. And they come back and they can barely hold down that job anymore. Because it’s like, “Forget it, what am I doing? I’m listening to this schmuck in a tie and he doesn’t know shit.” Where I’ve just seen the world in a whole new light and now I know what it is to be alive. Usually, they don’t end up with the same job by the next year. Or they keep that job and when it comes time to go to Burning Man again, depending on their level of fear, they will quit that job and leave it up to the winds to find out what happens next and they’ll just go to Burning Man again.
Jonathon credits Burning Man as helping people to see the world “in a whole new light” so they quit their job because they now “know what it is to be alive.” Eric also felt that Burning Man worked to extricate people from the “corporate” life. He explains that Burning Man “serves as a model for people to realize that there’s more possibilities in life for great adventures.”

But there's this greater purpose which is that it [Burning Man] serves as a model for people to realize that they're more possibilities in life, that there is great adventures to be had, that the security of your 9 to 5 corporate job and your white picket fence are not...they're not fun...you're not enjoying your life, and you can get-by otherwise. So I feel like Burning Man and the artistic scene and this can help be a catalyst for people to analyze their own lives and get out of their ruts that they don't even realize they’re in. I had a friend over last night who is a corporate lawyer who went to Burning Man for the first time and helped out with the building the Portal [an art installation at Burning Man 2010] and he realized coming out of Burning Man: "I have to change my job...I'm not happy and my soul is being sucked working for these fucking dickheads. Working on projects that I think are wrong, that I don't agree with. That there's people that I'm surrounded with that I don't like...that not only do I not like them, but they drain me, and my friends don't drain me. I'm thoroughly nourished. I am inspired, I am loved...they give me purpose to shine and to be like a better man."

For Eric, Burning Man serves as a model with which to realize that everyday Americans do not have to subscribe to what he considers a 9-5 unhappy lifestyle. Through contributing to an art installation with others in the community, his corporate lawyer friend realized that he did not want to continue working in his current occupation because his “soul [was] being sucked.” The apparent remedy for his friend was to change jobs, so that he may spend more time with his friends who “thoroughly nourish” him and inspire him to “shine” and be “a better man.”

Eric supposes that Burning Man can serve as a positively transformative experience leading others to quit their unhappy jobs and live a more communal lifestyle.
He implies that his particular lifestyle could serve as a kind of model for enjoying one’s life, even with the dislocating problems of modernity like meaningless work. According to Eric, creating art with others helped facilitate this transformation. Ralph explained that the transformative process of Burning Man specifically had to do with the “mutative” role of art.

I’ve continuously seen that art invokes something in people. And artful creations. I’ve had many pieces change my mind and that’s what I’m looking for is a mutation and getting people to get out of the realm of...the aesthetic that we’re feed has been watered down so much. Like I just ordered flowers today and I looked at Flowers.com and I was like, “Cheese and Rice! What is this crap?!” There’s a wide central area of creativity of what people call creativity which is an indoctrinated aesthetic. And I try to work outside of that. Because it’s an important mutative process. I have a strong sensation that good art is mutative. You come back from a really incredible art exhibition and it’s similar to seeing a really deep, incredible film and you’re changed. You’re really deeply intrinsically affected.

For Ralph and Eric, artistic expression leads to a “mutation” or a transformation in how they look at the world and the community they identify with. According to them, art can “inextrinsically affect” a person, thereby leading them to search for things beyond a corporate “9-5” lifestyle. These personal transformations—facilitated in part by Burning Man, but also by inclusion in the extended community of burners—lead individuals to personally identify with the larger collective identification of the group as a “community.”

**Collective identity of the community:**

Personal transformations, the skills physically practiced at Burning Man, and a group culture and ideologies lead to a personal and collective identification as a member of the Burning Man community. The burner community identity transcends place, even if the place of Black Rock City is important for the personal experience of group members.
As I tried to uncover what the collective identity meant to individuals, I asked Felipe if he thought there were any universally understood symbols in what he considers to be his community of friends and acquaintances on the west coast.

Felipe: I think even in the body of what is this light, effervescent kind of community, there is no defining thing...I shouldn’t say that...but...We each draw from so many different planes of information and experience. I don’t know if there is a uniform symbol that emerges. If there is a uniform symbol, it’s almost like Burning Man is it.

Interviewer: So what about if somebody was hanging out with everyone and doing all these things that they do together and they had never gone to Burning Man and never wanted to go to Burning Man. Are they still a member of the community? And what is Burning Man’s role, then?

Felipe: No, it’s totally true. This year was surprising because there were actually people that I knew that came to Burning Man and it was their first time. And I was like shocked that it was their first time because I knew them in this world [his hometown of Portland, OR]. It’s interesting, though, even to not go to the place, it’s still a symbol. Because it’s a symbol of creativity. It’s a symbol of spirituality. It’s a symbol of hedonism. It’s a symbol of all these different things that become these binding forces that people can come into this body because they’re attracted to it. But a very significant portion of that energy is directly related or at least been catalyzed by this place [Burning Man]. And so if there was a symbol, it would be the city that emerges in the dust and dies every year. Even for those that don’t go; they know the relationship of the place to this body of people. And so I think it’s still a symbol to them even though they might not fully comprehend through their own experiential understanding of the place and how it’s affected these people.

Felipe explains that the place of the desert and the city that is built each year for Burning Man and torn down again is an important symbolic touchstone for his community of burners beyond the desert. He explains that even if people do not attend the event themselves, many still consider themselves burners because the event has become a “binding force” for his community because it represents “creativity,” “spirituality,” and “hedonism.”
Although attending festivals is a common attribute of the burners I interviewed, attending Burning Man was not a perquisite for the extended community members to think of themselves as a “burner.” Some participants who have never physically attended the event in Nevada still consider themselves burners because they attend other burner events, like Regional Burns (smaller events that mimic Burning Man), in locations closer to their homes. They may also consider themselves part of the extended Burning Man community simply because they have many friends that attend the event or have attended the event in the past. Richard explains how people who have never been to Burning Man still consider themselves part of the community.

A lot of people consider themselves burners. I met this one girl, talking about how she loved Burning Man and considered herself a burner and she mentioned a couple of minutes later that she had never been to Nevada. And I said, but you just said you had been to Burning Man. And she said, “Yeah, but here, at Playa del Fuego” [the mid-Atlantic Regional Burn in Delaware]. She said, “I’ve never been to the ‘big Burn’ because I’ve never had the resources to make it all the way out there, but if you go to Playa del Fuego, or if you went to this Decompression party last night, this is Burning Man.” The Regional Burns are considered a big and important part of Burning Man that’s growing in importance.

The woman that Richard met at a party in Philadelphia considered herself a burner because she went to burner events with the extended Burning Man community in Pennsylvania and other areas in the mid-Atlantic region. Playa del Fuego is the “official” mid-Atlantic Regional Burn held each year in October in Delaware. Their “about us” webpage explains they are “a celebration of the spirit of radical self-expression, community, and participation.” Burning Man events are held all over the world and contribute to participants attaching themselves to the identity of a burner and the

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22 http://playadelfuego.org/
extended community of “burners,” sometimes without them ever having set foot inside the event in Nevada.

Even if interviewees didn’t actually physically attend Burning Man like Felipe or Richard explains, they still attach themselves to what Eric below calls the “umbrella identification” of being a “burner” and the extended community they associate with it.

Burning Man is so big and thus provides this umbrella identity for people to put themselves in and then put themselves into places where they are immediately more comfortable with other “burners,” even if they may be the Death Guild fire breathing Burners versus the happy loving unified.

Eric explains that even though there are many different “kinds” of burners, such as those who belong to the Death Guild themecamp (a themecamp associated with the “Thunderdome” where burners violently fight each other with jousting sticks while suspended in mid air), or “the happy loving unified” kind of burner, there is still an “umbrella identity” for participants to attach themselves to as “burners.” Once they have taken on this identity the burners “are immediately more comfortable” in places where other burners are located. In other words, even when burners are in different spaces or places, they still identify themselves as a burner and act in ways that are socially acceptable to other group members. This identification, the social practices and values attached to it, allows them a social touchstone with others who have attended the event, even if they have never attended the event themselves.

Isabelle, who worked on the art installation Basura Sagrada, is a meditative blonde woman in her late twenties. She is a massage therapist who spent years training as a dancer and performing at different festivals and group gatherings up and down the American west coast. She explained that she did not feel like she was as committed to
being a member of the extended Burning Man community as other people were. I asked her why.

What I find with the particular Burning Man festival and traveling community that we're talking about is that they are very very attached to identifying as a community. There is this sense around the number of events that we go to that is so about identifying with each other. It's actually not about the music... They're [music festivals] different and the focal point of these west coast festivals that we're talking about are about identifying with each other as a cohesive unit of 'you're in. You're a part of this thing that we're doing.' And the thing that we're doing is a bunch of different things. And mostly it's about a thought process and a way of viewing things that feels differently than other realms of the world that we all engage with. And so each one of them, part of it, too, is that you go for a couple days, or a week, or two weeks. And you completely cut yourself off from the rest of the world. And you limit your communication, your economic interactions, your social interactions. All of it... And you limit it to this isolation of connection that's happening. So in that regard it becomes this whole thing of the focal point being identifying as a quote unquote community. But the truth is that we're all a part of a larger community. So once we isolate these weeks or weekends, there's always this impression that people don't have a life beyond that. We don't always connect about our life beyond that one thing that we originally connected on... I actually think that becomes a disconnecting factor in the quote unquote community.

According to Isabelle, she and her community want to identify with and attach themselves to a larger group. Isolating themselves at festivals over the course of weeks or weekends and cutting themselves off from "economic interactions," "communication," and "social interactions" outside of the isolated community gathering becomes the "focal point [of] identifying as a quote unquote community."

Isabelle also admits that this identification can be a "disconnecting factor" for the rest of their lives because people in the community may not see their fellow burners as existing outside of the "quote unquote community." Additionally, she implies that there is a kind of boundary in the identification as a community that disconnects them from others and themselves, even while developing deeper relationships at these isolated
gatherings. She makes the important point that “identifying with each other as a cohesive unit of ‘you’re in,’” also serves to keep the rest of their lives (i.e. jobs outside of the traveling festival scene, etc.) out. She went on to explain,

One of my favorite quotes that my dad always says to me is, “Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.” What percentage of our life is chopping wood and carrying water? A huge percent. And to want to not share that with people is to not want to share a huge part of their life. And is missing a huge part of community actually.

The point that Isabelle makes shows just one aspect of how identifying as part of the burner community works to draw people deeper into the collective life of the group. For her, being a central member in the extended community requires a kind of dedication and almost a coerced nature as to the number of events members are socially expected to attend to maintain their social capital within the extended group. She finds the group emphasis on identifying as a community disconnecting because they pay so much attention to identifying as a community, that they often miss out on a large part of what community “actually” is.

The “disconnecting” aspect of the group boundary work Isabelle points out, however, is somewhat necessary for the group to develop a collective identity as “burners.” The group’s countervalues also serve the purpose of creating boundaries of the group. According to Lamont and Fournier (1992:85), “boundary work (the separation of Us and Them) is critical to the making of groupness. It is part of the process of construction of collective identity: individuals differentiate themselves from others by drawing on criteria of common traits and experiences and a sense of shared belonging.” Isabelle acknowledges that group members do draw boundaries between themselves and others and that it is not always in everyone’s best interest (i.e. “disconnecting”).
However, these boundaries help construct the symbolic collective identity of the group as the extended Burning Man community. The burners in this study repeatedly drew these kinds of boundaries as a means of emphasizing their “groupness” or what they referred to as their community.

Participants like Ralph, Salvador, or Marjorie actively use the culture of their extended Burning Man community which they juxtapose as ideologically separate from the mainstream culture. This pattern of distancing oneself from what participants’ termed again and again “mainstream America,” or “normal society,” was evident in almost all interviews, even if participants contradicted themselves to acknowledge they were also a part of the greater American culture or to reflexively view their own actions and values like Stein, Mark, or Isabelle. In other words, distancing themselves from mainstream culture helped to further affirm what participants perceived as their community’s “groupness” even if contradictions exist within their community value system.

For the participants in this study, relegating their community to a position against mainstream also meant resisting what they viewed as the dominant ideologies like consumerism in America. But this shared resistance also reinforced their “groupness.” Additionally, burners may see mainstream consumerism as a trope that continues to buffer the dominant economic and cultural systems, yet this particular brand of ideology helps to define them as a community (Kanter 1972; Swidler 2001). Community groups that want to defend their boundaries may use such things as distinctive clothing or ethical strictures that help members differentiate themselves from others in society (Kanter 1972) in a similar fashion to how burners use the boundaries of their group identity and values.
Local group identities may shift according to how the individuals negotiate resistance to dominant ideologies. In a study of three local art communities in Chicago, Grams (2004) shifts the frame of art production from an “occupation” (Becker 1982) or a “field” of cultural production (Bourdieu 1993) to what she calls a “locality” (Grams 2004:2). Shifting to the “locality” enabled Grams (2004:35) to focus on how localized networks of relationships of artists differ from occupational networks and how the localities share a common emphasis on resisting historical inequalities outwardly imposed by a dominant culture while “asserting a local identity.” Members of the extended Burning Man community also refute “a dominant culture,” although they typically refer to the dominant American culture they contest as “mainstream.” Networks of burners in various places throughout the world do have their own local identities, but the various “arms of the community” also share a larger cultural identity of that as “burners” which they view in opposition to mainstream America.

**Defining a “burner:**

Not all individuals who attend Burning Man may be considered “burners,” yet one does not necessarily have to attend the actual event of Burning Man in Nevada in order to be accepted as a “burner” by the extended community or to think of oneself as a burner. What then, is the definition of a burner? As I showed, burners identify as members of the larger extended Burning Man community largely by defining themselves and their group in opposition to “mainstream” ideologies and values. The burner self identity may thus be defined through social difference (Bourdieu 1984). Self-identifying as a burner helps to create a form of self definition that provides a sense of group belonging defined through difference, but also represents an attempt to reconcile the
intersection between a lifestyle and a collective identification (Maffesoli 1988). Yet this identity in and of itself does not necessarily define an individual as a burner because the symbolic boundaries of the group may limit access to who may be defined as a burner by the other members of the community or from an outside perspective. Thus, a self-definition as a burner may be in conflict with that of members of a group or from alternative perspectives. My definition below stems from documented observations and therefore does not rely on a definition of a burner only from the perspective of the burners themselves, although there are some similarities.

The collective identity of the community depends on the usage of shared cultural practices and expectations from both an internal view (i.e. from the perspective of the burners themselves) and an external view (i.e. from an outside “objective” perspective). Aspects of displaying the expressive aesthetic of the group help to define the symbolic and visible boundaries of the community, but are also part of the collective practices of the community which define them as a community. Additionally, active usage of burner values and ideologies, enforced by the social expectation (and social sanction) of other community members, contributes to the definition of what a burner is or is not. Taking this into account, I define a burner as:

1) One who has attended Burning Man in Nevada OR a regional Burning Man event elsewhere [and]

2) who attends multiple community gatherings where one or more individual(s) are present who have also attended either Burning Man in Nevada, or a regional Burning Man event elsewhere [and]
3) who actively utilizes a countercultural toolkit comprised of values, ideologies, a communal ethos, and cultural practices upheld, used, and reinforced by other members of the burner community.

This definition therefore takes into account the necessary social relatively of being defined from an outside perspective as a burner, largely because I argue that burners may be defined as burners or as members of the Burning Man community only to the degree that they adhere to group reinforced cultural practices. Additionally, this definition takes into account that just because one may be defined as a “burner” at one point in time does not mean they may always be defined as a burner. Being defined as a burner exists in large part only to the degree that one may be defined as a member of the extended Burning Man community.

Community Membership and Privilege:

Community members more often than not see their group as existing in contrast to mainstream America as a matter of individual freedom and choice. They ascribe themselves a position of opposition particularly because they create expressive projects together, attempt to live by a communal ethos, and highly value creativity, expression, and critical reflection, rather than necessarily because of structural conditions that have contributed to their ability to participate in the event. Although the sample of participants in this study represented a multitude of nationalities, 96% of the sample was white and most had at least a Bachelor’s degree. Participants did not necessarily see their privilege of upbringing, education, race, citizenship, mobility, or creative intellect as partial products of the environment and social structures surrounding them. There are a number of possibilities as to why group members articulated their involvement within expressive
community as value-oriented rather than an opportunity that most of the world will never have access to.

First, their own personal current lower class economic circumstances might obscure the reality that they are highly privileged in their expressive capacity and individual mobility that allow them to be included as a member of the extended community. Many members of the Burning Man community in Portland live in modest homes, sometimes have trouble paying the rent or making their mortgages, have few tangible ways to measure their income given that much of it comes in the form of under the table cash payments, usually do not have health insurance or retirement accounts, and generally do not shop at exclusive, expensive stores. This gives a semblance of lower class status because community members have problems they associate with lack of capital. They may thus relegate themselves to the “artistic poverty as other” category and miss the larger point that their whiteness, high level of education, creative capacity, and countercultural principles they might have been exposed to as children give them advantages over others even if they are poor themselves.

Secondly, the communal emphasis on inclusivity and reciprocity gives an impression that all are welcome at the table of community self-expression and mobility. In reality, only those who can similarly self-express or keep up with the time necessary for group projects will be central members of the group. The largely middle class backgrounds of community members are not necessarily prohibited topics of conversation, but rather play second fiddle to topics such as the biggest art installation on the playa in Nevada at Burning Man or the next upcoming group gathering. Membership in the community is limited to those who have the means (e.g. flexible occupations,
physical mobility, or creativity) and developed intellect to create artistic projects and successfully socially interact with others.

The burners in my study see mainstream America as simply accepting the dominant culture at face value. In other words, burners tended to relegate themselves to a "better than mainstream" standpoint that tended to discount the privilege with which they acquired this critical standpoint or the exclusivity of their group. However, the ability to equate one's life as a corporate lawyer to having one's "soul sucked" like Eric is largely the invention of someone with privilege, while being "thoroughly nourished" through artistic expression is an option reserved mostly for people who have the time to be involved in expressive projects. Additionally, even being exposed to expression through art is largely a product of class and upbringing (see Bourdieu 1984). Community members largely ignored their position of privilege which allowed them to express or celebrate together, even if they were able to be critical of themselves like Stein or Mark. The youth within the 1960's counterculture also failed to recognize the privilege of their position (Fischer 2006).

The youth of the 1960's counterculture were generally free from scarcity given the shift from deprivation to abundance in the exponential growth of the American economy after World War II that their parents benefitted from. These youth perceived that the "economic affluence was exacting too heavy a cost on individuals and their environment. In other words, young people asked themselves whether the mindless growth ethic was worth the cost" (Fischer 2006:296-297). But the youth within the 1960's counterculture failed to recognize that they were the children of affluence, itself based on the growth ethic (Fischer 2006). Members of the Burning Man community, a
legacy of the 1960’s counterculture (and many community members are themselves children of countercultural parents), also had difficulty recognizing the privilege of their ability to be mobile or create artistic projects together in a supportive group. Some burners, like Mark or Stein were able to be critical about themselves, but their criticisms has less to do with strictly understanding their standpoint of privilege and more to do with the application of their “tool” of critical reflection.

The Dialectic of Counterculture and the Mythical Mainstream:

Burners explained that they were concerned with “moving” mainstream American culture away from materialism. Other countercultures, like the hippies, have been viewed by sociologists as integral to the cultural progression of society. According to Yinger (1982:285) countercultures may drive large-scale social change as their countercultural values become incorporated in the mainstream. This process happens through a dialectic whereby antithetical ideals within the existing system give rise to “counter” values. These oppositional values ultimately become integrated within the more dominant system (Yinger 1982), thereby progressively changing the dominant ideas in society through a dialectic. According to Yinger’s presidential address to the American Sociological Association in 1977 (pp. 836)

Some use it [the term counterculture] as a word of opprobrium, an indication of incivility, depravity, heresy, or sedition. For others, counterculture means hope and salvation, a unique and perhaps final opportunity to get humankind off the road to destruction.

Given their intent of furthering countercultural principles based on community and anti-consumerism outside of the event, burners would likely see themselves as purveyors of attempting to save “humankind” from the “road of destruction.” Amongst the youth who participated in hippie countercultures in the 60’s and 70’s, there was also a strong belief
that the countercultural movements would alter society's "consciousness" in positive, transformative ways (Wuthnow 1976). As a "counterculture" rather than a "youth subculture," the goals surrounding the burner community have been to, as Xavier and Laura put it, "move" American culture "forward." In other words, burners claim to bring elements of cultural principles they practice at Burning Man to their home environments, purposively transmit their countercultural ideologies through practicing artistic expression and a communal ethos, and facilitate integration with their home environments.

The burner Bohemian value system emphasizes such values as a disdain for capitalist structures such as unintended (and intended) ecological consequences of production and is thus in many ways antithetical to mainstream American beliefs. The counterculture of the 1960's also emphasized community over consumerism (Berger 1981). Ideologies like anti-consumerism are integral to the extended Burning Man community. The ideologies add to the existing cultural repertories of burners. Swidler (2001:102-103) discusses the lifecycle of ideologies.

Ideologies, often carried by social movements, model new ways to organize action and to structure group life. Such ideological movements are, however, in active competition with other cultural frameworks—at the least, in competition with common sense, and usually with alternative traditions and ideologies as well. In a wider and more long-term explanatory frame, however, an ideology's appeal may depend on the strategies of action it supports, and the specific historical situations in which these contested cultural models are enacted may determine which take root and thrive and which wither and die.

The countercultural values supported within the Burning Man community have become the new common sense for burners, who also work for the expansion of these new "common sense" ideals in others through group socialization processes. New ideologies
that resonate with experience may eventually be come to be seen as subjectively meaningful and objectively true for individuals (Geertz 1973) and thus possibly become internalized (Abramson 2010). The strategies of action that burners support and have partially internalized include a stronger sense of communal interdependence and moving Americans beyond materialism. Subsets of more traditional mainstream America must identify with these ideals or at least find something attractive or resonant about them because rather than withering and dying, Burning Man has become incredibly well attended with “arms of the community” existing in various global cities.

Burners see expression, their countervalues, and being together in community as a kind of antidote to the consumerism and homogenization of mainstream American culture. For them, the ideals of their community like environmental awareness or group commitments to support, are a means of moving American culture in what they view as a constructive direction. However, at the same time, the proliferation of their countercultural ideals often assist the mainstream culture they seek to work against. Participants often unknowingly support the American dominant culture by buying goods for the actual event of Burning Man as Stein and Mark commented or by providing the authentic stylistic fodder for the commodification of fashion trends. Interestingly, this is done through a counterculture they assume to be in ideological opposition to the mainstream which does still buffer the overarching capitalistic system they exist within.

Kozinets (2002:31) writes

Art at Burning Man is socially constructed as a purely self-expressive practice that is radical, communally interactive, and not for sale. It is placed in dialectical opposition to the efficiency of modern industrial production in which designs are functional, divorced from public view, and conducted for profit. Burning Man’s emphasis on self-expression and self-transformation, rather than practical matters, provides it with a useful
differentiation from the prevailing ethos of productivity and efficiency used by market forces. Ironically, this differentiation is co-opted by companies that send employees to Burning Man for “team building” and to “expand creative thinking” (Hua 2000). The fact that corporations use Burning Man to enhance the very characteristics that they are criticized for point to an interesting irony.

Kozinets (2002) points out one chief irony of the event, namely that Burning Man provides creative training for capitalistic co-optation. Additionally, participants called upon traditional American ideals like “freedom” or foundational figures of America like Thomas Jefferson to give credence to their value systems in much the same way as neo-conservative liberals use the American constitution to give credence theirs. Interviewees were partially aware that many of their ironic stances played into the dominant American culture they attempt to resist. Yet they did not necessarily see re-appropriating traditional American symbols negatively. Rather, they tended to view their individual and group position as an inevitable functioning part of the “dialectic of counterculture” (Yinger 1982) and as their self-proclaimed group work of “moving” mainstream culture forward.

Although we may think of culture as less a stream in which we are immersed, and more like a tool kit with implements to actively use in various social situations (Swidler 1986), the participants I interviewed tended to discuss mainstream America as though it were actually a much larger stream with their group of burners clinging together in the middle of mainstream American culture on a log. For example, Marjorie identified members of her community as “all the freaky people,” who behave outside of the “cookie cutter American Dream” and Asteria “recognized” others as “part of [her] tribe” by their commitment to creating art and “being together in community” which she found antithetical to the “capitalist world.”
Americans may espouse contradictory and competing viewpoints and ideologies at the same time. In *Talk of Love*, Swidler (2001) finds that dominant images of romantic love resurface during discussions with middle class Americans, even when participants consciously disavow those same images. She asserts that when cultural critics explain this kind of cultural misunderstanding they tend to call upon the illustration of a dominating hegemonic ideology as being responsible [one example being the culture industry (see Gitlin 1983; Thompson 1990)] in a kind of cultural binary. However, culture may not necessarily be so clear cut within the confines of the binaries that individuals articulate when discussing their lives.

Swidler (2001:129) argues that the ideal of mythic love persists not because of hegemony but because “culture does not describe external reality so much as it organizes people’s own lines of action.” According to Swidler (2001), ideological hegemony does not necessarily mean people unthinkingly accept dominant views like burners think members of “mainstream” culture do because researchers have found wide-ranging cultural dissent and skepticism about the reality of the “American dream” in many empirical studies (e.g. Mann 1970; Huber and From 1973; Rainwater 1974; J. Hochschild 1981:114-47; Kluegel and Smith 1986:53-73; Reinarman 1987). Mann (1970) has argued that when thinking about day-to-day experiences, people are not necessarily persuaded by dominant ideologies, but the ideology “publicly promoted by mainstream cultural authorities provides the primary resource people have available for thinking about the more abstract generalizations that might describe their society” (quoted in Swidler 2001:254). In other words, limited access to alternative ideologies
prescribes a situation where individuals use the dominant ideology to describe their lives since they do not necessarily have another option.

"Mainstream" culture is thus not just one body with the same overarching dominant ideology. But distancing oneself from a perceived mainstream culture or ideology helps people order their lives, even with the empirically demonstrated heterogeneity of American culture and the largely mythical reality of the "American Dream." In particular, individuals may distance themselves from mainstream ideologies to help give order to their lives through a belief system they see as concrete.

Participants in this study positioned themselves in opposition to mainstream ideologies like consumerism and repeatedly referred to "regular society" or the "mainstream." However, the data present a more complicated picture than simply "us as burners" versus "robotized them." Countercultures or subcultures do not simply stand in opposition to one homogeneous "mainstream" cultural body of Americans. Dichotomies of mainstream/other do not necessarily present a full picture. Thornton (1996:93-96) criticizes studies of subcultures (e.g. Evans 1989; Frith 1978; Hebdige 1979; Mungham 1976) for their "inconsistent fantasies of the mainstream" which provide a caricature or the "chimera of a negative mainstream." She argues that

Dichotomies like mainstream/subculture and commercial/alternative do not relate to the way dance crowds [the group under study] are objectively organized as much as to the means by which many youth cultures imagine their social world, measure their cultural worth and claim their subcultural capital.

In other words, the mainstream provides a way that some groups of individuals measure their societal standing, but the "mainstream" culture is largely mythical. Although her point is well taken, the empirical reality of the data I present show that while participants
in my study do “imagine” their communal position as against the mainstream, they also act on countercultural principles that they believe are different than the mainstream. For example, even if riddled with contradictions, participants attempt to employ themselves in occupations congruent with their countercultural value system, like marijuana cultivation, as I will show in the next chapter. Moreover, their end goal is integration and positive transformation of American culture, rather than simply a condemnation of it.

Thornton (1996) accuses Hebdige (1979) and other earlier subcultural researchers as uncritically relaying the dichotomous beliefs of the subcultures under study and getting caught up in “denigrating” the mainstream. However, there are parts of the dominant American culture legitimately worth “denigrating” such as ignoring consumerism’s role in environmental degradation, just as there are aspects of counterculture and subculture worth critically examining like burners’ propensity for imaging themselves as different than a mythical mainstream. There are certainly great benefits of capitalism, but there also serious and lasting problems with the environmental degradation caused by the “treadmill of production” (Schnaiberg 1980) inherent within the capitalistic system that deserves critical examination.

I agree that “mainstream” American culture is heterogeneous, with a multitude of variation, and that it does little good to examine subcultures or countercultures simply in terms of a mainstream/subculture or mainstream/counterculture dichotomy. But this dichotomy helped inscribe symbolic boundaries of the group leading to greater cohesion and collective identity, helped shape social and individual action for participants in this study, and provided motivations for social action. Additionally, the participants in my study continually positioned themselves as antithetical to “mainstream” because of values
they viewed as problematic like environmental degradation, consumerism, or alienation. They did not "other" themselves from mainstream simply because it was "inauthentic" or "uncool." Members of the community maintain the distinction between themselves as a community and the mainstream because it helps them articulate their own viewpoints and values and the boundaries of the group. Participants also advocated for actively shifting the ideologies of the mainstream towards principles they more highly value such as environmentally-friendly practices by what Henri called "waking up" the mainstream (i.e. setting an example) or influencing the dominant culture by simply existing within it (i.e. what Laura called "integration"). Their opposition to values like consumerism largely had to do with the uncritical nature with which they view Americans' acceptance of these values, regardless of whether they were themselves aware that "mainstream" is essentially mythical. However fictitious the mainstream foil might be, the denigration of the mainstream provides a means of group cohesion. Thus, these shared cultural meanings within their community contributes to establishing a community identity and cohesion within the group (Katovich and Couch 1992).
CHAPTER 5

MOBILE COMMUNITY STYLES OF LIFE

Lifestyle choices have become increasingly important to individual self-identity in modernity in response to the influences of capitalism, mobility, and a risk-ridden world (Giddens 1991). Individuals have been stripped of more traditional identities and thus attempt to create new forms of self definition (Cohen 1985). What have been termed “expressive identities” (Hetherington 1998), represent some modern individuals’ attempts to address the intersection between lifestyles and the search for collective identification (Maffesoli 1988a, 1996; Bauman 1990, 1991). Bourdieu (1984:171) defines lifestyle as “a system of classified and classifying practices, i.e., distinctive signs (‘tastes’).”

Lifestyles in the extended Burning Man community, which include an emphasis on global travel, flexible occupations, and expressive style and taste, represent an aesthetic and value-oriented opposition to what burners may call “mainstream” lifestyles. Thus, these elements of the extended community’s lifestyles represent a social identity defined through difference (Bourdieu 1984:172).

Gary Fine (2010:386) argues that “the intersection of meaning, expressed through the negotiation of lines of action, constitutes a community.” Put another way, meaning and social action taken together generate community. Burners use elements of the group cultural meanings inherent in their lifestyle to help reinforce the symbolic boundaries of the group and produce a community built upon shared cultural codes. Yet how might this process play out? I found that flexible occupations, style, and the values that burners
attribute to their lifestyle provide a visibly recognizable and symbolic boundary for other
group members and may limit entry into the group. This chapter focuses on two
particular elements of the extended community’s system of classifying practices of their
lifestyle; the group flexible occupations and their cultural expression of style.

**The Lifestyle of Mobile, Flexible Occupations:**

Many burners in the extended community explain that they have occupations that
allow for travel so that they can attend Burning Man, other arts festivals, or because they
cite a penchant for world travel. In addition to frequently traveling the world or meeting
up through their travels at festivals like Burning Man or the Oregon Country Fair, many
participants have dual businesses in Bali, India, Mexico, Europe, and Asia. Some
participants spend their entire summers traveling on the festival circuit to sell clothing
they have designed and manufactured in other countries like Marjorie. She spends her
winters in India designing and manufacturing clothing and her summers traveling to
festivals or in Portland selling the clothes.

I will enter a community and then connect with people one on one. So, in
a sense, I have had my toes in a lot of different communities within
Portland and now along the west coast with my festival lifestyle and
within Burning Man which is a global community and also overseas in
India which is a travelers scene. So I’ve got a slice of my community in so
many different communities.

Marjorie notes that she belongs to “many different communities” because she travels so
frequently. I asked her if she thought there was an overarching identity for her group
given that she feels she belongs to so many different groups of burners all over the world
and the west coast.

There’s totally a common thread. That’s why I can say the global family,
which is one of the reasons why I felt very inspired to do the specific
direction of my business that I do. To bring back and rep the independent
designers from other countries to show people that this community goes well beyond our metropolitan area or the west coast. This is something that’s going on around the world. There’s people in our community in places like Sweden or Israel or other countries that are doing the same thing. So that’s actually what I’ve been most inspired about with bringing designs from independent creators from other long reaching portions of our community around the world.

Marjorie was “inspired” to have a business based in many world locations because of what she calls her “global family.” She wants to “rep” or represent designers from other countries to “show people that this community goes well beyond our metropolitan area or the west coast.” Additionally, Marjorie sees her self-employed occupation as integral to this lifestyle.

Many community members like Marjorie make money through occupations with untaxed and undocumented payments and incomes that allow room in their schedules for travel, group gatherings, and artistic creation. As I explained in an earlier chapter, every interviewee in this study was self-employed or engaged in short term flexible work where they were in charge of their own schedules. Some examples of these flexible occupations members engage in include massage therapy, self-employed carpentry, secondhand clothing collecting and selling, festival promoting, gallery operating, or any other manner of self-employment like creating and selling foods such as chocolates or herbal remedies. The flexible occupations allow group members to travel or attend festivals and gatherings of the community. They also allow for the extensive time needed to create art or participate in group expressive projects like art installations at Burning Man. Some participants like Marjorie design and manufacture their own clothes in other countries and sell them on the festival circuit allowing them to skirt American taxes, pay wages
they deem as fair to those in other countries, and generally be in charge of their own
schedules.

As a massage therapist, Isabelle makes her own schedule and can travel the world
as long as she has the funds to do so. She is the daughter of a German man and an
American mother. She grew up in Colorado and went to massage school in New Mexico.
She then lived in Portland for 7 years, but spent much of the time moving between
Mexico, Portland, India, and Germany. She fluently speaks English, German, and
Spanish. She currently lives in Australia and we spoke face-to-face during a visit she had
to Portland in 2008.

One aspect of my job really enables me to participate in a lot of these
things. The fact that I don’t have a 9-5 that I’m committed to most of the
year with only 2 weeks of vacation; that I can schedule what I want when I
want. And book up and make money and then not schedule anything for
the most part and leave and go have these kinds of experiences. A lot of
people don’t have that luxury to take off for a couple of weeks or on a
whim or whatever. So it definitely enables my connection to it.

Isabelle’s flexible employment gives her the ability to travel and attend festivals. She also
admits that a lot of people don’t have this “luxury.”

I asked Timothy, the owner of a small, nonprofit, progressive art gallery, why he
made the choice to stressfully piece together flexible employment over trying to get a
more stable job. He responded with an answer that had to do with prioritizing meaning in
his life and making sacrifices for an occupation with meaning.

I’ve just never come up with anything I want to do besides this. I’ve made
a lot of sacrifices to do this. I have no health insurance. I have a shared
housing situation. I don’t own a vehicle besides bikes. I don’t have access
to a lot of things that go along with the stability of a 9-5 job, but I also get
back from this experience, a will to live. And the feeling that I’m doing
something important.
Timothy chooses his job because he gets “a will to live” and a feeling that he is “doing something important” from his occupation. For him, this “will to live” is worth the trade-off of not having health insurance or having “stability.”

Xavier, a DJ and musician, who works as a bartender part time feels that members of his community have to create their own jobs because the “world is never going to be what we want it to be.”

A lot of the people that I bartend for on the weekends are people that seem to be okay with the way the world is. Maybe they’re catching on to the fact that they’re not going to have a better standard of living than their parents. Maybe they’re catching on slowly that working in a cubicle isn’t as great as they thought it was going to be. But for all of my friends, that’s never been good enough. And even the ones that do work in the corporate world, I literally can only point to maybe two that actually enjoy the work they do. About half my friends are unemployed and they’re not happy about it, but even when they had a job, they were miserable. It is conceivable that this world is never going to be what we want it to be….That is the sadness. That unless we create our own jobs, find some type of a need that only we can do or synthesize our color, our craft, our skew on things into some type of commercial product or service, we are either going to have to lower our hopes for what we want to do for a living or we are going to be poor.

Xavier sees contemporary life as fraught with meaninglessness, but he sees artistic expression in a communal environment or creating their own occupations that are infused with meaning as a way to ameliorate this “existential isolation” (Giddens 1991:9). Xavier emphasizes that “unless we create our own jobs” (i.e. creating self-employed alternative occupations), individuals are either going to have to simply accept being unhappy amidst modern dislocations or “be poor.” Xavier went on, “Would I rather be a drone and rich, or have this fire of creation in me and be poor?—obviously I choose this.”

After explaining that the “common denominators” of his community were that members had been to Burning Man or that they “eschewed the status quo American
dream,” Tex explains how he sees his community as developing an economic “third way” which includes a “whole new way of living in this world.” Tex, an articulate white community member in his mid-thirties with an infectious grin and a quick satirical wit, makes his living from project managing different artistic and community projects.

The American dream and the status quo has failed our generation so heavily, that many more people are starting to question that. So what we find is an ever growing community of discontented young creative people who have found, sort of, a third way. For a long time, I felt like I was living in this gray economy. Everything is project-based, freelance, under the table payments. Whether that involves transactions of a criminal nature or whether that involves just purely creative projects that get people by. The whole festival circuit or network is really a gray economy. No one claims this shit on their taxes. And I think that we’re just sort of the vanguard of a whole new way of living in this world. We don’t have the same opportunities our parents or their parents did. So what we’ve created is another way of making ends meet and fulfilling ourselves on a lot of levels.

According to Tex, members of the group have developed a “third way,” or occupations that are “project-based” or “freelance” with “under the table payments.” He sees his group as a “vanguard of a whole new way of living in this world” because they cannot take advantage of opportunities that their parents had. Both Marjorie and Tex describe a community of individuals that are drawn together by the appeal of “creative projects” outside of the mainstream. They are both also self-employed and travel the world quite a bit like most other members of their group.

Seneca, a woman in her early forties who spent time growing up as a child in Brazil, explains that she engages in used clothing collecting and traveling to festivals to sell the clothing because she wants to “rebel” against “what society thinks that everyone should be doing.”

It’s just me doing my own thing; it’s not working for anyone. I haven’t worked for anyone since I was like 21. I went on tour with the Grateful
Dead selling jewelry all over the country and realized then that I can just do what I want and not really have to do what society thinks that everyone should be doing. So I've always sort of rebelled against that.

Seneca "realized" when she was in her early twenties that she did not have to subscribe to the "rules" of more traditional occupations. Her occupation is one way she feels like is "rebell[ing]" against what mainstream "society thinks that everyone should be doing."

Like Seneca, participants tended to articulate the link between their value system and their lifestyle that included flexible occupations. For burners like Seneca, their cultural frames or their way of looking at the world does not "fit with" the mainstream American value system that regards stable 9-5 employment as a priority. They explain that have "chosen" to create their own flexible occupations that adhere to their countercultural values, but also allow them time to travel.

Bourdieu (1984:57) argues that "the artist's life-style is always a challenge thrown at the bourgeois life-style, which it seeks to condemn as unreal and even absurd, by a sort of practical demonstration of the emptiness of the values and powers it pursues."

Bourdieu sees the line that artists often draw between themselves and members of the upper classes as a kind of extension of class warfare. According to his viewpoint, artists or members of economically disadvantaged classes seek to visibly reproduce the economic power of the bourgeois by demonstrating their freedom from necessity. Because one visible and important aspect of economic power is the ability to keep "economic necessity at arm's length," other groups will attempt to demonstrate objective distance from economic necessity "which doubles freedom by exhibiting it. As the objective distance from necessity grows, life-style increasingly becomes the product of what Weber calls a 'stylization of life,' a systematic commitment which orients and
organizes the most diverse practices” (p 55-56). In other words, artists simulate a kind of economic freedom from traditional employment in order to demonstrate that they are, in fact, free to choose their lifestyle over structural constraint.

**Flexible occupations link with countervalues:**

Marjorie felt that her flexible occupation was a conscious choice that helped ameliorate “stress.” Our conversation centered on why she thought members of the community choose flexible and non-stable work over the security of having jobs with health insurance or retirement accounts, especially given that most community members are highly educated within the university educational system. She told me it was because members of her community have a different view on the “real meaning of wealth” than most Americans. I asked if their lifestyle was actually a choice or the result of larger circumstances.

Interviewer: On the one hand you explain an us-value of the community of “What’s the real meaning of ‘wealth?’” But on the other hand, I’m wondering if you’re not forced into it by the shifting changes in the economy and the unavailability of jobs outside of the service industry these days. Because I don’t know that members of the community would even be able to get stable 9-5 jobs if they wanted them.

Marjorie: Being in a position where I still have a lot of connection to people who have those typical kinds of jobs and also being in the profession where I’m selling to people and monitoring how what’s going on in our economy is affecting my own business because I’m doing sales. Honestly the thought of returning to my old profession after several years of this lifestyle gives me post-traumatic stress. If I was offered a job right now in the old corporate world that I once had, that was well paying with lots of benefits and health insurance and a company car, I would say no thank you.

I began my question implying that it might be possible that group members exist on the economic margins because they don’t have many better options, not because they cognizantly make the choice. Yet Marjorie insisted that even if she had the choice, she
would choose her current job. Like Marjorie, many participants described their staunch opposition to working in or re-entering jobs in the alienating “corporate world.” Many of them prioritized a self-imposed financial instability that provided flexibility to travel to festivals or to have the time to be involved in artistic projects centered on self-expression over taking more secure jobs. Like Marjorie, most participants saw themselves as making a personal choice to exist in a group of other creative people who emphasized the importance of meaning over materialism as a way to mitigate the dislocations in modernity. They saw their flexible occupations as enabling them to participate in a mobile lifestyle including travel and festival participation like Isabelle. Others, like Xavier, alluded to the larger point that artists and members of his community may be forced into their position by structural inequalities, but still used their community value system to defend the occupational “choices” they made rather than ascribe themselves a position of powerlessness within the “mainstream” economic system.

Group members often find ways to make money outside of what both Marjorie and Tex call “mainstream.” One particular flexible occupation that is attractive to community members because of its lucrative nature, relative ease, and the flexibility it affords, is the growth of medical marijuana. The outdoor growing season for marijuana lasts from the spring through the fall which gives participants 3-4 months of time off during the winter where they can travel or attend group gatherings. Participants may also pay friends to watch and water their crop while they attend summer festivals. Thus the marijuana trade often enables group members to afford the quality of life they find enjoyable.
Ten of the 44 interviewees admitted to either growing marijuana or selling it, while another 10 participants admitted to "trimming" marijuana during the fall harvest season. Trimming involves the act of shaping marijuana "buds" with scissors into a sellable product. In other words, roughly half of the participants in this study rely on marijuana for at least a portion of their income. Festivals can be a money laundering scheme for the growth of marijuana, but drugs also help finance the festivals or art installations. Justin, a web designer, painter, and art installation designer/live digital painter describes how making art and the festival "scene" of the extended community is often used for laundering money from marijuana.

I can't think of many better ways to launder money than producing artwork. Because it's kind of this thing that when you assign it a value, it has that value and someone can make it on the spot. I can make a painting on demand and if someone buys it for $1,000, that painting is worth $1,000 as far as the government is concerned. If you were paying exorbitant prices for artwork, it might not work. But average gallery prices, there's no controlling the price of it. So if I was a pot dealer I could pay larger amounts of cash to an art dealer and launder money that way. Another really good way to launder money is to throw a festival. If you throw a festival and your main source of income is your ticket sales, there's not really anybody checking how many people were there. There's nobody in the IRS. And a festival can invest an incredible amount of money in expenses and still not break even. And those expenses can go right back into the pockets of the people paying for the festival. So those two things combined make it so that the drug trade in general, but really the marijuana trade because it's cultivated on the west coast and other drugs like MDMA and acid and coke comes from outside sources. So the funding for those goes to outside sources. With marijuana, we see it coming right back into the community. Because festivals and artwork are great ways to handle cash, I see a lot of direct financial benefits from it. And I know they're direct because I've sold a lot of artwork to people who have a lot of their money from selling pot in one form or another. I've built websites for them. I've sold paintings to them.

Justin does not see laundering the money from the marijuana industry in a negative light.

His cultural frame prioritizes these practices as beneficial because the money from
marijuana goes "right back into community." He sees the practice as keeping money locally within his extended community as a "great way to handle cash."

Marijuana is also used to fund many of the large scale art installations at Burning Man or the bigger themecamps, although this direct connection is a phenomenon BMOrg tends to gloss over because many sources of funding for art installations do also come from legitimate sources. When referring to art installations at Burning Man, two of the interviewees used the same phrase "IT or THC" to describe how they think most of the larger art installations are financed. "IT" or "information technology," refers to thoseburners who made large sums of money from the technology boom in northern California, while “THC” refers to tetrahydrocannabinol which is the main psychoactive substance in marijuana.

Marijuana growth and distribution is partially legal on the west coast through the use of medical marijuana cards, but most participants grow or sell more than they are allotted legally. Jonathon runs a large marijuana farm in northern California for half the year and lives in Portland, OR for the other half the year. Growing marijuana allows him to travel and spend time with his group of friends. I asked why he chose a profession that was not fully legal, especially given the possible repercussions of getting arrested. He responded that engaging in the semi-legal drug trade is far preferable to him than the "whole trajectory that’s a good white Christian thing" he sees most Americans ascribing to. For him, the informal drug economy outside of this more traditional American life trajectory is a way he sees himself and his group as being "beautiful."

I think one of the most beautiful parts of our community is we’ve, by choice, somehow detached from the social norms of what life is supposed to be. I think there are multiple reasons why our particular family has gone that route [i.e. into the marijuana informal economy]. There is this matrix
idea about how you’re supposed to behave and what you’re supposed to do. You go to high school, you go to college, you get a career, you meet someone nice, you have kids, you get married, you settle down, you have a house, maybe two. This whole trajectory that’s a good white Christian thing...Being introduced [to drugs, to his community]...It’s a gateway to a different reality...That’s what really scares the status quo. There’s a different way to be, there’s a different paradigm that we can live in.

For Jonathon, the “matrix idea [i.e. reference to the movie “The Matrix” where humans are unknowingly used by robots] about how you’re supposed to behave” is something that the group has more or less gotten beyond. By going through a “gateway to a different reality,” they have changed the “paradigm” they exist within.

According to Jonathon, most people’s life trajectories consist of a structured set of steps that one has to incrementally follow. But one of the “most beautiful parts” of his group is that they have somehow been able to detach “from the social norms” of what mainstream American society accepts and allows by developing their own “system.” This “system” sometimes includes engaging in the semi-legal informal economy and allows participants a quality of life they deem preferable to mainstream American culture.

Jonathon continued to describe why he feels his community develops their own system. I also highlighted this quote in an earlier chapter, but it also provides context here.

If the system was working, we wouldn’t try and find another system. If it was possible to have life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as dictated by our constitution, we wouldn’t need to find a subculture. Culture would work...What we try to do in our community is that pursuit of happiness, to have a good life, to enjoy ourselves, to spend time with each other, to experience projects, and enjoy friendships and love and have that as a high call together.

To community members like Jonathon, the alternative occupational system based on flexible work or the “subculture” they develop only means something when done together. Mainstream American “culture” is out of touch with how people should live.
According to him, finding an alternative "system" of cultural and economic relations or way of life allows the group to exist in a different "reality." This "reality" enables what he considers as the true meaning of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness which includes doing "projects" based on artistic expression together, enjoying themselves, and generally leading a mobile lifestyle that enables these things.

For community members like Jonathon or Tex, existing on the margins of the greater American cultural and economic system within a community supportive of "experienc[ing] projects" and "enjoy[ing] friendships... as a high call together" gives them a sense of being in charge of ordering their own lives and value systems. That they are not necessarily subject to a predisposed life trajectory in which they have no choice or are subject to American values which they consider to have lost sight of the "true" meaning of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It also gives them a sense of creating their own social, cultural, and economic rules within their community.

Many burners explain that they choose to create their own occupations and own means of monetarily making it through the world, rather than give in to mainstream "9-5" occupations with little personal satisfaction. But this often leads people to have financial difficulties. Tad relayed the story of Denise, a young community member in her early twenties who quit college and her job to follow the "festival circuit" after being "plugged into the community."

I know a lot of them are in their 20's and when you're in your 20's you're not really thinking too much about that [having health insurance or retirement accounts]. But there's other people in their 30's and some of them are turning 40...Seneca for example. She has a loft in her creative space that she's using for a store. And Denise who my wife sort of plugged into the community. My wife told her about some party and she [Denise] had a job and she was going to school. And she came and she connected with all these people and is having this amazing time. And then
I see her around with Seneca all the time. She recently told my wife that she quit her job and is not in school and is just following the festival circuit. That can be okay and I know people make a killing on the festival circuit. And go to India and buy a bunch of stuff and sell them at festivals. There’s people that make $40,000 a year with no taxes. They’ve found their way and there’s always those entrepreneurial types in any social structure. In the sense of this community that we’re a part of.

Tad considered himself one of the more fiscally responsible community members because he has flexible work doing computer programming that allowed him time to travel to DJ gigs, but also the stability of a middle class income. He explained that after developing deeper relationships with the community, Denise stopped working and going to college. He does acknowledge that community members can make money through the festival circuit and achieve both a sense of financial stability and satisfaction, but later explained that it is only a few people in the community who are able to do this successfully. Underlying Tad’s discussion was a kind of concern for Denise and also for Seneca who is now in her forties and does not have any sort of financial stability for her future life.

Once withdrawing from the labor force in the formal economy, many participants engage in what they perceive as a burgeoning Bohemian underground festival economy like the one Justin or Tex describe or the fall marijuana harvest season that offers many artists unskilled, under the table, profitable employment. Quitting their day job serves to distance participants from the cultural and economic market structures of mainstream society. Once burners are integrated into the mobile lifestyle, they also make more and more connections in their extended networks, increase their social capital, and socially distance themselves from mainstream culture and less flexible occupations. It is a circular process whereby communal bonds are reinforced, which increases their community social
capital, which also increases their access to informal networks like the marijuana trade, which helps to further inscribe countercultural values, frames, and motivations. In the end, this process may economically disadvantage group members because they could have difficulty re-entering the workforce after years of informal work.

The flexible occupations of many community members reflect the structural economic changes of post modernity. Interestingly, participants tended to see their lifestyle as a matter of individual choice, rather than as a product of structural constraints that limit their occupational options. One example was Marjorie’s insistence that she would continue to choose her current mobile occupation over stable well-paid employment or Xavier’s “Would I rather be a drone and rich, or have this fire of creation in me and be poor?—obviously I choose this.” Community members tended to talk as though they made a conscious choice about adherence to short term flexible work because of their devotion to expressive or communal values, because they had been transformed through exposure to the group, or because they were searching for meaningful occupations. Although some community members may have found meaningful and economically viable occupations like Marjorie, many community members struggle to make ends meet. Other community members have difficulty re-entering the economy and finding jobs once they’ve been away from mainstream market structures in undocumented occupations like the marijuana industry. Participants may “choose” their lifestyle and occupations, but they are still unable to shake the deeply embedded mainstream culture in America that valorizes individual choice even if they see themselves in opposition to this culture. They still draw from more traditional
American values like freedom and individual choice, even in the face of having few other options available to them.

**Style as Taste Boundary:**

One of the key ways that members of the extended Burning Man community exhibit their supposed freedom from what they may call mainstream values or structures is through their outward presentation of their individual and collective identity via style and body adornment. Group members may discern who is or is not a member based on certain classifiable practices of taste and the associated symbolic boundaries. According to Bourdieu (1984:6) “taste classifies and it classifies the classifier” and can be defined as “the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices” (Bourdieu 1984:173).

I asked Seneca, a group member who creates clothing designs from clothing that other people have thrown out or donated to thrift stores, if what she looks like on the outside was important to her.

That’s just all part of the art form of being an artist, you just, you are an artist all the way through. You’re not just making art, you are art, you’re living art, you’re living-art. You’re not just making it, you are art. You are artistic and you’re being in that art world. I have my whole life, I don’t know anything different. So I’m always creatively coming up with everything. Everything creative, I will expound on, I will go to the farthest degree on. Whether its clothes, whether it’s makeup, whether it’s hair, whether it’s jewelry, whether it’s cutting hair... Anything I try to do the best I can.

According to Seneca, being an “artist” means that “you’re living-art.” She feels as though “artistic” people try to look a certain way on the outside through “clothes,” “makeup,” “hair,” or “jewelry” because “making art” also involves looking like “art.” In other
words, style is an important part of expression and being an “artist” for Seneca and other participants.

According to group members, the styles they wear are in contrast to other groups or mainstream America. Burners often derided what they considered to be the homogenized aesthetic of whatever American style was dominant at the time. One participant claimed, “We’re fed a very watered down aesthetic in the United States.” In other words, participants feel like the dominant culture prescribes the dominant aesthetic that members of the community resist adhering to. Burners explain that they attempt to disrupt what they think of as this bland taste of most Americans by being “authentic” or by being what Seneca called “a path carver.” “It’s stupid to copy other people. That’s what other people do. I usually hang out with path carvers. I don’t hang out with path followers.” In other words, she feels members of her community are authentic taste “path carvers” and everyone else copies whatever aesthetic is currently dominant in the mainstream culture. She sees the members of her group as being unique because of their ability to be authentic in their expression and not “copy” others. The aesthetic boundaries of their group help draw a distinction between themselves and others in America who adhere to what burners consider as the dominant aesthetic.

Two examples of group style include the circus-freak aesthetic of bands in the extended community, like March Fourth Marching Band, and the “steampunk” aesthetic. These particular styles of the group signify cultural codes for group members. The “steampunk” aesthetic is reminiscent of clothing worn in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century in Europe and the United States. This type of dress includes elements such as bustles or corsets. The circus-freak aesthetic resembles costumes that circus
performers might wear and includes elements such as marching band coats and hats with multiple buttons or face paint. This “circus-freak” aesthetic calls on historical interpretations of the legacy of circus performers as freak/other in the United States in the early twentieth century. Burners continue this tradition of freak/other through their dress and other “recognize” others as group members through these codes and taste preferences. The expressive aesthetic of the group helps bolster their burner community identity by providing this visual taste boundary or differentiation.

Burners saw style as an extension of their group expressive identity, but they were also aware that style served to mark group membership. According to Solomon, the expressive clothing he wears is part of “tribeing up” or creating a group with other like-minded individuals. He feels that “what you wear should reflect what’s inside you” because this leads to a person being their most “authentic self” and recognizing other “tribal” members of his group.

Solomon: You realize that what you wear in your day to day life is a costume; it’s a prop. It creates an expectation, so that everyone is in an agreement field about what they’re doing. Suits and ties, we’re in a bank, we’re doing business. You wear something else and you’re something else. It’s like you can change who you are. So what you wear should reflect what’s inside you. Your authentic self. Not so much what you do, but who you are. And that becomes art.

Interviewer: But how is that any different than when you were in high school and the jocks and the popular kids and all the status groups?

Solomon: It’s not different. It’s a human thing to tribe up. And you tribe up via your exposure with what’s on the outside. So by me wearing what I wear, I collect people who are also in my tribe. They can recognize me. Just like how an Amazonian tribal person would know another member based on their tattoos or their earrings what tribe they are in and who you’re talking to and what their values are. And instead of being coerced from the outside, it comes from the inside. That’s where the authenticity is such a great factor. Because if you’re authentically being yourself and you meet with someone else that is being authentic, you meet and it harmonizes. Suddenly you’ve got a group and two people moving in the
same direction. Then you have a dozen people moving in the same direction. You create amazing things, villages, communities, culture, anything. Because you have a number of people working towards a common goal. But it's not coerced from the outside, it comes from within. That's how the individual connects to the community is through their authenticity.

Solomon admits that wearing clothes that other members of his group can “recognize” is not that much different to attaching oneself to a group identity based on status. He feels that it is “a human thing” to “tribe up” according to what people wear on the outside because he thinks the outside reflects the inside of a person. He refers to the recognition as being a kind of “authentic harmon[y]” that leads to a group “moving in the same direction.” He feels that “the individual connects to the community” through their “authenticity” or by “exposure with what’s on the outside.” Style helps group members to find each other because others can recognize the aesthetic boundaries of the community.

Justin explained that he could recognize other people in his “loose community” by what they wear.

I think what would define the community would be that kind of persistence of pushing the boundaries, or changing those aesthetics. So, at the present point I could probably look at someone and identify them as someone who is part of this larger community, but that wouldn’t give me very much information about a more specific community... I couldn’t learn that from just what they look like, but I could probably tell if someone had piercings and tattoos and a certain type of the clothing that they were in my loose community of people I might get along with and have shared interests with.

The defining aspect of the community for Justin is that people “push the boundaries” or work to change the dominant aesthetic in mainstream culture. He admits that he would not be able to surmise anything necessarily specific about the person by what they were wearing, but he would be able to recognize people with “shared interests” through “a certain type of clothing.” Justin draws boundaries between his community and the
mainstream, explaining that his community worked to “push the boundaries” of the mainstream aesthetic.

Some participants draw the distinction between the aesthetic tastes and style of their community and others based on what they perceive as conflicting values that link up with their aesthetic choices. For example, Kyoukai, a professional dancer and “green” fashion designer (i.e. uses environmentally-friendly practices such as using only fabric from discarded secondhand clothes), explains how her value of sustainability is linked to how she designs clothing.

I was thinking that how the performing arts work for me. The work that I primarily do is butoh, and butoh came out of post Hiroshima Japan. It was absolutely a rebellion against westernization. So in my own life, as an American, the butoh path has been a way for me to rebel against the gigantic consumerism culture that I’ve been brought up in. So the dance is a way that I get to act out the rebellion I feel towards many cultural stereotypes and forms in general and by having an ecological focus on the clothing I’m also saying, “okay, here society, we are entrenched in consumerism, even myself. Even though 90% of the time I’m not buying new products, I still am addicted to having stuff.” I go to the Salvation Army bins. I bring in new stuff. So how does having this strong cultural thing and also having a statement about where we need to go as a global community? Which is sustainability.

Kyoukai explains that in designing and wearing clothing from “the bins” (i.e. a large warehouse full of discarded clothing that many secondhand clothing sellers buy clothing from by the pound for refurbishing) is an outward presentation of her value system of sustainability. She wears secondhand clothing explicitly because it is a “rebellion” against “the gigantic consumerism culture” she feels she is a part of even if she admits that she’s still “addicted to having stuff.” In other words, she feels like there is a distinguishing boundary between mainstream consumer culture and what she and other members of her group wear based on principles like a disdain for consumerism.
Mainstream media, such as television or movies, more often than not broadcast conventional styles through programming that reflects mass cultural reproductions. So those who have access to mainstream media or chain stores may have a similar sense of taste about fashion trends. Alternatively, access to the clothing designs of the burner community is more difficult than simply going to a commercialized boutique with multiple locations. Many styles of dress for burners often come through individual contacts they meet at community events or through the festival scene. Burners who want to be “in the know” about elements of particular styles must exist within the physical, cultural, and symbolic boundaries of the group to be familiar with the meet-up locations of the group and the stylistic codes. Many of the clothes or jewelry that burners wear are only available to be bought and sold at artistic or what have been called “transformational”23 festivals that outsiders might not know about. Although these festivals are technically open for attendance to those of the general population, burner social networks provide information on which festivals to attend.

In this general manner, entrance and access to both the physical and aesthetic boundary of the burner community is limited. The most current stylistic products of the community are really only able to be acquired and recognized by those who have already made their way into the boundaries of the group. The styles themselves change on nearly a daily basis and make symbolic statements about the person acquiring or creating the stylistic products in community as to their symbolic worth or their extent of group affiliation. Bourdieu discusses how the difficulty in acquiring products speaks to a

23 Quoted from TEDxVancouver talk, Jeet Kei Leung http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/TEDxVancouver-Jeet-Kei-Leung-Tr

201
product's symbolic worth or "distinctive power" and how the products can reflect the "quality" of the person acquiring them.

What is at stake is indeed 'personality', i.e., the quality of the person, which is affirmed in the capacity to appropriate an object of quality. The objects endowed with the greatest distinctive power are those which most clearly attest the quality of the appropriation, and therefore the quality of their owner, because their possession requires time and capacities which, requiring a long investment of time, like pictorial or musical culture, cannot be acquired in haste or by proxy, and which therefore appear as the surest indications of the quality of the person" (Bourdieu 1984:281).

The more difficult it is to obtain an object, the more reflected worth in the personality of the owner. "Objects of quality" that require significant amounts of time in appropriation are indications of a high quality personality. Although Bourdieu mainly refers to objects like an "exquisite little piece of furniture" (Bourdieu 1984:281) of the upper classes rather than a particular clothing style, other products that require an investment of time in appropriation can also be analyzed in this way. Handmade clothes in the burner community, attained from personal contacts at festivals or through friends, are difficult to obtain if one does not know the right people. The clothes presumably make a statement that says, "I know the right people and have insider information. My status as a crazy Burning Man artist with the correct social networks is affirmed. I have put in the requisite amount of time going to group events and networking. I adhere to this aesthetic."

Wearing these designs (and witnessing others who wear similar "unique" designs) at group events reaffirms the clothes' symbolic value, further inscribes group boundaries and taste, helps relay the level of commitment to the community, and reproduces the aesthetic of the group.

**Taste boundaries within the group:**
The distinction between the group and others also happens within the larger extended community itself and can lead to visible gradients of hierarchy of status within the group. These multiple levels of status within the group itself can be documented by analyzing elements of style. Community members exist underneath the overarching identity of “freak” or “expressive us,” which might disguise the gradients of hierarchy beneath this already differentiating identification. For example, the earlier pictures of group aesthetic show different group aesthetics such as “steampunk,” or “circus freak,” which often indicate which group within the larger burner community that individuals belong to. Taste says something to others about which group individuals belong to and what your role or status may be in the group and in the world at large. In the burner community, beneath the classification as self-expressive freak or burner, layers of “freakiness” exist; often these classifications are status oriented and say something about their role in group.

Trina gave the example of the “cool kids” at Emrgnsee, an electronic music festival that started in Ashland, Oregon and now takes place about an hour drive south of Portland. I asked her if aesthetic had anything to do with why she designed and sewed her own clothing by hand. She replied with an answer that included how the aesthetic aspect of expression can also be a “barrier” within her group.

Aesthetic is part of expression for me. It could also be a barrier, I’ve seen that for certain. Most recently at Emrgnsee, it’s the “cool kids” who dress a certain way and have a certain aesthetic. And they all sort of flock together like birds and then there’s those who have a different aesthetic and they flock together.

Trina explains that different groups within her community often “flock together” depending on the group aesthetic. She feels as though the “cool kids” at Emrgnsee dress
distinctly. Even within the overarching expressive “freak” styles of the group, group members can pick out who the “cool kids” are.

I asked Jenn if there were any specific symbols of her community and if she could recognize people as members of her group based on those symbols. She replied that “there’s definitely ‘a look’” of being a burner. This look often serves as a status symbol in the group.

There’s definitely ‘a look’... The whole feather, leather, lace tribe. And it’s funny because, the whole fashion aspect of it... The material culture of Burning Man. Because for me, I’ve always been someone who has had a hard time buying into that. I don’t have the money to drop on a $220 pair of pants to look cool. But there’s definitely, and I had a conversation with this woman about it at Burning Man. She was from Boston. She was really cute, looked all scenester—all scenester. It all started out because she was like, “I don’t feel like watching these half naked girls grind.” We were standing in front of dragamuffin [art car at Burning Man]. And I was like, “Yeah, what’s with that?” She’s like, “I’ll come out one night, wearing jeans and a t shirt and my hair in a ponytail and I can’t get the time of day. But then I put on my little leather vest and my flared pants, and my fancy belt, and my fedora, and everyone is like, ‘Oh, what’s going on... la la la.’” And so there is definitely this thing of, you don’t have to ever have gone to Burning Man, but if you look the part, you’re going to be accepted. And there’s plenty of times where I’ve felt like I haven’t looked the part even though I built the temple. I don’t have the look all the time. I can do it, but it doesn’t necessarily feel right. And because I don’t look the part, I don’t get remembered, I don’t get recognized or seen. And that definitely carries over into the default world—into this world. There is this kind of requirement for dressing up.

Jenn feels as though she does not “look the part,” of a person who has high status in the group even though she considers herself to have put in the requisite amount of time into expressive projects (i.e. “I built the temple”) to be a group member worth being “recognized.” Because she does not have the money to spend on the latest “scenester” festival gear, she feels she does not “get remembered,” “recognized, or seen.”
Like Jenn and Trina, some burners do admit that there are varying levels of visible classifications of hierarchy in their group via their sense of style. Burners can unknowingly reproduce mainstream stylistic superficiality by adhering to certain "scenster" styles; often leading others to view the group as "exclusive" or not as "accepting" as many in the group would hope based on visual criteria. As Jenn relays, many times burners must look the part in order to "get the time of day" from some of the other people in the community. For other participants, these taste boundaries within the group were actually positive because they provided a visible indication of a commitment to being "interesting."

After explaining that his community was made up of all the interesting people, I asked Richard, "What if somebody goes to Burning Man and they're not really that interesting. Are they still a member of the community?"

Richard: Well, they may be. It'd be hard to not tap into some community at Burning Man. But if you show up in jeans and a t-shirt and you go out at night, no one is even going to notice you because there's some guy in a glowing lobster costume right next to you that will be outgoing. And there's someone who created this awesome art car with swings on it that you'll be riding on. Someone that is trying to start up a conversation about whatever job they left behind and they're not playa-fabulous, they're going to have a hard time. No one's going to know how to relate to them and it will feel like they're not really jumping into the spirit of things which is radical creativity. So it's not that they'll be shunned or ignored, it's just that they won't be noticed because it's dark out there. Likewise in the daytime, if you're walking around in shorts and a t-shirt, others won't presume you're as interesting to talk to as the person that's naked, painted red, handing out snowcones. You're much more likely to go talk to them.

Interviewer: What about outside of Burning Man? It seems to me a pretty tough thing if a community won't recognize someone as a community member just because they only wear t-shirts and jeans.

Richard: Not that they're not recognized. We wear jeans and t-shirts, too. But when we get together in jeans in t-shirts, we'll be joking about the spectacle that was created by someone that went out in something that was
original and funny. It’s kind of like, when you’re at Burning Man or in the real world, you’re looking for the most interesting thing. Oftentimes at Burning Man, it will be, oh let’s find the loudest, biggest sound system, with the most famous DJ with the brightest lights. Going towards the brightest lights and the biggest spectacle can be what a lot of people seek out. The most interesting thing.

Richard believes that taste boundaries in aesthetic can indicate someone who is “not really jumping into the spirit of things.” For him, not being “playa-fabulous” at Burning Man is not necessarily an indication of how cool someone is, but of their commitment to the spirit of the community. He does not think that people are necessarily “ignored” on purpose, but because there are so many head-turning spectacles like the “glowing lobster” next to you, or the “awesome art car,” you won’t be noticed if you are not “jumping into the spirit...of radical creativity.” According to Richard, this boundary also seeps into the world beyond the event, but is not necessarily a problem. His comments indicate that burners like him feel that certain aesthetic boundaries are necessary and represent who is willing to adhere to the group value system.

**Lifestyle in a Modern Community:**

Artistic and cultural consumption, are predisposed to “fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences” (Bourdieu 1984:7). These “legitimated” social differences are defined through practices of taste and emphases on aesthetic preferences. Practices of taste and aesthetic choice, such as dress, distinguish classes and limit access and entry to them. Moreover, differences are used to define and assert one’s social identity (Bourdieu 1984). The styles of members of the burner community, grounded in the group aesthetic, are used to inscribe symbolic boundaries around the group and distinguish them from other groups.
Rather than regarding taste solely as "a gift of nature" as is generally assumed, Bourdieu (pp. 1-3) demonstrates that cultural "needs" are the product of upbringing and education and that works of art only have meaning and interest for those who possess cultural competence. Burners and their cultural preferences, including taste, are largely products of the group culture or the environment surrounding them at festivals or other social gatherings around the world. These elements of taste have been integrated into their individual "habitus" (Bourdieu 1977), but also the collective identity of the extended Burning Man community. For burners, their taste is not necessarily something innate or as "authentic" as they may suggest. Their taste stems from possessing the cultural competence to know what aspects of style such as the "steampunk" or "circus-freak" aesthetic are currently hip in the group, rather than only coming from the "authenticity" from within.

When participating in practices that require a discerning taste, members of the Burning Man community rely in part on their internalized cultural practices or their "habitus" (Bourdieu 1977). Habitus is the set of socially understood ways of acting, habits or behaviors that are acquired during the experiences of everyday life and are often perceived as normal or taken for granted. Interviewees often took for granted that they could recognize other group members based on "authentic" artistic expression that came from within, rather than this "authenticity" coming from established group codes and practices. Bourdieu (1984:170) contends that lifestyles are "systematic products of habitus" and that inherent in lifestyles are sign systems which can be socially classified by others. Members of the burner community classify or discern who is or is not a group member based on certain "classifiable practices" that include but also go beyond style or
taste. For example, the identification of a communal ethos which entails working interdependently on art projects, supporting other community members, or commitments to the group are also part of individual and the collective habitus.

In *Habits of the Heart*, Bellah et. al (1985:72-73) differentiate between what they call “lifestyle enclaves” and communities. Bellah et. al “might consider the lifestyle enclave an appropriate form of collective support in an otherwise radically individualizing society,” but in their view, lifestyle enclaves are not communities.

Whereas a community attempts to be an inclusive whole, celebrating the interdependence of public and private life and of the different callings of all, lifestyle is fundamentally segmental and celebrates the narcissism of similarity. It usually explicitly involves a contrast with others who ‘do not share one’s lifestyle.’ For this reason, we speak not of lifestyle communities, though they are often called such in contemporary usage, but of lifestyle enclaves.

According to Bellah et. al, lifestyle enclaves are different from communities because of the emphasis on social status and because communities also involve investment in public life such as politics. Lifestyle enclaves arose due to modern processes like the emergence of industrialization, the national market, and a resulting freedom from economic necessity that these new jobs gave. As status and social class came to depend more on our modernizing system of occupations and less on identifications with more traditional communities, concern for “lifestyle expressiveness” and displaying wealth became more important to the affluent American than traditional identifications. Bellah et. al see the “contemporary lifestyle enclave [as] based on a degree of individual choice that largely frees it from traditional ethnic and religious boundaries” (p 73). Put another way, in modernity, social status depends less on community affiliation and more on displays of wealth. However, as I showed in Chapter 3, the group is not a lifestyle enclave, but a
community due to the degree of commitments, support, and collective values and beliefs.

Much of the outward presentation of self and collective identification via style in the
extended Burning Man community is intent on displaying group membership or what
may be considered an artistic and expressive social status, rather than necessarily being
indications of belonging to a lifestyle enclave. However, the group does have a
discernable distinct lifestyle that contains practices which further inscribe the symbolic
boundaries of the group.
In the last few decades there has been a debate in sociology and other disciplines as to whether or not place still matters in the age of “new mobilities” (Sheller and Urry 2006), given the modern “placelessness of place” (Relph 1976), or the “transcendence of place” (Coleman 1993). The main argument of these scholars essentially rests on the notion that revolutions in transportation, technology, and communication have eliminated the need to be anchored at any one point. Yet the face-to-face social interactions necessary for the development of a community with gemeinschaft-like social relationships must ensue within place-based containers of social interaction (Driskell and Lyon 2002). A tension therefore exists between attempts by individuals to develop gemeinschaft-like relations with others and the physical mobility in the modern world where spaces of social interaction may continually shift. Accordingly, what role might place play in a seemingly “place-less” community such as the extended Burning Man community?

What were once spaces of place have become spaces of cultural and physical flows for mobile actors (Hall 2009), yet place still matters to sociological research regardless of physical mobility (Gieryn 2000). Places are imbued with personal, cultural, and social meanings for the individuals inhabiting them. People use places to create a sense of home, where they feel like they can really “be themselves” (Cuba and Hummon 1993). Individual identities can be wound up with that of place (Hummon 1990) and also
with the culturally constructed identity of communities (Sampson and Goodrich 2009). In other words, senses of place are often important to an individual’s sense of themselves and the groups to which they belong. It therefore follows that the home locations of burners may also be important to the collective identity and social relationships of the extended Burning Man community.

Burners spend a significant amount of time traveling the world and explain that they belong to a countercultural value-based extended community. However, regardless of the degree of global physical mobility burners exhibit or their own “placeless” value-conceptualization of their extended community, local context contributes to the creation of the social order of groups and should thus be emphasized in sociological research (Fine 2010). I focus in this chapter on a collectivity of burners who spend at least some portion of their year physically in Portland, Oregon in order to examine the cultural significance of local place as a site for social interaction for mobile actors attempting to create community. I investigate the significance of the urban cultural milieu, place, and the spaces (such as the urban built environment) in the locality of Portland, Oregon for the development of one “pocket” of the extended burner community. I found that the place and culture of Portland provided a ripe environment and cultural context for members of the extended Burning Man community to form a tightly-knit group. I also found that the spaces within the city provide sites for cultural and social integration of burners with others throughout the place of Portland.

The Portland “Pocket” of the Extended Burning Man Community:

The Burning Man Regional Network was formally launched by BMOrg in 2003 as “the year-round embodiment of the Burning Man experience, supporting it as a global
cultural movement. In cities around the world, the Burning Man Project has established Regional Contacts whose role is to help local Burners connect with each other, while bringing Burning Man principles and culture into their local communities. In places like Delaware or Oregon, regional contacts facilitate group events and hold regional “burns” during the year prior to the main “burn” in Nevada. There are 78 contacts in 45 American states and 29 contacts in 20 different countries other than the United States. These regional networks and contacts keep gatherings of burners consistent throughout the year. Partially through these regional networks, and partially through a personal desire to connect with other burners, “pockets” of the Burning Man community exist in different cities throughout the world.

I asked Richard, who lives in Portland, Oregon most of the year, if he thought that communities similar to his burner community in Portland could happen in places besides Portland or if his community was place-specific.

No, it’s happening everywhere in little pockets. It’s pretty expansive in Philadelphia and New York. I mean, it started in San Francisco. It was kind of a blossoming of the counterculture, much like the hippie revolution of the 60’s and the 70’s. It’s another counterculture blossoming out of San Francisco, transplanted to the Black Rock Desert Nevada, inviting the most enthusiastic people from the country and the world to come out there and live these ideals. And when they do, invariably they go home and they want to live these ideals in their hometowns so they find likeminded people... And they do like my friends did [in Philadelphia], get connected and find people that want to create a scene and have a lot of laughs and show people how to have a really good time. And transcend the mundane circumstances of their lives and live something really fabulous and special. This happens. It’s interesting to see the communities pop up. It’s the same community or sister communities that are connected, but they pop up first in San Fran, and then they spread to places like Portland which explode with enthusiasm and they spread to Santa Cruz and down to L.A. and every city. I went to regional burns in Arizona, Salt Lake City. They all have these little pockets of community that blow up with enthusiasm and a similar aesthetic.

http://regionals.burningman.com/regionals_intro.html

24
Richard has attended regional burns himself in other places beside Oregon and attests to having friends who develop contacts with other burners in places like Philadelphia. According to him, pockets of the extended community have “enthusiasm,” a “similar aesthetic,” and a certain kind of “like-mindedness” in common. Val also agreed with Richard that the different segments of the Burning Man community are developing in home locales. Val describes how the face-to-face social interactions at Burning Man become “whirlwinds” that move into in participants’ home environments and help create community.

I think what I’ve heard is that Larry Harvey [founder of Burning Man] said he wanted it to be kind of like a bunch of little whirlwinds that blow off and go off to other places and it takes the energy and it goes back to the homes of where people came from and it plants a little seed there. I think that’s definitely happening. And the regional events are emblematic of that intent. More people can get together and realize, oh, there’s 5,000 people in the city of Portland who go to this. And I might know 500 of them. And then you get to know each other and you take that experience that you had individually out there and you recreate it in little ways here and you make new friendships and alliances on the local front and it develops that community even more. Because it’s a community, however you want to define it, people come together for a common purpose.

For Val, burners that know each other beyond the physical confines of the event in home locations constitute members of the same extended community. They come together with a common purpose in face-to-face interaction and recreate the experience they had at Burning Man in a variety of home localities like Portland, OR. According to him, Burning Man-like events back in participants’ homes help to further cement “friendships” and “alliances” that develop what many refer to as their “community.” For him, the community is a community regardless of how it is defined from an outsider, but the
"local front" is still important to the development of relational bonds or making "new friendships and alliances" for the whole extended group.

Social interactions happen between burners in a variety of locations and "pockets" of the extended Burning Man community continue to crop up throughout America and the world at large. Portland, OR is one place on the west coast where a large contingent of the Burning Man community continues to interact year round beyond the confines of Black Rock City, Nevada. Many mobile members of the extended Burning Man community have mobile occupations like Marjorie that I demonstrated in the last chapter, but call Portland home for at least a portion of the year.

Formation of the "pocket" of the Burning Man community in Portland:

Burners in Portland began attending Burning Man in different years. Some of the first burners in Portland started going to the event in the early 1990's after it moved from San Francisco to the Black Rock Desert, while some members of the group have never been to the event yet they may likely still refer to themselves as burners. Individual actors in Portland in the early 1990's were beginning to get to know each other through different social avenues. Some members of the community already knew each other through attending the largely hippie event in Oregon called the Oregon Country Fair, a weeklong arts and culture festival in the woods outside of Eugene that began in 1969, or from smaller warehouse parties or gatherings in Portland. But what members refer to as "the community" in Portland did not really begin to take shape as a more cohesive group until the end of the 1990's.

Three main things occurred that helped to draw members of the group in Portland together into what most members refer to now as "the community." Firstly, Tribe.net
emerged as an internet platform for mainly west coast burners to communicate online with each other. Users of the online free platform self-selected into comprising the various subcultures and countercultures of the west coast including burners. Many users felt relatively secure in the notion that Tribe.net was unattractive for those in the mainstream culture so they were able to express countercultural ideas about drugs or art that they might not have in a more mainstream platform like Friendster.com or Myspace.com. The cultural exclusivity of the online platform also contributed to online networking and invitations to parties or gatherings that participants thought would be limited to fellow burners or at least people accepting of countercultural values. However, Tribe.net has largely been replaced by the more mainstream website Facebook.com for group members, something that some participants view as an example of the mainstreaming of the group.

The other two occurrences that contributed to community formation included the development of an affordable work space known as “The Egg” that became a central meeting place for the group to get to know each other and the creation of the March Fourth Marching Band that incorporated many burners, performers, and musicians from Portland who practiced at the Egg. The Egg started out as a warehouse space to hold lighting equipment for a burner who still runs his own lighting company out of Portland that does gigs throughout the world. The space then began to be the repository for all manners of the vast amount of gear it required to attend Burning Man such as geodesic dome structures or tools required to build art installations. As the space continued to change and develop, the owner of the Egg began renting out space to artists and crafters to work on their projects in a collective work environment. The Egg became a hub for the
creative workers and eventually burners threw themecamp fundraising parties there. The many successive parties and gatherings at the Egg contributed to burners developing close relational bonds with each other. The Egg is now mainly a gallery for visual art, although a few artists and local fashion designers still rent space to work.

Many burners on the west coast and in Portland knew each other from gatherings like those at the Egg, by their “playa handles” (i.e. nicknames given at Burning Man), their profiles on Tribe.net, or at least by reputation if they did not know them personally. By 2003, the March Fourth Marching Band (M4) had formed and began practicing at the Egg and most of the hundreds of Portland burners had become acquainted with one another. M4 helped make the group more cohesive because of the amount of performers associated with the band and also the many venues in Portland where they played. Today, M4 includes over 30 members of dancers, musicians, and stilters which contribute to the vast network of acquaintances. The band plays at different venues throughout the city that originally helped to cross pollinate different group members in different neighborhoods. M4 currently still frequently plays throughout the city and also worldwide.

Warehouse space such as the Egg could be rented relatively cheaply in the 1990’s in Portland. Efforts beyond gatherings at the Egg were also concurrently underway to create “community” such as weekly meetings of artists who also attended Burning Man. Smaller groups of friends in different neighborhoods began to network and meet at various “community” gatherings while others networked at the Egg, online, or at venues where March Fourth Marching Band would play. The group exists today as a tight-knit community of individuals who may or may not attend Burning Man but who interact on an almost daily basis.
Significance of Urban Culture and Space for Portland Burners:

"The beauty about Portland is that it’s a port. It’s totally a swinging door town. You can leave for a while, come back. The players will change, but the game is the same."

This interviewee describes Portland as a kind of travel-centered city where participants can leave and return at will. The “players” change, but the culture of the city is still there to welcome them. Many mobile members of the community of burners in Portland such as this participant travel the world or have mobile occupations but return to Portland throughout the year. As I demonstrated in the last two chapters, extended burner community members see themselves as belonging to a group based on values they see as outside mainstream America that draw the group together. Burners tended to discuss these values or their communal ethos as the primary reason for the existence of their community. However, further ethnographic observation data reveals that the place and culture of Portland provided a ripe environment and cultural context for members of the extended Burning Man community to form a tightly-knit group based in Portland, Oregon. Although “pockets” of the extended Burning Man community exist elsewhere, the urban environment provided a particularly welcoming context for burners.

The cultural and economic environment in Portland, Oregon:

Driving around the city, many Portland residents’ vehicles’ bumper stickers display one of the informal slogans of Portland—“Keep Portland Weird.” The slogan echoes the city’s embrace of artistic expression and openness to a variety of urban subcultures visitors might not find in other less “weird” cities. For example, when calling the mayor’s office, callers are put on hold listening to an assortment of local bands rather than more mainstream pop or classical music. Public art, farmer’s markets, local
breweries, coffee houses, and local crafts markets abound. Within the city limits, 15% of the land (or 12,591 acres) is devoted to park or open space, which includes one of the world’s largest urban forests, Forest Park at 5,124 acres of land. As a comparison, Central Park in New York City is only 843 acres. Portland has been referred to as one of the “greenest” places to live in the world. Local fashion is diverse and colorful. Public transportation is reliable and plentiful and many Portlanders bike to city destinations rather than drive. Portland has been cited as having the highest urban percentage of bicycle commuters in the country. The city also has a history of progressive urban development policies like an urban growth boundary that has contributed to downtown diversity, vitality, and an emphasis on smaller businesses rather than strip malls or box stores.

In 2000, Portland was 78% White, 6.6% Black, 6.8% Hispanic, 6.3% Asian, and 1.1% American Indian or Alaskan Native, with a median household income (in 1999) of $40,146 and a per capita income of $22,643. The city generally welcomes subcultural or collectivity heterogeneity in a hodgepodge mixture of alternative lifestyles (McKay 1996), elements from New Age movements (Heelas 1996), and the preexisting counterculture of the American west coast. Like other midsized cities, Portland is recognized by Richard Florida (2002) and other “creative city” advocates (e.g., Bulick et al. 2003) as having a significant amount of people who are “creative,” or “bohemian,” and attracted to “diversity.”

26 http://www.grist.org/article/cities3
27 http://npr.tumblr.com/post/15298528415/utncrader-urban-bicvling-is-generally
28 http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/41/4159000.html
One recent short-based comedy television series on the Independent Film Channel, “Portlandia” (2011), parodies the “weird” youthful urban subcultures of Portland. The video musical montage from the first episode begins with a character saying, “Do you remember the nineties? People were talking about getting piercings and getting tribal tattoos? And people were singing about saving the planet and forming bands? There’s a place where that idea still exists as a reality...In Portland...It’s where young people go to retire.” The montage stereotypes Portlanders as pierced tattooed environmentalists in a city “where young people go to retire” and features people riding tall bikes, clowns, and other parodies of local actors one might encounter in the city. Young people presumably “go to [Portland] to retire” in the video because it has things that young people are seemingly fond of like a progressive urban culture. Other characters in the show include “the owners of a feminist book store; a militant bike messenger; an artsy couple who attach cut-outs of birds to everything; an organic farmer who turns out to be a cult leader; an adult hide and seek league; and a punk rock couple.”

The stereotypical characters parody various subcultural groups in Portland in an attempt to poke fun at some of the highly visible urban subcultures in Portland. Many Portlanders do take pride in the “weirdness” of their city. However, not all city residents of Portland necessarily embrace “weirdness” or reflect the parodied subcultures in the

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29 Photo used with permission from: http://4walls4all.wordpress.com/
show. Variations often depend on neighborhood, locale, or group of people. Yet for the most part, Portlanders take pride in the “weirdness” of the city.

While paying for groceries at a local grocery store on my second day in Portland, the checkout clerk told me of his ambition to move his wife and new baby to Washington D.C. because he could not find a job in Portland that adequately supported his new family. He explained, “In Portland, it’s cool to be weird. I want to live somewhere where it’s cool to be middle class.”31 His comment reflects the discontent that some Portlanders have with the urban culture and what some view as the unavailability of jobs in the city. For him, “weirdness” is the mark or brand of the city, while he would prefer to live in a place that instead is marked by middle class aspirations. The unemployment rate for the Portland-Vancouver-Hillsboro, OR-WA metropolitan statistical area is 10%, just slightly higher than the national average of 9.5% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Yet there is a kind of heightened sense of the unavailability of jobs or underemployment in Portland amongst the residents.

One possibility as to why residents may feel shut out of the job market, even though the actual unemployment rate is not necessarily significantly higher than the national average, could be because during the 1990s and early 2000s Portland experienced an enormous population growth. From 1990-2003, the city quadrupled in population (by 107,821 people or a 25% increase) and was expected to continue growing by 27% over the following 20 years.32 Some interviewees indicated that there was a perception among native Portlanders that they were in competition with the huge influx of new residents for jobs. However, the growth rate has considerably slowed down to an

31 Field notes 8-14-10
32 http://www.pdc.us/bus_serv/facts-quick.asp
average annual increase of 1.05% from July 2006 to July 2010 (just 0.29% from 2009-2010), yet many residents still view the economic outlook of finding a well-paid job in Portland as bleak and competitive. Many still blame the bleak job market on what they consider to be the plethora of youth moving to Portland. Additionally, many Portlanders view the staggering growth of the city in the 1990’s and the general “green” beauty of the city as contributing to increasing housing prices. Many locals explain they are sick of others moving to their city. At first, houses were cheap in the 1990’s, fueling “community growth,” but now the attractiveness of the city has contributed to areas of gentrification.

An economic entrepreneurial spirit in Portland has developed in partial response to the greater demands of a modern flexible capitalism which requires adaptability from workers and part time employment, although Portland has long prioritized what one interviewee referred to as “make-your-own.” The Do-It-Yourself economic climate of Portland also stems from the city’s proliferation of its “neo-bohemian” (Lloyd 2006) subcultures. In Portland, local subcultures and “collectivities” or “groups of people who have been socialized in similar conditions...embedded in similar social relations, and so tend to have similar cultural understandings” (Holt 1997:326), combine with the demands of a postindustrial economic system and contribute to adaptive flexible occupations. This entrepreneurial spirit combined with what has been referred to as Portland’s “artisan economy” (Heying 2010) has led many Portlanders to create self-employed occupations based on things like fashion accessory development or the resale of second hand clothing. One self-employed burner who makes clothing and accessories to sell on the popular website Etsy.com explains, “Portland has always been make-your-own. If you would

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have asked me 6-8 years ago, I would have still said that Portland is a make it yourself, kind of DIY place before DIY became a popular buzzword.\textsuperscript{34} This "artisan" economic environment, in addition to the cultural acceptance of "weirdness" and the built environment of Portland, helped shape the "pocket" of the burner community in Portland. Additionally, burners have significantly contributed to the artisan economy in Portland through their own flexible and mobile occupations.

**Economic and Cultural Environment Shapes Burners:**

Burners in Portland attempt to create their own flexible occupations within the context of a postindustrial economic reality where their ingenuity and creativity are often capitalized upon by larger corporate interests. For example, creative styles that members of the group wear may be appropriated by larger commercial cultural production interests like high end fashion design. The flexible occupations of burners in Portland like medical marijuana growth, graphic design, or festival promotion mimic those within the already existing artisan economy in Portland and also bolster this already present artisan economy. The occupations of many of those in the burner community in Portland are untaxed with under the table payments. This kind of informal economy is possible in part because they exist in a city where self-employed occupations are the norm, rather than the exception.

The cultural environment inherent in a local self-reliant artisan economy is conducive to development of self-reliant flexible occupations for burners themselves. One burner, a lighting designer who has worked all over the world says he feels that the culture of the west coast is different from the east coast, especially because of a more relaxed atmosphere.

\textsuperscript{31} Interview 9-24-10
My culture on the west coast is I want my life to have a good story to it. I want to work so that I can live better, not live in order that I work more. And the east coast tends to be, I live to work. I mean, that was the Boston experience for me. All those people are trying to one up each other, “I work 50 hours, no, I work 60 hours a week.”

This participant believes that the culture surrounding him on the west coast prioritizes quality of life with a “good story” over “liv[ing] to work.” He feels that the culture of the west coast differs from that of the east coast where he used to live in Boston, especially in regards to the occupational environment. Burners live and work within this laid back cultural context of the west coast and of Portland. Most burners spend at least some portion of the year in Portland and interact with others outside of their community. The various subcultures of Portland and the urban cultural milieu of the city do not exist separately from the group itself as the group is “emplaced” (Gieryn 2000; Kidder 2009) within the built and cultural environment of the city.

Twelve participants explained that they moved to Portland from elsewhere because of its distinct cultural atmosphere and the surrounding beautiful landscape filled with wilderness areas. Many of the reasons members of the burner community gave as to why they moved to Portland centered on contextual factors such as the beauty of the city and the surrounding forest areas like the New River Gorge or Mt. Hood, the city’s emphasis on green building, the urban growth boundary, or a general awareness of environmental issues like urban farming or recycling. According to one participant, “Whenever I have friends from Texas that come to visit me, they are astounded that they can go to coffee shop and they have recycling and compost bins there; it’s different.” She went on to explain that the long duration of the rain in the winter contributed to people acting more “peaceful” than they would in other cities because it makes people “slow
down.” Some participants also alluded that the attractiveness of wanting to move to the city for them was linked to what they perceived as the cultural acceptance of “weirdness.”

The Draw of Cheap Space: One of the main reasons members of the burner community in Portland cited as to why they wanted to set up home bases in Portland was because they believed the availability of spacious cheap housing created an environment where “artsy” people like themselves could afford to live and work. According to one participant, “There’s so much community in Portland, it’s almost silly. Much of that has to do with the fact that there was cheap housing here.” For many of the participants, the cheaper housing in Portland gave them spaces like basements or extra room for studios where they could have space for creative projects whereas in other cities they couldn’t afford the extra space. Some of the first burners in Portland explained that they moved there particularly because it was affordable for artists. The cheap availability of housing attracted artists or burners to Portland, while Burning Man the event was also in the initial stages of creation. Thus, the cheap spacious housing in Portland initially helped draw burners to the city.

One neighborhood that was particularly important to the group formation of Portland burners is now called the Alberta Arts District. Food cart pods now line many corners of the street situated in between newly restored or built condos, shops, and restaurants. A participant who has lived in the neighborhood for 21 years explained that he was able to buy a large cheap house with a friend in what was then the run-down neighborhood. Because the neighborhood was cheap, artists or young people had boutique stores and could buy houses or at least afford the rents. This participant still
lives in the neighborhood, but explained that rents and house prices have skyrocketed as
the neighborhood has become more chic and gentrified; something that often happens to
neighborhoods inhabited by artists (Zukin 1982).

Mark, a tall white handsome gay man in his late thirties who is getting his bachelor's degree in urban planning, had a small clothing boutique in the Alberta Arts District but was pushed out as the rents increased. He facilitated a weekly group meeting of local artists called the artistry collective (many of whom also went to Burning Man together) looking to develop artistic community in Portland for two years until running a weekly meeting became too time consuming for him and the group disbanded. According to him, there is less money to invest in industries like fashion in Portland than other cities; one of the unseen consequences of living in a “cheaper” town. The lack of money in Portland makes being involved in the creative industries, like clothing design, more difficult than in other cities that have more access to investment capital.

LA has new money. San Francisco has old money. New York has both. But we don’t have much money here... There’s a lot of inspiration, there’s a lot of chutzpah, there’s a lot of can-do attitude, but there’s just not much money going around. But because there’s no money here, life is cheap. As soon as money starts moving in, we don’t get to live in the city anymore. It’s already happening.

According to him, “life is cheap” in Portland which enabled artists to live and work, but because “life is cheap” there also is not a lot of money “going around” to invest.

Additionally, a lower cost of living was not necessarily always a good thing because it meant that too many people wanted to move to Portland to take advantage of the lower cost of living. People could sell their more expensive houses in other places in the country, move to Portland, and get bigger houses for a lower cost. Like some other Portlanders, he is weary of newer money moving into the city because he believes that he
would no longer be able to live close to the urban core. He sees gentrification as almost
inevitable and that it has already started happening within Portland. Mark also describes
the “can-do attitude” in Portland as being full of “inspiration” or “chutzpah” as being
linked to the economic structural conditions in the city.

Gentrification is becoming an increasing problem in many of the neighborhoods
in Portland, particularly in the Alberta Arts District. Participants explained that people
moving to Portland could sell their more expensive homes elsewhere at higher prices and
buy homes at a significant discount in Portland, which eventually pushes prices up.
Cheap rents are good on the surface, but participants noted that people from other cities
have been helping to fuel increasing home prices in Portland and pushing artists or others
like minorities towards the boundaries of the city limits. The recent gentrification of
Alberta Street has also been documented by other researchers. Sullivan and Shaw (2011)
interviewed 39 residents of the Alberta neighborhood in 2005 and found that the Alberta
neighborhood has had a decline in Black businesses, but a recent increase in White ones,
both what they call “bohemian” and mainstream. They found that the remaining Black
residents of the Alberta neighborhood feel culturally excluded from the new retail stores
and advocate for re-examining promoting economic development for the “creative class.”

Other researchers have noted that it is not necessarily artists who should be
blamed for the negative consequences of gentrification. The artists who reinvigorate
neighborhoods and make the neighborhoods fashionable places to live are often displaced
themselves to other neighborhoods where they can afford the rent beginning the
reinvigoration-gentrification process over again (Bridge 2006). As an unintended
consequence, artists may push out individuals with incomes lower than themselves, but
the circular pattern of neighborhood building can have positive consequences for urban environments leading to city reinvigoration and artistic development along with the negative consequences that ultimately may contribute to greater social stratification. Although artists are often blamed for gentrification, they are only part of the process, not necessarily the cause (Markusen 2006). However, the important point is that cheap space in Portland helped lure many artists into the same physical environment of the city together, helped reinvigorate the city in the 1990s, and created an environment where those in the group wanted to live and work together.

**Urban Space Facilitates Interaction:** The main street in the Alberta Arts District, Alberta Street, is now home to a monthly outdoor arts event where artists and craftspeople line the sidewalks with their wares. The grassroots event began small and has grown so much in the last few years that the City of Portland now shuts the street down to traffic monthly during the warmer months for this “Last Thursday” event. Last Thursday has organically grown from the haphazard vending of art to a more organized event that includes vendors selling food and DJ or musical performances, although it still retains some of its bohemian vibe as vendors and musicians set up shop wherever there is space along the street and the structure of the event remains largely unregulated or planned.

Mark, the urban planning student, explains that he finds the city, meaning those city officials who run the city, “amazing” particularly because of the way the city embraces trying out new social events in their space.

The city pays for Last Thursday now. Which is amazing. And that was all community driven, but the city responded to it in a positive way. I think that is why people like living here. Because they can go, “We want to
close the streets” and the city goes, “Okay. Let’s figure it out.” That’s pretty amazing. Where do you get that? Not many cities.

Mark explains that Last Thursday began as a community-driven event without official input. But now the city of Portland pays for the event because residents said, “We want to close the street” and the city agreed.

Last Thursday often feels confusing and throngs of people walk from one end of the street to the other buying art or simply gawking at juggling buskers or other street performers. Many people drink at the various bars lining the street which adds to an atmosphere of revelry. For some members of the burner community in Portland, the event feels a bit like Burning Man. Especially given that some burners feel ownership over helping to rehabilitate the neighborhood through their own sweat equity of fixing up houses. The excerpt below is from a Last Thursday event in 2010.

A few more people that Curtis knew approached us. All five people standing with us took turns hugging the four visitors and two different circles formed where people were talking. Curtis remarked that Last Thursday felt a lot like Burning Man because there were so many different little DJ stations where people were spinning music and people dressed up... Three of us started walking back towards the theater. We saw around 60 people dancing, very crowdedly, in front of Felipe spinning records in one specific area. I saw another 5-10 people that I knew amongst the people dancing, including Stephen, a virgin burner who helped build our theme camp at the Burn this year. He had his 6 year old daughter on his shoulders and introduced us to her. We continued walking on to the street and saw Celeste, Frederick, and Frederick’s 6 month pregnant partner Claire with their two year old son. They were all vending thrift store clothes together. I greeted and hugged Frederick and said hello to Celeste. Curtis told Frederick he wanted to buy him a shirt, but instead handed him $200 for the marijuana trim work he had done for him the day before.35

This excerpt points out the large number of people I encountered who all seemed to know each other within the span of around 15 minutes at Last Thursday. Felipe is a DJ who often spins records at burner parties in Portland, festivals at other locations on the west

35 Fieldnotes from 9-30-10
coast, and at Burning Man and Stephen was in my themecamp on the Burning Man Nevada playa this year. The largest crowd of people on the street by at least 50 people was gathered in front of Felipe. I recognized many of the dancers from previous trips to Burning Man. This excerpt provides one example as to how burners bring the culture of Burning Man into the urban cultural milieu of Portland, but also how spaces in Portland have contributed to the formation of the group through ease of social interaction. The open street space was both a commercial site (e.g. Curtis paying Frederick for the trim work with marijuana and clothing vending) and a relationship building site (seeing friends).

The ease of running into other members of the burner community in Portland at events in the city, especially in the large open spaces, bike lanes, and sidewalks, helps to keep the bonds between individuals fresh because they see each other frequently. Activities like simply running into each other during events and chatting or bicycling create an atmosphere where fluid social interactions may happen. The participant below named Sam, an author with an independent press in Portland, describes how activities like bicycling are actually "community building."

Shared experience is hugely community-building, friend building and all of that. And you wouldn’t think shared experience is that hard to find, but it turns out it is. It turns out that the suburbs are lonely places, big cities are lonely places...Bicycling is an interesting one. Bicycling is spelled with a capital B among people I know in Portland. There’s nothing about bicycling that looks like a transformative social tool; it looks like a device for moving your body over a flat paved surface, but bicyclists all over the world have been recognizing that you on a bicycle rolling down the street is a shared social space that only other bicyclists understand. And Portland is this really amazing place that you can go out every night of the week for some party on wheels. Socializing, having shared experience on bicycles, has been hugely community building for me and lot of people in Portland and continues to be interestingly hugely community building around the world. And there’s a movement that we’re in the midst of right now in all
of these American cities, just creating a momentum for change among the
car centered paradigm... All of those opportunities for shared experience,
that you can socialize and talk about and absorb together afterwards are
fantastic community building tools.

Sam details that at first glance that bicycling appears as only a tool for transportation. Yet
he explains something more “transformative” simultaneously happens when people
bicycle together in urban environments. He believes that “suburbs are lonely places” and
implies that most big cities other than Portland are also “lonely places.” But for him,
having “shared experience” on bicycles or other social encounters is “hugely community
building.” Similarly, street space or the multitude of busy parks in Portland also provide
this role, as does the emphasis on shared experience at events like Last Thursday. Both
Mark and Sam explicate that without a city like Portland that explicitly and implicitly
welcomes community building through social interaction within its boundaries, the city
would be more like other “big cities [that are] lonely places.”

Without adequate city space where individual actors can construct social
gatherings, the city would not resemble the welcoming communal environment for
members of the burner community that it is today. The relative ease of running into other
citizens in parks, festivals, various outdoor markets, and even on the reliable public
transportation system contributes to a small-town atmosphere in a midsized city. Jane
Jacobs’ (1961) influential work The Death and Life of Great American Cities speaks to
this point. For Jacobs’, bustling sidewalks and parks brimming with life (rather than
empty parks or sidewalks) contribute to the safety of a city. According to Jacobs,
neighborhoods should mix together diversity and complexity in order to be a place where
people want to live. Not uncoincidentally, the first quote on the road in the desert to
Burning Man 2010 was a quote from Jacobs as burners actively embrace interactive
community building. “Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody. Only because and only when they are created by everybody.” For those attending Burning Man, it reinforces the notion that everyone should participate in the building of Black Rock City and the building of “community” as an action oriented value. The quote also speaks to the milieu in Portland with its emphasis on space for the diversity of residents to engage with each other in social interaction that is what Sam called “hugely community building.”

**Burner Community Integration with Urban Culture and Space in Portland:**

Members of the burner community in Portland spend a lot of time together maintaining their relationships. They attend each other’s birthday parties and weddings, throw fundraisers for members with cancer, occasionally watch each other’s children and pets, and likely attend Burning Man together. Group events may center on art projects or fundraisers for Burning Man which are often large costumed-themed celebrations of self-expression with several hundred outrageously dressed burners partying and dancing all night. Group events may also include not-for-profit events like “Covers and Blankets” where hundreds of community members bring blankets or household goods to be donated to local charity groups as an entrance fee to see other community members perform. But the events happen within the cultural context of a city that welcomes all nature of gatherings.

Both Holden and his partner, Sophia, often host gatherings at their house for members of the burner community. They also both moved to Portland from other places. Sophia grew up in Italy and then Massachusetts with an Italian father and an American mother. She moved to Portland from Massachusetts twelve years before our interview.
Holden moved to Portland from Atlanta, Georgia. He is an American with dual-Canadian citizenship who spent most of his childhood in the Philippines where his white Canadian father was employed. Holden recently quit his 15 year job as a GIS analyst involved in urban planning in Portland to start his own documentary film business. Much of his time is spent documenting burner community projects in Portland for friends or other community groups. Sophia also runs her own business that entails writing a blog and selling t-shirts and other paraphernalia that declare, “The People’s Republic of Portland.” She is also a dancer with March Fourth Marching Band, a central focus of the burner community in Portland and an unofficial symbol of the city. The two are an ideal typical Portland couple of sorts as they are both transplants who spend much of their time contributing to community groups in Portland through their own creative “weirdness.”

Holden is a tall, extremely thin man with dark handsome features and a smile that borders on game-show-host-esque in its laidback authority. I asked him what was distinctive about his group of friends and he replied with a response that included the locality of Portland.

Holden: I think the environment that is Portland gestates a kind of...comfortability with being weird here. So that kind of plays into people being comfortable being themselves... I find these people celebrating their weirdness and pushing that as an attribute, something that’s a good thing... I think our thresholds and our expectations as Portlanders, is a little bit broader than most places. There’s a sense of activism mixed with the notion of family, mixed with the notion of spontaneity, mixed with the notion of flamboyance, that’s very local but it’s something a little bit more exotic. Which is why I think many that come across this group of people are so intoxicated is because it is exotic. It’s like a really great cheese that you happen upon that you immediately fall in love with. I say intoxicating because I’ve seen people attempt to leave who come back. There’s this kind of ache people have for what it is.

Interviewer: Do you think other Portlanders see your group of burners as a separate group or just as more, like you say, weird Portlanders?
Holden: I’m not sure. I know we spend a lot of time trying to present ourselves in a positive way. In a nonconfrontational and creative and accessible way. In a public kind of way, intentionally. Like to say, “Put us in the Portland Freak category or the Portland Freak Freak category.”

In years past, Holden spent a large portion of his time organizing gatherings, dinners, and events for members of his Burning Man themecamp. He didn’t attend Burning Man this year for the first time in eight years, but still organized parties and fundraisers at his house for people that were going. He sees the “intoxicating” nature of his group of friends as being inextricably tied to the way that Portland “gestates a comfortability with being weird.” He sees his group as wanting to portray themselves in the “Portland Freak Freak category” (i.e. towards the far end of the continuum of Portland “weirdness”). For him, others are “intoxicated” with his group and “ache” to be a part of it particularly because their group is “exotic” and “celebrate their weirdness.” In this way, Portland as a cultural environment helps “gestate” an acceptance of self-expression where a group like those who attend Burning Man can thrive.

For some participants, Burning Man “heightens” the experience they already get from Portland because Portland keeps things close to the urban core which facilitates keeping things “tight.” Portland and the place of Black Rock City are mutually reinforcing contexts for community members.

We’re seeing the fruits of decisions that were made in the late sixties, early seventies to create the metro, urban growth boundary. Keeping things tight, keeping it in. You’ve got people with chickens in their backyard. Burning Man, for me and my friends, it just kind of heightens that whole scene and puts it into hyperdrive.

For him, Burning Man is like a kind of “heightened” Portland because Black Rock City mimics the kind of tight communal city space like Portland, only smaller. Portland the
city has also benefitted from the legacy of decisions from the 1960’s and 70’s. “Keeping things tight” in Portland means keeping the city itself built closer to the urban core which contributes to a smaller city feel; there are even people with “chickens in their backyard.”

Mark also shares the notion that space within the place of a city can work to create community, especially within Portland. He explained that the current built environment of American cities are not conducive to building community, but that many people in Portland have been working towards changing that.

I think as Americans in general we have trouble understanding what community is. We’re raised not to be in community. As an urban planner, our cities are designed to keep us from having community... We still get in our car and drive by ourselves to our workplace where we get out and walk in. So I think we’re trying to learn what community is and how communities come together and I think that’s one of the big things that the people around me are questing for. I don’t know if we found it... The work we’re doing is an extension of the work that the hippies did in the 60’s—that whole countercultural movement started this push—I think we picked up. I don’t know if we’ve figured anything out more than them, but we’re at least trying. I think people are at least trying to create community, trying to understand what that means... I think that Portland has created such a nurturing environment and the actual government of Portland has done so much to help the arts and they always have. I remember growing up here with Bud Clark [an older mayor of Portland] and he had this huge movement called “Expose yourself to the arts” and then he also started the Dada Ball. So we have this long tradition in this city of costumed parties and then the mayors’ ball at Halloween. The city was made for the Burning Man community.

Mark was one of five participants who explained that his particularly extension of the Burning Man community could not exist without the place of Portland. He points out that “the work” he sees his group as doing is an extension of the counterculture from the 1960’s. He sees his group as helping to create community in Portland, although the city already was “a nurturing environment” and “made for the Burning Man community.” For
him, even the “government” of Portland has also done a lot for the arts and for developing community.

The City of Portland as a bureaucracy generally welcomes “weirdness” from the Burning Man community or at least turns a blind eye to particular eccentricities. The “Mobile Groove Bomb,” essentially a party bus, often shuttles burner community members around the city in Portland in addition to taking members to Burning Man. According to its myspace.com page, the “Mobile Groove Bomb,” is a 1972 retired Tri-Met bus that ran up and down Burnside for 20 years. In 2005, she was purchased for a single cigarette and with significant renovations converted into an RV class vehicle by a small and dedicated team of like-minded individuals with a vision of a shared community resource. She made her debut as an Art Car at Burning Man 05, and since has become a mainstay as a sound stage and private transport vehicle at events and private parties. The Mobile Groove Bomb continues today to serve the Portland Metro, Northwest and West Coast communities. The Bomb’s vision for the future is one of sustainability, service, creativity and transformation, while developing an ever growing family of friends by sharing its magic with one and all! She is a beacon for the GROOVE wherever she rolls.... Funded exclusively by community donations and tended by her ever expanding cadre of loving volunteers, the Groovebomb relies on you to continue to serve the greater good.

As the excerpt explains, the bus was renovated with help from Burning Man community members and funded by donations. There are a few community members who are licensed and take turns driving the bus and there are many work parties that help to keep the bus in good mechanical working order.
The GrooveBomb often shuttles burner community members in Portland to and from events or simply for fun, such as one winter day when the city of Portland all but shut down due to snow. The City of Portland is generally unprepared for snow storms as it only gets a significant snowfall accumulation every few years. It usually rains throughout the whole of the winter in Portland with very little snowfall. One exception was a winter day when the city got around 5 inches of snow. Schools, the city government, and most businesses were shut down, unable to function since no one could get to work. Cars were unusable and the buses of the public transportation system, Trimet, were unable to efficiently move people around. I received a phone call at 8am telling me to get up and meet other members of the group on a certain spot on Alberta Street. When I got to the meet-up spot, there were around 20 community members getting

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36 Photo of the GrooveBomb from Burning Man 2010. Photo taken by Genevieve Cox
37 Photo of the GrooveBomb from BridgeFest 2010. Photo credit, Aaron Rogosin
on the bus which had chains on the tires. As I stepped onto the bus, I saw that the bus had
been converted into a mobile bar and hang out venue for the Snow Day. We spent the rest
of the day driving to various Trimet bus stops, picking up Portlanders none of us had yet
met, giving them Hot Toddlies and Peppermint Schnapps Hot Chocolates, and driving
them to places they could not reach on their own. On two occasions we stopped and had
snowball fights with children who were outside playing in the snow in the parks.

A mobile sound system bus with a bar for strangers would not be able to exist
unless other city residents and government officials at least implicitly supported others
owning and operating such a bus so openly in the city. The Portlanders we picked up
along the way had seemingly few qualms about nonchalantly stepping onto a party bus
with others they had never met to be driven around the city. Moreover, during the
Portland BridgeFest of 2010 (a festival created by burners in Portland over the course of
one week and supported by the City of Portland), the bus had a police escort as it drove
onto one of Portland’s bridges for a huge party with other city residents. Without a city
that accepts such “weirdness” in both its bureaucracy and public residents, the bus would
not operate so openly. Mark also explained that the “cosmopolitan” nature of the city’s
gay mayor helped to create an inclusive environment where “weird” is welcomed. The
ease of working with city officials helps the culture of Portland be more fluid with the
variety of sub and countercultures in the urban milieu like the burners.

Tex, the articulate arts project manager, was central to developing the PDX
Bridge Festival in conjunction with the City of Portland in 2010. When Tex calls on
members of his vast extended network of burners for volunteer help in one of his many
community art projects, they usually listen. Multiple interviewees reflected that when
Tex asks you to do something, it’s virtually impossible to say no because of his “charm.” Eleven interviewees brought up Tex without my prompting in our conversations as a group member who has been integral to developing projects and building community or as someone that they willingly support and volunteer their time to. He was also the organizational point person behind the building of *Basura Sagrada*, the $100,000 art installation that I participated in building with approximately 80 other volunteers at Burning Man in 2008.

At BridgeFest 2010 in Portland, hundreds of people danced, gazed at art, or picnicked on bridges shut down by the City of Portland for various events and parties over the course of two weeks. The Mobile Groove Bomb was used for group functions, infrastructure support, projects, and parties during the event. The successful Bridge Festival showcased Tex’s ability to network between what he calls, “unemployed (and unemployable) creative-types” and more traditional bureaucrats like the mayor and City Council of Portland. During BridgeFest 2010, Tex was interviewed by the local Portland newspaper, the *Willamette Week*. The article was entitled “Burning Man on the Willamette: PDX Bridge Festival raises some communal joy and art for the Hawthorne bridge’s Centennial.” In the article, Tex was quoted as saying “the big art spectacles that are public and free can really impact lives. I want to create what we do out there in a tiny corner of Nevada in the middle of Portland.” Tex’s comment highlights that group members are often actively working to integrate their burning culture with that of the city. Tex wants to “create what we do out there” back home in Portland. Many community volunteers helped Tex realize this vision and it could not have been done
without a vast array of committed volunteers or without the welcoming cultural context of Portland, especially a city council and mayor supportive of artistic efforts.

Trina echoed Tex’s sentiment when talking about doing creative projects back in her home environment of Portland. Part of this quote was used to explain the symbolic identification of “burner.” Here, it provides an illustration of how this identification is used in Portland.

We identify as burners, but it goes way beyond that because this is our everyday life... It’s not as if we go [to Burning Man] and we’re burners while we’re there and then we’re different when we come back; this is who we are, what we do. We’re creative. We do projects. Tex is a great example of that with the bridge project and kind of bringing these creative forces together to celebrate something within the city... I would love to see more people kind of graduating [from Burning Man]. Burning Man is a great lab... There’s enough of us that have been down there enough that for me I feel like there needs to be a progression into something else.

Trina feels as though a “progression” from Burning Man is needed, especially in regards to bringing elements of the event back to her home environment. For burners, volunteering and doing artistic projects in their home environments is part of their active cultural ethos of communal participation. Through social interactions at functions like BridgeFest, members of the burner community in Portland come in contact with other city residents and the two cultures become integrated.

At a preparty for Burning Man at Holden’s house, I sat down next to Nora and her husband Logan who were watching the fire in a burn barrel and listening to a DJ spin electronic music in the backyard. As we sat and listened to music, we discussed this year’s BridgeFest. I asked Nora what she thought about BridgeFest. She responded by relaying a story of a man from Boston whom she danced next to on one of the bridges during a large dance party. Nora explained that the man standing next to her “was

38 Field notes 8-14-10
wearing an Izod shirt and khakis” which she thought seemed out of place amongst the hundreds of flamboyantly dressed west coast dancing burners. He turned to Nora and said, “This is the greatest night of my life!” And Nora replied, “Welcome to our whole life! This is what we do every day.”

Nora saw the man from Boston as experiencing a kind of eye-opening transformation, shared with other people in celebration on the bridge. Nora points outs his “Izod shirt and khakis” implying that the man existed within the mainstream aesthetic culture and did not more freely express himself like those dancing around him from the west coast. But according to Nora, the shared celebration with the others on the bridge who have experiences like this “every day” because it is their “whole life,” enabled the man to “have the greatest night of [his] life.” In other words, Nora supposes that the power of shared celebration and outward self-expression amongst the group leads to individual positive transformative experiences. She describes a group culture that exemplifies outward self-expression via style to explain why the man had “the greatest night of [his] life.” She draws a distinction between her community and the more “mainstream” aesthetic culture she assumed the man belonged to. Yet the space of the bridge provided a means where her community could interact with others outside of her immediate group.

Earlier in this chapter, I showed how the street space within Portland contributes to group social cohesion by using the example of Alberta Street and the ease with which individuals can socially interact frequently. In this section, I used the example of the Mobile Grove Bomb and BridgeFest to highlight how members of the burner community in Portland come in contact other city residents in Portland. In this way, local urban space
helps contribute to community cohesion but also diffuses (and integrates) the counterculture of the burner community into the place of Portland. Fine (2010:361) calls such spaces of social interaction “interlocks.” Interlocks are sites of communication that connect local actors within groups and the larger public (White 1995:1053). Spaces such as BridgeFest or Last Thursday provide mechanisms for groups to link up with other groups and incorporate different group cultures into larger social systems. The environment of Portland, which helped to create the burner community in Portland, also facilitates wide interaction and cultural dispersion.

**Significance of Place for Burner Community Cultural Integration:**

Despite modern physical mobility, places or the physical environment still matter to social life and should not be discounted in sociological research (Gieryn 2000). In a review of sociological work on the importance of place in sociology, Gieryn (2000:464-465) gives places three necessary and sufficient features. Firstly, a place needs a bounded “spot in the universe.” A place could consist of a living room, a city, a region, or any location with boundaries. There also must be a “physicality” to a place. Thirdly a place must be invested with meaning from the people within the place. Spaces both shape and are shaped by the people within them; a space becomes a place when invested with meaning and value, according to Gieryn (2000). The spaces within Portland, and the cultural context linked to the spaces of the built environment such as the interactions on sidewalks at events like Last Thursday, help to make it a “place” that burners exist within. Burners in Portland simultaneously help construct the symbolic and cultural meanings of Portland simply by virtue of their physically being there and interacting with other local residents. In this way, the place of Portland provides a container for social
interaction, but also works as a cultural “interlock” (Fine 2010) where different cultures may mingle and integrate.

A locality like Portland also provides the basis by which culture is radiated outwards. Fine (2010) advocates for what he calls a “sociology of the local” that takes into account the culture of localities. As a stage for action, the local creates a lens by which participants establish group boundaries. He argues that local contexts contribute to the production of the social order of groups, but then provide the basis for cultural extension between networks that transcend the local. In this way, burner culture is intertwined with the local culture in Portland, which then provides the basis for integration between many other localities. Members of the Burning Man community in Portland use their relation to the locality of Portland to help understand their individual and group identities, but are also simultaneously culturally integrated with networks that “transcend the local.” Spaces in Portland helped provide places that contribute to group cohesion and solidarity. Greater built environmental circumstances in Portland such as multiple parks, street space/events that facilitate social interaction, or the availability of cheap housing provided the physical framework for cohesive group formation. Additionally, a cultural context supportive of “weirdness” in Portland helped contribute to the physical formation of community that could more easily integrate with the urban cultural milieu, but also helped in the symbolic construction of the community identity.

Relating to a local community helps produce identity continuity (Turner 1987) and oftentimes, the identity a person can be wound-up with the sense of place such as considering oneself a “city-person,” or a “country- person” (Hummon 1990). Places like Portland therefore contribute to the symbolic construction of individuals, communities or
groups. Sampson and Goodrich (2009) suggest that in the symbolic construction of community, actors draw upon the opportunities and constraints of their physical setting. They argue that identity is largely culturally constructed and reproduced, but communities are bound to particular locales and are partially constructed through the lens of the local landscape. The cultural meanings of the place that is Portland combine with the collective identity of the extended Burning Man community or individuals’ own cultural repertoires. In this manner, the Portland “pocket” of the extended Burning Man community has its own unique collective identity, partially influenced by the local context of Portland, but the group also exists within the larger extended identity as “burners.”

Place is not merely a setting, it is a force with independent and detectable effects on social life (Werlen 1993). Research has found that social involvements with others in the community, such as networks of friends and family, organizational memberships, and even local shopping, prove to be significant ties to local places, while the erosion of regional landscapes and geographical mobility might weaken personal identification with a particular locale (Cuba and Hummon 1993). However, the mobility of those in the extended community of burners does not necessarily weaken their ties to Portland or to the extended community as a whole. Spaces within Portland and the affirming cultural environment of the city contributes to the development of holistic relationships in the group even amidst individual mobility. The burner community in Portland is characterized by enduring relationships that prioritize communal values like volunteering for activities within the city. Enduring social relationships within the communal group provide a commitment to the group, but also to the place that is Portland. According to
Lawler (1992), commitment to a group and its local culture provides the principles for action that help shape the group and consequently are radiated outwards into other groups.
CHAPTER 7

CREATING COMMUNITY IN MOBILE MODERNITY

Communities have always existed and will continue to exist because humans are essentially social beings (Scherer 1972). Yet as modernity has progressed, the processes of globalization have created a more interdependent world than ever before, facilitated by technological advances and the ease of mobility. Rather than leading to a sense of moral interdependence as a global community, some scholars have argued that the interdependence of modernity creates a sense of doubt and risk for individuals who also grasp for self-identity and meaning. According to Beck (1992, 2008), the global transition from a “first” to a “second” modernity is characterized by structural societal shifts from institutions that mutually reinforced one another such as the nation state or a “Fordist”-type economy, towards a more global and risk ridden world. “Modernity [a]s a risk culture” has led in part to a sense of “personal meaningless,” where we search for self-identity and the “moral resources necessary to live a full and satisfying existence” (Giddens 1991:3-9). However, even in the context of modernizing forces, bonds between individuals, especially the relational bonds of community, do not necessarily lessen in degree or importance.

The Durkheimian tradition helps express that being tied into something greater than oneself is inextricably tied to our humanity, even in the face of modernizing forces. As we advance in the evolutionary scale, the ties which bind the individual to his family, to his native soil, to traditions which the past has given to him, to collective group usages, become loose. More mobile, he changes
his environment more easily... Of course, the whole common conscience does not, on this account, pass out of existence... In order for the individual to remain attached to the group with a force equal to that of yesterday, the ties which bind him to it must become stronger and more numerous (Durkheim 1963:138).

According to Durkheim, in the face of modern mobility and modernizing forces that change our social interactions, individuals must create new and stronger ties to one another. Durkheim (1995:15-16) identifies society with “an immense cooperation that extends not only through space but also through time.” For Durkheim, community is moral and “morality consists in being solidary with a group and varying with this solidarity” (Durkheim 1963:137).

Participants from all over the world trek to the physically, socially, aesthetically, and ideologically isolated place of Black Rock City, Nevada to practice living and working together in an isolated and punishingly harsh environment. Participants have no choice but to work interdependently in this environment, especially given a social context that collectively maintains a sense of community and group solidarity. Participants work together, eat together, and live around each other in an environment that mimics more traditional forms of community life. Burners must rely on each other for their own safety and look out for the welfare of others. Physical conditions like dust storms and heat intensify the solidarity of community members. Practices at the event like building art installations or theme camps work to engrain the ethos of a community in a cultural context that is mutually-reinforced by those attending the event. Moral bonds formed during these socially interactive experiences facilitate an extended community with a group culture that prioritizes a communal ethos. This ethos is taken into participants
home environments and reinforced by other group extended community members in places like Portland, Oregon.

Numerous social ties between individuals in the extended Burning Man community are created and honed through practices and social interactions that take place in a variety of places throughout the world. Individuals meet up and interact at Burning Man, gatherings or parties in west coast cities, places throughout the world, or festivals in America. The individual mobility of community members helped, rather than hindered, their ability to form a cohesive extended community that they felt integrated within. Even if some personal relationships between individuals suffer due to the extended nature of the group, the group exists as an extended community that individuals feel they belong to. The group exists as an extended community because: 1) members share common activities and beliefs, 2) they are bound together principally by relations of affect and common values, and 3) members engage in face-to-face interactions and commitments to the group. Group commitments in the extended community aid in instilling a sense of group belonging.

Values of the extended Burning Man community that are particularly important to the making of their “groupness” and collective identity (Lamont and Fournier 1992:85) include their “countervales” (Yinger 1982) and ideologies. Examples of these values include environmental awareness, criticisms of the homogeneity of American culture—especially mainstream media and television, and an emphasis on being anti-materialism or anti-consumption. Burners believe that elements of their lifestyle, such as flexible mobile occupations, allow them to exist beyond the confines of the mainstream culture in
America. They see their mobile lifestyle as aligning with their value system, regardless of the mythical reality of the “mainstream” in America.

Some contemporary information society theorists (e.g. Castells 1996, 1997; Urry 2000) tend to discount a Durkheimian perspective on collective representation and instead see society as less a “society” based on face-to-face social interaction and more as a series of networks, mobilities, and flows involved in the global interplay of information based on “nodes” (see Mellor 2004). Lash and Featherstone (2001:15-16) argue that we now live in a “de-traditionalized, transformed and fragmented” world where “the social bond comes more and more to resemble communication” rather than face-to-face interactions. In the information society theorists’ view, technology is more likely to dictate culture than lived human shared experience, which has been articulated by participants in this study as integrally important to their lives. Even though interviewees in my study may likely point out the “isolation” of greater American culture, they would just as likely reject a perspective that focuses solely on the analysis of “global networks and flows” that Urry (2000) argues produce a “hollowing out of existing societies” (Urry 2000:36). For the participants in this study, working interdependently within community in face-to-face interactions is still very much alive. For them, what one participant termed cultural “ripples” and a resistance to what they perceive as dominant ideologies, are an important part of creating community and affirming aspects of the fluidity or movement of culture in modernity, not a “hollowing out.”

Within the context of modernity and globalization, Giddens (1984) argues that individuals long for a sense of “ontological security” or the sense that the world is stable and meaningful. This longing provides motivations for individuals to act at on
unconscious level. I would argue that burners are both unconsciously and consciously motivated by finding meaning in a globalized world, but they are able to find it, at least partially, through the sanctuary of their group practices, collective identity, and a communal ethos that emphasizes collective interdependence and solidarity. The system of social relations in the extended Burning Man community (e.g. volunteer interdependent work on group artistic projects), economic relations (e.g. developing a gray economy financed by the semi-legal medical marijuana trade and undocumented and flexible occupations like selling clothing at festivals), and cultural relations (e.g. adhering to a value system that includes group ideologies and shared symbols like the Man), reinforces the use of elements of modernity to embrace, rather than efface, problems like risk and meaningless in modernity. Future research focusing on the social bonds between individuals under modern constraints—especially in regards to communal relations and interactions—should take into account that the fluidity of culture and mobility may actually decrease feelings of existential anxiety or isolation.

Burning Man came into being in a region already supportive of countercultural values like those of the hippies, yet the reality still remains that the event has become increasingly well attended and recognizable throughout the world. The event itself has crossed over into mainstream American culture. For example, the Burning Man website received almost 8 million hits and entries per month in 2005 alone. Burning Man has also been documented in various major media sources such as The New York Times Magazine, Playboy, and MTV. In the week prior to Burning Man 2011 The New York

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39 From the staff email list on March 9, 2005: “BM Web Site Usage Statistics—2/05.” As I do not have access to this email list, I obtained this information from Chen’s (2009) endnotes.
The *Times* ran 3 separate articles about the event. The participation of the event itself has increased from 20 participants to over 50,000 yearly attendees in only 25 years. The ideologies, values, and communal ethos of the group must provide some means of personal motivations for individuals to attend the event or the event itself would exhibit a decline in growth and popularity rather than the drastic increase it has sustained. I concede that the novelty or “the party” of Burning Man may provide a source of powerful motivation to attend the event, but the grueling environmental conditions of the playa and the socializing forces of other burners who adhere to a communal ethos at the event make it socially difficult to abstain from adhering to a communal ethos; at least while in the physical confines of Black Rock City.

Ann Swidler critiques the notion that motivations provide the impetus for social action, preferring instead to understand culture as a “tool kit.” In particular, Swidler (2001:20-22) critiques Geertz’s method of ethnographic thick description as an “analytic slight of hand” because she argues he sees social life as “a context for expressive symbols” and because “moods and motivations” or a collective “ethos” do little to help us understand “the varying ways people appropriate and use cultural meanings.” However, my findings show that for the participants in this study, a communal ethos and collective values are important to their lived everyday realities, their active use of culture, and the creation of an extended community built partially on ideological reasoning. Their countercultural toolkit was important for individual action, but participants also continually referred to (and acted upon), the importance of emotional and physical group commitments that included their collective ethos and countervalues.

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250
“Community,” for participants in this study, is a term that includes their community commitments like supporting each other or their collective belief system and a collective identification. Group members interpret being in a community as face-to-face social interaction with other like-minded individuals regardless if the interactions occur at Burning Man, in Portland, or other places throughout the world where community members meet-up. Rather than tie their extensive Burning Man community to a single cohesive definition, burners tended to link the term with countercultural values, a symbolic “burner” identity, and commitments to supporting one another. Participants’ attempts to characterize their community such as “community starts in your heart and emerges outward into your life,” reflect their desire to create communal bonds with others and live “community” as a collective action oriented principle, not necessarily as a place-based grouping.

I have shown that members of the extended community of burners exist as a mobile community in different spaces throughout the world with group cultural practices, symbolic boundaries, relationships of affect, and group values. Mobile actors thus create community by:

1. Turning the once place-based conception of the term into a group of collectively held action-oriented principles that include shared values and ideologies, identities, commitments, and lifestyles. These principles aid in the creation of group cohesion and community belonging.
2. Transforming a variety of spaces into symbolic places of the community that help develop the solidarities of different extensions of the mobile group and provide sites of cultural integration. These places assist in the construction of a collective identity and reinforce the sense of mobile community belonging.

Regardless of the degree of mobility in modernity, social ties between individuals do not necessarily lessen in degree or importance. A larger community can be created in a variety of places at once, rather than in only a single locale.
Place and Community:

In her thirty year longitudinal study of a community development in New Jersey, Keller (2003:266) strongly asserts that without a “bounded site of territory and turf,” a group is not a community. Placeless communities like virtual communities “as indicated by their name, are mirages” (Keller 2003:298). Although I agree with her on the latter account, my data demonstrate that communities, firmly grounded in supportive relationships of mutual reciprocity, can develop beyond the confines of a single bounded locale.

The majority of my interviews took place in the locality of Portland, Oregon and I thus acknowledge that my findings may be criticized as indicative of a place-based community (or at least a city-based community), rather than necessarily a mobile community. However, during my four years of ethnographic research I observed a fluid movement of group members between different locations in Portland, cities throughout the west coast, and other global locations. Other “pockets” of the extended burner community in locations like San Francisco or New York City most likely do vary as to their degree of integration with the local culture, the exact content of collectively held beliefs, or the cohesion of those particular subsets of the extended community, but still exist as members of the extended Burning Man community. Different places may influence the collective identity or the social relations of subsets of mobile communities, but the individuals still belong to a placeless greater collective community identity with commitments and social interactions that stretch into many spaces and places. Urban places throughout the world and the west coast provide places for burners to attend collective group events and create community. Urban places, like Portland,
permit the development of a public, cosmopolitan life in ways that were not available in more traditional communities. For modern urban settings provide a diversity of opportunities for individuals to search out others of like interests and form associations with them, as well as offering more chance for the cultivation of a diversity of interests or pursuits in general” (Giddens 1991:174).

In other words, urban places provide important interaction grounds for globally mobile individuals. Additionally, focusing on one urban place in particular helped me arrive at a deeper understanding of how local contexts may interact with subsets of a mobile community.

In Portland, I found that the local place context provided a ripe urban cultural milieu and built environment for developing relations of solidarity in the burner community. In this manner, local place contexts can shift the parameters and constraints within which groups work and the degree of local cohesion. The culture of the burner community has become intertwined with the local culture in Portland and Portland offers a particularly hospitable environment for groups like burners, but that does not mean that the extended community is necessarily based around the place of Portland per se. However, focusing on Portland aided in demonstrating the role place may play for members of mobile communities.

I found three major ways that place contributes to the formation of mobile communities. First, place (especially urban space) has the capability to facilitate face-to-face social interaction and community building and thus impact group cohesion and solidarity. The ease of running into others in urban contexts, especially urban contexts like Portland that provide multiple spaces such as public parks or wide city streets with multiple uses, provide opportunities to develop or renew social bonds with others in the extended community. The degree of availability of grounded space with which to socially
interact, has implications for how deep the relational bonds can be between individuals; thus impacting group cohesion and solidarity. Without frequent face-to-face interaction (and the spaces for these interactions to take place), group solidarity would likely decrease. Secondly, places provide physical sites where members of mobile communities may develop and expand upon cultural practices and toolkits. The places then serve as “interlocks” (White 1995, Fine 2010), or physical localities that provide cultural integration and diffusion. Third, spaces become places when invested with meaning and value (Gieryn 2000). These transformed spaces of the mobile group help reinforce the collective identity of the group and further forge a sense of community belonging. Spaces that have become places of the group are important for individuals who are highly mobile, especially because they might be moving physical locations often.

Members of the extended Burning Man community move in and out of other different local contexts and environments throughout the year, but still exist as committed members to a community. On the other hand, although the group of extended burners do currently constitute a community with gemeinschaft-like relationships and commitments, it remains to be seen whether the extended Burning Man community can continue to uphold these commitments to the group over an extended period of time. Some burners I interviewed argued that they were a generational and therefore sustained community since there are children and grandchildren being born into the now 25 year old culture of Burning Man. The group currently constitutes a community with the equivalent deep relationships of locality-based groups, but this does not mean they will not suffer fragmentation and loss of cohesion. Relationships of trust require continued maintenance which is what locality-based communities offer by virtue of sustained face-to-face
interaction involved in local interactions. The local community contains “a settled people” who “understands its own habitat” and care about its collective fate (Bellah 1991:267-275). But in place-less communities, individuals can leave at will. However, for participants, this individual “freedom” to leave the group at will was part of the initial draw to the community. In fact, the voluntary nature of their association to the mobile community could be what keeps it so attractive to members and cohesive.

Participants insisted that community is a “common unity,” rather than something individuals should be forced into by virtue of the place they inhabit. Durkheim (1995 [1912]:62) defines religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things...things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite all those who adhere to them into one moral community.” Durkheim continues (474-5) that although particular religious symbols may themselves disappear over time, society will always feel the need to collectively reaffirm those sentiments that help unify the larger group. Similarly, although individual symbolic meanings and contexts will change over time, participants articulated their desire to continually reaffirm their relationships and belonging to a group greater than themselves. Burners also spoke about community as though it were sacred; the idea of community was a belief and practice to be upheld in and of itself. The yearly pilgrimage to the desert and group symbols like the Man help to reaffirm the sentiments and shared principles of the larger community, even with the demonstrated mobility of individual members. Additionally, especially because of globalization and modern processes, culture is open to change as actors move in a process of dislocation, transplantation, and relocation (Werbner 2005) and many members of the extended community also remain open and receptive to change.
As communities become placeless due to the globalizing forces and mobility in modernity, on the surface it may appear that the strongest connection between individuals may be ideological rather than place-grouped. For example, relatively small yet highly visible groups based on ideology like the Tea Party have managed to exert great influence on larger political processes and on the surface appear to offer a sense of group belonging. However, I would argue that groups that rely only on an ideological focus or leisure activities do not offer the same sense of solidarity or relationships of affect that a community does. The extended community of burners may have group ideologies, but they also have a sense of group belonging and commitments that other groups, like the Tea Party, do not. I would argue that the strongest connection between individuals as modernity progresses continues to be deeper relationships of affect that tie individuals into a collective. My study has shown that mobility does not necessarily erode relationships of affect and may, in fact, only increase the social bonds between individuals within community. Studying additional mobile communities may provide fertile research grounds for sociologists moving forward. Pertinent research questions could focus on the changing role of urban contexts for mobile communities and ways that culture may be used to reinforce, or alternatively erode, gemeinschaft-like relationships.

The burners in my study might be thought of as cosmopolitan given their propensity for world travel and attitudes of “openness” about other cultures throughout the world. Sociologists like Craig Calhoun (2003:546) critique theories of cosmopolitanism on grounds that “cosmopolitan theories are individualistic in ways that obscure the basic importance of social relationships and culture.” Calhoun argues that theories of cosmopolitanism have been forced into two major “false opposition[s].” On
one side of the standard cosmopolitan theoretical dichotomy is “the utopia of cosmopolitan liberalism” and on the other side is “the specter of reactionary nationalism or fundamentalism” (Calhoun 2003:531). Calhoun argues that this tendency of sociologists to place cosmopolitanism into an ideological dichotomy between the “illiberal local” and the “liberal cosmopolitan” “permits, at most, a thin appreciation of the sociological character of group formation and membership, including changes in ‘belonging’ and efforts to transcend particular solidarities” (Calhoun 2003:532). My dissertation has taken an in depth look at the group formation and culture of one extended globally mobile community that included a focus on individuals’ sense of belonging to the group. As such, this study managed to avoid some of the pitfalls of theorizing mobile cosmopolitan actors as “putatively autonomous, discrete, and cultureless individuals” (Calhoun 2003:535). However, further studies of mobile communities would likely benefit from a greater attention to other local global contexts with larger degrees of stratification and inequality than localities in America like Portland, OR than I focused on. For example, a follow up study to this dissertation might include a focus on the global places where burners design and manufacture clothing such as India or Bali. Attention should be paid to ways in which the lifestyles and interactions of mobile community members express privilege or complicate everyday life for non-mobile individuals in those local contexts.

Further studies of mobile communities might also benefit from a greater understanding of how the multiple layers of individual and group identities may intervene in group belonging. Calhoun continues:

I have argued that reducing the diversity of cultural and social identities to different tastes or possible ‘identifications’ inhabits attention to the ways
in which they are both basic to individual lives and undermines recognition of why those on the losing end of processes of globalization (and other social arrangements) may have special reason to understand their place in the world and organize their action through such solidarities (546).

I agree that further studies should pay more attention to “those on the losing end of processes of globalization,” but focusing on the culture and community formation of burners in America provided a case with which to study mobile community formation and a focus on group culture, commitments, and belonging. I also agree with Calhoun’s point that multiple identities often operate simultaneously within a group and that it may be reductionist to assume all members of a group have the same identity. But I have shown that even when extended community members disparage the group identification as a “burner,” they still likely attend Burning Man and acknowledge that they belong to the larger extended Burning Man community. The identities within the extended Burning Man community are fluid and change depending on local context, but group members still participate in group commitments and a larger sense of community belonging.

Overlapping group boundaries and individual identities do not necessarily erode the deeper relationships within the community. In reality, the multiplicity of meanings and fluidity of culture and local contexts may aid in establishing commitments to mobile communities because the group commitments may be modified depending on the locality within which the social interactions take place. In a globalized world with increasingly fluid structures, the ability to adapt may help grow a sense of belonging.
LIST OF REFERENCES


260


05-Dec-2007

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IRB #: 4125
Study: Social/Cultural Capital in the Balinese and West Coast, USA Artist Network
Approval Date: 04-Dec-2007

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved the protocol for your study as Exempt as described in Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 46, Subsection 101(b). Approval is granted to conduct your study as described in your protocol.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in the attached document, Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human Subjects. (This document is also available at http://www.unh.edu/osr/compliance/irb.html.) Please read this document carefully before commencing your work involving human subjects.

Upon completion of your study, please complete the enclosed pink Exempt Study Final Report form and return it to this office along with a report of your findings.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to contact me at 603-862-2003 or Julie.simpson@unh.edu. Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,

Julie F. Simpson
Manager

cc: File
    Dillon, Michele
24-Mar-2010

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IRB #: 4125
Study: Social/Cultural Capital in the Balinese and West Coast, USA Artist Network
Study Approval Date: 04-Dec-2007
Modification Approval Date: 19-Mar-2010
Modification: Addition of interviews with growers of medical marijuana and organic food in rural California

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved your modification to this study, as indicated above. Further changes in your study must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval prior to implementation.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in the document, Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human Subjects. This document is available at http://www.unh.edu/osr/compliance/irb.html or from me.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to contact me at 603-862-2003 or Julie.simpson@unh.edu. Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,

Julie F. Simpson
Manager

cc: File
    Dillon, Michelle